
Jonah: Doing God's Work

SCOTT HOEZEE

In a seminar I co-lead with Dr. Neal Plantinga, we read a portion of a Robert Caro biography of President Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson was a complex man, but an overall impression that emerges is that he was deeply flawed—opportunistic, egotistical, and constantly deceptive. Yet, in the early years of his presidency, Johnson accomplished tremendous good in founding Medicare, the Voting Rights Act, and the Civil Rights Act. This leads Dr. Plantinga to the observation: God can hit straight shots with crooked sticks. Well, the prophet Jonah was a crooked stick, if ever there were one, but as we will see today on *Groundwork*, God manages to hit a straight shot with Jonah after all. Stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we are now halfway through the book of Jonah. It is four chapters, and our series on Jonah, four programs corresponding to the four chapters, which are really the four dramatic acts...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If Jonah were a play, it would be a play in four acts; and today we are in act 3...in Jonah 3. So, let's just remind ourselves, and our listeners, Darrell, what has been going on so far.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, in the first chapter, God tells Jonah: I need you to go and preach against the city of Nineveh—that great city of Nineveh—and give them the word that they need to repent; and for whatever reason, Jonah says: No, I am not going to do that. I am going to flee to Tarshish. He is going to go the literal geographical opposite direction of the city he was supposed to go to. He says: I am going to get on a boat and I am going to go to Joppa; and for some reason, we are not really told why he doesn't want to talk about Nineveh, or why doesn't he want to go preach, but he just doesn't want to hear it. He tries to run away from God, which is actually ridiculous because you cannot run from the omnipresent God, right?

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is going to find that out soon enough. So, yes; he boards a ship so he is moving away from God...away from God's assignment. God sends a storm on the ship, though, and the sailors figure out eventually Jonah is the problem. Eventually, they don't want to do it, but Jonah says: I think your only hope to be saved is if you get rid of me and throw me overboard, so they do; and by all rights, as we said in the previous program, Darrell, Jonah was dead. I mean, he was sinking down into the depths. So, he was getting farther and farther and farther away from God—away from the presence of God; and he is sinking down into the grave; but, as we saw in the previous program, even though Jonah had tried to run away from God, when he gets in this deep trouble, he calls out to God and God sends a fish, and the fish is not the punishment, we said, the fish is

the salvation; and so, eventually the fish vomits Jonah up. I heard a preacher say one time that Jonah was such an unlovely, sour person, even the fish couldn't stomach him for long. But he gets deposited on dry land, and then, Darrell, as we begin Jonah Chapter 3, we hit the reboot.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, this is where we pick up, and it says: Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. ²“Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” ³Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city, it took three days to go through it. ⁴Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Jonah has figured out what you said a few minutes ago, Darrell, that running away from God is ridiculous. It is not going to work. So, that was a non-starter; so, when he gets his divine assignment a second time, this time he goes; and here again, we see a reference to three days. So, you know, we said in the previous program, Jesus made the analogy in Matthew 12 that Jonah was three days in the belly of the whale; Jesus was three days in the tomb; and throughout the Bible, Old Testament and New, three days is a symbol that marks out something. It is not, first of all, chronological time, literally three 24-hour days; it is more holy time, right? It is more *kairos* time; and whenever three days is used, it marks something significant.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, we've got three days of Jonah being in the belly of the fish, we've got three days where Jonah takes...that is how long it takes to go through Nineveh; and then Jesus picked it up when he said there are three days and three nights where he is in the belly of the earth being his death, burial and resurrection. So, the number three is definitely significant; but what we need to know...Nineveh is not the people of God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, Jonah is being used to speak God's Word in truth to a nation that probably didn't even know anything about him, probably worshipping foreign gods in the first place; and I find it very interesting, that even though that message is still true, that salvation is from the Lord, he is going to a particular nation and demographic that had no knowledge of it, which is unusual in the line of prophets, like you said earlier.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; if you look at any of the prophetic books...Zephaniah, Zechariah, Amos, Micah...they are all prophets speaking to the people of Israel; either to the northern kingdom of Israel or to the southern kingdom of Judah, but the prophets all speak to Israel. Now, there is one prophet, Nahum, who also, later will also have to speak a word of judgment to Nineveh, but otherwise, typically, the words that the prophets speak from God are directed to reform the people of God, and to accuse the Israelites of their sins; but here, for some reason, Nineveh is of concern, and we don't know why. I mean, there must have been all kinds of places on earth whose evil could rise up before God. So, why was Nineveh singled out? Why did that particular city get God's attention? We don't know. Maybe something like this happened a lot. Maybe lots of times God sent prophets to other nations, and we just don't know about them, but we do know about Jonah, and for some reason, this was his assignment.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is not made very clear at all to us why God would want to be interested in what Nineveh is doing, and how he wanted to intervene there. It also harkens back to what we talked about in the other episode about God's mercy. He wants to not give them what they deserve. He is trying to warn them so that they may repent; but also, I think it could harken to what God's heart is. His heart has always been for all nations to worship and glorify him, which we find in Isaiah 49:6 where salvation, it says:

“I will make you (Israel) as a light for the nations, that my salvation shall reach the ends of the earth.”

That could be one of the reasons why he is interested in Nineveh, being that they are not one of God's people chosen, he still wants to get that message across.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it goes back to the founding of Israel in the sense of the call of Abram in Genesis 12: (verse 2) I will make you a blessing to all nations. That was always going to be...and this is going to be really important in the final episode of this series, Darrell, when we get to Jonah 4, and we are finally going to find out the real reasons why Jonah fled from God in the first place; but that is something the Israelites needed to remember, but tended to forget. They existed as sort of God's beachhead to save all nations. But Nineveh...we don't know what god or gods they worshipped, but we are sure it wasn't Yahweh...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The God of Israel. They might have worshipped Marduk, the Babylonian god, or maybe they were like the sailors on the ship in Chapter 1. They just worshipped all kinds of gods, you know; they just believed in polytheism. There were a whole bunch of gods; but they certainly are not the covenant people of God...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They don't know God. So, why would they listen to Jonah?

DARRELL DELANEY

I have heard this saying, where it says, you know...atheists will say: I don't believe in God; but then the person will say: But God believes in you. So, the fact that the Ninevites are worshipping these other gods, and that is something that they are not actually caring about, does not mean that God isn't intimately involved and connected and wants to help them and save them; and so, why not...the "why not" question will continue to come back, but it doesn't mean that God isn't interested in them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This kind of goofy character of Jonah strides into Nineveh, delivers the message, which we didn't know the content of the message until now...now we know the content: Forty days; shape up or ship out; forty days and Nineveh will be no more. That was the message. We didn't hear that message in Jonah 1, but now we do. Will they listen? Well, stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are in Jonah Chapter 3; the third episode of our four-part series on Jonah, and we just heard that Jonah has finally, having resisted and fled God, when God tells him a second time to go preach repentance to the Ninevites, he does; but you know, why would they pay attention? Even today, right? I mean, sometimes if you are in a big city, Darrell, you know, you see these doomsday prophets walking around Central Park in New York, or Grant Park in Chicago, holding those big *the end is near* signs. It is almost a cartoon caricature; and, you know, we give these people a fleeting glance. Domsday prophets are a dime a dozen. So, why would they listen to Jonah? I mean, why didn't they give Jonah just a fleeting glance? Maybe they did, or what did they do?

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, what they did was they heard God's message clearly and they repented. So, even though Jonah didn't want to go, even though he got a second chance to preach it, I am not quite sure if he preached it with the most conviction possible, but even though he says: Forty days, shape up or ship out; for some reason, that message hit home with these Ninevites, and they repented because the message still has power in it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁵The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. ⁶When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

DARRELL DELANEY

I was thinking about this, and I believe this, that every preacher on earth who preaches the gospel of Jesus Christ wants to have this kind of response when they get done preaching. Everybody has to repent now, and come up to the altar, do an altar call, whatever it is. The response that Jonah got was one hundred for one hundred. Every single person, even the animals were called to fast. It is really powerful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is amazing. Sometimes when you talk to people after church as a pastor, you are shaking hands at the church door, and maybe you preached a sermon you were hoping would be really challenging, and then people say: I really enjoyed the sermon; sometimes I would want to say: Well, I was kind of hoping it would bother you a little bit, you know...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I was looking for a different response. Well, Jonah got the response that by all rights he was looking for. It was very, very effective; and I like the question the king asks in his decree in Jonah 3:9: "Who knows, (the king says) who knows?" God may yet relent. But, to those who have been paying attention to this book so far, Darrell, we know that God almost will certainly relent; because we said in the previous program that at the very end of Jonah 2, verse 9, it is the dead literary and theological center of the book, where Jonah says: Salvation comes from the Lord.

DARRELL DELANEY

Boom

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, who knows, the king says. Well, the reader knows. Salvation comes from the Lord; you people repent, you are going to get saved.

DARRELL DELANEY

And so, the fact that salvation comes from the Lord is the epitome of the mercy that he is showing. We talked about it in the last episode, how his mercy shines because he is rich in mercy; and for him to relent and accept the repentance of these Ninevites, who knew nothing about him, who cared nothing about him, shows that he is rich in mercy, and that salvation comes from him; even if the message is kind of watered down or mediocre or not the best effort all the time, I know when I preach sermons, sometimes I feel: Oh, man; I don't know if I did a good job there. I feel kind of critiqued...my inner critic goes into overdrive; but then,

those are the ones where people will come up and say: Man, God really used you that time! It is interesting that his mercy will cover over that message and make it powerful...make it strong.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Some of the sermons I really loved, the people thought were just kind of ho-hum; and the sermons I struggled with and I was so glad to be done with, then they come up and say: That was powerful. I would say: Really?

DARRELL DELANEY

That was your best sermon.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That sermon? I didn't even like it myself. But God uses us, right? So, there is hope for the wayward Ninevites; but here is something else that struck me when I read it this time, Darrell, that I don't remember thinking all the other times I have read Jonah, and that is one of the words of the king's decree in verse 8: Let everyone give up their evil ways and their violence. *Boom*, that is all he says. He doesn't give them a list; he doesn't give them examples, he just says: Give up your evil ways and your violence. Well, how did the people know what that was? Apparently, they did, but isn't it interesting that apparently, they knew exactly what the king was talking about. He didn't have to spell it out. That is kind of curious.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; it is curious because it could point to either Jonah's reluctance to tell the full message, or it could relate to: Okay, you know what you did; so, we don't even need to go there; we don't even need to name it because everyone knows the evil words of our hearts—the evil actions—because the Bible says in Jeremiah 31: I will put my law on their hearts. So, we know right from wrong. God has given us a conscience. I don't care who you are...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

We all know right from wrong. So, he probably didn't want to go there, but everyone kind of knows. You look in the mirror, you know what you did.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, you come clean.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The great Reformer, John Calvin, often talked about how God put the *semen religionis*—the seed of religion—is deep in the heart of every person, even though they are fallen...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Even people who say they don't believe in God or believe in God but never go to church, they have this moral sense in them. You could even go up to a terrible Mafia person, you know...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A real thug; a criminal; and if you said to this person: Repent...you should repent of your evil and your violence. If the person is honest, he is not going to say: What do you mean? What are you talking about? I have no idea what... He will know; he knows exactly...he maybe doesn't want to stop, but a criminal like that knows right from wrong enough to know that he is engaged in the wrong, and you don't have to spell it out for them, they know; and it seems to be the same for the Ninevites.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and it looks like the majority of them stopped all of their evil ways, as we look at the verse in Chapter 3 here, that says: ¹⁰When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented, and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

So, now...I mean, it feels like a happy ending; you know, because Jonah has actually batted a thousand here. He did what God told him to do; the people have repented and God has relented; so, it seems like everything is all great, but there is more to the story, isn't there?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; this isn't quite the end. It is the end of the story as far as the Ninevites are concerned. They are being saved. God does relent. Nothing bad is going to happen to them. We don't know that God communicated that directly; but you know, they were given a forty-day deadline, and I guess when day forty passed and God didn't do anything, they knew: We are saved. We are going to find out in the next chapter that Jonah wasn't necessarily sure that the Ninevites had gotten themselves off the hook either. He is going to camp outside the city and wait for the fireworks, which don't come, and that is the story of the fourth chapter; but for now, the Ninevites have done what Jonah told them to do, and God has relented, because God is, as you said earlier, and as we talked about in the previous program, he is merciful...he is compassionate; but all of this has implications for our lives today, and we will close out the program thinking about what some of those are in just a moment.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we are in the third chapter of Jonah, and we have seen Jonah on God's second attempt to send him to Nineveh to preach repentance to them or else. Jonah went, Jonah preached, and as you said, Darrell, was his heart really in it? Was it sort of like, you know, meh, repent, whatever. I don't know, but however he said it, the people took it seriously. The king declared a fast for animals and people; they had to wear sackcloth, cry out to God...who knows...he said, who knows...this God may yet relent, and he does; but let's make a few summary observations, Darrell, as to how some of this might impact us today; and the first I think we can talk about is something we talked about at the head of the program today: The idea that God can hit straight shots with crooked sticks; and we said Jonah is a crooked stick, but God used him, and got the job done.

DARRELL DELANEY

It's a beautiful thing because, I mean, we see Jonah going in the opposite direction, doing his own thing until he comes into the belly of the fish and comes to himself and repents in song to God; and that actually is relieving to me because I don't always do things right; I don't always have God's best agenda in my own forefront of my mind to get up and do immediately; and so, whenever I go off the rails, so to speak, I know that if I repent that God will show mercy; and that actually was something that benefited the Ninevites in this situation; it benefits us, and we never know who will be affected by our obedience to God when we come back as a crooked stick being made straight by God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and you know, I mean, a lot of times we think: Well, I cannot witness, you know; I am too weak; I am not eloquent; I am not good with words; I never went to seminary; I cannot witness for Jesus. Well, you know, God can use you...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God used Jonah, flaws and warts and all, right? And he can use us. There are a lot of people who will testify: I didn't think I could ever witness, and then I tried it and God moved and saved my neighbor...saved my relative. So, don't ever count yourself out. God can use you to witness and to preach good news to people; but a second thing, I think, Darrell, is that we should never write off other people either as lost causes.

DARRELL DELANEY

I don't know about you, Scott, but I don't know how to read the heart of a person...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

I don't know the hearts of people. I don't know where they are on the trajectory of regeneration with God; I don't know where they are in the sanctification journey; and I cannot say because I looked at the outer appearance that that person is not worth it, because God told us in 1 Samuel 16* that he doesn't look at the outer appearance...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

He looks at the heart; and so, we need to ask God to show us hearts, but he also knows that he has given us a commission to go and tell everyone anyway. So, we cannot judge a book by its cover, so to speak...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DARRELL DELANEY

And call people lost causes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; but we do this sometimes, and sometimes it is maybe to let ourselves off the hook so that we don't have to witness, but you can say: Oh, you know, Sally...my friend Sally...there is no sense telling her about the gospel. She is so cynical...she is as anti-religious as they come. Or, you know, look, I think the people at work laugh at me behind my back because I go to church; so, you know, they are never going to change. So, I am going to keep my mouth shut. I am not going to talk about my faith to these people. I am not going to open myself up to ridicule. There is no hope for them anyway. Well, you know, what Jonah 3 teaches us is that, you know, the swift repentance of the woebegone and wayward Ninevites tells you that you never...as you just said, Darrell...you never know where God's Spirit is at work; and you know, it is sort of like to book of Acts. The apostles could not keep up with the Holy Spirit.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Holy Spirit kept popping up all over...the Ethiopian eunuch, and the Spirit is here, and the Spirit is there...

DARRELL DELANEY

The Centurion...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Centurion, and Cornelius and his family, and you know, the Spirit was all over the place. So, there are no lost causes; there are no hopeless cases; and that is something that at Calvin Seminary and Calvin University we have been doing prison ministry...

DARRELL DELANEY

Okay.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we have an educational program at a prison here in Michigan now; and that is one thing we always say: We don't want a person's worst five minutes to define the rest of their life. They made a terrible choice; they pulled a trigger; they robbed a store; they made a bad decision, but the worst five minutes shouldn't dictate their life and we shouldn't write them off as though there is no hope. There is hope. Jesus can call all kinds of people.

DARRELL DELANEY

If we are saying that someone is a lost cause, we are basically saying God's arm is too short to save them...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

That he is limited in some way and that there is nothing he can do; and we do that when we feel inadequate sometimes, and if we feel we cannot do it, we will often attribute that to God not being able to do it, and that is a no-no. Moses found that out...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

We also know that God has a lovingkindness that transcends race, it transcends gender, it transcends social status and class; and that is the God who Jonah cried out to in the belly of the fish. He is the one who is in charge of salvation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and that is, I think, the third lesson here. So, don't write yourself off. God can use you to witness. Don't write other people off because God may be working in their hearts and is just waiting for you to talk to them; and then thirdly, don't limit the love of God, as you just said, right? There is no such thing that we can tell of a godforsaken people, or a godforsaken person. If God cared about the Ninevites, that just shows the reach of his love. He cares about everybody. We cannot tell...as you said...we cannot judge a book by its cover, Darrell...we cannot tell who is going to respond to the message. What we need to do is remain open to God's surprises. He is a surprising God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and we need to be obedient to his promptings. I mean, literally in the great commission he tells us to go. He doesn't say go and then you don't have to talk to these people...you don't have to talk to these people because they are lost causes; no, everyone who bears God's image is worthy of the love, the dignity, the respect, and the message of good news that might save their soul one day; and we look forward to Revelation, where all tribes, languages, people and nations are demonstrations of God's compassion that is surprising. A lot of people are going to be surprised when we get there; and Jonah has given us a brief reminder of God's lovingkindness for even Ninevites, a people who were far from him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, sort of to riff on the rhetorical question that has popped up several times in this program: Who knows? Who knows how God might use you, weaknesses and all?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who knows how or where God might be at work right now? Who knows who is included in the circle of God's care? Well, you know, you know who knows, Darrell? I think it is the one who remains open to letting God use them through his Holy Spirit, because when we are open to God's surprises, when we are open to God using us, then we can speak to all people that central message of Jonah, that salvation comes from the Lord. Thanks be to God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we conclude our study of Jonah, and discuss our sinful nature and God's great grace. Connect with us now at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Groundwork is a listener supported program produced by ReFrame Ministries. Visit reframeministries.org for more information and to find more resources to encourage your faith. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney.

***Correction:** The audio of this program misstates the reference for this passage as 1 Samuel 15. The correct reference is 1 Samuel 16:7.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/jonah-doing-gods-work>

Printed on April 1, 2025