

A WHALE OF A TALE (part #1)

Jonah 1:1-3

Today we are going to look at the story of Jonah. A while back a mother of one of our preschoolers told me a funny story about what her child said about Jonah. When he was about two he learned a song about Jonah, and the words went like this: “Who did, who did, who did, who did, who did swallow Jonah Jonah? And the next verse said, “Whale did, whale did, whale did, whale did, whale did swallow Jonah Jonah...” Now, technically it was a great fish that swallowed Jonah, but one day that kid said to his mom, “I know the name of the whale that swallowed Jonah, do you?” And his mother said, “No, I don’t. What is it?” And the child said, “His name was Whodid”.

Well, the story of Jonah is certainly by all standards a whale of a tale. Think about it. A backslidden prophet is on the run from God. But God runs him down and causes him to be swallowed by a great fish. He lives in the belly of the fish for three days and nights then the fish vomits him up on dry land. And the prophet had learned his lesson, repents of his sin, and goes off to a wicked city to pronounce God’s judgment upon it. Now most, if not all of us, have never questioned the literalness of this greatest fish tale ever told. Sometimes we might do well to question a fish story from Tommy Woods or Jerry Glover, or J.D. Beck or Tommy Gregory, or maybe even Patti Gregory, but we wouldn’t dare question Jonah’s. But it is not so with everyone. Here’s what one blogger said,

“Growing up Pentecostal, I was raised to believe the Jonah story was a literal event. But even back then, I found the story a little difficult to swallow. I used to imagine that when Jonah was inside the whale, it must’ve been like when Pinocchio and Geppetto were trapped inside Monstro.”

And then he went on to argue how silly it was for anyone to believe such a whale of a tale. Here’s another skeptic’s opinion:

“The most common interpretation (of Jonah) nowadays, and one that is held by indubitably orthodox scholars, is that the story of the prophet being swallowed and then disgorged by a ‘great fish’ is merely didactic fiction, a grand tale told to establish a religious point”.

Now, this man is certainly incorrect in saying that most orthodox scholars believe Jonah is a fictitious character. But let me say, if it were true that Jonah and the great fish are merely fiction that opens up a whole Pandora’s Box of serious

problems. For 2 Kings 14:25 says very plainly that Jonah, the son of Amittai, prophesied in the days of King Jeroboam of Israel. And if Jonah was fictitious, then who's to say that Jeroboam wasn't fictitious, and for that matter, that all the other kings named in 2 Kings were fictitious? But also, our Lord Jesus Christ says on three occasions that the only sign that He would give that He was the Messiah was the sign of the prophet Jonah (Matthew 12:38, 16:4; Luke 11:29-32). That just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days, so He would be in the heart of the earth for three days. Jesus believed in a literal Jonah.

Beloved, certainly the Jonah event is miraculous. But that is no problem for us, because we believe in a miraculous God! And for a fish to swallow a man is no more miraculous than for a fish that Peter caught on a line to have a piece of money in its mouth, as Matthew writes about. It's no more miraculous than a talking donkey as the book of Numbers tells us, and it is no more miraculous than a den of closed-mouth lions with supper standing helpless in their midst, as Daniel testifies. So we don't need to defend the historicity of Jonah. We just believe it and learn the truths that God would have us learn to make us stronger in our faith.

So let's begin to look at the autobiography of Jonah. Please begin reading with me in Jonah 1:1. The book of Jonah is unique among the Minor Prophets. There are twelve Minor Prophets. The first nine prophesy before Israel's exile in Babylon and three last three prophesy afterwards. And in the OT cannon Jonah is the fifth of the pre-exilic prophets, standing as the centerpiece of the first nine. I think that is no accident, because Jonah's message is unique. You see, all of the other eight prophets pronounce judgment upon Israel, but not Jonah. Jonah's message is not one of judgment, but love, love for the heathen nations who do not know Jehovah God. God told Jonah to go and proclaim to Nineveh that judgment was coming. But it was God's plan all along to use the warning of judgment to bring them to repentance, that He might bless them. And as you know, that's exactly what happened. We'll talk more about this in another message. But the message of Jonah is that **God loves the entire world and wants them to repent and be saved.** And a secondary message is that **when God places a call on your life, the smartest thing to do is to obey.** And the main character of Jonah is not the fish, which is mentioned only four times, or Jonah, which is mentioned eighteen times. The main character of Jonah is mentioned thirty-eight times, and that is God.

Now, today we are going to focus on Jonah's call. Verses 1 and 2 says that the word of the Lord came to Jonah, commanding him to go to Nineveh and cry out against it. Nineveh was one of the premier cities of Assyria, and when Jonah heard God's message he immediately began to get a queasy feeling in his stomach. "Nineveh? Oh, God, please, anywhere but Nineveh!" You see, the Assyrians were foreigners, and they were wicked to the core. They were steeped in idolatry. Some say that the Assyrians worshipped between 3,000 and 4,000 different gods. And Assyria was a cruel nation who had often persecuted Israel in the past. And Jonah

had no sympathies for the Ninevites at all! When he thought of Nineveh he longed for the day that the hammer of judgment would fall.

Beloved, let us stop at this point and hear what God would say to all of us. Just as surely as God placed a call upon Jonah, He has placed a call upon you and me. Ephesians 2:10 says that we are His (God's) workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them". Meaning; that God has a pre-ordained plan for the life of every child of God. Paul writes in Romans 12:2 that it is a good, and acceptable, and perfect plan. And He tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that it is for the glory of God ("Whether you eat, drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"). As the old Puritan preacher Thomas Watson wrote, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever". And you can be sure that God has a call upon your life to glorify Him, just as He did Jonah.

Now, I want us to address two questions in relation to God's call. First of all, what happens when we obey God's call, and secondly, what happens when we disobey. When God places a call upon your life you can know that He has three purposes in mind. First of all, God calls us to **sanctify us**. That is, God calls us to service in order to make us more holy, more Christ-like. We've all probably heard it said before, "God can't use a dirty vessel". Well, beloved, if God couldn't use a dirty vessel then He wouldn't use any of us. Was Jonah right with God when God called him? Absolutely not. How about Isaiah? When God called him his first response was, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips!" (Isaiah 6:5). But Isaiah went on to become perhaps the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. We saw last week how Jacob's very name meant "deceitful". Yet God chose him to be the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. And when God refers to Himself in the Old Testament, sometimes He called Himself the God of Isaac. More than that He called Himself the God of Abraham, but most of all He said, "I am the God of Jacob".

Now, beloved, please listen carefully. I'm absolutely not saying that if you serve Jesus it doesn't matter how you live. The reason that many churches are so weak and the reason that many churches have such little respect from the world is because of the sinful lifestyles of so many of her members, even her leadership. YES, we should and we must live godly lives if we are called out to serve God. But sometimes God calls us before we get our spiritual act together, and that's because He's telling us **now's the time** to get our act together and begin serving Him. Remember this. Mark it down and underline it. **God calls us just as much for our benefit as for those we would serve**. And one of the purposes of His call upon us is to sanctify us, to make us more like Jesus.

Most of you were here a few weeks ago when I shared about the ministry of Heidi Baker, missionary to Mozambique. And you may remember the story of how she recruited one of the leaders of their ministry. A pastor in the area had a moral failure and had to be removed from his pastorate. Heidi had no idea who would

replace him, but as she prayed about the situation, God told her to go to a certain tree in the community and there she would find a man to work with her. So she went, and sure enough, a Mozambiquen man was sitting under that tree. As Heidi began to talk with him, he shared with her that he had just gotten out of jail, needed a job, and his Christian mother had told him to go sit under this tree and wait for God to do something. At that point Heidi began to second guess God just a bit, but wisely decided to obey the Holy Spirit and just trust God to do whatever He wanted to do. So the man began to work with Heidi and that church, and soon became one of the leaders of the community-wide ministry. But the point is that man wasn't fit to be a pastor in anyone's eyes but God's! And when God called him to preach His Word to others, He had a marvelous plan to change that man himself.

So beloved; when God calls don't use the excuse that you're not ready, that you're not close enough to Him. If He calls then just yield yourself completely to Him, and by His grace He'll make you ready. He will sanctify you.

But there is something else about God's call that we need to see. God not only calls you to **sanctify** you, but there are times when God's call will **stretch** you, it will discomfort you, it will even disturb you. Just like Jonah, God could call you to personally reach out to an Assyrian. He certainly calls His church as a whole to reach out to the Assyrians. And I do not mean the Assyrians in the Middle East. Beloved, we are surrounded by Assyrians. They are those who do not worship our Jesus. They are immersed in themselves and their idols. And they are so different from us either economically, racially, or culturally. And they are lost and headed for eternal hell. But though we should have compassion on them, we despise many things they do and say – we despise their disrespectful manner, their dress, their language, their music, or on the other end of the spectrum their ostentation and arrogance – we see all of these things and recoil from them.

But our despising doesn't stop with what the Assyrians do and say. We despise them as well. We harbor feelings of prejudice or judgment toward them. And should God speak to us and say, "Go and witness to that lost one down the road who is of a different race, or who is so poor, or who is rich", many of us would react just like Jonah. Now, I do not say that God's call will always be to go to the ghetto or to Crown Pointe, though it might be. But I do say that God will often call you out of your comfort zone, He will often cause you to be inconvenienced, to make changes, to make sacrifices of things that are important to you. I ask you, when was the last time you went out of your comfort zone for the glory of God?

Most of you know our secretary, Debora Brown, and you know what's going on in her life. Debora has been a committed Christian for years, and about three years ago the Lord chose to stretch her and her husband David just a bit. They went on a mission trip to Romania and got much more from the trip than they bargained for, for God laid a burden upon their hearts for orphans in Romania that was bigger than life. And they began to go back to Romania about twice a year, and soon they became

state-side representatives for Bread of Life orphanage, raising support for them everywhere they could. And you know the rest of the story. God had more in mind for them than just fund raising, collecting clothes, and a couple of mission trips a year. God has called these two laypeople to sell their home in Pickens County, move to Texas, and become full time missionaries with Bread of Life. And they are going with no regular source of income. Talking about a stretch of faith! But I've never seen Debora happier than she's been since they said "Yes", to God's call.

There's one more thing about God's call that we need to see today. It will not only **stretch** us, it will **strengthen** us. Beloved, it is a spiritual law just as surely as the law of gravity: **faith grows best when put to the test**. Write that in your margin if you are a Bible marker. Faith grows best when put to the test. David wrote in Psalm 18, "I will love You, O Lord, my Strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer...I will call upon the Lord, Who is worthy to be praised. So shall I be saved from my enemies". That is a great statement of faith. But why was David able to make it. I'll tell you. It was because his faith had been put to the test. He had seen God deliver him from the lion and the bear, and he had seen God deliver him from Goliath, and he had seen God deliver him from the hand of blood-thirsty King Saul. Beloved, when you obey God's call to step out on faith and do something you've never done that's scary or unpleasant to you, He always strengthens your faith when you obey.

Jeff Kemp is a former pro football quarterback. And a couple of weeks ago I heard his inspiring testimony on one of our Christian radio stations. Jeff and his wife were committed Christians and he had a good job as a backup quarterback for the Seattle Seahawks. They had two or three kids running around the house, and life was good, but maybe just a little too good for them. Jeff says that they sensed a need for a stirring from God, he might have even used the words, "We needed to be stretched". So they began to pray that God would stretch their faith. They particularly wanted their children to see that God was real and that He hears and answers prayers.

Well, God took them up on their prayer. Soon afterwards Jeff went into training camp as the fourth string quarterback, and pro teams only keep three quarterbacks on their roster. The two quarterbacks ahead of him were both promising rookies, and he was a middle age veteran, so he knew that unless something unusual happened he would not have a job in a matter of weeks. Now, remember their prayer, "Lord, stretch our faith". Well, God was hearing their prayer, and God answered their prayer. For it was not long after that that the first string quarterback got hurt, leaving only three quarterbacks to start the season, and one of them was Jeff. **But**, the coach didn't want to throw either rookie into the fire so quickly, so guess who gets to be the starting quarterback that year? Jeff Kemp, who was only weeks ago a fourth stringer.

But the story is not over. Even though Jeff did a decent job as the starter, the number one quarterback got healthy again, came back about 2/3rds into the season, and Jeff was odd man out. He was cut from the team. So he goes home and tells his family as they are sitting around the dinner table, and Jeff says to his wife and children that they will pray and trust God to give him another job. Well, after that challenge, one of Jeff's sons, about six years old, begins to pray, "God, let my daddy get a job with the Eagles". Now, Jeff says that his son had no idea what he was praying. The only reason he said "Eagles" was because he played on a soccer team whose mascot was an eagle. But that was his prayer. So in a few hours it was lights out and all went to bed.

Now fast forward about fifteen hours or so. The phone rings in the Kemp house, and guess who was on the other end of the line? You know already. It was the Philadelphia Eagles, and they needed a quarterback. And so Jeff and his family moved to Philadelphia, and Jeff said that it was amazing how God worked out the details. They had a special needs child and Jeff said that they found a house within minutes of the only school equipped to teach him within hundreds of miles. Jeff was knocked out in a game, and they saw God not allow him to be seriously injured. But let me ask you, do you not think that there were some elementary school kids in Seattle that would tell you they knew that God was real, and that God answered prayer? And do you not think that Jeff Kemp and his wife were not strengthened in their faith when God answered the prayer of their six year old? Beloved, God's call upon your life not only stretches you, but when you obey it will strengthen you. And it will give you joy like no other joy this side of Heaven! Because you know that you've obeyed God. He is pleased with you, and He has supernaturally intervened to show you His approval.

So we've seen what happens when we obey God's call. God will sanctify us, He will stretch us, and He will strengthen us. But before we close we need to see the other side of the coin. What happens when we refuse to obey God's call? Look at verse 2 again. Jonah fled from the presence of God. Now, of course, Jonah was never literally away from God's presence. David wrote, "If I ascend into Heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in Hell, behold you are there" (Psalm 139:8). We can never escape God's presence. But, beloved, we can surely escape God's protection! We can surely escape God's peace. And what an awful, dreadful, place to be! What a place of misery! There is a word that appears in verse 2 and again in verse 5 and again in chapter 2 that says it all. Look again at verse 2. Jonah went **down** to Joppa, and then he went **down** into the ship. And then after he went down into the ship he further went **down** into the lowest part of the ship. Now look at 2:6 "I went **down** to the moorings of the mountains...", which means Jonah went into the depths of the ocean.

Beloved, that's what happens when you run from God's call. There is only one path away from God, and it is down! Down to dishonoring the name of Jesus. Down to the disciplining rod of God. Down, down, down!

As we close I ask you, what is the call of God on your life today? Is it the call of salvation? Is it the call to get out of the comfort zone in which you are so happily snuggled? To be willing for God to do something unusual in your life?