



The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God's Mercy

Timothy J. Keller

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An angry prophet. A feared and loathsome enemy. A devastating storm. And the surprising message of a merciful God to his people.

The story of Jonah is one of the most well-known parables in the Bible. It is also the most misunderstood. Many people, even those who are nonreligious, are familiar with Jonah: A rebellious prophet who defies God and is swallowed by a whale. But there's much more to Jonah's story than most of us realize.

In *The Prodigal Prophet*, pastor and *New York Times* bestselling author Timothy Keller reveals the hidden depths within the book of Jonah. Keller makes the case that Jonah was one of the worst prophets in the entire Bible. And yet there are unmistakably clear connections between Jonah, the prodigal son, and Jesus. Jesus in fact saw himself in Jonah. How could one of the most defiant and disobedient prophets in the Bible be compared to Jesus?

Jonah's journey also doesn't end when he is freed from the belly of the fish. There is an entire second half to his story--but it is left unresolved within the text of the Bible. Why does the book of Jonah end on what is essentially a cliffhanger? In these pages, Timothy Keller provides an answer to the extraordinary conclusion of this biblical parable--and shares the powerful Christian message at the heart of Jonah's story.

The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God's Mercy Details

Date : Published October 2nd 2018 by Books on Tape

ISBN : 9780525641629

Author : Timothy J. Keller

Format : Audio CD

Genre : Religion, Theology, Christian, Christian Living, Nonfiction



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Timothy J. Keller**

From Reader Review The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God's Mercy for online ebook

Julie says

Wonderful. The author unravels a complicated and often misunderstood story of the Bible. It is a story for everybody in any century.

James says

Another excellent and approachable exposition of a familiar biblical account from Keller in a way that illuminates, convicts, and challenges with practical application examples. Very similar to his treatment of the parable of the prodigal son in "The Prodigal God", he both walks through the account verse by verse, adding context, commentary, and perspective as the story unfolds, and then brings it back to a high level application through a Christian walk, with an emphasis on our relationship to God's word, the world He created and His grace. He challenges cheap grace for how it distorts our relationship with God and also outlines how we miss opportunities for obedience when we don't let God's grace change the way we relate to others.

Keller spends a lot of time breaking down the patriot/nationalist leanings of Jonah and how dangerous these can be when idolized above God. While there is nothing new under the sun, the time to revisit these themes could not be better given the current political climate and lack of gracious, constructive discourse. I also particularly enjoyed the example he used of the conservative southern presbyterian who idolized the Scots only to find out through an extended visit to help serve in an old Scottish church that they leaned socialist based on their view of the doctrine of grace. The Western church holds too many idols on the both the liberal and conservative sides and it is important to separate those views from truth of the gospel. "We sneer at people more liberal than us as social justice warriors; we disdain those more conservative than us as hateful bigots."

Nota bene: I read part of this and listened to part on Audible. Keller doesn't read the audiobook himself. Not that this takes anything away from the book or the message, I just enjoy his voice and reading/preaching style so it was a small disappointment.

Adam Diaz says

The Prodigal Prophet is a great book. I have to admit, Timothy Keller is one of my favorite authors, so I'm a little biased. His writing style and train of thought always connect with me well. He does an excellent job drawing out lessons from the text of Jonah. As always, his writing is gospel centered and he points the reader to Christ. I was very encouraged.

The book is very relevant to our contemporary time and issues we are facing in today's society. He hits hot topics, including racism and politics among others, directly. He does so without taking a partisan side and addresses the topics in light of the gospel. As a Christian who has a hard time relating with any political system in its entirety, this was greatly appreciated.

I found this work to be profound, original, and accessible. I would recommend it to a wide range of audiences, Christian and non-christian alike!

E says

This book is okay. By far the strongest portions are those in which he connects Jonah to Jesus, including a plausible explanation of the "sign of Jonah" to which Christ refers. I still do not always agree with Keller's conception of what the gospels entails as far as the "social gospel" is concerned. Part of the issue is that he rarely differentiates between that which individual believers and that which the institutional church is supposed to pursue. One time he *does* differentiate well is when it comes to politics. He speaks very clearly and ably about how pastors should not take public political stands. He also argues well for why believers should not be too aligned with any one political party's platform (although he perhaps underplays the value of political parties themselves).

He's also a little vague about the extent of the atonement, although I want to assume he holds to definite atonement. The issue here is that he is vague with the "you's" and "we's" in his prose--it's not always clear when he's referring to believers or to his readers or to mankind in general. But this book is definitely worth reading. I particularly enjoyed his points concerning suffering and God's sovereignty. He makes a strong case for God's purposes in this world, including his use (and plan) of suffering. He also speaks strongly about the unity of the Trinity, including the deity of the suffering Christ.

George P. says

If people know anything about the prophet Jonah, they know he was swallowed by a big fish. Consequently, because we live in an anti-miraculous age, people tend to dismiss Jonah's story as just another fish story, the product of an ancient, credulous imagination. That dismissal is a shame, for the Book of Jonah tells a story with a timely message for people who live, as we do, in a moment of resurging nationalism.

The timeliness of that message is evident throughout *The Prodigal Prophet* by Timothy Keller. The book grew out of a series of expository sermons Keller preached at various times in his ministry. It reflects evangelicalism at its best: a biblical, Christ-centered, relevant call for conversion, not just in our spiritual lives, but in the totality of our lives.

We first meet Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25, which says that Jeroboam II, ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel, "restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amitai, the prophet from Gath Hepher." Although Jeroboam II "did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (verse 24), God kept covenant with His people (verses 26–27) and the territorial promises He had made to them. Jonah was the prophet of God's promise-keeping.

Jeroboam II reigned from 792–751 B.C., a period during which the Assyrian Empire, which had earlier threatened Israel, had stagnated. After his death, however, it resurged and began to threaten Israel once again. In 722 B.C., it conquered Israel, brutalized its victims, and deported the population. Israel never recovered as a political entity. When we read the Book of Jonah, we need to keep the tension between Jonah's prophecy of territorial expansion and the subsequent history of Israel's destruction in mind, for it is

key to understanding the book's message.

It explains Jonah's reluctance to take "the word of the Lord" (Jonah 1:1) to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. Though God instructed Jonah to "preach against" that "great city" (verse 2), Jonah knew that God's judgment implicitly carried a promise of mercy to the repentant. "I knew that you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (4:2). As a patriot, the prophet didn't want to see good come to his nation's enemies. But God did, and so He asks Jonah (verse 11): "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?"

The tension between Jonah's prophecy and Israel's destruction also explains the book's continuing relevance to us. The book ends without an answer from Jonah to God's question. "The main purpose of God is to get Jonah to understand grace," Keller writes. "The main purpose of the book of Jonah is to get *us* to understand grace." Grace is God's kindness and compassion to all people, not just *our kind* of people. Its ultimate embodiment was the incarnation of the Son of God, who died as the substitute for our sins and rose as the harbinger of our eternal life. When we understand this, it not only changes our hearts, but it changes the ways we relate to others. That is why God's question at the end of Jonah is left unanswered. It is a question those who claim to follow God must answer anew in every generation.

The Prodigal Prophet makes for compelling reading. It explains the meaning of the Book of Jonah in its original context, but it draws out the implications of that meaning for our context. It shows the baleful ways Christians can worship ideological idols, misuse Scripture, and fail to love their neighbors as they should. But it also shows what a gospel-centered mission looks like, as well as how the gospel shapes our relationship with neighbors in our everyday lives. I'll close this review with Keller's penultimate paragraph, which itself ends with a question:

"We live in a world fragmented into various "media bubbles," in which you hear only news that confirms what you already believe. Anyone whose uses the internet and social media or who even watches most news channels today is being daily encouraged in a dozen ways to become like Jonah with regard to "those people over there." Groups demonize and mock other groups. Each region of the country and political party finds reasons to despise the others. Christian believers today are being sucked into this maelstrom as much as, if not more than, anyone else. The Book of Jonah is a shot across the bow. God asks, how can we look at anyone — even those with deeply opposing beliefs and practices — with no compassion?"

How you answer that question reveals what's in your heart.

Book Reviewed

Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God's Mercy* (New York: Viking, 2018).

P.S. If you found this review helpful, please click "Helpful" on my Amazon.com review page.

P.P.S. This review is cross-posted from InfluenceMagazine.com with permission.

Richie Valdes says

It's hard to find a modern Christian writer that can beat Keller. He's done it again with this book on Jonah. He has a great gift of taking a book and writing it that it seems incredibly applicable to today and to his

audience but has that feeling like it's going to stand the test of time and be a timeless resource for the church. The Prodigal Prophet feels like that. H

Keller is deep into the weeds of Jonah in a way I've never thought of or heard in my entire churchgoing life. But, as is classic Keller, the second he makes a point it is so evident you wonder how you missed it all these years. The focus on nationalism and justice and "othering" of people is incredibly timely and saturated with scripture references to reinforce the point. Only one spot that was a little concerning was his point on love and abuse. I read it charitably but it came off a bit wonky and could cause some to take great umbrage with it. But other than that one instance, I found this book to be incredibly insightful and eminently applicable both to myself and the church at large.

Matt Witten says

Extremely practical but challenging deep dive into the book of Jonah.

Barry says

It seems every Keller book is a must-read, and this one is another winner.

Being a lazy reviewer, I'm just going to drop in a couple of quotes:

"Jonah's whole problem was the same as ours: a conviction that if we fully surrender our will to God, he will not be committed to our good and joy. But here is the ultimate proof that this deeply rooted belief is a lie. A God who substitutes himself for us and suffers so that we may go free is a God you can trust."

"When Christian believers care more for their own interests and security than for the good and salvation of other races and ethnicities, they are sinning like Jonah. If they value the economic and military flourishing of their country over the good of the human race and the furtherance of God's work in the world, they are sinning like Jonah."

Josh McCormack says

Amazing insight into a story that we probably gloss over. Books of the Bible aren't written by modern fiction authors. They tend to be brief, and you have to read carefully to know all that's going on. This is what you come to expect when you listen to a sermon from Pastor Keller, and this book, based on a series we heard when we attended his church, is consistent with that. If you're a Christian you'll learn more about Jonah than you every though possible, as well as about a lot of the rest of the Bible. If you're not a Christian you'll be pleasantly surprised by the critical eye Keller takes to Christians, and the numerous references from literature and events that he weaves into his messages. I'd highly recommend this quick read to people who aren't Christians to better understand what Jesus and the Bible are really about, and Christians should definitely read it to help them learn what we should really be getting from the book of Jonah.

Luke Koskinen says

This is the best book I've read this year. If you want to be blown away by a story that feels familiar, yet is so deep; read this book.

Gabriel says

Book Review: The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God's Mercy

Author: Timothy Keller

Format: Softback

Topic: The Book of Jonah

Scope: A biblical exposition of the book of Jonah for application contemporary life.

Purpose: To encourage Christians to understand grace more fully and apply it more deeply to their lives.

Structure: This book contains an introduction, 12 chapters, and an epilogue. Although the book is not explicitly broken up this way, I'd argue the chapters make up two different sections. The first 9 chapters dive deep into the book of Jonah and make a lot of theological and statements. Every verse of the short book is covered at least a little. Chapters 10-12 switch gears by taking some of the major themes and applying them in deep and impactful ways to contemporary society (specifically Western Americanized Christian).

What it does well: *Keller is a translator. He takes deep and often complicated subjects from the Bible or more scholarly authors and translates them for more popular audiences. He is a master of reaching the heart and head of his reader.

*Any reader that has not truly immersed herself in the biblical book of Jonah will come away with a much deeper knowledge of the book. Keller covers the entire book in ways that will make many people go, "Oh."

*The last three chapters are worth the price of the book, IMO (although I enjoyed the rest of the book as well.) Keller's scalpel on some of the idols of the current Western church (both liberal and conservative) is exacting and incisive. There were quite a few times when I would catch myself thinking, "Yeah, that's just like [insert person or church here]" only to realize in just a couple sentences that he has described me as well.

*Keller knows the human heart. He is very helpful at describing how we rebel against God and the antidote.

*Although there is much more done well, my favorite part of this book (as is my favorite part of Keller as an author) is how well it describes grace and what Jesus has done for us. This book, although about Jonah, is really about Jesus and his work to see us come to him.

What it lacks: *This is not a commentary. It is not meant to be. This is not a criticism, but instead informative.

*One thing I was a little disappointed about was the lack of mention of abortion in a section entitled "Christians and Politics" (163-170). As I mentioned above, Keller attacks many sacred cows of both liberals and conservatives (we are not only to be for the poor but also to contend that sex is only for marriage). His biggest attack is to say that Christians cannot abstain from politics, nor can they buy wholesale into any particular party's platform. He says we must contend for those who are most vulnerable and alludes to many disenfranchised groups. This would have been a particularly good time to mention abortion which attacks our most vulnerable. He seems to mention some other important things but shies away here. To be fair to him, it seems as though many of the points he makes will logically lead to the belief that we should contend against abortion when followed to the end. So, as much as I was a little disappointed, the implications of these points will be clear to those who listen.

Some quick highlights: "Jonah concluded that because he could not see any good reasons for God's command, there could be any. Jonah doubted the goodness, wisdom, and justice of God."-15

"God shows him here that he is the God of all people and Jonah needs to see himself as being part of the whole human community, not only a member of a faith community."-37

"To deny God's wrath upon sin not only robs us of a full view of God's holiness and justice but also can diminish our wonder, love, and praise at what it was that Jesus bore for us."-65

"To work against social injustice and to call people to repentance before God interlock theologically."-94

"Then God says, in essence, "You weep over plants, but my compassion is for people."-118

"Sin always begins with the character assassination of God."-138

"We sneer at people more liberal than us as social justice warriors; we disdain those more conservative than us as hateful bigots." -171

"Religious people often invite nonbelievers to convert by calling them to adopt new sets of behaviors and new ritual practices, and the while redoubling their efforts to live a virtuous life. That, however, is to load more burdens on people.... While the gospel must lead to a changed life, is is not those changes that save you."-207

Recommendation: This is a good book. It is easy and accessible. I recommend it for anyone who wants to go deeper into the book of Jonah or anyone who may be teaching this little book. I would also highly recommend it to anyone who is seeking to understand some of the nuances of Christianity. I found my heart moved multiple times.

Daniel says

The book of Jonah is every bit as relevant today as it was 2500 years ago.

I've been a fan of Timothy Keller since college. The first book of his I read was "The Reason for God." I really admire the work Keller has done pastoring in Manhattan and reaching millions with his books. Another of my favorites was "The Prodigal God," where Keller explores the deeper meanings of the Parable of the Prodigal Son from Luke 15. "The Prodigal Prophet" is a natural follow-up to that book. Keller emphasizes the fact that Jonah represents both brothers in Jesus' parable, the younger brother in Jonah 1 and 2, the older brother in Jonah 3 and 4.

Kellers latest book and the story of Jonah are extremely timely for our political/religious climate. The story of Jonah, Keller argues, emphasizes topics like nationalism, racism, prejudice, and religious elitism. Jonah reveals the dangers of conjoining religion and patriotism and placing national pride over devotion to God.

Jonah is full of reversals. The prophet of God refuses to pray while the pagan Gentile sailors cry out to their own gods and become worshipers of YHWH. Jonah remains hard-hearted and even violent in his view of the Assyrians while the Assyrians' hearts are softened and they turn from their violent, evil ways. Jonah's biggest issue is not with the Gentiles, it's with God who would offer mercy and forgiveness to his enemies.

I appreciate Keller's honesty and courage to present the truth about justice, grace, mercy, and forgiveness on more than just an individual scale. Through the story of Jonah, God is showing that he cares for all people everywhere, even the pagan, Gentile sailors; even the brutally violent Assyrian Empire. God cares. God wants to show grace and forgiveness. Are we willing to follow a God who wants to show love to those we consider our enemy?

Overall, Keller's latest book is a quick, thrilling read diving into the story of Jonah and its implications for the 21st Century. This would make an excellent series to preach through or teach in a Bible class setting. I'd recommend this book for all church leaders, pastors, and teachers, especially if you are concerned with issues of justice.

Bill Pence says

The Prodigal Prophet is quite simply the best book I've read this year. It offers many insights that I never considered about the small (four chapter) book of Jonah, and makes helpful applications to our current culture. Depending on your political persuasion, and stance on the current immigration debate, chances are you may not agree with everything he writes.

Keller tells us "The book of Jonah yields many insights about God's love for societies and people beyond the community of believers; about his opposition to toxic nationalism and disdain for other races; and about how to be "in mission" in the world despite the subtle and unavoidable power of idolatry in our own lives and hearts. Grasping these insights can make us bridge builders, peacemakers, and agents of reconciliation in the world. Such people are the need of the hour".

An insight that I appreciated early in the book was the author's comparison of Jonah's story with Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son. He tells us that the parallel between the two stories, which Jesus himself may have had in mind, is the reason that he chose The Prodigal Prophet as the title. Interestingly, both the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Book of Jonah, each have a cliff-hanger ending. Keller offers his speculation on Jonah, which I found to be helpful.

Keller tells us "Jonah takes turns acting as both the "younger brother" and the "older brother." In the first two chapters of the book, Jonah disobeys and runs away from the Lord and yet ultimately repents and asks for God's grace, just as the younger brother leaves home but returns repentant. In the last two chapters, however, Jonah obeys God's command to go and preach to Nineveh. In both cases, however, he's trying to get control of the agenda".

Keller tells us that the book of Jonah is divided into two parts - the records of Jonah's flight from God and then of his mission to Nineveh. Each part has three sections—God's word to Jonah, then his encounter with the Gentile pagans, and finally Jonah talking to God. He tells us that one of the main messages of the book is that God cares how believers relate to and treat people who are deeply different from us. God wants us to treat people of different races and faiths in a way that is respectful, loving, generous, and just. Grace is another key theme of the book.

Keller takes us through the well-known story of Jonah and then applies it for us.

As I read the book I highlighted a number of excellent quotes. Below are 20 of these quotes:

1. When the real God—not Jonah's counterfeit—keeps showing up, Jonah is thrown into fury or despair. Jonah finds the real God to be an enigma because he cannot reconcile the mercy of God with his justice.
2. Jonah concluded that because he could not see any good reasons for God's command, there couldn't be any. Jonah doubted the goodness, wisdom, and justice of God.
3. And that is the problem facing Jonah, namely, the mystery of God's mercy. It is a theological problem, but it is at the same time a heart problem. Unless Jonah can see his own sin, and see himself as living wholly by the mercy of God, he will never understand how God can be merciful to evil people and still be just and faithful.
4. The dismaying news is that every act of disobedience to God has a storm attached to it.
5. The Bible does not say that every difficulty is the result of sin—but it does teach that every sin will bring you into difficulty.
6. If we build our lives and meaning on anything more than God, we are acting against the grain of the universe and of our own design and therefore of our own being.

7. Sin is a suicidal action of the will upon itself. It is like taking an addicting drug. At first it may feel wonderful, but every time it gets harder to not do it again.
8. When storms come into our lives, whether as a consequence of our wrongdoing or not, Christians have the promise that God will use them for their good (Romans 8:28).
9. You may sincerely believe that Jesus died for your sins, and yet your significance and security can be far more grounded in your career and financial worth than in the love of God through Christ.
10. Shallow Christian identities explain why professing Christians can be racists and greedy materialists, addicted to beauty and pleasure, or filled with anxiety and prone to overwork. All this comes because it is not Christ's love but the world's power, approval, comfort, and control that are the real roots of our self-identity.
11. Any identity based on your own achievement and performance is an insecure one. You are never sure you have done enough. That means, on the one hand, that you cannot be honest with yourself about your own flaws. But it also means that you always need to reinforce it by contrasting yourself with—and being hostile to—those who are different.
12. Often the first step in coming to one's senses spiritually is when we finally start thinking of somebody—anybody—other than ourselves.
13. True love meets the needs of the loved one no matter the cost to oneself. All life-changing love is some kind of substitutionary sacrifice.
14. To deny God's wrath upon sin not only robs us of a full view of God's holiness and justice but also can diminish our wonder, love, and praise at what it was that Jesus bore for us.
15. A God who substitutes himself for us and suffers so that we may go free is a God you can trust.
16. With 20/20 hindsight, we can see that the most important lessons we have learned in life are the result of God's severe mercies. They are events that were difficult or even excruciating at the time but later came to yield more good in our lives than we could have foreseen.
17. It is only when you reach the very bottom, when everything falls apart, when all your schemes and resources are broken and exhausted, that you are finally open to learning how to completely depend on God.
18. God's grace becomes wondrous, endlessly consoling, beautiful, and humbling only when we fully believe, grasp, and remind ourselves of all three of these background truths—that we deserve nothing but condemnation, that we are utterly incapable of saving ourselves, and that God has saved us, despite our sin, at infinite cost to himself.
19. No human heart will learn its sinfulness and impotence by being told it is sinful. It will have to be shown—often in brutal experience. No human heart will dare to believe in such free, costly grace unless it is the only hope.
20. Salvation belongs to God alone, to no one else. If someone is saved, it is wholly God's doing. It is not a matter of God saving you partly and you saving yourself partly. No. God saves us. We do not and cannot save ourselves. That's the gospel.

Scott says

Tim Keller is always so skillful at connecting themes of the Bible with contemporary life and culture, and *The Prodigal Prophet* is no exception. The first half the book is primarily an exposition of the book verse-by-verse with connections to Jesus Christ, other parts of Scripture, and theology in general. Well-written, but there wasn't as much that was new and insightful. The second half of the book is where Keller does what he does best. He takes the person of Jonah, contrasts it with the people of Nineveh and the events of the story, and makes some insightful connections to our culture. In particular, political partisanship, slavery, racism, and poverty are addressed in the context of the book of Jonah. They're certainly thought-provoking applications, and it makes me wonder how *The Prodigal Prophet* would have different, or even existed, had we not been in the current state of affairs our world is currently in.

Dylan Brady says

He's done it again. Thankful for Keller and the way he brings fresh views of Christ in familiar places. More importantly thankful to God who time and time again grants fresh mercies to fools such as Jonah and myself.
