

The Gospel According to Jonah

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Stephen Witmer

Several years ago Michael Pollan, the best-selling author of some excellent books on food, hunted and killed a wild California pig as part of his effort to prepare a meal hunted and foraged in the wild. After shooting the pig, he walked to it, knelt, and touched it, saw its blood flowing onto the ground, and experienced a surge of emotions, including pride, relief, and happiness.

The other emotion he felt (but hadn't expected) was *gratitude*. But, in Pollan's words, gratitude "for what exactly, or to whom? For my good fortune, I guess . . . but also to this animal, for stepping unbidden over the crest of that hill, out of the wild and into my sight. . . . More than the product of any labor of mine (save receptiveness) the animal was a gift—from whom or what I couldn't say—but gratitude seemed in order, and gratitude is what I felt" (*The Omnivore's Dilemma*).

It's a sacred moment for Pollan, though he seems unable to connect the dots to God. He feels grateful to the pig, but also to someone (Someone?) for *giving* him the pig. In the end, he seems content to simply record the emotion he feels and leave it there. But what a moment and what a remarkable description! This passage feels like a groping toward the gospel. Pollan even articulates an awareness of *grace*—the pig was a gift more than a product of his labor, and his role was mainly receptiveness. The terminology sounds like some New Testament descriptions of the gospel. Someone has supplied a free, unexpected, and undeserved gift, and it feels right to be thankful. It's perhaps unusual to find a hint of the gospel in a description of a secular, liberal, "foodie" intellectual killing a pig. But there it is.

Shine More Brightly

There are even clearer hints of the gospel in another perhaps unexpected place: the Book of Jonah. I say unexpected because the events described in Jonah took place about 800 years before Jesus, there is no explicit mention in Jonah of any Messianic figure, and the main character of the book is a recalcitrant and sinful man. But Jesus himself invites us to look for hints of the gospel in the Book of Jonah.

He does so by referring to his own death and resurrection as "the sign of the prophet Jonah" ([Matthew 12:39](#)) and by comparing Jonah's experience with his own ("for just as Jonah . . . so will the Son of Man"). This suggests that the shape of Jesus' experience is roughly similar to Jonah's experience. If we know the stories of both Jonah and Jesus, we can immediately see the similarities. The raging sea and the cross are both places of

desperation and death. The fish and the tomb (in which both Jesus and Jonah lie for “three days and three nights”) are (quite unexpectedly in each case) a step along the way toward life after death. In both cases, God is the one responsible for this new life—he tells the fish to deposit Jonah on dry land ([Jonah 2:6, 10](#)) and he exerts his great power to raise Jesus Christ from the dead ([Ephesians 1:19-20](#)).

Jesus sees Jonah’s experience as analogous to his own. You might say that in this case, the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament (i.e. Jesus’ reference to Jonah) actually points to the Old Testament’s use of the New (i.e. Jonah’s story embodying hints of a greater story to come—the redemptive events most central to the gospel itself).

Are there other hints of the gospel in Jonah’s experience? Jesus’ self-comparison with Jonah invites us to ask this question. I think the answer is yes. Most of these hints, however, come by way of *contrast* between Jonah and Jesus rather than comparison. This is not surprising. It’s easy to imagine that the story of a wayward and disobedient servant of God would more naturally point by *negative* example toward the perfect servant of God who perfectly fulfilled his mission. Jesus himself says he is “greater than Jonah” ([Matthew 12:41](#)). The similarities between Jonah and Jesus show us the glory of Jesus and the gospel, but the differences cause the gospel to shine even more brightly.

And the differences are many. For instance, although Jonah describes his experience in the sea and the fish in terms that sound like death ([Jonah 2:1, 5-7](#)) he didn’t actually die in the raging sea or the hungry fish. That’s because his mission was to preach, not to die. By contrast, Jesus’ mission was to preach and also to die. Thankfully, Jesus had more than a near-death experience. He really did die ([John 19:34](#); [1 Corinthians 15:3](#)). Because he did, there’s a gospel to preach.

Moreover, the reason Jonah came close to death was *because of his own sin*. He himself says this to the sailors on his ship: “I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you” ([Jonah 1:12](#)). In fact, throughout the book of Jonah, we see the pagans in the story acting more honorably and righteously than the prophet. The prophet who despises non-Jewish peoples and wishes them harm ([Jonah 4:1-2](#)) is the recipient of their sacrificial kindness ([Jonah 1:13](#)). The prophet who is slow to experience a change of heart (and it’s not clear that his heart has changed even by the end of the book) sees pagan sailors ([Jonah 1:16](#)) and pagan Ninevites ([Jonah 3:10](#)) repent and draw closer to God. Jonah’s near-death experience is clearly because of his own sin. The cause of Jesus’ death is utterly different. He dies not because of his own sin but because of the sins of *others* ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#)). The righteous dies for the unrighteous ([1 Peter 3:18](#)).

Jonah didn’t willingly choose to enter the raging sea or the belly of the fish. He was thrown into the sea by the hands of the sailors ([Jonah 1:15](#)), but he knew it was actually God casting him into the sea ([Jonah 2:3](#)). And it was God’s decision, not Jonah’s, that Jonah would enter the fish: “And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah” ([Jonah](#)

1:17). In the case of Jesus, it is clear that God sent him to the cross (Acts 4:27-28; Romans 3:25; 8:32). But it is equally clear that Jesus willingly *chose* the cross: “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord” (John 10:17-18).

Jonah grudgingly obeyed God after his near-death experience in the fish and went to Nineveh to preach, although his heart still wasn't in it (Jonah 4:1-3). Jonah's almost-death was intended by God to win his obedience. But Jesus' death was his act of obedience: “For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:19). After the fish, Jonah's work was just beginning; God gave him a second chance to fulfill his commission (compare Jonah 1:1-3 and 3:1-3). But at the cross, Jesus could say his work was *finished* (John 19:30). God's redemptive plan was accomplished through Jesus' obedience. With less-than-ideal material to work with in the person of the prophet Jonah, God sovereignly used Jonah's *disobedience* to draw people to himself (Jonah 1:16).

What happened to Jonah and Jesus after the fish and the grave? Jonah's “resurrection” left him in an inglorious pile of fish vomit on the shore (Jonah 2:10). Jesus rose gloriously from the dead (Romans 1:4) and ascended into heaven, to the right hand of God (Ephesians 1:20-23). So although Jesus went lower than Jonah (he actually died), his ascent was infinitely higher.

Different Preachers, Different Responses

All these differences make surprising the very difference between Jonah and Jesus that Jesus himself highlights: the responses they received. The people of Nineveh accepted Jonah's post-fish preaching humbly, immediately, and completely. They repented when they heard his warning. Not so the people of Jesus' generation. “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” (Matthew 12:42). Although Jesus doesn't say it explicitly, the implication is clear: his own generation by and large did not heed his message.

Why does this comparison between Jonah and Jesus matter? It matters because it points us to our perfect Savior, a Savior who willingly died for our sins (rather than his own) and was then raised from the dead by God into unimaginable and eternal splendor. He was rejected by many of his own generation, but will be praised forever by his people. This is the gospel according to Jonah.

Stephen Witmer (PhD, University of Cambridge) is pastor of Pepperell Christian Fellowship in Massachusetts and adjunct professor of New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He is a Council member of The Gospel Coalition and the co-founder

of Small Town Summits, an organization that serves rural churches and pastors. He has written *Eternity Changes Everything*, the volume on Revelation in Crossway's *Knowing the Bible* series, *A Big Gospel in Small Places*, and *The Preacher's Greek Companion to Hebrews*. You can follow him on Twitter.