

## Jonah, the Manipulative Prophet (Jonah 1:17-2:10)

Intro: For years Sunday school teachers have taught children that God told a whale to save Jonah from death and that inside of the fish's belly the prophet repented with heart-felt prayers of repentance. Unfortunately, this version of the story doesn't do justice to the biblical text. Jonah's bad attitude traps him inside the fish where he doesn't act like a hero. *As Christians we should not try to replace God's plan with our own agenda for two reasons: 1) God will help us sink into our own little worlds; and 2) God will not put up with us trying to manipulate Him with Scripture.*

Let's consider the first reason why we shouldn't try to change God's plan:

I. God will help us sink deeper into our own little worlds (Jonah 1:17-2:1).

1. God's chastisement begins in our small world.

a. God chastises Jonah in his small world. Two clues indicate that God appoints the great fish to judge the prophet's unmerciful attitude. First, the Hebrew word translated "appointed" refers to instruments of God's justice. God appoints a plant (Jonah 4:6), a worm (Jonah 4:7), and an east wind (Jonah 4:8); all of which serve as an object lesson on justice.

b. The Hebrew word translated "great" has close ties with God's judgment. The great city practices evil (Jonah 1:2). God hurls a great wind (Jonah 1:4) and a great storm (Jonah 1:4, 12) after the prophet in judgment. Thus, when God appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah, He exercises judgment on the prophet.

c. Our small world may be defined as the place where we exercise our agendas instead of God's plan. In this place, God chooses to inflict judgment upon us. None of us will soak in the stomach acid of a great fish for three days, but if we practice our own agendas, we will experience horrible circumstances in our lives. God appoints these seasons to persuade us to step back into the world as He intends it.

d. Since Jonah continued to rebel against God's plan, God made the prophet Jonah's world an extremely small place.

2. If we rebel against God, our world will shrink into a small place.

a. The Lord confined the place where Jonah could carry out his own agenda to that of inside a great fish. Jonah tries to flee from God but to no avail. Most of Jonah 2 happens with Jonah inside the fish. His world shrank from the entire

outside world to that of an extremely small place. Later Jonah describes his descent into the depths of the sea by the way he prays inside the fish.

b. God places restrictions upon us as well. In our Christian language, we tend to say, "God closes doors". Our time in the belly of the great fish might be God setting up obstacles to thwart us from fulfilling our own agendas. God might turn our worlds into small places by limiting our finances, our transportation, or our housing. God can create an extremely small place from which we may exercise our agenda over His plan.

c. From Jonah's uncomfortably small world, he prays to God. His unmerciful attitude, however, transforms into prayers of self-centeredness.

Let's consider the second reason why we shouldn't try to change God's plan:

II. God will not put up us trying to manipulate Him with Scripture (Jonah 2:2-10).

1. Our attempts to manipulate God stem from selfishness.

a. If the congregation highlights all the places where Jonah prays with first person pronouns in Jonah 2, they will notice the selfishness of Jonah's prayers. In other words, Jonah uses a lot of I, Me, and My language. One might object and say, "Isn't this how we all pray?" The narrator, however, provides proof that this type of language unmasks Jonah's selfishness. One example will suffice.

b. The prophet Jonah quotes Psalms 118:5 and 120:1 when he prays in Jonah 2:2. If a word is placed at the front in the Hebrew text, that word receives greater emphasis than the other parts of the verse. This is called fronting in linguistics. Psalm 118:5 fronts "from my distress;" whereas, Psalm 120:1 fronts "to the LORD." In Jonah's prayer, he places himself first, "I cried out." Thus, even the word order of the Hebrew Scriptures points to Jonah's selfishness.

c. When we pray to the LORD from a place outside of His will, we simply miss the mark. Our prayers reveal the selfishness of our hearts. They tend to reflect what we want to happen rather than what God wants to transpire in the earth. Ultimately, God's way leads us out of the small world where we have chosen to live. His plan blesses all people, not just us.

d. Jonah quotes several Psalms to God in an attempt to change God's plan of mercy to Nineveh.

## 2. Our tactics to influence God may involve quoting Scripture.

a. The prophet Jonah tries to manipulate God by praying Scripture. He wants to make clear to God what the Psalms say about His plan to save Nineveh. First, God belongs to Israel, not the Ninevites. The narrator makes this clear in the statement that Jonah prayed to “his” God (Jonah 2:1). The prophet Jonah cries out to Yahweh, his God (Jonah 2:2) as opposed to the pagan gods. Second, the temple belongs to Israel. Jonah hopes to enter God’s holy temple once again (Jonah 2:4, 7). The Ninevites don’t have this privileged access. Third, Jonah brags about not worshipping vain idols like the Ninevites (Jonah 2:8).

b. Jonah’s prayer reveals his unmerciful, selfish motives against God’s plan for Nineveh. God plans to have mercy on Nineveh if they repent, but Jonah’s agenda involves judgment and destruction regardless. The prophet prays in such a way that reminds God about His chosen people and their privileged status above foreigners. Jonah anchors his prayers in the Psalms in nearly every verse in Jonah 2 (See my Jonah Commentary).

c. We need to avoid rebelling against God’s plan. He extends mercy to all people. We may not like it if God decides to pour out His mercy and invite our enemies to the cross. Jesus said what credit is it to us if we only love our friends and family. The heart of true Christians doesn’t shrink back from God’s plan to save their enemies. They embrace God’s mercy for others and thank Him for their place in His plan.

d. The great fish, disgusted with Jonah’s prayer, vomits him onto dry land toward Nineveh. In Jonah 3, the lukewarm prophet only partially obeys God’s Word.

In conclusion, *we should not try to replace God’s plan with our own agenda for two reasons: 1) God will help us sink into our own little worlds; and 2) God will not put up with us trying to manipulate Him with Scripture.* When we try to impose our agenda on God, He allows us to enter our own small worlds. God will close door after door to keep us there until we repent of our selfish attitudes. Unless we repent, our prayers only unmask our evil hearts and our Scripture application only serves our own agenda.