



## THE GOD WHO CARES

I love movies – particularly movies with a twist. *The Sixth Sense*, *The Prestige*, *Life of Pi* (actually, with *Life of Pi* you kind of get 2 for the price of 1!). All stories in which you *think* you know what's going on, until you reach the end. And then, suddenly, everything gets flipped, and you begin to realise: you don't! After which you want to watch the movie all over again just to spot the holes.

In a similar way, you can think you know what the Book of Jonah is all about ... until you reach the end. Because there is a twist in this whale of a tale. Let's take a look ...

### Jonah 4

In this chapter, Jonah prays another prayer – and in the process, shows his true colours. But not only do we discover what matters most to Jonah, we discover what matters most to God – and what it takes to truly represent Him to a lost and broken world. We've got to:

**1) See God as we should.** Look at the final verse of ch3: "So the LORD repented of the evil He had declared He would do to the people of Nineveh." Jonah's mission was an unparalleled success. And I reckon most of us would be pretty happy with that result, yes? Yes.

But not Jonah.

He is *not* a happy bunny.

English translations don't capture the first verse of chapter 4, but in Hebrew it reads: "And it was a great evil to Jonah's eye." In Jonah's opinion the calamity would have been a mercy, and the mercy would have been a calamity! And so he lives up to his name (*yonah* = dove, a symbol of peace, but also associated with moaning in Nahum 2:7).

Why is he so unhappy? Because Jonah had a problem.

He saw things in the complete opposite way to God.

Yes, Jonah believed in God, and yes, Jonah believed in God's judgement (no doubting it). He was a genuine *Ben-Amittai* – a 'son of truth.' But God's love? He could understand it in theory – but not in reality. And you can get Christians like that, too: people armed with an 'Armageddon eschatology', who would much rather take a 'bunker approach' to the world than take risks and reach out and see the world transformed.

For Jonah, it was all about winning an argument.

For God, it's all about winning souls. Don't forget.

**2) See others as we should.** So, Jonah lays into God, and says, in effect, "I knew this was going to happen! I *knew* I couldn't trust You!" And it's at this point you begin to understand the real reason Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. It wasn't a fear of ridicule, or rejection, or getting his head stuck on a pole – it was a fear of success. He didn't want them saved – he wanted them *dead*. He *hated* them.

Part of the rationale for that was that the Assyrian Empire was the epitome of violence and idolatry. In fact, Jonah's views were far from unique – people from other nations would have felt the same. But there was also bigotry and unforgiveness and a sense of tribalism in Jonah's heart. And that can happen to us, too.

Sometimes, as Christians we can have a view of others – particularly those 'outside' of our group or culture or church – which is out of sync with *God's* view of them. We may not hate them *per se*, but we might see them as being of less worth than us, or more trouble than us, or as a threat to us. But when God looks at people, He sees individuals He loves. Individuals worth caring about.

Even worth dying for (as Jesus, the greater Jonah, would).

Do we?

**3) See ourselves as we should.** Jonah heads off in a sulk and sits down on a hill to the east of the city, to see what God will do next. And then you get the second miracle in the book (the first one being the whale): a vine grows up overnight and Jonah gets some shade. But then, just as quickly, God allows a worm (or worms) to start eating away at the vine, and it dies. And Jonah is livid. Because he cares about the vine, right? No – because he cares about *Jonah*.

There's a school of psychology that says: if you want to find out what is most important to a person, get them to talk about the things they're terrified of

losing. And in a way, that's what God is doing with Jonah. In fact, in each chapter of this book Jonah 'loses' something: his security in ch1, his freedom in ch2, his reputation in ch3, his comfort in ch4. What is God saying? The Phoenicians and the Assyrians are not the only idolaters in this book – Jonah is, too. And the object of his worship is ... Jonah!

God is gently reminding Jonah – and us – that the priority is not us and our agendas, but the needs of a lost world ("Seek first His Kingdom," as Jesus puts it in Matthew 6:33).

If we are going to play our part in fulfilling God's mission, we need to remember: it's not all about me.

### **Jonah = Israel = Us**

So, the lesson of the Book of Jonah is: we all have a mission to fulfil, a part to play in God's big plan. But to truly grasp that, we have to see God, others, and ourselves, in the right way – and in the right order!

A thought to end on: there's something strange about the Book of Jonah. Unlike the rest of the Prophets, which are predominantly prophetic in content, Jonah contains just one prophecy, made up of 5 Hebrew words (3:4). So, in what way is this a 'prophetic' book? Answer: because the whole thing is! E.g. just as God told Jonah to proclaim His message to the Assyrians, God told Israel to be a witness to the world. Just as Jonah ran off in the opposite direction, Israel disobeyed God and rejected His commands. Just as Jonah ended up being taken to where God wanted him to be (in a whale), so Israel got taken to where God wanted them to be (in exile).

Jonah's story isn't just *his* story – it's *Israel's* story. And *ours*.

And that's the reason the book ends as it does, with a question from God: "Do I not have the right to care about Nineveh, that great city ... and lots of cows?" (What a great ending!) Did Jonah get the message? We're not told – perhaps because God's words are not just directed at Jonah, they're directed at the reader.

They're directed at *us*.

Will we get the message? Will we go where Jesus tells us to go? Will we be there for those who need Him? Will we love the people Jesus loves?

He is the God who cares, for all of us. Will we care, too?

Enough?