Learning from Bible Narratives

Last in the series, “God’s Word: Guide for Daily Life”

# Scripture: Jonah 1:1-17; 2:7-3:5,10; 4:1-11

# Key idea: Using some basic Bible study skills, we can profit immensely from Bible narratives.

# Intro:

As we apply God’s word to our daily lives, we discover that there are various types of literature in the Bible. Each type requires slightly different skills if it is to be interpreted properly. Probably the greatest amount of text in the Bible is devoted to what we would call narrative, or stories; written accounts of events, with the context, a time frame, a type of plot, and a purpose for writing. So this morning I want to take a little time to help us develop our skills in understanding the biblical narratives. How do we go about digging out the meaning of a Bible story? The first question that we have to answer before we even start is what approach we will use as we begin to interpret the biblical narrative. I’m illustrating today with the book of Jonah.

# Approach the narrative as the Bible does.

For example with the story of Jonah, our first question in our contemporary world usually is, "Did a fish really swallow Jonah." But the Bible does not ask or even hint at that question, either in the OT book, or when the story is referred to by Jesus in the NT (Matt. 12:40; Luke 11:30). The Bible just takes the story at face value assuming it is a true story, happening to a real prophet in Israel's history. When we take the story at face value too, we are approaching it in the way the natural reader of the original text would have and in the way Jesus did. **We will learn best and profit most from the narratives of the Bible if we read them and try to understand them in the natural way their first readers did.**

(The only special case is apocalyptic literature, such as Revelation, which is a genre of literature which people of Jesus’ day understood from cultural experience but for which we have no cultural reference so we need to learn how to approach that book before we try to interpret it. We need extra help to put ourselves in the place of the first readers.)

But you ask, "Isn't this simple approach just being naïve about the development of the Bible?" No, it is not. Here’s why. The approach does not preclude asking very critical and modern-type questions later. The approach just recognizes that if we really want to find the meaning of the Bible narratives, we will come the closest when we approach it as if we were an original reader, rather than a modern critic.

I'm not saying there is no place for sophisticated modern questions, I'm just saying that there is a grave danger that if we focus on those types of questions we will miss finding out what the book intended to say as well as how it speaks to us. We need to deal with higher critical questions and matters of introduction, as scholars call them, secondarily. On a scholarly level, our quest can definitely be enriched by such questions. But, if we major on these latter type of questions, as some do, we can easily lose the plain meaning of the story and then be unable to apply the narrative to ourselves for our profit. We can miss the point for the sake of our modern curiosities or doubts. It is far too easy to fall into conjecture on matters the Scripture does not reveal and find ourselves among those whom Paul described as having “an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, [and] evil suspicions” (1 Tim 6:4 NIV).

# Ask questions like these to interpret the narrative:

The second skill that we need to master in order to interpret Biblical narrative sections well is the skill of asking good questions about the story. We might call this skill being an “active listener” as we read.

1. So let's say you want to interpret the story of Jonah. How should you start? First you read it and preferable at least twice. If you have time to read it more than twice, you might read it the third time in a different version.
2. Each time, make observations and write down the questions you have. What things pop out at you? What do you notice? What do you need an explanation for? Write down especially the hard questions. Does something not make sense? Does something seem unsuitable or improper or out of place? Is a word or concept repeated?
3. Then try to answer questions like the following to expand your understanding of the narrative. Along the way work on the questions you have raised as well.

* **Why is this story in the Bible?**

Remember, Bible stories, especially in the OT, are not there to endorse what is happening; they are there to make one point usually. So, it is up to the interpreter to find that point and not use the story to teach something that it did not intend to say.

Certainly part of the answer as to why the story is in the Bible will be the association with whatever prophetic figure wrote or dictated the book or is the key figure in the narrative. That’s a given. Another part of the answer may be something miraculous that happened in the story. But remember that the prophetic tradition was very seldom interested in miracles for miracles sake. The prophets and the NT apostles as well were very much interested in the meaning and the lessons, the Word from God that the miracle and the story brought to us. So look for that message especially. That is definitely the case here in Jonah. Certainly, the story is about a prophet. Certainly we have a miracle in it with the vomiting up of Jonah on dry land after three days in the fish. But the miracle is not the main point. It serves only to be the convincer to Jonah that he had better obey God.

* **What is its context in history?**

A Bible book like Jonah or an individual narrative in a larger book will mean much more if we understand how it fits into the historical context in which it was written. For example, here in the book of Jonah, what does the city of Nineveh represent in relationship to Israel? Why does Jonah not want to go there? When you investigate this you find out that Nineveh was the capital of the ancient nation of Assyria, the enemy of northern Israel, in fact, the enemy that eventually destroyed northern Israel. The Assyrians were the cruelest nation of antiquity. These discoveries makes Jonah's reluctance to go there more understandable. They also help us sympathize with his disappointment that the city is not destroyed much more than we otherwise might.

* **What is the story's role in the book in which it appears?**

Sometimes we are only dealing with one story which is only one part of a whole book. For example, if we are studying the book of Genesis, and we are looking at the life of Isaac, we would need to understand how Isaac fits into the sequence of the four patriarchs, otherwise we will not comprehend the whole significance of who Isaac is and what is important about his story. Here in Jonah, if you were going to a Bible study and the assignment for that week was Jonah chapter four, you would find out in one reading that it could not be understood without at least reading chapter three and probably without knowing what happened in chapter one and two as well.

* **Are there surprising things in the story?**

It is often true in studying the Bible that one of the keys to finding the author’s focus of the story is to notice where the surprising element is. In the case of the book of Jonah, there are a host of surprises. First, it is very unusual to have a prophet who runs away from the Word of God, and his book is still in the Bible. Secondly, there's the whole deal about being swallowed by a fish, and living to tell the story. Third, there is the thorough repentance of Nineveh after Jonah accepts his second chance mission. Even Israel did not normally repent at the preaching of the prophets. This repentance was so surprising, that God even backed off from the judgment that he had promised. Finally, there is the surprise of Jonah's pouting which provides the opportunity for God to reveal his underlying loving concern, even for Israel's enemy. So these surprises will help us find the main points of the story of Jonah.

* **What is the main point?**

How do we find the main point? Often it is the point toward which the story moves. I think that is the case here in Jonah. The story is focused on God's concern for the huge city of Nineveh. It is the reason why Jonah was called. It is the reason why God insisted that he go. It is the reason why God relented from his promised judgment after Nineveh repented. It is the reason why Jonah is chided by God for his pouting. Other times we find the main point by noting what is repeated for emphasis.

* **How do the teachings of this story tie in with other Biblical truths?**

Here in Jonah, this main point of God's compassion upon Nineveh is an amazing point, considering that this is the Old Testament era, hundreds of years before it was revealed completely that God desired his grace to extend to both Jew and Gentile if they would but seek him.

Another tie that we will discover with the book of Jonah, is that Jesus referred to his time in the grave as the sign of Jonah. Jesus’ contemporaries were asking that he give them a sign. Even though Jesus had done many miracles, some of which John actually labels as signs, Jesus promised his hearers only one sign, the sign of Jonah. Further, Jesus said that the people of Nineveh repented much more readily than the people of his own day.

He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here.   
Matt 12:39-41 NIV

# Apply the narrative to today.

This is where many Bible studies and Sunday School lessons end. But there are two more critical steps if studying the Bible is to be both helpful and relevant to our lives today. We must ask two more types of questions.

**First, “What principles from the story are especially relevant today?” Or to put it another way, “How can I apply the lesson(s) of this story to our time?”**

Let's work on these two questions together working from the book of Jonah.

Well, we read several chapters from the book of Jonah and we could actually apply principles from several parts of the book of Jonah.

1. One of the first relevant principles from the first part of the book is this one: One can't run away from the call of God. If the call of God is on your life, that call will continue to be felt, even if you go in the opposite direction. God is patient. God is persistent. God is faithful to call, even when we are not in the listening mode. This is as true today as it was in the day of Jonah.

1. Another principle from the book of Jonah is this: God is a God of second chances! I don't think Jonah wanted a second chance to go to Nineveh, but he got it. It was a gift of grace. And this time Jonah's jumped at the chance and went as instructed. God is still a great God of second chances! He forgives our sins, raises us up after failure, and more than we think possible, he often opens the way for our life to be renewed, for our gifts to be used, and renewed dreams to be pursued. Our second chance may not look as much like the first opportunity as Jonah’s did but it will still be a great, “second chance” or even “third.”

1. Another principle from the book of Jonah is this: God responds to contrite hearts. When Jonah repented, God gave him back his mission. When the people of Nineveh repented, God relented from judgment, gave grace and their future changed. Jonah understood that this was how God worked. God had revealed himself in this way to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Ex 34:6-7 NIV

Jonah explained his conception of God's mercy this way.

I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Jonah 4:2

God is still a God of forgiveness. It is part of his basic nature. When we show contrition, God wipes away our sins (1 John 1:9).

1. Lastly, I notice in the book of Jonah the principle that divine love encompasses enemies. The Ninevites were the enemies of Israel. God knew that in a few decades they would be the destroyers of Northern Israel and much of Southern Israel. Yet the love of God for the people of Nineveh is directly revealed in this book.

And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?” Jonah 4:11 NIV

This is a marvelous lesson for us today as well. It is a principle that we need to constantly remember. God loves those with whom we disagree just as much as he loves us. God loves those on the opposite side of the political spectrum just as much as he does us. God loves those who are the enemies of our country just as much as he loves us. It may be an uncomfortable truth for us just as it was for Jonah. But it is a truth we very much need to understand in order to help us perceive God’s perspective. This is the only way we can keep the correct Christian perspective in the atmosphere charged with political extremes that we find ourselves in today.

# What should I do, think, or feel to personally apply this story?

If Bible studies make it to the previous question, that is great. But to really finish the course, we need to be able to apply the lesson to our own personal lives.

This is the question where "the rubber hits the road," so to speak. It is one thing to speak in generalities about what a text may mean and even about how it could be applied to our day and age, but it is another thing to ask ourselves personally how we should respond to the Bible text. What is the Holy Spirit asking me to do, to change, to think, in response to the Bible study that I've been doing, hearing or participating in?

The Bible is not a book that we read simply for curiosity sake. The Bible is a book that is intended to mold us, to change us to transform us as we study it. But in order for that to be accomplished, it's important that we get to this last step.

This is especially true also for those who lead Sunday school classes and Bible studies. If we as Sunday school teachers, Bible study leaders, and preachers only talk about the Bible, we will not be nearly as effective as we could be if we were more specific in leading each student to apply the principles that they have learned to their own life. That is why often in services I have response times, quiet times of prayer, or even times for a raised hand where people can respond to what is said. Other times I may ask pointed personal questions for us to think about, questions aimed to help us do exactly this: apply the narrative to our personal lives. In this way the Bible promise is fulfilled.

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,   
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire  
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. Isa 55:10-11 NIV