

Dr. Gary Yates, Book of the 12, Session 17, Jonah – The Message and Structure of Jonah

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This is Dr. Gary Yates in his lecture series on the Minor Prophets. This is lecture 17, The Message and Structure of Jonah.

We're going to continue our study of the book of Jonah.

The exciting part of studying this book for me is that we've dealt with the background issues, but now we get into the actual message of the book. What is God teaching us through this book? Hopefully, we will be able to add something to your understanding of the book that all of us have known from Sunday school and from the time that we were children. But there's more here than just a Sunday school story.

There is some powerful theology that's reflected in the book of Jonah. So, as we begin looking at the message, I want us to think about what exactly is the purpose of the book of Jonah. I'm going to mention several things.

Beyond simply being a fish story and also beyond simply reflecting the fact that God is concerned about the Ninevites, I think as we look at the book of Jonah within the book of the Twelve, we also have to realize that the book of Jonah, in part, as part of this larger corpus of twelve books, is reminding us of the power of the prophetic word. It's also raising the issue of how people respond to the prophetic word. So, there's more than just a story about Jonah and a fish.

There's even more than just the story about Jonah and his interactions with the Ninevites and God's concern for the Ninevites. There is a reminder in this story of the necessity of proper response to the prophetic word. I think there's a key passage about the prophets and the way that people respond to those messages.

We've mentioned this passage before, but Jeremiah chapter 18, verses 7 to 10. In many ways, the book of Jonah is an actual example and demonstration of that theological principle at work. Jeremiah teaches us there that if at any time if the Lord announces through a prophet that he is about to bring disaster on a people if those people will respond and listen to that message, there is the opportunity that the Lord would relent, that he would not send the judgment, and that instead he would send a blessing.

The reverse of that was that if God promised good and shalom for people and they did not respond in the proper way, or they turned to sin, that message of blessing could turn into judgment. So, we have that going on in the book of Jonah as well.

God announces through Jonah, he tells Jonah I want you to go to Nineveh and proclaim to them.

In 40 days, Nineveh will be overturned. As you hear that message, there doesn't seem to be any conditions attached to it. There doesn't seem to be any kind of possibility that maybe God will relent and not send the judgment.

But there's this underlying understanding in the Old Testament that whenever a prophet announces something that is going to happen in the future, unless that prophet specifically says, the Lord has sworn an oath, this is what he's absolutely going to do, he will not change his ways, or unless the prophet says the Lord is not going to revoke what he says, there was always the possibility that if people responded and repented and turned back to God, there was the opportunity that God would relent and not send the judgment. So, the book of the Twelve, remember as a whole, is raising the issue, well, how did the people of Israel respond to the word of the Lord? These prophets carry out a ministry in Israel and Judah and then in the post-exilic community that extends for three to four centuries. How did the people respond? Generally, what we understand from the book of Hosea forward is that there is very minimal response or there is exactly the opposite kind of response from what God is desiring.

Throughout the book of Hosea, there's this motif where God is saying to the people, return to me, come back to me. But there's also the idea that there's a spirit of whoredom in the people of Israel that does not allow them to return to God. So, there's this problem of improper response, failure to return, that's raised in the book of Hosea.

And then in the book of Joel, Joel chapter 2, verses 12 to 14, the book of Joel at the front of the book of the Twelve as well, gives us an example of, again, a prophet calling the people to respond and the possibility that if they do listen to God, they can avoid the judgment that God is going to bring. The prophet says, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, with mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments.

Return to the Lord your God, for he's gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He relents over disaster. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave a blessing behind him.

So, there's always this possibility that if there would be a proper response, and we have an example of that in the book of Joel, where the people did respond to God, but for the most part, in the mind of prophets, the people do not listen. There's a pattern that works itself all the way through the book that we looked at in the very early stages of the course, where we were talking about there's repentance and relapse. So, for the people of Israel in the book of Joel, there is a repentance.

So, they turn back to God. But then, in the books that come after that, in the book of Amos, in the book of Micah, in the books of Zephaniah and Habakkuk, there's a relapse. Ultimately, that's what brings about the judgment of the Northern and the Southern kingdoms.

The second positive example of repentance is found in the mind of prophets, and here's the surprise element: it's the Assyrians who respond. Of course, then there's going to be a relapse with the Assyrians because there's going to be the judgment speech that the prophet Nahum pronounces against them. But here's the amazing thing: in the midst of this, as the Book of the Twelve gives us, throughout a 400-year period, three or four positive examples of repentance.

One of those positive examples is the Assyrians. It's the enemies of Israel. It's these wicked, violent people that we know about.

It's the people who oppressed Israel and ultimately brought about the exile of the Northern kingdom. They're the people that respond. And so, part of what I think the book of Jonah does as it functions in the book of the Twelve is that it's asking the question, why wasn't there more of this kind of response from the people of Israel? I mean, they had many prophets that went to them.

Jonah goes in on the first day of his message. He preaches a five-word sermon. In forty days, Nineveh will be overturned, and the people will respond to God.

Why wasn't there this kind of response on the part of the people of Israel and Judah? In many ways, this serves in the book of the Twelve as an indictment of the unbelief of God's own people. And it reminds us that if Israel and Judah had, in probably the smallest and most minimal ways, if they had come back to God, what kind of mercy and grace would God have shown to them? In the last lesson, we talked about the fact that I'm not sure that what we have in Jonah chapter three is actually a revival, a national turning to God. I'm not sure if even there is a conversion of the Assyrian people.

But even when there is the most minimal response to God, even in a sense when they're simply afraid of the judgment that is coming, and they cry out for God to show mercy, God is inclined to show mercy even in those kinds of limited examples of repentance on the part of his worst enemies. What would it have been like if the people of Israel had responded to the word of God? So, this whole issue of response to the word of God and the indictment of Israel is part of what's going on as much as the message of a disobedient prophet and God's mercy to the Gentiles. I think another issue and another purpose of the book of Jonah is that the book of Jonah is going to wrestle and struggle with the issue of the tension between justice, divine justice, and divine mercy.

Now, when we read the Old Testament, we think of a book like Job, and we think, wow, that's a serious book that deals with the problem of theodicy and justice and mercy and what happens to the wicked and all of those kinds of things. In the way that Jonah is parodied, we may not see that there's something similar going on, but we have a serious reflection on the issue of God's attributes of justice and mercy, and when God shows mercy to the wicked and good things happen to these people, and they are spared from judgment. What does that say about the justice of God? Jonah, why did Jonah not want to go? Well, the narrator very craftily and very effectively keeps that reason hidden from us until we get to the very end of the story, chapter four verse two.

Jonah says to the Lord, I knew exactly what was going to happen, and that's why I tried to flee to Tarshish. Not because I was afraid of the Assyrians, not because this didn't fit into my time schedule, not because I was afraid that they were going to flay me alive or anything like that. I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

And so, Jonah is struggling with this. If God shows mercy to these people, what is that ultimately going to mean, and what is that ultimately going to be? What kind of impact is that going to have on the history of Israel? As we read this in retrospect, and depending on the time when the book of Jonah was written if the exile of the northern kingdom has already happened, the people reading this know that issue. So, there is a serious issue here about God's justice and God's mercy.

I think as we work through the tension, it doesn't resolve all those issues, but it demonstrates something to us about God that I think it's important for us to see. God's inclination to show mercy, even to the worst of the worst, is even greater than his disposition to mete out justice. These are two aspects of God's character that we're going to have to deal with.

Ultimately, God will mete out justice to the Assyrians. Ultimately, we can trust in the judge of all the earth to do right, but God has a disposition to show mercy that is above even his responsibility and his inclination in his holiness to mete out justice. We see that in the confession of Exodus 34:6, and 7. God keeps hesed and compassion and mercy for a thousand generations.

God also holds the guilty accountable, will not excuse them, will not relent from judgment toward them, and often will punish the sins of the fathers on the children for three to four generations. God's inclination to show mercy is for a thousand generations. There's always a limitation on the justice and the wrath and the anger of God.

Anger may last for a moment, sometimes for the people of God, when God disciplines them, but there's joy in the morning. We're going to have to wrestle with this as we look at the book of Jonah, the problems between divine justice and divine mercy, and ultimately the sovereignty of God and how those attributes relate to each other and are ultimately worked out. There is also a reminder in the book of Jonah, I think a third purpose in the book, of God's heart and God's compassion and God's concern for the nations.

This is definitely a part of this, that Jonah, as one of the covenant people of Israel, celebrates the fact that God has shown mercy to his people. One of the central theological confessions of the people of Israel, God is a God of compassion, a God of these; he's slow to anger. We've experienced that in our own history.

Well, what the book of Jonah wants us to see is that God deals with the nations in the same way. God has a redemptive concern for the Gentiles, and it was often easy for the people of Israel to forget about that. Jonah, in a sense, Yonah, the word for dove, does represent in some ways the people of Israel as a whole.

The people of Israel were certainly not called to go out and be missionaries and to preach to the nations, but they were given the role that they were to be a kingdom of priests who would ultimately mediate God's blessing to the nations. If the people of Israel celebrated their confession that God is a God of hesed and compassion and mercy toward us, then they should also celebrate the fact that God's mercy and compassion extend to the nations. God is willing to deal with those people in the same way that he deals with the people of Israel.

The people of Israel cannot hold God's mercy, God's grace, and God's compassion to themselves. It's not just for them. God has a redemptive concern for the nations.

I think many people forget that when they read the Old Testament themselves. One writer once made the comment that the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament is that the New Testament is missional. That is a major mistake.

You have missed a big part of the story. Christopher Wright has brought this out very effectively in his book *The Mission of God*, which deals with the Old and New Testament theology of God's mission. There is a story of mission and God's concern for the nations that runs all the way through the Old Testament.

Jonah stands in that trajectory and in that line. Let's think about this a little bit. We're going to go back to the very beginning of the story of salvation history.

In the beginning, God blesses humanity. That's what it says in Genesis 1.26-28. God makes him his image, gives him the privilege to rule and reign as his vice-regent. Sin interrupts that story.

Sin interferes with God's design. God must ultimately bring judgment. But throughout the Old Testament, what we have are a series of covenants where God is working ultimately to restore that blessing, not just to the people of Israel, but to all of humanity.

After the Tower of Babel, there was a significant rebellion against God. There is disobedience to his commands, but God does not turn away from his concern for the nations at that point. He raises up Abraham so that Abraham and his descendants will become the instrument of that blessing.

Someone has said how odd of God to choose the Jews. He's like, why does he focus on these people throughout the Old Testament? But the Old Testament is not just a story about God's concern for Israel. There is a missional story behind all of this where God is working to ultimately reach the nations.

God says to Abraham, through you, all nations on earth will be blessed. So they're to be the instrument of that blessing. That's reflected later in the book of Genesis in the role that Joseph plays and the blessing that he provides for the people of Egypt.

That's what God's people were supposed to be about. When Abraham's people leave Egypt and God performs this great deliverance, the Exodus rescues them out of their slavery, making them his chosen people and forming them as a nation. The book of Exodus tells us there was a mixed multitude.

There were actually Egyptians who joined themselves to the Lord and left and were part of that deliverance as Israel made its journey to the promised land. God told the Israelites that they were to treat aliens that came into their land with respect, and they were to be allowed to be part of the worshipping community if they gave their loyalty and allegiance to the Lord. There's a redemptive concern for the nations.

In the genealogy of David, there is a Moabitess by the name of Ruth. She becomes a significant part of the story of salvation history. She becomes a part of the people of God when she tells Naomi, your God will be my God, and your people will be my people.

The miracles of Elijah and Elisha often benefit foreigners because they need to know about the greatness and the glory of God. The Syrian widow that Elijah ministers to experiences the blessing of God. At the same time, Israel is experiencing the cursing of God because they are worshipping the Baals.

The healing of leprosy for Naaman, he finds out about the greatness of the Lord and he goes back to his land and promises to worship the Lord. God's blessings are not just reserved for Israel. The role that God had given to Israel, Exodus 19 verses 5 and

6: I've carried you on eagle's wings, I've brought you to myself, you're my chosen people, but I have called you to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests.

Their role as being a priestly nation was to mediate God's blessing to other people. In a sense, even the geography of where God placed Israel, he put them in this land bridge between these great superpowers. As those nations came by and as they passed through, they were to see the Lord and they were to come in contact with the people of Israel and learn about the ways and the greatness of God.

Deuteronomy chapter 4, why did God give Israel the law? He said, I have given you this law, and as you observe it and obey it and keep it and follow the dictates that God has given to you, the nations around you will say, what kind of people has ever received a law like this? What kind of God gave these kinds of good and holy and righteous commands to his people? What kind of God or what kind of people has a God present and near with them like the people of Israel? What was to happen is that Israel lived this distinctive paradigmatic life for the nations and represented this is what a holy nation looks like. As the people saw the blessing that the God of Israel poured out upon them, they would say to the people of Israel, tell us about your God. We want to know him.

We want to know a God that is with you. We want to know the God that has given you these good commands. We want to share in the blessings that you've given to us.

In fact, sometimes the covenant promise that's given to Abraham is not just the idea that all the nations of the earth will be blessed, but the word blessed is often put in the Hithpiel stem that has a reflexive nuance and the idea there is in you all the nations will bless themselves. In other words, they would see the blessing that God gave to Abraham, and they would say, may you be blessed like Abraham because the God that Abraham serves is a God that we want to know. The sad thing is that Israel was given this role, this blessing, kind of this missionary responsibility, but they failed to live up to that.

I think the book of Jonah is reflecting on the fact that Israel did not fully understand the idea that the grace and the blessing and the salvation that God had given to them was also intended for the nations as well. I think we get a good illustration of how all of this was supposed to work. There are missions in the Old Testament and missions in the New Testament.

They work a little differently. Missions in the Old Testament involve the nations coming to Israel and saying, wow, we want to know your God. Unfortunately, they end up worshipping the gods of the other nations.

Missions in the New Testament is more the idea of the people of God going out to the nations and proclaiming the message. But God's concern for all peoples is part of the story from the very beginning. A good idea of how this is supposed to work, I think is reflected in the story of Solomon and the queen of Sheba.

She hears about the incredible blessing and the incredible wisdom that God has given to Solomon. She wants to check that out for herself. She goes, and she learns about the greatness of the Lord and the greatness of Solomon's God.

Unfortunately, even in Solomon's life, he ultimately turned that into glorifying himself and living for himself rather than reflecting God. As we get to the Old Testament prophets, the idea of Israel's witness and ministry and, ultimately, the inclusion of the Gentiles in the blessings that God had for Israel is going to be a major motif throughout the prophets. The eschatological message of the prophets, remember, deals with four things.

God is going to restore Israel. God is going to bring them back from exile. God is going to restore the Davidic dynasty and put a king on the throne who will fulfill the promises to David.

God is going to rebuild the land and rebuild the city of Jerusalem and the temple. Ultimately, through the blessing of Israel, the nations themselves would share in that. Probably the prophet who reflects this international concern for God the most is the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah says in Isaiah chapter 60, when the light arises of God's salvation for the people of Israel, the nations are going to flock to that light and they're going to want to experience the blessings of that kingdom. Isaiah 42.6 and Isaiah 49.6, the role of the servant of the Lord who is going to be the suffering servant who will ultimately suffer for his sinful people is not just to save Israel, but ultimately, he will also be a light for the nations. It is too small a thing in terms of the mission that the Lord gives to the servant for him simply to restore and bring back the people of Israel.

That message and that salvation is going to extend to the nations. If anyone has the idea that the Old Testament is not a missionary book, then one of the passages that they should look at, and I think this one definitely relates to the book of Jonah, is a promise that is found for us in Isaiah 19, verses 19 to 25. I think this is one of the great missionary texts in all of the Bible.

It rivals Matthew 28, Acts chapter 1 verse 8, and it shows us that God's missionary concern did not begin with the great commission. Listen to Isaiah's vision of the kingdom that's given to us in Isaiah 19, verses 19 to 25. In that day, there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt and a pillar to the Lord at its borders.

Egypt had been Israel's great enemy and oppressor in the past. Now, in the future kingdom, when God restores Israel, there's going to be an altar to God in the middle of the land of Egypt. The people of Egypt are going to turn into worshipers of Yahweh.

Verse 21, the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering and they will make vows to the Lord and they will perform them. I mean, God had judged and destroyed Egypt in the past at the exodus because they were Israel's oppressors. Now, they're going to experience God's salvation themselves.

Verse 22, the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and he will heal them. So, the Lord, instead of striking Egypt with a plague, he's going to strike them with a blessing and with healing. And then finally, in verse 23, it says this: on that day, there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

So, what's going on here? Well, look at verse 24. In that day, Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, Blessed be Egypt, my people, and Assyria, the work of my hands, and Israel, my inheritance. Okay. Is there a missionary concern in the Old Testament for the nations? Absolutely.

And what this passage is saying is it's not just going to be Egypt that is brought into the kingdom of God, the past enemy of God, the Assyrians who, in Isaiah's day, were the oppressors of Israel. They were the ones who were invading the land. They were the ones who took the northern kingdom into captivity.

In the future, they will be included in the blessings of the kingdom. There's actually going to be a highway that goes from Egypt to Assyria and to Israel. These three nations together will become the people of God.

Israel will not alone have that role. She's going to share it with the Egyptians and the Assyrians. I think what's going on here is that Egypt and Assyria, these two representative nations, are merely representative of the fact that all nations are going to be included in the future kingdom.

This is an Old Testament example pointing toward what we see in Revelation 5. I see people around the throne of God from every tribe, language, nation, and group, and they worship the Lord because the Lord has redeemed them and saved them. Isaiah foresaw that and prophesies about that, and he uses the Assyrians as the prime example of people whom God cares about. This is all part of the backdrop and the

background of why God's concern for the Assyrians and for the Ninevites was so important in the book of Jonah.

If God can show mercy to these people, then God can show mercy to anyone. Remember some of the Assyrian artwork that we talked about and their glorification of violence; the people impaled on sticks, the severed limbs, and their torture of the peoples that they subjugated and conquered in battle. Ashurbanipal, the inscription, with their blood, I dyed the mountain red like wool, and the rest of them the ravines and the torrents of the mountain swallowed.

I carried off captives and possessions from them. I cut off the hands of their fighters and built therewith a tower before their city. I burnt their adolescent boys and girls.

If God can show mercy to this kind of decadent, depraved, wicked group of people, then God can show his mercy and compassion to anyone. And that's the thing that Jonah doesn't like. All right, let me just focus on two more passages that talk about the extent of God's mercy and compassion to the nations.

And I think it kind of gives us a theological backdrop for what's going on in the book of Jonah. We have what I would see is another amazing missionary passage in Jeremiah chapter 12, verses 14 to 17. Similar to the way that God shows mercy to Egypt and Assyria and Isaiah 19, this passage talks about God's mercy to the Canaanites, the native people that were living in the land at the time that Israel came in to take possession of it.

These were the people that God had originally told the Israelites that they were to exterminate and get rid of. These were the people who had ultimately introduced to the people of Israel the Baals and all of the false worship practices that were abhorrent and deplorable to God. Surely, God is not going to show mercy to the Canaanites.

I mean, they were supposed to be wiped out in the process. But look at what the Lord says through Jeremiah. Thus says the Lord concerning all of my evil neighbors who touch the heritage that I have given my people Israel to inherit.

Behold, I will pluck them up from the land, and I will pluck them up from the house of Judah among them. God's going to judge these nations that have oppressed their people, but there's a hope for them in the same way that there was for Israel. And after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them and I will bring them again, each to his heritage and each to its land.

Even the people that have oppressed Israel, I'm going to bless them. I will restore them. And it will come to pass that if they diligently learn the ways of my people to

swear by my name as the Lord lives, even as they taught my people to swear by all, then they shall be built up in the midst of my people.

But if any nation will not listen, then I will utterly pluck it up and destroy it, declares the Lord. Even the people that taught my people to worship the Baals and do these wicked, abhorrent things that brought about the judgment of exile, I'm going to judge those people, but I will replant them just like I do the Israelites. God is willing to show the same compassion to the nations that he did to the people of Israel.

At the end of the book of Jeremiah, when there are a series of judgment speeches against the nations, the oracles against the nations, at the end of a number of them, it says that after this judgment is over, the Lord will restore the fortunes of these various groups of people. The same word is used in the book of Consolation in Jeremiah 30-33 to talk about the restoration of the people of Israel. At the end of the Minor Prophets, we'll come to a passage in Zechariah chapter 14, that after God has carried out a purging judgment on both Israel and the nations, there's this final battle and final judgment at the end of time, that ultimately the nations will come to Jerusalem and they will worship the Lord.

Jonah is part of this larger theological message in the Old Testament that I think sometimes even we as Christians can miss. God has a missionary concern for the nations. The people of Israel, in many ways, had missed this.

It's important that we not miss it ourselves. As we see that this is something that drives God from the very beginning of history, it reminds us of the importance of the church fulfilling its ministry and its mission to take the gospel to the nations. A couple of other things here.

We're reminded in the book of Jonah of the election of Israel and yet the fact that God is concerned for nations that are hostile to Israel. God has a redemptive concern for these people in these nations. Part of the message of the book of Jonah is that the Lord wants his people to share that concern.

Those are some of the basic purposes of the book of Jonah. Before we get into the individual chapters in the book of Jonah, I'd also like us to talk about the structure of the book and how it's put together. Now, the book of Jonah is largely different from all of the other books of the Twelve because those books are primarily messages and oracles from the prophets.

The book of Jonah is primarily a narrative. We have one chapter of poetry, the prayer of Jonah that's embedded in this narrative, but it's primarily a story about a prophet's life. The closest thing that we have to this in other prophetic books is that we have a number of narratives from the life of Jeremiah the prophet, but generally, the prophetic books are more about their messages.

Jonah is more about the story. The story of Jonah is arranged in a way that reflects, I think, the narrative technique that we see often in other places in the Old Testament. What I would like us to see is an understanding of the structure of this book.

Even if you've heard this story growing up from the time of Sunday school, if you don't understand the structure of the book, you miss, I think, the real punchline of this book. The book is divided clearly into two halves and two sections. These two halves and these two sections are going to mirror each other.

In chapter one and two, the first part of the story, we have the Lord rescuing Jonah from death. Jonah is this disobedient prophet. God hurls a storm as he tries to flee from the presence of God.

When Jonah is thrown overboard in chapter one, that looks like the end of the story. But God appoints a fish, and God provides a fish that rescues Jonah from death. We have this celebration of that in chapter two.

So, that's the first panel. Jonah disobeys God. As a result of that, he is deserving of death, but God rescues him.

Jonah chapter three and four, the second section of the book, God commands Jonah to go a second time. This time, Jonah is obedient. The focus of the story here is that now the Lord is going to rescue the Ninevites from death.

They are under a sentence of judgment, forty days, and Nineveh will be overturned, but the Lord spares them from death. Do you see a similarity and a parallel between the first half of the book and the second half of the book? Someone who is undeserving of God's mercy and is at a point of death is spared from that. In chapters one and two, it's Jonah.

In chapter three and four, it's the Ninevites. So, Jonah is offended by the fact that God is going to show mercy to the Ninevites. What about the fact that God has shown mercy to him? All right, making that point a little bit more clearly when we dig a little further into the structure, the book of Jonah is actually laid out.

In the four chapters, I want you to try to imagine a wall that has four panels on it. We have what is referred to here as an alternating panel structure, whereas in chapter one, we're going to refer to this as the A panel. In this A panel, the main focus of this narrative is the interaction between Jonah and the pagan sailors that are on the ship that he's aboard as he flees from the presence of God.

So, chapter one, an A panel, Jonah and the pagans, we could call it that. Chapter two, our second panel in the story, is going to have a B panel. There's a B element here.

Now the interaction is not between Jonah and the pagans or Jonah and a group of people. We have the interaction between Jonah and God. Chapter two is introduced by saying, Jonah prayed to God and we have the content of that prayer.

So, chapter one, Jonah and the pagans, that's the A element. Chapter two, Jonah and God, the B element. We're back in the third panel in chapter three to another A element.

Jonah is primarily interacting with a group of pagans. The word of the Lord comes to him a second time, just as it did in chapter one. Jonah is going to go and preach to the Ninevites.

The shocking thing is, the Ninevites respond. Chapter four, the fourth panel, is a B element that parallels chapter two because now, again, we have Jonah and God dialoguing. This time they are dialoguing over and about the salvation of Nineveh.

So, chapter one in the laying out of the story, this is part of the literary artistry of this book. Chapter one and chapter three parallel each other as chapters where Jonah is interacting with a group of pagans. The humor of this and the irony of this is that in both of these panels, the pagan people are a lot more sensitive to God than Jonah is.

Then chapters two and chapter four parallel each other because they are both chapters where Jonah is interacting with God. Both of them are introduced by statements, Jonah prayed by God. Okay, so now that you've seen this, the chapters one and two, chapters three and four, and then the panels, now you're ready for the punchline of the book.

The punchline of the book is that as God spares someone from death in the first part of the book, Jonah prays to God and celebrates that. Salvation is of the Lord and I will repay my vows because God has saved me and God has shown his mercy to me. Jonah didn't deserve that.

Jonah had disobeyed God. Jonah does what no other prophet does in refusing to follow God's law or God's command and tries to flee from God's presence, yet God saves him and Jonah rejoices. When I get out of the fish, I will go and pay my vows to God.

However, in the second half of the book, when Jonah sees and observes that God has spared the Ninevites from death, his response and his prayer to God in chapter four is entirely different. Now, instead of celebrating God's deliverance, Jonah is going to complain about the deliverance. Instead of celebrating the fact that God is a

God of salvation, Jonah complains, this is why I fled to Tarshish in the first place: because I know that you're a God of mercy and compassion and hesed who relents from sending judgment.

I didn't want you to show that. And so, the punchline of this book is the contrast between Jonah's response to God's mercy and then the opposite way that he responds when God shows mercy to the Mennonites. For the people of Israel, there is a larger message here.

The mercy of God cannot be contained within Israel alone. It ultimately is for all people. All right.

In the book of Jonah, we have three great acts of deliverance and salvation. Okay. Salvation is of the Lord.

Jonah says that. We have three clear incidents where God saves someone. The first of those incidents is in chapter one, where the sailors on the ship are in the midst of this great storm, and they're afraid, and they cry out to God, and God spares them from death.

When Jonah is thrown overboard, the waters are quiet. They thought they were going to die. They thought this was the end.

God listens to their prayers. God shows mercy to these pagans, and they sacrifice to God, and they make vows to God, and they seem in this chapter to become genuine worshipers of the Lord. So, looking at the sailors, when God saves you from death, what's the proper response? Sacrifice, praise, and thanksgiving.

All right. At the end of chapter one, we have our second great act of salvation because Jonah is thrown overboard. He's in the midst of the sea and the storm and all these things that have happened.

And in chapter one, verse 17, the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. The fish was not the judgment of God.

The fish was the instrument of God's salvation. Jonah is saved. What's his response? He praises God.

He thanks God. And in chapter two, verse nine, again, salvation belongs to the Lord with the voice of thanksgiving. I will sacrifice to you and what I have vowed, I will pay.

That's the right response. The response of the sailors. We thank God, and we offer him sacrifices and vows.

The response of Jonah, God saves him from death and he offers to God sacrifices and vows. Okay. So, in light of this, the third great act of salvation in the book is that God spares the city of Nineveh.

So, what type of response do we expect to see? In light of chapter two, we expect Jonah to pray a prayer and to write a psalm that surpasses even chapter... God saved a whole city, 120,000 people. But the amazing part is, is that Jonah is angry with God. And that's the punchline of the book.

The people of Nineveh had committed great evil, ra'ah. And the Lord, when they repent of that ra'ah, spares them of the calamity ra'ah that he plans to bring upon them. But then Jonah chapter four tells us it was exceedingly ra'ah to Jonah.

It was evil. It was something that was bad in the eyes of Jonah. Again, not just because Jonah is selfish, but I think in some ways because Jonah is wrestling and struggling with the issue of divine justice and divine mercy.

But whatever the reason is, Jonah's response to the salvation of Nineveh ultimately is the wrong response. And it reflects that Jonah, as a prophet, does not share what is in the heart of God in terms of his compassion for the Ninevites. It reflects the idea that Jonah believes that God's mercy is for the chosen people, for himself, and for the Israelites.

But God should not be showing this kind of mercy to the Gentiles. The use of God as a God of compassion, a God of hesed, a God of mercy in Jonah chapter four is there to show us that this great confession that was used to talk about the Lord's relationship with the people of Israel is also the way that he will interact with the nations around them. All right.

There are a couple of other themes that are major and central to the book of Jonah. And as we overview the book, I would just like to quickly mention a couple of these. The book of Jonah is going to stress for us the idea of God's universal sovereignty.

God is the creator. God is the one who has made the world, and therefore, he controls the things that go on in the dry land, and he controls the things that go on in the sea. God not only controls the things that happen with Jonah's life as he commands him and directs him as he goes out to the city of Nineveh, but God is sovereign over what happens in this pagan city as well.

There is also going to be the idea that God as the creator God is also in absolute control of the forces and the aspects of nature that are reflected in this book. In fact,

there's a key word that's going to show up in the book that will help us to see this. The first demonstration of this is that in chapter 1, verse 4, it's going to tell us that the Lord hurled a great wind and a great storm upon the sea.

Jonah is trying to flee from the presence of God. If I can get out of the land of Israel, then I can flee away from God. However, God simply, like a warrior throwing a javelin, simply throws a storm.

He hurls a storm, directs it at the ship that Jonah's on. God's sovereign over that sea. Jonah says God's the creator of the dry land and the sea.

Why doesn't he recognize that you can't run away from God's sovereignty? But the word that is going to be repeated in the rest of the book that's going to remind us of God's control over the forces of nature is that there is going to be the Hebrew word manah, the word to appoint, that is used in chapter 1 and three times in chapter 4 to talk about God's universal sovereignty. First of all, in chapter 1, verse 17, the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. The Lord manah, he directed that fish to be in that exact spot.

That's the extent of God's sovereignty. Jonah chapter 2 verse 10 says that the Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out on the dry land. This fish is an instrument of God.

One writer has made the point that the fish is a lot more responsive to the commands of God than Jonah was. That's a good thing for Jonah. But then in chapter 4, when Jonah becomes angry and he's upset about God's deliverance of the Assyrians, God is going to teach him a lesson.

God is going to use an object lesson. The word manah again is repeated three times here to talk about God's control of the forces of nature. Chapter 4 verse 6, God appoints manah, a plant that provides shade for Jonah.

Then after Jonah is enjoying this and he's exceedingly glad, he's happy about the plant, it tells us that then on the next day, God appointed manah, a worm that attacks the plant and destroys it. Jonah again is back to being angry. Then to make the lesson even more pointed, chapter 4 verse 8, when the sun arose, God manah appointed a scorching wind.

So, four times the word manah is used in the book of Jonah. In other places we see God directing storms and fish and all these kinds of things. It is a reminder of the universal sovereignty of God.

So what? How does that fit into the larger message of the book? This is something that Jonah would have recognized: hey, this is elemental theology. God is the creator

God who's in control of all things. In fact, Jonah gives us a confession that the Lord is the creator God.

He made the sea and the dry land in chapter 1, verse 9. However, what Israel and what Jonah often did not understand is that there is a corollary to God's universal sovereignty. That idea is that along with his universal sovereignty, there is a universal compassion. Therefore, the idea that the Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love, a merciful God, relenting from disaster, is not just something that applies to Israel.

It also applies to the nations. Now, the final theme in the book of Jonah that surveys and overviews what this book is about is that the idea of evil and calamity is a key recurring theme, keyword, key idea, and key motif. God deals with the Ninevites' ra'ah, the evil that they have committed, and how God meets out his justice and shows mercy.

That's the tension, and that's the struggle of the book. That's the aspect of God's character that Jonah is struggling with. That's the message of theodicy that is underlying this book.

So, it's important, and it's interesting as you're working your way through the book of Jonah; pay attention to the places where the word ra'ah is going to be used. In Jonah, chapter 1, verse 2, the Ninevites have done great ra'ah. It comes up before God.

That's why God is going to send Jonah in the first place. Chapter 1 verse 7 and 8, however, ra'ah is going to be used to refer to the calamity that Jonah himself has brought upon himself and upon the ship and the sailors by the fact that he has not obeyed the word of the Lord. Jonah is as guilty of ra'ah as the Ninevites.

Chapter 3 verse 8, the king of Nineveh calls for the people to repent. That repentance involves the abandonment of ra'ah. When they do that, God makes the reciprocal response of turning from the calamity ra'ah.

Remember, this word can mean both evil and calamity. God relents from that calamity. This quality of God changing his mind is part of how God interacts with people as they hear the prophetic word.

Finally, when this happens, the sparing of Nineveh, Jonah chapter 4 verse 1, is ra'ah to Jonah. It's evil. He doesn't understand this.

God has shown this mercy to the Ninevites and instead of celebrating that, Jonah complains about God relenting from his ra'ah. So, these themes and the structure help us to understand what the message of Jonah is all about. Jonah celebrates God's deliverance in his own life.

Why is he unwilling and unable to do that when God does the same for the Ninevites? Hopefully as we study the book, we'll understand in a better way the heart of God, the fact that God is a compassionate God. He is not just a God who cares about us. He's not just a God who cares about the church.

He's not just a God who cares about the United States. He is a God who cares about the nations. That concern is reflected in the Old Testament as the prelude to God sending his son, Jesus, to be the Savior of the nations in the New Testament.

Jonah highlights that key aspect of God's nature and God's character. We'll continue to study that as we work our way through the book.

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his lecture series on the Minor Prophets. This is lecture 17, The Message and Structure of Jonah.