

Major Messages from the Minor Prophets

Love People as God Loves People

The Book of Jonah

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Dr. Steve Horn

Introduction: The Prophets of the Old Testament are divided by scholars into the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets. More precisely, we call Isaiah, along with Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel, Major Prophets. The remaining books of the Old Testament are called Minor Prophets. The terms major and minor refer to the size of these books, not the degree of their importance.¹

There are 12 Minor Prophets. We are studying through the Minor Prophets. We will devote one Sunday (one message) to each of the 12 Minor Prophets. Our goal is to discover that central core message of the book.

Jonah is probably the story that we know best of all of the prophets. But, I wonder if we know the reason for the story. To me, Jonah is one of those stories that must be read, studied, and applied in its entirety. Reading the story in its entirety then gives us the message that is punctuated in chapter 4.

That doesn't mean that there are not some important lessons to learn along the way. Let's overview the story pretty quickly, then we will come to chapter 4.

Overview of Jonah:

Jonah is a story about sin and its consequences. (Chapter 1)

In chapter one, we discover that God seeks a servant to go to the city of Ninevah—a wicked city. Instead, Jonah heads down to Joppa. In fact you get a series of “going downs.” He goes down to Joppa to get on a ship headed down to Tarshish. Once on the ship, he goes down to bottom of the ship. Some have suggested that the literary quality of the narrative at this point emphasizes that Jonah is trying to get as far away from the will of God as he can. At each downward step, he is further away from the will of God for his life. These series of “downward” choices ultimately lands him headed down to the bottom of the sea. He is thrown overboard by the crew of the ship when he is singled out as the cause for the violence of their voyage.

There, Jonah is swallowed by a large fish. Here, we are reminded that our sins will surely find us out. Jonah is a story about sin and its consequences.

Jonah is a story about second chances. (Chapter 2)

That brings us to chapter two. Here we see that Jonah's story is a story about second chances. Even though he is swallowed by the fish, he surrenders, and is given a second chance to obey. Sometimes it takes us being in the belly of a fish—hitting rock bottom—for us to surrender to the will of God.

¹ Lamentations is considered with these books as a major prophet because it is written by Jeremiah.

Jonah is a story about spiritual awakening. (Chapter 3)

Jonah's story is a great story about spiritual awakening. When Jonah does go to Ninevah, repentance is the response, and because there is repentance, there is revival. It is a sweeping revival—the kind of revival that we long for in our own city, state, nation, and world.

But, as incredible as those truths are, that is not the real message of Jonah. The story is the set up for the real message that comes in chapter 4.

Text: But Jonah was greatly displeased and became furious.² He prayed to the LORD: "Please, LORD, isn't this what I said while I was still in my own country? That's why I fled toward Tarshish in the first place. I knew that You are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to become angry, rich in faithful love, and One who relents from sending disaster.³ And now, LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

⁴The LORD asked, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

⁵Jonah left the city and sat down east of it. He made himself a shelter there and sat in its shade to see what would happen to the city. ⁶Then the LORD God appointed a plant, and it grew up to provide shade over Jonah's head to ease his discomfort. Jonah was greatly pleased with the plant. ⁷When dawn came the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, and it withered.

⁸As the sun was rising, God appointed a scorching east wind. The sun beat down so much on Jonah's head that he almost fainted, and he wanted to die. He said, "It's better for me to die than to live."

⁹Then God asked Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

"Yes," he replied. "It is right. I'm angry enough to die!"

¹⁰So the LORD said, "You cared about the plant, which you did not labor over and did not grow. It appeared in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹Should I not care about the great city of Nineveh, which has more than 120,000 people who cannot distinguish between their right and their left, as well as many animals?"

But ultimately, Jonah is a story about the size of God's amazing grace and love. (Chapter 4)

The application, for me, of this book is found in this last chapter. The whole reason that Jonah seems to run from God is that he knows that God will relent if the people repent. Jonah seems to be enamored with the thought of these people facing the judgment of God. Out of this story, we see God's great love for mankind. There is no one God does not love and will not offer salvation. Let us pray that we catch God's vision in this regard. Do you have some enemies? Your enemies may not be personal enemies, but you still have them. Maybe your enemies are those of a particular background. Maybe your enemies are those who are a particular kind of sinner. Can I ask a very pointed question? Do you want that person to be saved? Or would you be glad to see them face the wrath of God? If we cannot pray for their salvation, we have not begun to understand the great love of God.

Chapter 4 is driven by questions, so let's ask ourselves some questions ...

1. Do you deserve God's grace?

Verse 2 spells out God's grace? We receive that grace, but sometimes are unwilling for others to receive that same demonstration of grace. When we begin to understand the fullness of God's grace poured out on us, we are beginning to understand that all are worthy of receiving that same grace.

2. What is your attitude about those farthest from God?

No matter where a person is, no matter what a person has done, God loves that person. He created every person.

There is a song that I like to sing that says:

God loves people more than anything.
God loves people more than anything.
More than anything, He wants them to know,
He'd rather die, than let them go.
'Cause God loves people more than anything.

So, if God loves people more than anything. If more than anything God wants all to be saved, then should we not want the same things as His followers?

3. What have you invested in reaching those farthest from God?

Jesus told one of his most famous stories ever about this very point. The story is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable had a starting point of a question from a so-called expert of the law. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus asked him a question: "What is written in the law?

The man answered: "Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus told him that he had answered correctly. The man not satisfied asked a next question: "And who is my neighbor?"

It is then that Jesus told him the story. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him, and left him for dead. First, a religious leader of Jesus' day saw the man, but walked by on the other side of the road. Then, a Levite came by, and he too walked by on the other side of the road. Then, a Samaritan (understand that Jews in that day hated Samaritans and Samaritans hated Jews) saw him. This Samaritan had compassion on the man. He bandaged his wounds, put him on his animal and brought to an inn and took care of him for the night. The next day, he gave the innkeeper money to continue the care for him and even said, I will repay you whatever else I owe you when I return.

Then, Jesus asked the question that all of us are being asked today. "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

The man of the law gave the only answer he could give. "The one who showed mercy to him."

Jesus then said, "Go and do the same."

You will notice that Jonah ends with a question. You will notice also that we don't get the answer. I think there is a reason for that. The question is not so much Jonah's; it is our question.