



APPLYING JONAH

KELLY BURTON | OCTOBER 23, 2019

I just returned from my fortieth high school reunion. Although it was a delight to see so many friends, I walked away realizing that some had not changed at all. Even though so many of us looked so old, there were so few of us making a real go at maturity. There was in the air those two nights a pathetic sameness that I am sure some saw in me too. Maturity takes time. Moreover, *spiritual maturity* requires discipline and a distinct surrender to the Holy Spirit. One way spiritual maturity comes to both expositor and listener is by letting the Spirit apply the meaning of a Bible text to their everyday life. I have been asked to write on sermon application, particularly applying Jonah.

Jay Adams likens the idea of applying Scripture as “to knit or to join something (or oneself) to something else.” Adams compares sermon application to applying paint to a wall. The fresh paint changes the appearance of the wall. When applying Scripture then, one ought to remember the immense change the Spirit has in mind, a transformation from pathetic sameness to maturing Christlikeness. Effective application is rooted in the pastor who first allows the text to plow down deep into his soul, revealing his own inadequacies; he receives the conviction and then asks God for the power to change. Once here, the expositor positions himself in his pulpit as an example of change, not one detached from his listeners.

Although many of us have been taught in homiletics to end load our application in narrative preaching, I find that weaving in the application with explanation seems to impact the listeners *throughout the sermon*. In his book *Preaching that Changes Lives*, Michael Fabarez highlights this point: “If the purpose of preaching is to change lives, and if outlining is underscoring the highpoints of the sermon, then we should make the passage’s applicational thrust the understood points of our outline, accentuated throughout the entire sermon.” Let’s consider some applicational thrusts we might make throughout the Book of Jonah.

Jonah 1:1 begins with the Hebrew particle “And.” Isn’t that an odd way to begin a story? Why would Jonah begin with “And”? We want to turn a page or two back to see if we missed something. The story begins with “And” because it fits in the bigger more comprehensive story of redemption God is telling from the beginning. The story begins with an explosion: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah.” But it was not the first time the Lord spoke to Jonah. 2 Kings 14:25 clues us in that Jonah is an experienced prophet who knows what God’s voice sounds like. He is choosing to ignore God. Application comes early in Jonah to the expositor who does his homework. One might consider making application under this heading, *“God is watching you when you are in rebellion. Many of you know what God’s voice sounds like, don’t you? Have you ever ignored God when He speaks? Then you can find some kinship with Jonah as the two of you sprint the other way of your assignments. But beware as you attempt to orchestrate your own agenda. The path of disobedience is always downward. Instead, why don’t you stop, confess your rebellion, turn around and thank God for His warning.”* Jonah 1:4–6 is bursting with application.

God hurls the perfect storm at the missionary on the run. Let the expositor consider the *doctrine of adversity* exposed early on in Jonah. Adversity serves us for our good providing guard rails when we are marching off the path of obedience. *“What adversity are you facing this morning? Stop a minute and ask God what He is showing you about yourself in the trouble. Now, thank God and mimic the pagan sailors; call out to your God!”* The preacher must ask himself in his study, “What has God taught me in the school of adversity? What was my game-changer when God put me in the college of hard knocks?” Charles Spurgeon remarked, “Most of the grand truths of God have to be learned by trouble. They must be burned into us with the hot iron of affliction.” In Jonah 1 three insights emerge worthy of application: *The Sailor’s Fear*, *God’s Sovereignty*, and *Jonah’s Dangerous Contentment*.

In Jonah 2 the expositor is faced with preaching a prayer. It is not a typical prayer; most church members begin with petitions. This prayer is not man-centered but centered on the goodness of the God who is always watching. Surely your listeners know how to pray, but do they pray like Jonah 2? Consider these applications from the belly of a fish: *“Unbelievers don’t have this kind of comfort in adversity”*, or, *“How could anyone so far from God have hope of being delivered from their dilemma?”* Even this, *“God did not need Jonah to accomplish this work. Would you consider thanking God with me this morning by singing, giving, and encouraging others?”* Teeming with Gospel opportunity, the disciplined expositor will be alert to *his own need* for the Gospel and preach it with personal conviction.

Verse-by-verse preaching exposes *repetition*. In Hebrew narrative, repetition is similar to our bold or italics in English. Jonah 3:1 underscores the mercy of God. Why wait until the end of your sermon to apply this pulsating opportunity? Tell them *“We are made in the image of God. Serious Bible readers think ‘Am I being merciful to my family, to my co-workers?’”* Chapter 4 underscores mercy again! Just as God appointed a fish to save Jonah, He appoints shade over Jonah. And the beauty of the Book of Jonah is that it ends with a question. Invite your church to hear the Spirit asking, *“How will you finish the story?”* When applying Scripture then, one ought to remember the immense change the Spirit has in mind, a transformation from pathetic sameness to maturing Christlikeness.

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