

EVERYDAY LESSONS FROM JONAH

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The Book of Jonah is anything but “everyday.” It features extraordinary events we would seldom, if ever, see. God talks to Jonah like a next-door neighbor. He tells the prophet to travel to the capital of the Assyrian empire that controls the prophet’s nation. His mission is to warn those enemies that God is going to destroy them in forty days.

Instead, Jonah flees by ship in another direction, and God stops him cold with a raging storm that threatens his life and everybody’s on board. The loss of all the cargo comes in an effort to keep from sinking. When the captain and crew find out that the disaster has arisen from Jonah’s disobedience, they try to row back to shore but have to accede to his directions to throw him overboard to get the sea back to normal.

Instead of drowning, Jonah gets swallowed by a big fish and spends three days thinking things over after it becomes evident that God is not going to destroy him. So, when the fish coughs him up on the shore, he heeds his mandate, goes to Nineveh some five hundred miles away, and delivers the message to its huge population. Instead of destroying the sinful city like it deserves, God relents because, of all things, from the king on down, they repent, putting on burlap, sitting in ashes, and observing a fast of food and water under the Middle East’s scorching sun (3:7).

Instead of taking sides with God, glad that the sinful people have repented and been spared the threatened fate, Jonah sulks presumably because the Ninevites were enemies, and he felt foolish prophesying something that did not happen.

Instead of feeling relieved that he had finished his mission, he sits down east of the city to wait. When a plant grows up big enough to shade him, he feels delivered from the intense heat only to have a worm ruin everything. He is mad enough to want to die from personal double disappointment instead of valuing the preservation of all those ignorant others from a fate worse than a hot desert wind.

Events are crossroads where many features meet. In the Jonah event, its many features come in the extreme, which makes their lessons more evident. As it is easier to tell which football team is better in a 72 to 2 victory than in a 21 to 20 game, so also in Jonah everything comes across radically clear. Below are some points we can gain from perceptively reading this ancient text.

Facts are clearest when seen in the extreme. The enormous number of extraordinary occurrences in Jonah say in no uncertain terms that God involves himself in human affairs. That is not as evidently so in the normal scope of time and place. Our confidence about his immanence in world history rests mostly on promises made before in connection with extraordinary cases.

God has compassion for ignorance, for sinners, notably for sinners against us. People who do not know left from right have God’s attention, concern, and provision (4:11). His manner of operating with them affords us a mentality to adopt in our own interactions with such people.

God cares about our enemies as well as us (cp. Matthew 5:44). Loving enemies sets a high, demanding standard, and it's not a fanciful one, judging from how our creator interacts with his creation. He is concerned about people on both sides of every war.

Human resistance does not thwart divine intent. There is no escaping God's intentions. He will accomplish them if not immediately, then appropriately. Running off does not change anything.

Stray data are important in understanding more completely the truth of things. Jesus' appeal to the Jonah incident taps into God's universal control and worldwide interest. He is the God of the whole world, not just our part of it, and he controls the affairs of all people, not just ours.

We do not need to know everything to be sensitive to what we do know. A reader wonders how much of Jonah's predicted picture the people of Nineveh would have known about the one true God—or if Jonah couched his message in those terms at all. What would they have supposed the form of their future destruction might take? Presumably they did not know, but they knew they had serious faults and had some sense of sorrow for them and some way of expressing it. They acted on what they did know.

A sensitive conscience responds to sufficient reason. Avoidance only leads to getting “beat over the head” to make us listen. Even people as supposedly hardened as pagan Ninevites—especially their rulers—can still sense the warnings of divine disaster. They do not need constant miracles to get them to believe—as Jesus' contemporaries were doing with him (Matthew 16:4; 12:38-41 = Luke 11:29-30, 32).

“God willing.” Between human effort and its consequences divine intervention is always possible. Actions have consequences good and bad, and we only partially control either. Like Jonah, we can try to escape, but we cannot succeed unless *deo volente* (cp. James 4:15).

Our choices affect more than ourselves. They affect people whose lives are intertwined with ours through no choice on their part. In Jonah, we can see of the cost of all that lost cargo and the fear that took its toll on the crew and passengers (1:5). That's in addition to Jonah's own trauma in being thrown overboard into a raging sea (1:12-15), being swallowed by a big fish, and the three days he had to think about his fate (1:17). The text does not record any promise that God would deliver him from the sea or the fish or give him a chance to redeem himself. He envisions that possibility perhaps as an inference from the fact that he had survived thus far (2:2-9).

Jonah illustrates what God's unchangeableness means—his immutability. He is consistent; he changes with changing circumstances (3:10).

The Book of Jonah stresses the fact that God is near, he is immanent in his world. He talked directly to Jonah. He sent a storm on the Mediterranean Sea when Jonah fled from Joppa toward the west instead of northeast (1:4). He sent a big fish to swallow the unfaithful prophet (1:17) and had it cough him up on the beach three days later (2:10). God changed his mind about destroying the city when its inhabitants repented (3:19). He grew a plant to shade Jonah (4:6) and then had a worm kill it (4:7).

We obey God even if doing so makes us look bad to people that we fear will take it out on us in rejection and even persecution.

God puts a limit on the extent to which others can resist him. That applies to both sides of the story in Jonah. God limited the Ninevites with threat of destruction and reeled in Jonah when he tried to disobey.

It is essential to take advantage of second chances to do what is right, to undo previous failures. God may not provide a big fish to bail us out the second time.

We do not have to understand in order to obey God's clear commands. Our sense of justice and what should happen is not the final word on such matters as Jonah addresses. Our parochial viewpoint misleads us because it is incomplete and erroneous. From all our previous experience in trusting him, we have enough reason to trust him in cases that are not clear to us.

Seeing clear demonstrations of divine intentions and activities does not necessarily convince even God's people to feel and do as we ought. Human self-centeredness still resists God's larger perspective. Jonah was more exercised by losing his shade from heat than he was about the fate of a whole big city (4:10-11).

We are such a mixture of strengths and weaknesses. Jonah disobeyed by fleeing in the opposite direction from his divine mission. Because of his "prejudice" against Assyrian enemies, he got mad because God was not destroying those people like Jonah had predicted; he pouted because God took away the plant that had grown up to shade him; he even had the gall to criticize God! On the other hand, he prayed inside the fish, expressing hope, promise, and thanksgiving. His prayer shows the familiar disconnect between religious observance and godly living.

What of sliding-scale judgment? Jesus did a takeoff on the Book of Jonah, saying that the Ninevites would fare better in the Judgment than the Israelites in Jesus' day because the Ninevites repented when Jonah warned them about their coming destruction (Matthew 12:41 = Luke 11:32).

We learn lessons from our own experiences. We can avoid some grief from life's mistakes by watching what happens to other people when they err. That applies even more to the record of what has happened to people we read about in a Book like Jonah.