

THE
GOD
WHO
IS

As Told by a Man Named Jonah

by Duane Smets

The God Who Is: As Told by a Man Named Jonah.

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CHAPTER 1

The God Who Gives Us His Word

Why the Book of Jonah?

Jonah is a fun book.

In four short chapters a ton happens. It has epic tales with all kinds of surprises, twists, and turns—ships caught in a storm, a gigantic fish, a whole city coming to God, and a crazy magic plant. Have you ever heard the expression, “it’s a whale of a tale?” That comes from this book.

Jonah is a great story and its doctrine is just as rich and full. It grapples with some of the most difficult theological questions you can ask and answers them by putting God on display. Many have mistakenly looked at it as a book about Jonah where his example is meant to teach us a moral lesson, but the book is really more about God and what He does. It’s not so much a biography of Jonah but a theography of God.

On top of that, the book has some moments where it really crawls under our skin, looking at how we operate as humans and what goes on in the psychology of our hearts. It looks at things like fear, sorrow, anger, bitterness, and resentment. This book gets into us deep.

Finally, and most importantly, it points to Jesus in a totally unique and powerful way. Jesus himself talked about the Book of Jonah and said it was the one sign that proved He was for real in what he came to do. This book documents something that happens in 8th century B.C. but teaches us that from God’s perspective, the events were setting the stage for something greater God had planned—the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the 1st Century.

Tullian Tchividjian wrote a great book on the story of Jonah I recommend called *Surprised By Grace*.¹ When interviewed by The Gospel Coalition he was asked, “Why do you say Jonah is one of the best books for helping us get a better grip on the gospel?”

Here was part of his answer:

“Most people inside the church, including ours, assume that the Gospel is something non-Christians must believe in order to be saved, but after we believe it, we advance to deeper theological waters. The truth is, however, that once God rescues sinners his plan isn’t to steer them beyond the Gospel, but to move them more deeply into it. After all, the only antidote to sin is the Gospel—and since Christians remain sinners even after they’re converted, the Gospel must be the medicine a Christian takes every day. For our church, it was through probing the story of Jonah that we came face to face with the fact that the gospel is not just for non-Christians but also for Christians.”²

In working through the Book of Jonah, we are consistently and increasingly exposed to pictures of ourselves. We learn what it looks like to continually turn to God, depend on God, and have God work in us through His mighty power, truth, and grace.

It’s a phenomenal book. Kids love it. Scholars fight over it. Literature nerds eat it up. If you have ever read *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville you might be interested in what he said about the Book of Jonah. Here’s what he said (Hint: for fun, read it with a pirate voice):

¹ Since the writing of *Surprised By Grace*, Tchividjian has sadly been disqualified and resigned from his role as a pastor, finding himself in need of the great grace which he wrote about. Regardless, his words are still worth citing.

² Tchividjian, Tullian. “The Gospel According to Jonah.” The Gospel Coalition. 11 Mar, 2011. Web.

Shipmates, this book containing only four chapters—four yarns—is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures. Yet what depths of the soul does Jonah’s deep sealine sound! What a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet! What a noble thing is that canticle in the fish’s belly! How billow-like and boisterously grand!³

I love that.

How Can We Know the Book of Jonah is True?

But how do we know the story of Jonah is true and not just “a whale of a tale?” There has been a lot of doubt and skepticism about Jonah for a number of reasons.

Most obviously, we have the issue of a huge fish—it swallows Jonah, keeps him alive for three days, and then gets spit up on dry land. It just sounds too fantastic. Then, we have the whole city of Nineveh repent and come to God. Surprisingly, this just sounds even more unlikely. Go figure. Then, at the end, there is a plant that springs up one day jack-and-the-beanstalk style and grows big enough to cover a full grown man and gives him shade. The next day it shrivels up and disappears. So now we’re just getting ridiculous. How are we supposed to know these are not just fairy tales? What (if any) reason do we have to know the book is true?

Basically, what we’re dealing with isn’t a question of whether or not Jonah is a fairy tale so much, but whether or not there are such things as miracles.

A first point to be made is fairy tales claim to be fairy tales. They start out with “once upon a time...” This book doesn’t. It starts out with a truth claim. What is that truth claim? “The word of the LORD came to Jonah”—not a fairy tale, but the true and trustworthy word of the LORD.

³ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Boston: C.H. Sidmends Company, 1892), 44.

So then, what is the issue with miracles? The first thing to recognize about them is they are all over the Bible. If you have a problem with miracles, you're going to have problems almost anywhere you turn in the Bible. Here's the thing: the Bible is a book about God and the Bible presents God as being The One who created everything in the beginning and is all-powerful and never stops being so.

If the God of the Bible actually exists, then there is nothing he can't do. Miracles are not hard for Him! He can exercise his supernatural strength and authority at any time He chooses because He is God. So, if there is a God, and He is anything like the God that the Bible describes, then everything in the Book of Jonah is entirely possible and within the bounds of logic and reason.

But suppose we don't want to accept the concept of God and His miracles because the world we know is not the world of His Bible? David Hume, the great skeptic, acknowledged that any rejection of miracles is based on experience. What he doesn't acknowledge is just because you haven't experienced something doesn't mean it isn't true. For example, I've never had the experience of seeing the Eiffel Tower, but just because I've never experienced it doesn't mean the Eiffel Tower doesn't exist. Things which are true stand true regardless of my personal subjective encounter with them.

As a final argument for Jonah's authenticity, we can make it real simple: in Matthew 12 and Luke 11 Jesus talks about the stories in Jonah and treats them as being completely true and factual. So, was Jesus wrong? Was he deluded or even lying? Saying Jesus was a crazy person who believed in fictional tales is a pretty accusation.

How is Jonah Relevant for Us?

Now that we've introduced Jonah and dealt with its authority and authenticity, you might still be wondering, "How is it relevant for us? What does this story have to do with us?"

First, if you're reading this and still not sure about the truth of Jonah's story, consider this: you don't have to believe everything that happens in the Book of Jonah in order to benefit from its message.

You can put your judgment about Jonah's historicity on hold and just look at it as a story meant to teach something and still get a ton out of it. Basically, even if it is just a fairy tale, it is a very, very good one. The themes of fear, anger, guilt, and freedom are universal things we deal with as humans. The picture of God it paints—of who He is and what He is like—shines brightly regardless of whether or not you accept everything that happens in the text. If you're reading this and you're not yet a Christian, that's okay, there is value in this teaching, and there are grace and time for your understanding of it.

One of the coolest aspects about Jonah is that it's not hard to understand and relate to. It was written about ten thousand years ago, but there's not a whole lot in it which makes it inaccessible to people in our day and age.

A big goal of mine is always to take us into the time of the Bible and get us into the shoes of the people who were first hearing and reading its words. A lot of times, some big things separate our own time from the Biblical past, but here in this book, we see an era where the culture deals with a lot of issues similar to the ones our culture deals with here and now.

In Jonah, we've basically got this self-righteous Christian who thinks he's better than everyone else. Plus, we've got a bunch of pluralistic pagans who think there are many belief systems, all are fine, and there are many different ways to God. Sound familiar at all? This book is extremely relevant and helpful for those of us who live in a culture not so different from the one that Jonah lived in.

What is relevant for us in Jonah? Everything. If you stick it out and read through this book, I promise you will not be disappointed. This is a powerful and amazing story and if you commit to reading it, it can change your life.

This is my prayer for each reader—as we work through Jonah, may your heart be probed and pressed, and may you learn more about yourself. Even more, I pray you would come to see the beauty and wonder of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—that we have a God who pursues us and died for us and rose to give us life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Duane Smets

Duane Smets serves as the pastor of preaching and vision at The Resolved Church in San Diego, CA. Duane has a Bachelors of Arts in Religion from Point Loma Nazarene University, a Bachelors of Theology from Life Pacific College, and a Masters of Arts in Theology from Talbot School of Theology at Biola University. In 2005, Duane planted The Resolved Church with Acts 29 Church Planting Network and currently serves on the board for the San Diego Church Planting Network. Duane and his wife, Amy, have three daughters, Adina, Skyla, and Chloe.