**Transcript**

**Bible Stories for Adults – Part 13 – Jonah and the Big Fish**

**December 16, 2022**

We’re continuing our series, *Bible Stories for Adults.* This is part 13. The story is *Jonah and the Big Fish.*

I call it *Jonah and the Big Fish* because many people have dismissed this book out of hand. They know there is no fish in the ocean that can swallow a person whole, let alone sustain a person once in a fish’s stomach. Of course, these same people dismiss the entire Bible, because all the stories we have covered so far, like *Parting the Red Sea*, etcetera, all seem impossible to them. But we have a secret they don’t know. It’s not because we don’t share it with them, but because they can’t receive it. Now, that doesn’t make us better people or more intelligent. Faith, which is the secret comes not from ourselves, but from God. And that helps us understand what God has for us in the scriptures.

It’s been a while since we did one of these Bible stories for adults, so let’s rehearse the Bible study rules we covered in the very first episode. There are seven of them.

* We understand God is communicating His will to us in the Bible.
* We understand that the Bible is perfectly truthful, just as it is. (That’s one and two.)
* Three is don’t confuse what people say with what the Bible says. There are lots of opinions about the Bible and what’s in it, but it’s what the Bible says that we’re studying today.
* The Bible is a guide for living God’s way – that’s four – which is His will for us.
* Five: The Bible is three stories in one big one.
  + The first story is how things got the way they are and how they will be fixed.
  + The second one is how God has dealt with people through the ages.
  + And three, how God is taking us from the way we are now to the way we will be the future.
* Six is that any given verse simply asks, “What’s the point?” What’s God trying to teach us here?
* And seven is take on the undergirding attitude – faith.

If we apply these, we can understand not only how God works, but also what He wants us to learn from any given Bible story.

Since this issue seems to be the biggest stumbling block – the issue of how Jonah got swallowed by a fish, let’s look at that first. It plainly tells us how it happened. Let’s look in Jonah 1:17.

**Jonah 1:17 –** *And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.* Now, that word *appointed*, it can also be translated *prepared* – somewhat the same meaning. So, this was a special fish. I can just hear it: “Yeah, right.”

There’s not much information about this fish. All we know is that this fish had a throat big enough to swallow Jonah whole, and it was a special fish. It was appointed, or prepared, for this purpose. It might not have had any teeth, because he was in one piece when he got down in the fish’s stomach. The only sea creature we know of today that might possibly be able to do that is several of the species of whale. But there’s no record of that ever happening outside of the book of Jonah. But that’s okay. The story does *not* say there are lots of fish that swallow people. It says there was a fish specially prepared by God to swallow Jonah.

Humankind prepares all kinds of animals for specific people. They breed cattle to eat. They breed sheep for wool, sheep dogs to heard sheep. But it’s a complete no-no for God to prepare a fish for His purposes. This fact can teach us that they don’t want to believe that God can do what He wants – way more than we can. So, people who don’t want to believe God tell us the whole story is fiction. And they tell us there was no such person as Jonah. It’s just a made-up story.

Well, there are two points to be made about that. Let’s ask the question, “Was Jonah a real person?” Well, I can offer you two proofs – both out of the Bible. One is in 2 Kings 14:23 through verse 25. Let’s start there.

**2 Kings 14:23-25 –** *In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years.* So, we’re getting a context here. We’re told about when the people lived and so on – how long they reigned. You can look in your Bible, if you know how to do it, and come pretty close to the exact year this is talking about. It says: *And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.*The Bible identifies Jonah as a real person in these verses.

Here's the second one. It’s in Luke 11:29. It says:

**Luke 11:29-32 –** *When the crowds were increasing, he –* that’s Jesus – *began to say, “This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*

So, Jesus not only believed that there was a man named Jonah, who preached in Ninevah – just as it says in the book of Jonah – but that his sign – the sign of Jonah – being in the fish for three days and three nights – was the sign that He would be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights, and that He would be resurrected.

Now, are all the skeptics know – and you and I can know, too – that, for the most part, no one survives for three days and three nights inside a fish. And we can know that no one comes back to life after through what Jesus went through either. That’s what the disciples thought they knew after He died. But just to show you how important it is to them who disbelieve, consider that most atheists believe the Bible is not authentic today. They believe, without doubt, that Homer’s *Iliad*, which is about eight hundred to a thousand years older than the Bible, and was, back then, equivalent to the ancient Greek Bible, so to speak, they believe that’s authentic, but the Bible is not. That’s in the face of hundreds more copies of ancient Bible texts, mostly all agreeing with each other, and many of them completely intact. Whereas, the *Iliad*, which veracity is never challenged, is considered completely valid though are hundreds and hundreds fewer copies that include many fragments. And considering that the Bible is about a thousand years more recent than the *Iliad*, it all adds up to an uneven playing field, created by the anti-God bias that has been injected into the world.

So, what can we learn from the book of Jonah? Well, I think the one that most people focus on is that it doesn’t pay to disobey. That *is* where the rubber meets the road. But there are other things to learn from it.

Did you know that the Bible is one of the most astounding testimonies to the brilliance and the power of God? And the book of Jonah is pretty well to the front of the books that talk about that. Let’s look at it.

The story starts with God telling Jonah to go preach repentance to the city of Ninevah. That might have been a hundred years before Ninevah captured Israel – maybe more than that. So, Judah was taken by Babylon, but before that, the nation of Israel, which was separate from Judah at that time, was taken by the Assyrians, whose capital, we believe, was Ninevah. That might have been about a hundred years before Ninevah captured Israel. So, Ninevah was a city in Assyria, and in Jonah’s day, the Assyrians were considered by God to be the worst of the nations, because of their worship of war and their brutality toward their captives. Jonah probably feared the Assyrians and hated them for their cruelty. You can read what Nahum, the prophet, said about Ninevah . He said, “Your enemies will clap their hands when they hear what has happened to you.” Nahum was prophesying their downfall.

So let’s read the story of Jonah, startin in verse 1 of chapter 1.

**Jonah 1:1-3 –** *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”* Okay. So, here’s what Jonah did. *But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish –* exactly the opposite from Ninevah *–  from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.*

So, here’s a guy who’s trying to run away from God. It’s a rather terse description. God tells Jonah to go to Ninevah and he goes the opposite direction. So, this is partly a story about how futile it is to disobey God. That might be the main one people focus on – especially when God wants us to do something for Him. But there’s more.

Once he’s in the ship out at sea, we’re told that God suspends His normal auto-pilot weather system – that gives rain to the just and the unjust – and deliberately sends a fierce storm to buffet the ship – to the point of coming apart at the seams. And the sailors, who were pagan – believed, probably, the gods of the Greeks and the Cretans and various others – began to cry out to their gods for fear of their lives. It got so bad they tossed the cargo overboard to lighten the ship so it wouldn’t set so low in the water. Meanwhile, the captain found Jonah, in the deepest part of the ship, sound asleep. It reminds me of Jesus, who went to sleep during a storm when He was with the disciples in one of their boats on the Sea of Galilee. The captain woke Jonah up and told him to pray to his God along with the others. And then, something happened which sounds strange to our ears. The sailors cast lots to see who was the cause of the evil that had befallen them. They believed – like so many people back then – that when bad things happen to people, it was always because of something that they had done. So, guess who the lot fell on? Yes, our man – sleepy head Jonah.

So, they were very curious about him now. Who was he? What did he do for a living? Where was he from? What was his ethnicity? When he told them that he was a Hebrew, and he worshipped the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land, they got really agitated with them, and asked him what he had done to make God so angry. I think we can see the incredible desperation and fear in them.

As the storm got worse, they said, “What can we do to you to calm this terrible storm?” And Jonah said to them, “Throw me into the sea and the sea will be calm, because I know that it’s because of me that this storm threatens the ship.” Now, under normal circumstances, if you’re out at sea and there’s a storm, it’s the luck of the draw. It’s part of God’s random system. But Jonah *knew* that he had done something wrong. He was running from God – a futile effort.

Now, Jonah had his faults, that’s for sure. But we can’t say he was dishonest, can we? So, this is interesting. Rather than throw him into the sea, they tried hard as they could to row him back to shore. So, they had respect for his life. But the storm was so strong that they cried out to Jonah’s God to forgive them and then they threw him in. And, as soon as they did, the storm ceased.

Now, as a result of this, in response to this obvious miracle in their minds, these pagan sailors, immediately in the face of this miracle, gave God thanks, offered a sacrifice and made vows to Him. What do you suppose those vows might have been? Well, “We know you’re the true God. We’ll always worship You. We’ll follow You till the end of our lives” – all the same things we say when we get baptized. So, this religious act, although probably short-lived, is a forerunner of what happened later in Ninevah. But then, God saved Jonah’s life by providing a biological submarine that came to his rescue. Not exactly. The big fish swallowed him, where he stayed for three days and three nights.

I was talking to a lady the other day, who lived in a rental house, and she had to move out of it. So, they were in a panic to find a place to live. They knew that they needed to find a house of their own so that wouldn’t happen to them again. So, she was very, very upset about all of this. She had planned on living in that house for quite a long time, I think. As it happened, they found exactly the house they were looking for in the very place they needed it to be. It wasn’t a fixer-upper. It was ready to go. She was telling me that she thought that having to move out of her house was a terrible disaster, and yet actually, it was a blessing.

That’s the same thing with the fish, isn’t it? If he had just not shown up at the right time, Jonah would have drowned. I’m sure that it wasn’t pleasant inside the fish, but in the end, he lived. So, God saved Jonah’s life by providing this fish vehicle for him. We can wonder if the digestive juices of this fish dissolved the hair off of him and made him pale, and if it melted his clothes so he’d be naked. We don’t know all the details about this. But while he was in the fish, amazingly, Jonah began to compose a poem, which he probably finished later. Here it is – it’s in the second chapter:

**Jonah 2:2-9 –** *“I called out to the LORD, out of my distress” –* so it’s past tense – the fish was past tense, right? – *“out of the belly of sheol” –* literally, the grave. He knew he was as good as dead, except for God, who survived being a meal to a big fish – *“I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me. All your waves and your billows passed over me.” And then I said, “I am driven away from your sight. Yet I shall again look upon your holy temple. The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!”*

Now, God apparently liked the beginning of this poem – I think that was probably the beginning of it – quite a bit, because, in the last verse of this chapter, we read that:

**V-10 –** God *spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah,* unceremoniously, *onto dry land.*

That takes us to God’s second run at Jonah. Listen to the similarity:

**Jonah 3:1-3 –** And God said, “Jonah, as I said a few….” No, it doesn’t say that. But He did say, as He said a few days ago, “Go to Ninevah and call out my message.” And guess what? Jonah did.

This time he got it right. God’s attitude adjustment had worked, as we will see. Do we wonder what he thought as he sat there on the beach, covered with fish vomit and whatever else? Maybe he thought, “If only I’d listened, I could have saved myself a lot of trouble.” Or, “God wasn’t asking a question.” Or, “I didn’t know it then, but I had no choice.” Have you ever had the inclination to do something for God and then run away from it?

Two examples come to mind to me. And they seem quite difficult to some folks. One is the Sabbath and the other is tithing. Like the people who don’t want to believe in God, they find all kinds of inventive ways to avoid believing they should do what God tells them to do. And these are just two of the most superficial examples I could think of.

So, while Jonah was afraid of the Ninevites, he was now more afraid of God. We say today, “With God, all things are possible,” but that might not have been as positive a thought with him at that time, because the thing that was now possible he didn’t really want to do.

What else can we learn from Jonah? I think one of them is, God always has His reasons for doing things. He does have a random system for life – you know, problems have them. But when He takes action, there’s always a reason for it.

We are told that the city of Ninevah, while a city of 120,000 – small by our standards today – was so big it took three days to walk across it. That’s what it took on foot. That’s still a big population for those days, and the only reason I can think that it might have been that big is that people back then did not cluster all their animals, like we do today. It was important to have the animals you were going to eat close by, because there was no refrigeration. But they didn’t have feed lots – just big fields. So, maybe that was part of the reason why a city of 120,000 took three days to walk across. That would be about thirty miles.

As it happens, Elaine and I live in a town of 15,000 – much smaller. And I believe it would still take a day to walk all the way through it. Of course, this isn’t like most towns you think about. Across the street from our Walmart, there’s about eighty acres of cow pasture. So, there you go. Some things don’t change.

**V-4-10 –** So, Jonah walked one day – a whole day – into the city and made this statement in a loud voice: “The city will be overthrown in forty days!” Have you ever seen those people on the street with the cardboard signs that say, “Repent, the world ends tomorrow?” I have, but only in cartoons. But I know they’re out there. So, we automatically, when we think of that picture, discount them as unbalanced. You could expect that people would just blow Jonah off and go right on doing what they were doing. But to our surprise, everyone who heard him believed God. They started fasting. They put on sackcloth – that would be, roughly, like wearing burlap today – itchy. And it says that they did this from the least to the greatest – everybody! The word soon reached the king and he called a city-wide fast, saying, “Who knows, maybe God will relent and not destroy us.” And sure enough, because they turned to God, He relented and did *not* destroy them.

Now, here is another big lesson from this story. We know that a scant 150 years later, the Assyrians captured Israel and were so brutal that they scattered them so much that they lost their national identity. Other people look at this story and they say, “Well, since it was only 150 years later, that was probably just a crocodile tear repentance – just a short-term repentance.” But, if you think about it, God was not dealing with the entire nation of Assyria throughout its entire history at that time. He was just dealing with those people in that city. None of the people in Ninevah, during Jonah’s life, were yet alive to wreak havoc on Israel later. So, could it be that their repentance was real? Well, Jesus implied that their repentance was real. God gave those people a warning, a chance to repent, and they did. So, the lesson here is that God loves *all* people and wants them *all* to come to repentance. And He is fully capable of working with individuals in a certain point in time within His overall plan.

So, why did He do that at this time and not others? Well, perhaps He was inclined to think they were ripe for it. And it appears that was the case. Even Jesus told the Jews of His day that Ninevah repented at the preaching of Jonah. And the Jews He was speaking to, who looked down on other nations as spiritually inferior, did not.

So, what kept the Jews from this blessing? Well, the Jews were notorious for looking down on other nations. They had lost sight of the fact that God had originally called Abraham and his family to set an example for the other nations. Their existence was to be evangelical. But they’d lost sight of that in their self-righteousness.

Do we ever look down on others who believe differently than we in matter of God? Well, this story is in there to help us understand we should never do that. *God* is the one who gives repentance, not us. God gave repentance to us. It wasn’t our idea. So, when we look down on other people, there are more fingers pointing back at us than are pointing at them. Better to live and let live, unless we would like to learn the hard way like Jonah did.

Now, at this point, you could end the story, but God’s not done yet. Here comes another shocker. After Ninevah repented, we read in Jonah 4:1:

**Jonah 4:1-2 –** *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.* And he gave God an “I told you so” speech. He said: *“…I knew that you are a God of compassion and mercy,* and if I went there and preached that You were going to destroy them, and they repented, then You would relent, and I’d look like a fool!

And the other side of that, too, is he hated and feared the Assyrians so much he *wanted* God to kill them all! And he was angry with God because he knew God was gracious and merciful, just as He said. So, he was thinking about this all being about him and how he was going to look. He had clearly forgotten all about being rebellious himself, and yet, allowed to live.

What was it that blinded him? This is a good lesson for us. Well, his own anger and his own desire to look good to others. He might as well have said, “You know, God, this really needs to be about me, not what You want.” So, God had some work to do.

**V-5-8 –** So, Jonah goes out of the city to the east and makes a shelter for himself. So, if he’s looking at the city from the east, that would mean the hottest part of day would come and he would be facing the sun. But God caused a vine to grow up with big leaves to shade him from it. It grew up in a day. And it says that Jonah was really glad to have that there. But the next day, early, God caused a worm to attack the plant, so it withered. What’s this all about? Well, it says a scorching east wind came up, and the sun was so hot that he grew faint. It says he built a little shelter, but apparently…you know, the hottest part of the day is late in the afternoon, right? So, the sun would have dipped below the top of his shelter. The day before he had that vine growing up in front of him, perhaps to protect him from it. So, when the sun got so hot he grew faint. It was a miserable place to be. It’s hot in that part of the country. And he grew really angry that the plant died. So, he asked God if he could die. And God responded with a question:

**V-9-11 –** “Are you doing the right thing to be angry that the plant died?” And Jonah said yes, he was. And then God asked him another question that reveals the main point of this story. He says, “You pitied the plant that you had no investment in. It just grew there in a day without any effort on your part. *Should I not also pity Ninevah – that great city – in which there are more than 120,000 souls who do not know their right hand from their left?*” Spiritually, completely oblivious – ignorant to God’s plans – people who had no chance to learn God’s way, except that He send Jonah.

So, what’s the point? Well, the point is that God loves everyone. And just as Jonah loved that plant, which is just a vine, God loved Ninevah. His plan is not just about us and our wants. Think about this. God has made Himself responsible for the spiritual success of everyone who has ever lived, including, but not just including us. Think about what happened. God used this guy with a bad attitude to help convert the sailors on the ship. And then, when Mr. Bad Attitude goes to Ninevah, God, in spite of Jonah, allows the entire city to repent and turn to God. That’s how God works. He can do amazing things! He doesn’t have to have a perfect person to go out and do His work – fortunately for us, right? We’re probably all, at times, in the same boat with Jonah in our attitude. But that’s the point of the story – one of them – is that you can never figure God out – how He works. He can ask us questions, the answer to which is obvious, and yet, it wasn’t obvious to us before He asked them. God knows best. That’s called being poor in spirit in the New Testament. That’s what Jesus said.

So, what happened to Jonah? Well, think. Who wrote this story? The only who could have would have been Jonah himself. There’s just too much personal, biographical information in there. It looks like, in the end, he repented, too. Ninevah got the message, the sailors got the message and Jonah got the message. So, God is good. And not just good, but incredibly brilliant and powerful beyond our knowing. God has a reason for every thing He does. Better to go with Him, even when we don’t yet know why.

This is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families, and the Church of God.