

## **Out of the Belly of the Fish**

April 27, 2014

### **Jonah 3**

You may be surprised to find this message, just a week removed from Easter, coming from the Book of Jonah. Bear with me, and I hope you will see the connections as we go. I'll give you an obvious one to start with.

From the earliest days of Christianity, Christians recognized the allegory from Jonah's time in the belly of the fish to the time between the Crucifixion of Christ and the Resurrection. This is directly referenced by Jesus, as recorded in Matthew 12:38-42. Turn with me there.

#### **READ Matthew 12:38-42**

Keep that relationship in your mind as we go forward.

The story of Jonah and the whale may be one of the most commonly known stories from the Bible – at least most people would probably have an idea what you were talking about if you made some mention of Jonah and the whale – though a lot of people would probably confuse this story with that of Pinocchio. Never mind that the Bible says “great fish”, and a whale is not a fish at all – that is an unimportant detail.

Just to make sure we are all on the same page, let's refresh ourselves on the story.

The setting for this story of Jonah is that of a prophet in Israel during the time after the split of the kingdom after the time of David and Solomon. There is a reference to someone named Jonah in II Kings, but it is not clear whether that is the same Jonah. At any rate, God called this particular Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach a message of repentance to them. Nineveh would have been about 500 miles east of Jonah's hometown.

Jonah did not want to go, and he did not want to go badly enough that he booked himself onto a ship going in the opposite direction. There would have been at least two reasons for Jonah going west, as far as he could, instead of east like God told him to. First, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, which was the greatest power in the region at the time, and not a friend of Israel's. It could have been a dangerous place for an Israelite, especially an Israelite coming to challenge them to repent. Second, Jonah did not want to preach God's message to them because he did not want them to be given the opportunity to repent – Jonah wanted God to just go ahead and wipe them out and get it over with. It is interesting that where Nineveh is located is now in

Iraq. What if God called you to go there now? We would clearly recognize it as a dangerous place for us, but how honest would we be about the notion that we would rather God just wipe out all those Muslims and get it over with? While you are considering that... I read a story this week about how Muslims are being converted to Christianity not by missionaries, but from within Islam itself, as many Muslims come to recognize the fundamental failure of Islam as a pathway to right relationship with God, and the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is directly revealed to them by God. Incredible stuff happening there. Nineveh may have been just such a place.

As Jonah and his shipmates headed west, God caused a great storm to come up. The crew feared for the ship and for their lives. They assumed that this storm represented some sort of divine judgment on somebody on board, so they cast lots to find out who the guilty party was. Jonah's number came up. He seems to have pretty easily confessed his disobedience of God and volunteered to be thrown overboard. To their credit, the crew tried to avoid that, but finally, after seeking absolution from God, tossed Jonah over. The sea immediately became calm, and Jonah found himself inside the belly of a great fish that God had sent.

Jonah prayed there for deliverance. His prayer does not really indicate any greater enthusiasm for this mission but more of a grudging recognition that he was going to have to do what God called him to do. So the fish threw Jonah up onto the land, and off he went. Here's where we pick up the passage that I asked you to turn to at the beginning.

### **READ Jonah 3**

This would have been one more spectacular crusade, but it only took 8 words, and the whole city, from the king to the animals, repented and turned to God. Now that's preaching with power! No, not really. It had nothing to do with the power of Jonah's preaching. This was all about God.

You might have thought Jonah would be happy about this, but instead, he pouted. He said, "That's why I didn't want to come here in the first place!" God answers Jonah with a question that is at the end of the book: "Should I not be concerned about that great city?" The book ends there. We are not told any more about Nineveh, and nothing about whether Jonah sat there pouting or improved his attitude.

There are some strong messages in here about the consequences of disobedience of God and the necessity of delivering the message of God's love and grace to people we are really not all that fond of. Different interpreters have found multiple layers of meaning in this story, much as we find layers of meaning in the parables of Jesus. Was Jonah a real person? I don't know. Was he really in the belly of a fish for three days? I don't know, but I am certain that God is capable of whipping up a storm to turn a ship around and having a fish swallow a man and spit him out after three days – just as I am certain that God could create the universe out of nothing but His imagination and part the Red Sea and raise Jesus from the dead. And I am just as certain that God's grace can bring about radical, life-transforming change in the lives of people, whether it is a whole city or one at a time. In this story, that happened for the crew of the ship and for the people of Nineveh. In your story, it can happen for you. My friend Steven Gregg has a tee shirt that on the front has the question: How do I know that God changes lives? And on the back it says: Because I was there when God changed mine. This story is not all about allegory and metaphor and interpretation – it is about God moving in powerful, radical ways to bring His people to Himself. That is where we connect directly to Easter and to the power of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ to save us from sin and death and make us perfectly one with Him, forever. God can do that.

Let's make two more connections between this story of Jonah and the story of the Resurrection of Jesus.

First, Jonah's experience of carrying out the mission that God had called him to was not for Jonah's benefit. Jonah fought it all the way, and we don't know if his attitude ever changed. But there was dramatic change for the people of Nineveh. The text tells us that they even put sackcloth on their animals. They felt the conviction of God that strongly. It was Nineveh that experienced the power of the grace of God in a way that made a difference, not Jonah. Neither was the experience of Jesus for the benefit of Jesus. It was never about Jesus. He always knew that He had come to save the world, not to save Himself. There is no doubt that Jesus could have saved Himself, but God's plan was for Jesus to make a way for the whole world to be reconciled to God. For both Jonah and Jesus, it was about being carriers of God's grace and instruments of God's salvation.

Second, we only have these two people in our Bibles because of what happened after their three days in the dark. If Jonah had just gone overboard and died like he thought he wanted, we would have never heard of him. It is only because God brought him out of the belly of the fish and used him as an instrument of His grace that we know Jonah's story. If Jesus had just been killed and buried, he would have been a footnote in a history book, or maybe at best remembered as a teacher and prophet. He certainly would not have gotten much play in Jewish religious history. But the descent into the dark was not the end of the story for either of them... and it is not the end of the story for us, either. Jonah's mission after he came out of the fish changed Nineveh – the Resurrection of Jesus Christ changed the world, forever. We know Jonah and Jesus because they mattered.

As we consider Easter, one week removed, we need to ask ourselves if it mattered to us. Not if April 20, 2014 mattered, but whether Easter mattered as the remembrance and celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Is it more than just another holiday reason for family gatherings – like Christmas with colored eggs instead of ornaments? A quick comparison of the numbers of people in church today to the numbers of people in church last Sunday would suggest that we have some challenges in the world understanding the power of the Resurrection. The world may hear Resurrection as a concept but attach no more meaning to it than the concept of a man living for three days inside a fish. For Easter and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ to be more than an interesting story, the power of the Resurrection has to be real and it has to be personal. The Resurrection represents the power of God to overcome sin and make us right and pure before Him, starting right now. The Resurrection represents the power of God to overcome death and give us life with Him, forever, starting right now.

When we understand that, and realize the great truth that the Resurrection matters because it brings us – each one of us – freedom from slavery to sin and victory over death, we become “Easter people”, and we emerge from our own dark places. Out of the belly of the fish. Out of the tomb. Into the light. Into life. Where God really wants us to be. That is the power of the Resurrection, and it is for you, Easter people.