

Jonah: The Uninspiring Inspiration for Missions

Jonah 4

(black Bibles page 775; Children's Bibles page 1108)

Our final sermon on the book of Jonah! What's this book about, anyway?

- What do we think of this statement? *"Clearly this book is about the man Jonah. Every chapter is about him! Especially the final chapter, which seems unnecessary, shows us this book is about him."*
- Not bad. But there's a problem: the abrupt ending of the book. What happens to Jonah? He disappears, and God gets the last word... or rather, the last *question*.

The plant and the worm

- Through a plant, God provides wonderful shade from the desert heat. (4:6)
- But then it's worm vs. plant. And man vs. God.
- "And the Lord said, 'You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night.'" (4:10)
 - Jonah did not invest time, money, or effort into the plant. *But I created and sustain the Ninevites, Jonah.*
 - Jonah did not *own* the plant. *But I own everything and everyone. They are my creatures.*
 - And plants like this are short-lived. *But the Ninevites will live a long time...*
- And now the last verse adds one more thing: *and it was just one plant!* "And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (4:11)

The impact of the abrupt, open-ended conclusion of the book:

- The engaged reader asks: "What did Jonah do next? What *should* he do? And was God in the right?" *And now you starting taking a side, reader!* You are invested into Jonah's story, and the abrupt ending of

the story forces you to engage the question God ends with.

- What if Jonah says: "You might care about the nations. Fine. But don't involve me!"

The History of Missions

- *God's mission.* "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). A divine promise. God is on a mission to bless the world.
- *New Testament missions.* We know how Genesis 12:3 is fulfilled: in Christ – the descendant of Abraham – and his followers carrying out the Great Commission. This is *centrifugal*: starting from Jerusalem, the center, the message of Jesus goes out to the world. The church is told, "Go and tell!"
- *Old Testament missions.* By contrast, Israel told the world, "Come and see!" Israel's mission was primarily *centripetal*, towards the center, not centrifugal. They were to be a light *before* the nations, drawing them in, rather than a light *to* the nations. See Deuteronomy 4:6.
 - One big exception to this: Jonah. *He goes out to a foreign nation.* This foreshadows NT missions!

The impact of the abrupt, open-ended conclusion of the book:

- To the Israelites, a challenge: will you be on board with God's future mission *to* the world? – if it means to the dirty Gentiles? If it means to a dreaded enemy nation? If it means *you are called to participate*? If it means the Gentiles might not have to submit to Israel's king, or come to Jerusalem to worship, or be circumcised, etc.?
- To us a challenge also: will you be on board with God's mission to the world? – if it means to your enemies? If it means *you have to participate*? If it is inconvenient? If you might be killed? Or disliked?

To the Lord's Supper... We remember the sign of Jonah! (Matthew 12:38-45)