

Episode 231

Shea Houdmann

Jeff and Kevin are joining me again today as we're going through our Difficult Passages of the Bible series. We're going to be talking about the account of Jonah in the Book of Jonah. It's a pretty easy one to find if you're looking for Jonah.

Shea Houdmann

So the story most people think about, the first thing that comes to their mind is Jonah and the whale, although the text actually says God provided a great fish. So what exactly it was, we'll discuss that a little bit. But the Book of Jonah, the main point is not the fish. The fish is only a small part in Jonah chapters 1 and 2, where it mentions a fish swallowed him and then spit him out in chapter 2. But the story of Jonah is far more about a prophet who was called to go to a certain people he didn't want to go, and he went the exact opposite direction. And throughout the whole Book of Jonah is Jonah not doing what the Lord wanted him to, even when he obeyed and actually preached the message that God told him to deliver. He didn't do it with the attitude demonstrated by his reaction to those people repenting.

Shea Houdmann

So let me introduce a little bit. So in Jonah chapter 1, God tells the prophet Jonah to go to Nineveh and to preach to the Ninevites. Nineveh was a city. It was the most powerful empire in the Middle East at that time. The people of Israel knew that Ninevites, the Assyrians, were a great threat to Israel. So Jonah did not want to go. And so instead of going to Nineveh, actually got on a boat and was heading the exact opposite direction. So then Jonah's in this boat. God sends a storm to the boat. The boat's about to sink. The sailors there are actually trying to save Jonah's life, even when they found out he was running from God. Ultimately, Jonah says, just throw me overboard and the storm will go away. I think Jonah there was not hoping to be rescued. He was hoping to die. He would literally rather die than go to Nineveh. But God provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. Then it says Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. And then we get to Jonah chapter 2, and the fish vomits Jonah onto the ground.

Shea Houdmann

So before we cover any of the other aspects of the account of Jonah, Jeff, a little bit, what can you tell us about this great fish? Is this possible? What type of fish might it have been? Don't want to spend a whole lot of time on that, but

that's really one of the common questions we get is, is it even possible for any sort of fish or whale to swallow a human being?

Jeff Laird

Yeah. Well, unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how you want to look at it, Disney got it wrong. Pinocchio is not a biological documentary of what it's like to be inside of a whale. Most actual whales and sea creatures, they eat really, really tiny things. So their mouths typically are plenty big enough for a person, but their throats are not. They usually can't actually literally swallow into their stomach a human being. So the first thing we have to say about the entire account is simply that in the Bible, it says that the Lord had appointed, in past tense, a great fish, which could mean anything from God had picked one out to God just created one specifically for that purpose. So at the end of the day, God could have just created a fish to do this in the first place. So ultimately exactly what kind it was or wasn't, it doesn't really make a difference, but it is kind of fun to speculate about.

Jeff Laird

And if people are looking for the natural side, yeah, there's ways that you can do that. There's a famous story recently about a diver who was inside of a humpback whale's mouth for 30 seconds by accident. There's a woman who was swallowed or mouthed up to her thighs by a whale shark for a few seconds and was okay.

Jeff Laird

I find the whale shark thing interesting because if you really, really insist that you want to find the closest thing we can get, I'd go with the whale shark because they do swallow air. They put air in their mouths so that they can feed. They have a coughing mechanism that they use to spit stuff out and they do sometimes beach themselves. So if that helps you sleep better at night, then you can say, yes, it was a giant whale shark that swallowed Jonah. Or it could have been something that was what we would now think of as extinct that was still sticking around.

Jeff Laird

But the real point of it is that Jonah's trying to avoid God's will at all costs. He is absolutely dead set about not going to Nineveh. We'll talk about the reasons for that later. And God uses this dramatic way of saying, I am not asking you to do this. I am telling you, you are going to go and do this. And so what you were saying, Shea, even if Jonah was saying, I would rather die, just throw me overboard. God is definitely not giving him that option.

Jeff Laird

To me, the more interesting conversation gets into the subject of whether or not he was alive or dead. If we take the fish version, I can imagine how

horrible that would be to spend three days squeezed inside something, desperately trying to breathe whatever little bit of air that you get. And then there's the idea of him actually dying and going through that. So interesting to think about exactly what sort of animal it might have been. There are options, anything from sperm whales, to extinct monsters, to God just creating something. But the point is that there's nothing in the story that makes us look at it and say, no, this is just some sort of contradiction or can't happen. Something happened involving some sort of sea creature, and that's how he wound up where he was.

Kevin Stone

It must have been a horrible experience. Anybody who's ever cleaned a fish after fishing, preparing the fish for a meal, the insides of a fish would not be a fun place to spend any time. Jonah spent three days and three nights there in that belly of the great fish, the sea creature of some kind. Again, the Bible doesn't say whale, but it's some type of an aquatic creature. And as far as trying to identify what kind of a creature it was, I think it's barking up the wrong tree. That's not what we're called to do, I think, as we approach Scripture. We don't have to have all the details figured out. God told us what happened, that Jonah was thrown overboard in the midst of a storm. He was sinking down into the depths, and this sea creature swallowed him whole. And kept him alive. It was actually God's method of preserving Jonah's life. Otherwise, he would have drowned to death. So, God preserves his life by means of this sea creature and takes him back to shore and deposits him there so that he can finish the work that God had given him to do. As far as what type of creature this was, it doesn't really matter. It was something big enough, obviously, to swallow a man. And it was something Scripture says that God prepared for Jonah.

Kevin Stone

And we see a lot of God's preparations in the story of Jonah. God sends a great wind in chapter one. Literally, God hurled the wind there to rock the boat. And then we have God preparing the great fish. We have God preparing a plant later on and uses that wording, God prepared a plant or God appointed this plant. God prepared a worm in chapter four. God prepares a wind again in chapter four. And through it all, what's God really preparing? God's preparing a person. God's preparing Jonah. Because Jonah had, at the beginning of the story and all the way through, he has no compassion for the people of Nineveh. Therefore, he doesn't share the heart of God. Because God's heart was full of compassion for the Ninevites, God wanted them to repent, to turn from their idolatry, and to turn to the one true God. He used Jonah, this stubborn, rebellious prophet, to accomplish that work.

Kevin Stone

So he is working in the hearts of the Ninevites, but he's also working in the heart of Jonah, his prophet, and he is preparing him to bring that message. And again, as far as what type of creature this was exactly, Scripture doesn't say, but we do know that there is nothing too hard for the Lord. If he created the sea, and Jonah actually mentions this in chapter one, Jonah says that he fears the Lord, the God of heaven, who created the sea and the dry land. If God created the sea, it's no problem for him to create a creature in the sea. If he creates the dry land, it's no problem for him to create a plant or a worm on the dry land. Is there anything too hard for the Lord? And the answer, of course, is no, there is not. He can do anything.

Shea Houdmann

Kevin, well said, and that's a good point. So many of the questions we get about Jonah focus on exactly what we've been talking about for the first nine minutes of this episode. It's like, well, what was it? Is this even possible? And while you don't want to always just immediately jump to the miraculous route, if you believe in a God who is the creator of the heavens, the earth, and everything in it, God creating a fish or enabling a fish to swallow Jonah and then spit him out three days later, it's not a problem. So could it be a perfectly natural phenomenon like Jeff was giving different options for, something miraculous, God actually creating some sort of creature just for this purpose? Both of those are possible, but the difficulty of, I don't understand why some people obsess that unless I can identify a specific creature capable of doing this, I can't believe the story. When again, Jonah was written approximately 2,600 years ago, it's possible that whatever creature it was is now extinct. If it was in the Mediterranean Sea, it's been fished thoroughly for thousands of years. It's entirely possible there was some sort of creature we're not even aware of. So yeah, it's interesting, fun to think about, not fun to think about what it would have been like being in the fish, but fun to guess, speculate what it might've been, but let's not get so caught up on that detail that we lose the forest for the fishy tree.

Kevin Stone

Another thing that's cool to think about is that fish live a really long time and the bigger they are, the longer that they have lived. For a fish to grow to the size that could swallow a man, that fish is probably very, very old. And just to think about how God had maybe planned this all the way from this fish's beginning, started with small fry, and then this fish lives for decades and decades. And then at just the right time, just the right moment, God has that fish in just the right place. And so God had maybe possibly been working on

this miracle to save Jonah for decades. It just kind of boggles the mind, the forethought and the actions of God.

Jeff Laird

This is interesting to think about. It also means that I'm not going to be looking at goldfish the same way anytime soon, or koi in the koi pond, because now I'm thinking if I let this thing live too long, who knows what's going to happen.

Jeff Laird

One of the other things that's important for us to look at in Jonah, and when you get past the whole whale thing, is the idea that you have somebody who's appointed as a prophet or called a prophet of God, who is actively resisting going to talk about God to a particular people. That really is the more curious aspect of this whole thing. What happened with the fish was dramatic, but theologically, the more interesting thing is why would Jonah be so absolutely dead set against this? Now, there again, there's reasons for that.

Jeff Laird

Shea, you were alluding to the idea that the Assyrians were dangerous. At the time that Jonah lived, which is somewhere in the middle to late of the 700s BC, that was a time when Assyria was beginning to attack and threaten areas in the northern part of the promised land in Israel. The Assyrians were also very, very comfortable with their reputation for being sadistic and cruel and violent. Now, a lot of nations in that era were cruel and violent when they went to war, but the Assyrians were all about war and conquest. That was something that they just expected. This is how we do business. We go to war and we do conquest. Instead of going to a city and putting it under siege, the Assyrians would often do things like going to a smaller town, killing all the people there, and then taking body parts, skins, skulls, and things like that and displaying them when they went to bigger cities as a way of saying, this is what's going to happen to you. Or look at what we did when we captured this group. We cut off all the men's feet and hands and gouged out their eyes and tongues and all this really gothic metal kind of stuff. Well, the Assyrians would not only do those things, they would brag about them. A lot of that had to do with that psychological warfare. You have people who are thoroughly and completely pagan and they're presenting themselves as a threat to Israel. You can understand why Jonah would possibly look at a group like that and say, I absolutely refuse under no circumstances do I want to see those people redeemed.

Jeff Laird

An analogy that I've used for that for people sometimes, and it's a little on the rough side, but is the analogy of a Jewish person living in the early days of Nazi Germany and seeing all of the awful things that are happening to Jewish

persons. If you could imagine in the early to mid 1930s, God reaching down to a Jewish person and saying, I want you to go to Berlin and I want you to preach to the people of Berlin. You could kind of understand that Jewish person saying, no, I don't want to see those people redeemed. We're not saying that that's a good attitude, but you can understand where that impetus comes from. There's reasons to understand why Jonah would have been so just hatefully resistant to going to Nineveh. It was because of what they represented against his people. And as we found out, unlike some people, Jonah's attitude did not change. Unfortunately, he went there and he got exactly what he was not hoping for. And the last thing we see of him is him pouting. So strange to think about how that fits into him being a prophet, how that fits into him being called by God and some of these other things. But that's really kind of where some of the deeper, longer discussions can happen is about Jonah and his motives.

Shea Houdmann

For sure. In chapter one, you're not told why Jonah didn't want to go. And even the whole thing about how terrible the Assyrians were really not mentioned in the book of Jonah, something we know from history and something we learn later in scripture. But when Jonah eventually arrives in Nineveh and preaches, presumably the God, the message that God had for him, it was Jonah chapter three, verse four, yet 40 days in Nineveh shall be overthrown. Was that the entirety of his message or is that just a brief summary? We don't know. But to everyone's surprise, especially Jonah's, the people of Nineveh repent. Everyone from the king of Nineveh down to the lowest people, even to their animals, put on sackcloth and seem to have a legitimate repentance. So then God did not bring the disaster upon Nineveh that Jonah was hoping for and that he had predicted.

Shea Houdmann

And then chapter four starts with, but it displeased Jonah exceedingly. And then he says, oh Lord, is this not what I said to you when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish. That's the opposite direction he was going for. I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, oh Lord, please take my life for me, for it's better for me to die than to live.

Shea Houdmann

So here's Jonah, amazing, great repentance in the people, most successful one sentence sermon of all time. God used it. You think Jonah, yay, my enemies are no longer my enemies. No, Jonah said, I wanted you to destroy the city. It was like literally he'd gone out of the city and was sitting up in hell,

looking down, hoping to see a Sodom and Gomorrah, fire from heaven type of thing going on. But that's not what happened. He's like, Lord, is this not, this is why I didn't want to come. I had a feeling you were going to do something like this. So the fact that he was so bitter, so angry that he couldn't rejoice when an entire city of people repented and engaged in some sort of relationship with Yahweh, it kind of shows you where Jonah was at. And then his conclusion was like, I'd rather die than sit here and watch a city filled with my enemies repenting. Jonah was a messed up dude. He's had a lot of problems and you see it throughout the story, just his completely rotten attitude at multiple steps of the process.

Kevin Stone

Yeah, God wanted to save, God wanted to show mercy. He saw a city full of people, a nation full of people that was spiritually blind and had no idea of what the truth was. And God's heart of compassion reaches out to them and sends his prophet to give that message of salvation. And so God's wanting to show mercy. And then we have the prophet who wants to see judgment. He wants to see them condemned. He wants to see them get what they deserve. And God has to work in Jonah's life.

Kevin Stone

And I think we have to be careful of the same thing sometimes.

We see atrocities, we see horrible things happen. Our first reaction, I think many times is, well, I hope they get what they deserve someday. I hope that that judgment falls. And yet how much better if they would just repent, if they would know the mercy of God and turn to God's salvation.

Kevin Stone

I love the structure of the book of Jonah. If you just laid it all out in one line, you go right to the very middle of that book, then you would find the words, salvation is of the Lord. It's like nestled right there in the heart of the book of Jonah is that message, salvation is of the Lord. We have a God who saves. We have a God with a missionary heart who seeks and saves the lost. And we want to, our prayer should be that we share that same attitude, that we have that same desire to see people saved.

Jeff Laird

And Jonah challenges a lot of our thoughts in that way, that we should be with that sort of an attitude. And it challenges our thoughts about what it means to get messages from God or what a messenger of God looks like. And by no means is Jonah held up as a primo example of a really good prophet. And he's clearly not being approved of in the way that he's behaving. But it's interesting to think about the idea that Jonah had that sort of attitude and yet he was delivering a true message from God. So it's worth considering when

we look at our friends, neighbors, people in culture to remember sometimes that God does not excuse bad personality, bad behavior, but just because somebody is unsavory or just because they have personal flaws does not necessarily mean that they're not saying something true. Scripture does say that we know people by their fruit. So we can have a good understanding of a person's relationship with God by the way that they're acting. So it would be reasonable for people to say, Jonah, you got some issues with God. Well, he clearly did have those. And yet the things he was saying were actually true. So it reminds us that when we get certain messages, we really have to focus on the message more so than the messenger. Not that the messenger is not important, but that we do have to understand what's being said more than just taking it by the personality of who's there.

Jeff Laird

What's also interesting to me is the idea that it might have been that Jonah's attitude was exactly what was needed in going to Nineveh. Again, this is a culture that celebrated using mayhem and torture and violence and all sorts of gruesome things to intimidate their enemies and their opponents. And we know that when scripture says that somebody goes and preaches a message, we're very sure that Jonah did not walk into the city, say one sentence, and then walk out. And he didn't just repeat that one sentence. That's the message that he was preaching. I would imagine that Jonah probably went in there and said exactly what he thought and felt about the Ninevites. So I could imagine Jonah going into Nineveh and being very direct and very explicit about the judgment that he thought and hoped God was going to bring on the people. And then including that reference to saying that God says, if you repent, maybe not.

Jeff Laird

So it's interesting for me to think that Jonah might have been selected in part because he hated the Ninevites so much that when he went into the city, he was going to be speaking their language. He was going to be speaking to them or preaching to them in a manner that they actually would have accepted and received if he was really aggressive and really nasty about that. I could see the Assyrian mindset saying, that doesn't sound good, but it wouldn't have seemed as foreign as we might have thought. So even there, we see preparation. Like Kevin was saying, God is preparing these things beforehand. So it's strange to think that God could actually use somebody's hatred to mold them to be the perfect instrument of communication for a particular culture. But that seems to be what Jonah did.

Jeff Laird

Now, unfortunately, that didn't last forever. Historically, we know that a generation, maybe two or so after Jonah was there, Nineveh was destroyed in judgment. But for the time being, the things that he said actually made a difference. And I wonder sometimes how much of that had to do with his personality matching that intensity and anger that you get from Assyrian culture.

Shea Houdmann

I love that. I saw Kevin talked about numerous times in the book where God prepared this, God prepared that. Did God prepare Jonah that he was exactly the right person to deliver this sort of message based on some of the unsavory aspects of his personality that we see? Very, very possible.

Shea Houdmann

So before we close, I just want to touch on something briefly that Jeff mentioned at the beginning. In Jonah chapter two, as Jonah is in the great belly of the fish, he says something interesting. The waters closed in over me to take my life, the deep surrounded me, weeds wrapped around my head. At the roots of the mountains, I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever, and you brought up my life from the pit. So some speculate that Jonah actually died when he was in the belly of the fish. Biologically speaking, that makes sense. Obviously, as we talk about it, God can do anything, could preserve Jonah's life, but it would be impossible for a human being to stay alive in the belly of any underwater creature for three days and three nights. The Mediterranean Sea, there wouldn't have been water to drink, there wouldn't have been enough air to breathe, etc., etc. So then when the fish spit Jonah back onto dry land, the theory is that God brought him back to life.

Shea Houdmann

Now, is that what actually happened? I don't know. The Bible doesn't get that specific. I think it's possible, even plausible, that Jonah died and God brought him back to life. Yet another miracle that God performed in this book. But what's most interesting about that, in Matthew chapter 12, the religious leaders come to Jesus and ask him for a sign. Basically, give us a sign to prove that you are who you say you are. In Jesus' response, Matthew 12:39, But he answered them, an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. 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, someone greater than Jonah is here.

Shea Houdmann

So here's one, Jesus verifying the details of the story of Jonah. So if you're going to say that the story of Jonah didn't actually happen, well, now you're saying that Jesus was mistaken about it. That's obviously a very big deal to that. But the main point I want to bring out is Jesus compares his time, three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, in the tomb, to Jonah being three days and three nights in the belly of the fish. So Jesus was clearly dead for those three days and nights. His body was dead. Jonah, it would then make sense to fulfill the analogy that Jonah was also dead when he was three days and three nights. But again, I'm not saying that's what the case was, but if you're following the picture here, that would complete Jonah's illustration of what Jesus did in a more complete way. So what do you two think? I'm familiar with this theory, and which way do you lean and why?

Kevin Stone

Yeah, I think either way, you can make a case for it. Either Jonah died in the fish or he just was miserable for those three days. But either way works because even if he stayed alive during that whole time in the fish, for all intents and purposes, he seemed to be dead. I mean, he was gone from the world. You take Jonah, throw him into a stormy sea, he sinks down, he's swallowed whole by a fish. He's a goner, right? Nobody comes back from that. As far as we're concerned, he's dead and gone, but then God had another plan. And three days later, here's Jonah again, alive and well and preaching the gospel. It's amazing.

Kevin Stone

And then with Jesus, of course, they scourge him, they nail him to a cross. He's bleeding from every square inch of his body. They stick a spear into him and pierce his heart. They take him down, they wrap him up, they put him in a tomb, they seal the tomb, and he is a goner, right? Because nobody comes back from that. It's impossible. You don't come back from that type of treatment and dying on a cross. But God had another plan. And three days later, here's Jesus again, alive and well, preaching the gospel. God's plan was not thwarted. So whether or not Jonah actually died in that fish, the analogy works quite well. And it's a wonderful picture of Jesus' resurrection, that sign of Jonah.

Jeff Laird

Yeah, I can see either one of them working. I can see Jonah being transported by a fish in some way and then being tossed up onto the beach and going, wow, I'm still alive. And then God says, yeah, I know you are. Now, like I said, go to Nineveh. But I can't help it. I like the drama. I like the visual idea of Jonah being a dead body inside of a fish. And I have at times in my life, for health reasons, you've put things like acid or stuff like that, that

stays under a bandage on your skin to get rid of something. And it does some interesting stuff to your skin. So I'm imagining Jonah being in the belly of a beached whale on the beach and coming out and looking like somebody who's been through that exact experience, what that would have done to his skin and his hair and everything else like that. And that being the guy who goes to the Assyrian city of Nineveh, passed all the skulls by the doors and things like that, and brings this message of judgment. It adds to that interesting drama that's in there. So I could see how that would work. And theologically, it would certainly work for him to have actually died.

Jeff Laird

But I agree completely that it really doesn't make a difference one way or the other. I'm inclined to think that he probably did not die, that he was just suffering through that time when he was in there. And I don't know that I have a really explicit reason for it. It's just as I read it, my gut leans that way. But either one of those would work and either one of those would have lessons for it. But I have to admit that I do like the very goth metal idea of a semi-digested Jonah being brought back to life and going to Nineveh.

Shea Houdmann

Can you imagine the scene in the end of Jonah chapter 2, verse 10, the Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out into the dry land. That would be something I would love if there were video cameras back in that day and someone caught this. If there are witnesses there, imagine the looks on their faces, like what in the world has happened? That's beside the point.

Shea Houdmann

So the story of Jonah, as we said at the beginning, the vast majority of questions we get about Jonah is, what's up with the whale? Is this even possible? Is this a mythological story? All these things. We firmly believe it happened exactly as the Bible describes. So what sort of fish it was, what sort of whale, ultimately doesn't matter. We trust that God is capable of accomplishing something like this. But the main point of the story of the book of Jonah is when God tells you to do something, do it. And then when your enemy repents, the proper reaction is to rejoice. So what Jonah should have been doing is like, wow, the most evil people I know of, the people who are threatening to actually attack Israel are repenting and turning to the Lord. That's something to celebrate. And Jonah's reaction was the exact opposite. So you look in the book of Jonah in time after time after time and he's doing the exact opposite of what God wanted him to and the exact opposite of what someone should do in the situation witnessing what he was witnessing.

Shea Houdmann

Hope our conversation today about Jonah is helpful to you in understanding the story. Maybe taking your eyes a little bit off the whole thing about the great fish even though clearly we understand that's the most well known part of the story by far. This has been the Got Questions podcast on Jonah in the whale, the great fish. Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.