

# *Old Testament Core Seminar*

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## JONAH & MICAH

### **Introduction**

Good morning again. We are continuing to move through the Minor Prophets. Today we'll look at Jonah and Micah. One is a popular story – in fact so popular and so well known that the main theological point is often overlooked. The other is a little known prophet – but one who preaches a power message that adds a lot to our understanding of Old Testament expectations and hopes.

[PRAY]

### **JONAH**

#### **Context**

Jonah the prophet is also mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. That means we can place his ministry during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel. This puts Jonah in the early to mid 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. In Israel's history, this is a few decades before they are invaded by the Assyrians. Nonetheless, even though the Assyrians haven't conquered the Israelites yet, they have been a perpetual enemy and thorn in Israel's side for a long time. As you may already know, Jonah is called to preach to the Assyrians. That's the dynamic that really sets the context for the book. Assyria is Israel's enemy. Therefore Jonah doesn't like the Assyrians. But Jonah is called to preach to the Assyrians. And so Jonah doesn't want to go and preach to the Assyrians.

Redemptive-Historically Jonah is similar to all the other Minor Prophets we've looked at so far in that he is situated between the division of the kingdom and the fall of the North. What Jonah adds to the story of redemption is the emphasis that Yahweh is God over all the nations, not just the covenant people, and that He saves other people outside the covenant community. Now, these things are taught in other books too. But in Jonah it's *really* emphasized. What this helps us see is that in all this talk about God's wrath on the Day of the LORD, Yahweh's desire is primarily to *save*. He is a God characterized by grace and mercy. We should not think, as some falsely do, that our God is vindictive or somehow delights in the destruction of the wicked. Rather, He is a God who is eager to save, and the book of Jonah shows how positively active He is in saving people, pursuing them with grace even when they don't even know it.

#### **Theme**

As just mentioned, the main theme of Jonah is often missed because we get so enamored with the exciting story. Thus we make that exciting story the focal point, rather than seeing that that story is but the vehicle to convey a very profound message. And that profound message is:

*Salvation is Yahweh's sovereign work.*

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That's the message. Salvation is Yahweh's sovereign work. What we are going to see is that two major doctrines come together in Jonah. One is Yahweh's sovereignty. Jonah is *very* strong on Yahweh's complete control of His universe. And the other is that salvation is of Yahweh. He dispenses it. And Jonah brings those two doctrines together to say that Yahweh is sovereign over salvation. No one helps Him, and no one can stop Him. Salvation is the sovereign work of Yahweh alone.

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[This outline does not need to be gone over. The class only needs to be told that it is printed in their handouts so that they could have a little guide for their own study.]

### Outline w/ Pivotal Texts

- I. Jonah 1:1-16 – Yahweh saves those ignorant of Him.
  - II. Jonah 1:17-2:10 – Yahweh saves those disobedient to Him.
  - III. Jonah 3 – Yahweh saves those rebellious against Him.
  - IV. Jonah 4 – Jonah needs a lesson about the heart of mercy that overflows in salvation.
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### Theme texts

Perhaps a word of **apologetic** before we go any further. I'm sure that most, if not all, of you know the story of Jonah. He is called to preach to the inhabitants of Nineveh. Seeing that Nineveh is the capital of the Assyrians, he got on a boat heading in the exact opposite direction, as far from Nineveh as possible. When a storm came upon the ship he was on, the sailors threw him overboard. Then a great fish swallowed Jonah, eventually throwing him up on the beach very close to, lo and behold, Nineveh – at which time he finally went and preached to the Ninevites. The apologetic needed, of course, concerns the fish story. Some do not believe that that actually, literally, really happened. It is, after all, a little much to swallow. I mean, it's a bit incredible! So, many disassociate their interpretation of the story from any historicity.

Some say it's an **allegory**, representing the spiritual pilgrimage of every Christian in that we all go through a time of rebellion and God arrests us and brings us back to Himself. Others say it's a **parable**, which is more specific than an allegory, where Jonah really represents the nation of Israel fleeing from Yahweh and being brought back. Still others say it's a **midrash**, serving as an illustrative commentary on another part of the Bible. In this case, those who take this line of interpretation are arguing that Jonah is a fictitious story meant to illustrate and highlight Exodus 34:6: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." And of course there are many who say it's just a **myth**, believed to be true only by primitive people, but known by more intellectually advanced thinkers to be just the storytelling of a superstitious pre-modern culture.

Finally there are those who say that it is indeed true **history**. They say that there are no clues in the text to indicate that the author intended this story to be understood as allegory, parable, or midrash. Jonah writes his story to be understood to have really happened to him. The reason people treat it as allegory, parable, or midrash is because they need something to fall back on because they have already ruled out that something like this could really happen. And, of course, the reason people treat it as myth is because they really have no intention of believing the story (or much of anything else in the Bible) in any way, shape, or form. And if this story seems improbable and unrealistic, that's exactly the point: *it's a miracle*. True, people aren't

swallowed and spit up by fish every day. But that is exactly why it's recorded: it's a unique and extraordinary work of power by an extraordinary God.

Well, what shall we then say? How should we understand this story? What will be the key to figure out which interpretation is the right one? The answer is to find out what Jesus thought of the story. We are, after all, followers of **the Lord Jesus Christ**. We desire to think His thoughts after Him, and believe the things *He* believed. Many brilliant men have proposed many brilliant theories, but to be faithful, we'll follow Jesus as our interpretive guide. And besides, He is the greatest interpreter of the Old Testament of all time. So turn for a moment to **Matthew 12**. Look at **verse 40**. [READ] What Jesus sees in Jonah's story is that it is **typology**. What that means is that the story of Jonah *really* happened, and under God's providence happened with the intent to prefigure and foreshadow something about Christ. In this case, Jonah's experience was a type of Christ's resurrection. For only 3 days will the Messiah be dead before He lives again. Look at **verse 41** as well. [READ] Jesus believes that Jonah's preaching was also a prefiguring and foreshadowing type of Christ. Christ's deliverance from death was greater than Jonah's, and Christ's preaching was greater than Jonah's. In those two ways Christ fulfills what Jonah typologically prefigured.

And one last point. Do you see there at the beginning of verse 40 the words "**as Jonah** was...?" Jesus is saying that His resurrection is "as" Jonah's experience. Now, would Jesus have us understand His resurrection as allegory, parable, midrash, or myth? No, the Christian gospel compels us to understand Christ's resurrection as a real historical event. Working backwards then, when Jesus refers to Jonah and says that His own resurrection is "just as" Jonah's experience, we see that Jesus understood that Jonah was literally swallowed by the fish, and thrown up by the fish three days later.

The point of all this is that we will not **understand Jonah's point** if we don't understand what genre of literature he is here employing. And my conclusion, by listening to Jesus, is that this is real history, serving, under God's providence, as a type of the coming Christ. The resurrection is the greatest miracle of all. If you can believe *that*, then it should be no problem believing Jonah.

## [TAKE QUESTIONS]

### **Jonah 1:1-16**

**Chapter 1** is very much about Yahweh's sovereignty over nature, and His salvation of pagan sailors. Now, by "salvation" here I mean from earthly troubles. Look at **verse 4**. [READ] It's Yahweh who causes this storm. Trying to figure out what the cause of their troubles is we read this in **verse 6**. [READ THROUGH VERSE 9] Jonah's words there in verse 9 are implicit that Yahweh is the only God that there is. Well, the sailors suddenly fear Jonah and his God, and so we read this in **verses 15-16**. [READ] Thus we see that the sailors are saved from the storm that threatened to destroy their boat.

It's very interesting that in **Mark 4:41**, when Jesus calmed the storm, the disciples react the same way the sailors here did, with fear. Mark 4 reads "They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'" What conclusion does Mark want us to come to? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] He wants us to conclude that Jesus *is God*. In Jonah 1 it's Yahweh controlling nature. In Mark 4 it's Jesus. Implication: Jesus is Yahweh come in the flesh. Jesus is God.

## Jonah 1:17-2:10

Notice Yahweh's sovereignty over nature again in **verse 17**. Yahweh appointed the great fish to swallow Jonah. [READ] And it's Yahweh who commands the fish to vomit Jonah out. Look at **chapter 2, verse 10**. [READ] Jonah even sees his plight as being Yahweh's doing. Look at **verse 3**. [READ] And in it all he knows that Yahweh's purpose in His sovereignty is to save. Look at **verse 9**. [READ] And that there is really the theme of the book. "Salvation comes from Yahweh."<sup>1</sup>

## Jonah 3

In **chapter 3** Jonah finally gets around to preaching to the Ninevites. They repent, and Yahweh spares them. Another saving act.

## Jonah 4

**Chapter 4** is the climax of the book, and drives home the book's theological message. Ironically, it's chapter 4 that is often neglected in the telling of the story. Let's look at the **first few verses** together. [READ VERSES 1 THROUGH 3] Isn't that amazing? Jonah originally fled because *he knew* that if he went and preached, and they repented that Yahweh would spare them! We often think that he fled because he was scared of what the Assyrians would do to him if he approached them. Not true through. What he was afraid of was *Yahweh's mercy*! He didn't want the Assyrians to benefit from it! He knew Exodus 34:6 which he quotes here. [READ LAST PART OF VERSE 2 AGAIN] He knew that Yahweh is a God who sovereignly saves. And that is much of the point of the book. No matter how corrupt the Ninevites are, no matter how disobedient Jonah is, no matter any situation with winds, waves, and great fish, if Yahweh has set His grace upon someone *nothing* can stop it! He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy.

In verses 5 through 9 you can read about the little pity party Jonah throws for himself, and you can also read about Yahweh's continual providence over nature. Basically a plant grows up to give Jonah shade as he sits on the mountain side, and then Yahweh kills it. The point of it all is found in **verses 9-11** [READ] The story is meant to show Jonah how he too ought to be as zealous as Yahweh for the salvation of other peoples. To be Yahweh's people is to care for the nations the way He does.

Now, before I take questions, let me ask one myself. If Yahweh is so sovereign over the process of salvation even despite Jonah's actions (and let me also just make this question even more difficult by throwing in the doctrines of predestination and election), then what difference does it make whether or not we evangelize our neighbors or hit the mission field? I mean, if God is going to save them, and He doesn't need us, then *why does He need us*? What do you think?

## [TAKE SOME ANSWERS]

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<sup>1</sup> It might be interesting to point out that in the belly of the fish Jonah *already* believes himself to be saved! Cf. v. 6.

The Bible gives *a lot* of answers to this question.<sup>2</sup> But the one I want to focus on here from Jonah is this: God wants to change **our hearts** to be more like Him. He wants His people to reflect who *He* is. God is not content on just saving us. But He also wants to shape us into the image of Christ, to show forth His glory in the world. To do that He has to change our hearts. And what we see in Jonah is that God is putting Jonah through a lot to get his prophet to care for the Ninevites, to love his enemies, just as God Himself does. He made the Ninevites. He knows they are eternal creatures. Shouldn't Jonah also care for them and have pity on their condition? Yes, Yahweh could have gotten His message to the Ninevites some other way, with some other more willing prophet, but He loves Jonah enough to give him this great lesson about how widely God's heart overflows with mercy and grace and compassion to save even the Ninevites! Ought God's people also not love and care for others as well?

And so, the practice of **evangelism**, *doing* evangelism, is for *believers* as much as it is for unbelievers. The practice of it changes *our* hearts just as much as theirs. And that's what God wants: big hearted, loving, caring, sacrificing people who shine as bright lights in this dark world. So if there is someone you don't like...try sharing the gospel with them, and see if through that God doesn't help you see that person with an eternal perspective and so bring you to have compassion on them and pity them in their plight of not knowing Jesus, instead of grumbling against them for worldly reasons.<sup>3</sup>

## [TAKE QUESTIONS]

## MICAH

### Context

In the historical timeline, Micah is the latest of the Minor Prophets we've seen so far. In chapter 1, verse 1 you can see the names of kings who reigned during Micah's ministry. Even though those are all Judean kings, Micah prophesies concerning both kingdoms. And a lot goes on during Micah's time, there at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. As the book opens, Assyria is about to invade Israel. By the end, their invasion and the conquering and scattering of the Northern Kingdom will have happened. The South will still remain, but they too would have had to endure that same threat. Just to give you some bearings, this is also the time of the prophet Isaiah.

This invasion and dispersion of the northern tribes is of course a major theological conundrum. Those are Yahweh's people. Is He casting them off? Is He not fulfilling His end of the covenant? Well of course the answers to those questions is "no." Fault does not lie with Yahweh, but Micah's message is that this judgment could have been stayed had Israel kept *her* end of the covenant, and that there is still hope if she'll yet repent. But since she won't, Micah's message flashes to the future, to predict a day when a remnant of those dispersed will be saved through a future King in the line of David.

### Theme

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<sup>2</sup> There is the issue of means (Acts 13:47-48; Romans 10:13-15), the issue of God's glory (Matthew 5:14-16), the issue of God displaying grace through us (1 Timothy 1:15-16), the issue of obedience (Matthew 28:18-20), the issue of love for truth and therefore compulsion (1 Corinthians 9:16; 2 Corinthians 4:13-14), etc.

<sup>3</sup> And if that person is already a Christian, well you just need to repent. That's just a whole different issue. You don't have the option of picking and choose which of your brothers and sisters in Christ you're going to like and not like. Christ has called us to a community of love.

We can summarize the main point of Micah like this:

*Yahweh will save the remnant through a future King.*

Even though Israel is lost, all hope is not lost. You can hear in that theme sentence that Yahweh is still committed to saving His people. However, not every single individual of Israel will be saved. Only “the remnant” will. That word, “remnant,” is an important word to understand in the prophets because it comes up over and over again in just about *all* the prophets. And it always comes up in the context of salvation, so it’s very important that we understand what “the remnant” is. Basically the remnant are those who will still be saved even after the fall of the North and the South. And that remnant is defined as *those who repent*. It’s really as simple as that. The two nations are cast off, but those who repent will make up the returning, saved remnant. And this salvation will be accomplished by the great and final coming King.

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### **Outline w/ Pivotal Texts**

- I. Micah 1-2\* – Judgment is coming.
- II. Micah 3-5 – But the remnant† will be saved through the coming King.
- III. Micah 6-7 – Therefore repent and be saved.

\*Notice that each section begins with the word “hear,” reminiscent of Deuteronomy 6:4.

†The “remnant” is defined as those who repent.

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### **Theme texts**

The **basic structure** of the book sounds like this. Judgment is coming. But the remnant will be saved. Don’t you want to be part of the remnant? Then repent, and you’ll be saved! Let’s look at that in the text.

### **Micah 1-2**

Chapters 1 and 2 are a rehearsal of Israel’s sins and their coming judgment, very similar to much of the rest of the prophets. But before Micah is done, he flashes to the future. Look at **2:12-13**. [READ] Though they are about to be judged, the *remnant* will return by the hand of the king.

### **Micah 3-5**

Chapters 3 through 5 also look forward to this salvation. Look at **4:1-2**. [READ] Again, what we are seeing is that it has always been Yahweh’s plan that the Gentiles will join the covenant community in being counted among God’s people. That, of course is today. **Romans 10:12-13** tells us that “there is no difference between Jew and Gentile-- the same Lord is Lord of

all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

But the Lord’s work does not stop there. For, as we’ve talked about many times before in studying the prophets, there is yet another horizon of salvation. The great end-times return to the Edenic paradise is foretold in **4:4-7**. [READ] The phrase “every man sitting under his fig tree (verse 4)” is a symbol of the New Heavens and the New Earth. That’s why in John 1:48-49 Nathanael got so excited when Jesus said He saw him sitting under his fig tree! Nathanael concluded that Jesus must be the One to bring the eternally peaceful New Heavens and New Earth.

Indeed that is exactly what Micah himself says. Turn to **chapter 5. Verse 1** is about the conquest of Israel. [READ] But all is not lost. Look at **verse 2**. [READ] Here is the prediction of the coming King who will again rule over Israel. And did you notice there the reference to this King’s eternity? Sadly, the NIV really misses that here. But other translations bring out that the last phrase of verse 2 is literally “from the days of eternity” or “from everlasting.” Again, this ascribes deity to Christ. The Old Testament itself, not just the New Testament, teaches that the Messiah is divine.<sup>4</sup> However, **verse 3** says that Israel will have to wait for this day of their divine King. [READ] And **verse 4** glories in His work, as again we see His salvation will include more than just Israel, but will be enjoyed “to the ends of the earth.” [READ]

## **Micah 6-7**

Chapters 6 and 7 again have that courtroom motif, like the second half of Isaiah. These chapters go to define who “the remnant” are who will be saved by this coming King. It is those who repent (6:5, 8). And the book ends with these great words of comfort in **7:18-20**. [READ] And notice in those words how the emphasis is on the fact that the people’s *sins* is the real problem, not the Assyrians. It’s salvation from *sin* that the true people of God long for.

## **[TAKE QUESTIONS]**

Some application that we can draw out of this is, as always, **repent** of your sins and commit your life to Christ. For a far worse coming judgment than even Israel saw is soon coming. God’s wrath will break out against sin one last time in a final judgment. On that day, as it is today, salvation will only be found the King of kings, the Lord of lords, He who is from everlasting days of eternity, the Lord Jesus Christ. Because He alone has done what we just read of at the end of Micah 7. He alone has taken away the sins of His people when He died for them on the cross, and rose again from the dead. No other religious leader has ever even claimed that.

Further, I would amplify that message by exhorting us to take the **warnings** in the Bible *very* seriously. This was a *real* judgment Israel endured, and so will ours be. No one can be complacent and presumptuous in their religion. No one can get lazy because “once saved always saved.” That kind of language is *not* biblical. The proper way to speak of eternal security is to say that “those who are truly saved, and not just making a game of religion, *will* persevere to the end in faith.” And one of the ways God has graciously given us to persevere is with very stern

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<sup>4</sup> See also Psalm 110:1 and Jesus’ interpretation of it in Matthew 22:41-46.

warnings in the Bible. Israel heard one here in Micah, but the same idea is echoed again in the New Testament. Turn to **Hebrews 3**. Look at **verses 12-15**. [READ] We are given this warning not to play with sin because it can so bind us and enslave us if we play fast and loose with it. Take Esau for example in **Hebrews 12:15-17**. [READ] When he wanted to repent, he *couldn't!*<sup>5</sup>

And you'll notice that in each of those texts from Hebrews that the believing community is called to look out for everyone else. Thus, we are called to help and aid one another in our local churches so that *no one* falls away. We have to help one another persevere in faith, strong until the end – until we enter, once and for all, that final eschatological rest, and we all sit under our own fig trees!

### [TAKE QUESTIONS]

### Conclusion

Well, we've looked at half of the Minor Prophets. I pray that you've been struck by the LORD's holiness, our own sinfulness and need of a savior, the LORD's great mercy in providing that savior in Jesus Christ, and our great calling now to live new and holy lives as His disciples. Next week we'll look at three more before returning to the Major Prophets.

### [PRAY]

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<sup>5</sup> The teacher may want to insert here the story of the man in the iron cage from *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The teacher may also want to include a clarification that what is being said here is *not* that one can "lose their salvation," but that one way the Lord preserves *true* believers is through such warnings. Those who do not heed such warnings, and fall away, demonstrate that they *may* not have been truly born again in the first place.