



Converting God's Friends: From Jonah to Jesus

TELFORD WORK

Some time ago I was invited to deliver a month of sermons at a church in my area. The theme I chose was “Bible Studies You Didn’t Outgrow.” Every week we revisited a Bible story we tend to relegate to children (Eden, the flood, David and Goliath, and Jonah), retelling it with the complexities and nuances—as well as the New Testament appropriations—that make these stories so significant to Christian faith. Jonah proved the most rewarding. As we tell it to kids, it is little more than Pinocchio-as-missionary. Jonah for grown-ups is a deep parable of conversion: not just the easy and swift conversion of God’s enemies, but especially the excruciating and uncertain conversion of God’s friends. Its themes go to the heart of Israel’s identity, apostolic mission, and even the ministry of the Son himself. Jonah shows us divine initiative to encounter the unfamiliar; it brings painful contact with others, costly mercy to enemies, frustration with circumstances and with God, obedience learned through suffering, and the stakes of either conversion to new life or retreat to the old. Even if Jonah is for kids, it is certainly not for the faint of heart. Its four brief chapters are delightful, accessible, and penetrating. Over the years this wonderful, disturbing, chillingly hopeful story has taught me a series of invaluable lessons.

Jonah shows that God’s truth goes beyond the factual. I don’t mean by this that Jonah is likely fictional and that fiction is compatible with biblical authority or even inerrancy, though those are worthy arguments. I mean that when God deliv-

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ers a message of judgment on wicked Nineveh, the goal of that message is mercy, because the deepest truthfulness of God is shown in our love of the other—both the Triune Other and the wayward neighbor—and God is “not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). Jonah’s displeasure at getting the most immediate and thorough results of any prophet in the whole Jewish canon owes to his insight that the will of his Master is not to condemn but to care (Jonah 4:2, confirmed in 4:10–11). That never makes God a liar. Yet if God’s word can be ambiguous—and “Nineveh shall be overthrown” is a rather open-ended remark (3:4)—then the ambiguity is not ultimately resolved syntactically but theologically, by considering the character and mission of the One who ultimately sends the message. Jonah is one sign among many that the life in which Scripture is rooted is the holy love that is God.

JONAH IS A HARBINGER OF CHANGE TO COME

The book of Jonah shows us the growing and developing scope of Israel’s mission as its goal approaches. As a child Jonah would have learned as Torah that Israel’s God is compassionate, gracious, patient, and kind—yet would still visit iniquity in no uncertain terms (Exod 34:6–7; Deut 7:9–10). Joel hears in God’s eschatological promises to Israel the old-fashioned mercy but not the old-fashioned retribution (Joel 2:13).¹ Jonah would find this new covenant pleasing enough when God promises it to the prophet’s own wayward chosen people. It fits Jonah son of Amittai’s role in 2 Kings, prophesying the expansion of the northern kingdom in the reign of the idolatrous Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–29). The blessings are out-running the curses!

Yet now God is engaging the enemies of Israel. Compassion and mercy belong to the God *of* Israel, not just *to* Israel. Jonah sees a sign of this even while he is sailing away from his commission, as a refugee. The storm God hurls at him scares the pagan crew out of its idolatry (Jonah 1:4–10) and into confessing the God of Israel (Jonah 1:15–16). The confirmation of this horrible premonition at Nineveh becomes unbearable. Jonah discovers that the curses haven’t disappeared after all, but have been displaced to the soul of the one offering the mercy.

We see this in the way Jesus’ fellow worshipers in Nazareth respond to his fulfillment of Isa 61:1–2a (good news preached to the poor) but not 61:2b (the day of God’s vengeance): his neighbors reject him, expel him, and try to kill him (Luke 4:16–30).

How will we respond to this new phase of God’s mission? What follows the joy or the revulsion with which we greet God’s good news? Jonah’s sudden ending mirrors the premature ending of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan: the prodigal is reconciled and celebrating in the house while the righteous son is self-exiled by the father’s mercy. It seems as if God’s people continue to ponder the implica-

¹Michael A. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 345–347.

tions of God's reaching out to a faraway city of menacing idolaters. Jewish liturgy sets all of Jonah alongside Micah's promises of God's faithfulness to Jacob in 7:18–20 as the *haftarah* (synagogue reading) for Yom Kippur (paired with the scapegoat and the purity regulations in Lev 16 and 18). In which of these directions—one purified nation, or one purified world—will this holy love finally go? And in which direction shall we?

GOD'S TRUTH IS PERSONAL, AND THUS INTERPERSONAL

The direction we pursue will either be God's or it will not. Athanasius's *On the Incarnation* and Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* both sense a dilemma that God faces after creatures turn against him. Letting the injustice continue would compromise God's own justice, but punishing it would annihilate his creation and give the devil something of a minor victory. The only way out from the dilemma is not to choose either horn, but for God to enter his creation and renew it at God's own cost. Sin robs God either way, so mercy inevitably costs God.

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In Jonah we see a messenger of God bearing a little of that cost, and hurting terribly for it. Jonah may be a self-parody by the end of the story, but there is a level of sympathy and intimate self-disclosure in God's final exchange with him. God understands the pain and the expense of caring for the lost: “‘Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?’ And [Jonah] said, ‘Yes, angry enough to die’” (Jonah 4:9). YHWH said, “You are concerned about the bush...should I not be concerned about Nineveh?” (vv. 10–11). This thread of commonality between the two—their common disdain for the unworthy, Jonah for Nineveh and God for Jonah, along with their common pity on the pathetic—is a tenuous communion of the same holy love. As far as Jonah is from God's heart, he is not quite beyond reach. Neither are we! Jonah is a helpful reminder both to romantics who think grace ought to come easily to us and to cynics who think we are irretrievable when it does not.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF FLEEING GOD'S SERVICE

Jonah prepares us for the difficulty of participating in God's grace. It turns out that resistance frustrates the servant more than the master. The story bursts with ironic testimony to God's sovereign love. Sailing “away from the service of YHWH” (1:3) to pagan Assyrians, Jonah ends up confessing YHWH to pagan sailors (1:9). Trying to hide out of God's sight (2:5), he encounters God of heaven, sea, and land (1:9). Resigned to a watery death, while underwater he glorifies YHWH as deliverer (2:1–10). Disdainful of the word YHWH gives him, he ends up in a conver-

sation with God outside a pagan city. Longing for Nineveh's destruction, he gives it a new lease on life. A prophet of YHWH to the "wicked" (1:2), YHWH's heart seems wicked to him (4:1). God's grace follows the graceless Jonah everywhere except—for the moment anyway—past the threshold of Jonah's own heart. Whether or not we like it, the good news is a reality to which we *will* finally witness. So perhaps we had better learn to love it.

JONAH: AN AMBASSADOR OF GOD TRAVELING IN HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLES

Clearly that will take some doing. Michael Jenkins draws on the work of Robert McAfee Brown to describe the "hermeneutical circle" of disorientation and re-orientation that happens when God calls us into the arena of the unfamiliar.² Our response leads to a jarring experience. This shatters our old understandings and creates the need for new ones. We turn back to the faith we know with our new questions, and receive new answers that direct us to new actions and set the stage for another turn of the circle. These travels are a kind of pilgrimage, both to our faith's historical center and to its eschatological frontier. They take us out to witness the Spirit's work, change us, and bring us back to a home that is now inevitably different. Lesslie Newbigin describes the crises and new creations that come from and lead to cross-cultural contact as a three-way exchange between the acculturated missionary, the cultural mission field, and Scripture.³ All three are susceptible to being transformed in the course of their conversation as the Spirit guides the Son's disciples "into all the truth," showing the church and ultimately the world that all that the Father has belongs also to the Son (John 16:12–15). Heeding the call of God converts both the traveler and the locals to bigger and better visions of God and God's plans.

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The book takes the audience along with Jonah through this hermeneutical circle. In fact, it takes us through it nearly twice. The first circuit capitalizes on readers' natural sympathy with Jonah. Having entrapped us by the tragic first act with its noble closing prayer, the sequence now repeats in a second act that retrains us to sympathize instead with God—and his beloved Ninevites and their cattle—*over* Jonah. The story converts us by repeating itself first as tragedy, then as farce.

For anyone too sure or sanguine about what that conversion might look like, Jonah's story holds surprises. Note the long sequence of frustration in each circuit:

²Michael Jenkins, *Invitation to Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001) 64–65; Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 30–31.

³Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

CIRCLE	FIRST CIRCUIT	SECOND CIRCUIT	EFFECT
Initiative: Word from God	"Go at once...cry out" (1:1-2).	"Get up, go...Go at once...proclaim" (3:1).	The Spirit leads us into encounters with the unfamiliar and apparently inhospitable.
Early Response	Jonah flees (1:3).	Jonah goes at once (3:3a).	This shocks our expectations.
Contact: Journey	At sea God brings a tempest (1:4).	Jonah walks into the city and preaches judgment (3:3b-4).	We usually rely on our prior resources and turn to what we trust in.
Mercy: Reaction	Heathen repent (1:5a, 6).	Heathen repent (3:5-10).	Our old ways and trust may fail us.
Frustration: Denial	Jonah sleeps (1:5b).	Jonah is grieved (3:10-4:1).	We may remain stubborn...
Result	Jonah is accused (1:7-8).	Jonah accuses God (4:2a).	...in the face of the failure...
Creed	Jonah confesses God (1:9).	Jonah confesses God (4:2b).	...of our old faith...
Proposal	Jonah opts out (1:10-12).	Jonah opts out (4:3).	...and resist conversion.
Suspense	The crew rows anyway (1:13a).	Jonah waits for the outcome (4:5-6).	Yet the word still gains a new hearing...
Frustration	The storm grows (1:13b).	The sun and wind grow (4:7-8a).	...as the Spirit's work of frustration...
Outcry	The crew hand over Jonah to die (1:14-15a).	Jonah begs to die (4:8b).	...drives us to desperation in the old...
Action	Jonah swims and the sea calms (1:15b).	Jonah complains and God responds (4:9-11).	...and opens us to trust in the new.
Obedience: Resolution	The crew sacrifice to God; Jonah prays and is saved (1:16; 2:1-11).	?	This can transform us in unpredictable ways into people of new convictions and forms of life...
Conversion: Loyalty	The crew vow to God (1:16).	?	...which offer new ways of seeing as the Spirit takes what the Father has bestowed upon Christ and declares it to the church (John 16:12-15).

This is what many conversions really look like. In his guide to evangelism Brad Kallenberg demonstrates how the process of changing one's perspective by exchanging paradigms can be confusing, painful, often protracted—and does not necessarily end happily.⁴ Jonah certainly fits that description. In the first circuit, his confession of God is resigned and distant (Jonah 1:9) compared to the pagan sailors' zeal (1:14). Only after going down to Joppa, down into his ship, into the stormy sea, and three days and three nights underwater does Jonah finally come to appreciate the fish as God's deliverance from the grave and a new opportunity to fulfill obligations (Jonah 2:3–10). In the second circuit, Nineveh throws itself into God's arms with the same zeal as the sailors, whereas the outpouring of grace and the psychological warfare that follows between Jonah and God produces not a joyful prayer but a death wish and a deeper lament than ever (Jonah 4:8–9).

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Our churches often prepackage normative conversion stories like Paul's, Martin Luther's, or John Wesley's for believers to conform to, but our congregations are full of stories across the spectrum of responses in Jonah. We receive grace with more ambivalence than we like to admit: “The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!” (Matt 12:41). The floods and storm of the first circuit are God's judgment and the fish God's deliverance. The plant of the second circuit is a sign of God's deliverance and its worm and winds warning of God's judgment. The order is important; God leaves us sober rather than triumphant precisely because the greater sign of God's mercy has exposed darkness deep in our own hearts. My own decision to follow Jesus looked a little like Jonah's response to God in 4:3 and a little like the king's in 3:9. The garbled theology that led to my strange young faith in Christ was transitional long after my confession was conventional. It was more a frustrated hermeneutical circle than a resolution. It was not until later that its shape became clear and the underlying issues began to work themselves out.

The story abruptly ends, unresolved, in a penetrating rhetorical question. But how does the *matter* end? The apocryphal character of Tobit represents one school of interpretation of Jonah, in which Gentiles come to faith through the razing of Nineveh and the splendid rebuilding of Jerusalem (Tobit 14). Tobias rests in peace at news of Nineveh's destruction, satisfied that Jonah has won his old feud with YHWH (Tobit 14:15).

⁴Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002).

WHAT JONAH SHOWS ABOUT JESUS

There is another way to read Jonah, through the story of a man whose journey of redemption resembles Jonah's own difficult journey. Christ travels Jonah's hermeneutical circle, too, in a rather different direction than Tobias. Jesus of Nazareth is the last figure we would expect to identify with the pouting prophet to Nineveh, yet the New Testament itself repeatedly points us in that direction.

Jonah puts the reality of faith, hope, and love unusually sharply: to obey a God who is Other will end in life with the other—including the unattractive other. No other life can suit this God. The Lord of all calls us in him to one another until God is "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). God's emissaries scale the walls of human separation whether they are fleeing God's presence and meeting pagan mariners (Jonah 1:5–6, cf. Acts 8:4–25) or resigned to God's service and watching pagans repent all around (Jonah 3:4–4:4, cf. Rev 11:13).

Anyone who romanticizes this contact has not really experienced it. Irritation, rivalry, fear, violence, status-seeking, lust, need, fatigue, and all the rest make human sociality as unsustainable as it is indispensable. Many prophets protest when they receive their missions or complain as they undertake them, finding any number of excuses for why they are unsuited to God's task. This little story discloses the reason. Its obscure Galilean prophet doesn't complain about the prospect of contact with the unpalatable objects of God's concern, he just flees. Jonah is a true picture of a prophet's heart as God's message begins truly to sink into it.

It is amazing enough that Israel would be telling this humiliating story. It is downright phenomenal that it would end up in its own Bible. And it is just incredible where Jonah shows up in the New Testament:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to [Jesus], "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign; but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth." (Matt 12:38–40)

Is Jesus really comparing himself to Jonah, the whiny runaway? Why would he reach down to just about the sorriest excuse for a prophet in all of Israel's Scriptures? Why not pick Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel? In prophet school, they don't teach you to be like *Jonah*.

Jesus is of course predicting his death and resurrection. But why cast it in terms of Jonah? Why take an impressive sign like resurrection and sully it with this tragic farce? Well, perhaps he identifies with his fellow Galilean.

Clarifying what that might mean demands that we consider two varieties of a common misconception of God. First, many imagine that people are loving and God is strict, especially in the Old Testament. However, our actions tell a different story: it is we who are harsh on those who oppress us—just as Jonah wants to be. *Jonah* didn't so love *Nineveh* that he gave them *God*. *God* so loved *Nineveh* that he

gave them *Jonah*. God sent Jonah to Nineveh, not to condemn it, but that it might be saved through him (cf. John 3:16–17). And Jonah didn't like it one bit. Jonah runs away because he can't tolerate God's compassion.

And where does Jesus fit into this picture? Many construct a pseudotrinitarian variant on the above mistake, regarding the Father as the one who holds a grudge against all humanity and Jesus as the nice one. The Father is fearsome and angry, so we're glad to have Jesus on our side to soften him up. However, what makes us think that love of God's enemies comes effortlessly to Jesus? He is living under Roman occupation. His own puppet king has overseen a mass murder of his fellow toddlers. Every day he sees Roman abuses of power against his people. By the time he is thirty, how many horror stories do you think Jesus has accumulated that would make our blood boil? Why should Jesus have found it easy to forgive the Romans who are crucifying him like they have crucified so many who came before him, and who would soon destroy his homeland and scatter his fellow Jews? Who's going to soften *Jesus* up?

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Jesus *is* a rather reluctant prophet when it comes to extending God's mercy outside Israel. He can be rather short with Gentiles, and when he does help them, he usually tells them that they are beyond the scope of his original mission. Maybe the Father isn't the bad guy after all, but the steady source of Jesus' sacrificial love and compassion. As Jesus himself prays on the night of his betrayal, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want” (Matt 26:39, cf. Jonah 2:8–10). Moreover, at that time Jesus tells his few remaining companions, “I am deeply grieved, even to death” (Matt 26:38). That is an unmistakable echo of Jonah's words *after* Nineveh had repented and God had withered Jonah's favorite plant (Jonah 4:9 LXX). Jesus puts himself in Jonah's place not just as one who will be delivered from a grave but one who will agonize over the consequences of that deliverance. He alludes not to the sympathetic first cycle or just the edifying halftime prayer but especially the troubling denouement. He has issues.

We have issues too, legitimate issues. Suffering from sin and watching others suffer tempts us to harden our hearts. It drives us to the position of those scribes and Pharisees who demand a sign from Jesus. They have legitimate issues too. Their hardened hearts want vengeance, so they demand that Jesus show himself to be their kind of deliverer. That is what makes them “an evil generation” (Luke 11:29).

My sign will disappoint you, Jesus says. It will trouble your souls even to death, as it troubles my own. Like Jonah, I am the gift to the world God loved.

"[A]s Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation" (Luke 11:29–30)—even to Israel's enemies (v. 31).

Many of us, especially in the past few years, have sensed a growing need, not just for the world but even, perhaps especially, for God's people: a cure for a hardened heart. I just don't have it in me to love enough. Here the sign of Jonah offers concrete help. When news of some new outrage begins to choke off my compassion, it helps that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). Jesus knows the torture both of suffering innocently *and* of bearing the burden of forgiving his persecutors. His appropriation of Jonah simultaneously honors the profundity of our injured sense of justice and reveals the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit to be unspeakable love for their world, unconditional love, grievous love—the only kind that can conquer our hardened hearts. It makes me love Jesus more than ever.

Jonah learned obedience through what he suffered. Jesus did too. Jonah's prayer while he waited to live or die in the belly of that fish (Jonah 2:2–9) could have come from the same Jesus who moves from Friday's "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46) to Sunday's "Do not be afraid" (Matt 28:10). However, for all the similarities between these two bearers of grace, there is a critical difference. God's love triumphed *over* Jonah. On the boat he displays the same cynical calculus as Caiaphas, wagering that it would be expedient to sacrifice one man for the life of the group (cf. John 11:50), and his utilitarianism only gets more pusillanimous until he is ready to abandon all Nineveh for the sake of his soul. But Jesus is "greater than Jonah" (Matt 12:41) in that God's love triumphed *in* Jesus. His human magnanimity grows and deepens in the infinity of his divine magnanimity as his story progresses. Jonah arises from the deep, but he pouts until the story is over. Jesus arises from the tomb and offers peaceable fellowship (28:9–10). He faces temptation but radiates light rather than letting in the darkness.

Then Jesus, the risen prophet, promises to go with us (Matt 28:20) as we bring his peace even to *our* enemies and help him gather into one the children of God scattered abroad (John 11:51–52). Jesus not only fulfills the promise of Jonah's first hermeneutical circle and supplies the missing resolution to the second, but begins a new and glorious third: "Go, proclaim" (Matt 28:19–20). His victory has freed us from our need to seethe like Jonah or revel in destruction like Tobias. Our faithful response as his disciples can be Jonah's long-awaited happy ending. ⊕

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