

Jonah 1:1-16

The story of Jonah is a familiar one. Flip through just about any children's Bible and you're likely to see the image of a bearded prophet in the belly of a fish. It's so familiar that conversation of the book often centers simply around whether it actually happened. On that question, the specific details of the story and, more significantly, Jesus' discussion of it in Matthew 12:39-41 and Luke 11:29-32 argue persuasively that this "story" really happened.

But is that really all there is to talk about with this book?

The book's outline is simple. The prophet disobeys the Lord and nearly dies because of his sin until he is swallowed by a fish. Given a second chance, Jonah preaches God's message to a people who, in turn, repent of their sin. Meanwhile, the man complains that God didn't handle things right.

God is loving and forgiving; man is disobedient and selfish. Pretty straightforward, right?

Yes and no. The broad statements about God and man are indeed true, but like all of God's word, there is depth in the words of Jonah that display truth about God and declare grace to us. There is a picture of the work of Jesus in the story of Jonah.

Let's take a look.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before me."

It's approximately 760 BC and the prophet Jonah is living in the northern half of what used to be the united kingdom of Israel. He's a faithful prophet of the Lord (2 Kings 14:25) in a nation that, for the most part, is not faithful to the Lord.

Then, one day, the Lord speaks to him again (or perhaps for the first time). Keep in mind that the role of prophet is a significant one in the Old Testament—along with the Law, prophets were the primary way the Lord spoke to his people (Hebrews 1:1). Therefore, when the Lord speaks, it is something more than Jonah reading his Bible; there is an unmistakable clarity to the Lord's message.

The Lord's message is a unique one. Rather than a message for God's people, it is a message for God's Not-People, in this case, the Ninevites. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, a nation that had oppressed Israel and demanded tribute in the past. Though Assyria was currently focused elsewhere, within the next 50 years, it would lay siege to Israel and destroy it, taking the people into captivity and resettling others into the land. This is the people that Jonah was to take the message. The Lord had seen the wickedness of the Ninevites.

We get used to sin. We expect it in our world and in ourselves—pride, envy, lying, hatred, adultery and murder are facts of our existence. The Lord, however, never gets used to sin and He will call to account those who commit sin. At the same time, however, the Lord offers forgiveness, even to those who are not "His people." Isaiah 19 declares that Egypt

and Assyria are his “handiwork” and Old Testament stories of Gentiles like Hagar and Naaman show His care. That care continues today as 2 Peter 3:9 notes that He waits to send Jesus in judgment because he wants “many to come to repentance.” God was not done with Nineveh.

But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.”

Jonah hears the message and heads the opposite direction, to “flee...from the presence of the Lord.” Make no mistake about his aim. Nineveh is 500 miles northeast of Israel (near modern-day Mosul, Iraq) and Tarshish was on the far western edge of the Mediterranean Sea, perhaps in present-day Spain. He’s travelling months in the opposite direction, likely leaving home forever.

Should we cut Jonah some slack? There are good reasons to avoid Nineveh:

- The 500 mile journey through the desert
- It’s an enemy city with walls 100 feet high and 50 feet thick
- What will he do when he gets there? It’s a city of hundreds of thousands.
- The people worship idols, not the Lord, so why would they care what the Lord says?

The real reason for Jonah’s disobedience, though, appears in Jonah 4:2 . He fled because he assumed God would forgive the Ninevites and Jonah wanted no part of it. For his part, Jonah might have rather had the job of Nahum, the prophet 150 years later who declared details of God’s judgment on Nineveh. Instead, Jonah was to announce God’s declaration of the sin of Nineveh and then watch as they repented and God forgave them. Unwilling to participate, Jonah abdicated his role as prophet and fled.

The pastor Sinclair Ferguson said the great danger for Jonah and for us is when we hold God’s word at arm’s length and say, “This far but no farther. I am comfortable with you in this area of my life but don’t push me to _____.” (in Jonah’s case, fill in the blank with “reach out to the pagans.”)

Rather than preach to the pagans, Jonah makes his way to the port city of Joppa and buys a boat ticket. If Joppa sounds familiar, it’s because there is a story in Acts 10 where the apostle Peter is also in Joppa. While in Joppa, God speaks to Peter, giving him a vision of “unclean” animals and using it to prompt/remind Peter that the message of the Gospel is for all nations, and not simply the Jews. Moments later, Peter receives an invitation to share the Gospel to a group of pagans in another city. Sounds pretty similar to Jonah, huh?

Will Peter pull a Jonah and flee the opposite direction? Or will he prove faithful to the Lord’s call? Praise God! Peter obeyed, and the Kingdom of God opened wide to pagan sinners like you and me.

The Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep.

Interestingly, God lets Jonah go. He lets him buy a ticket and get on the boat. He doesn't stop him right away. Though God knows his sin all along, he gives Jonah time to repent before he brings on the storm.

We see God's mercy here. He is merciful to Jonah to not crush him immediately and merciful to not let his sin go unchecked. God could have sent someone else, after all; it would not have been difficult to call another prophet. But God is merciful to Jonah and determined to use him. He is also merciful to Nineveh. God is so determined to give Nineveh the chance to repent that when His servants avoid the task, He will make them focus on it.

In addition to God's mercy, we also see God's sovereignty. It's not a difficult thing for the Lord to send a "great" wind and a "great" storm. Psalm 135:5-7 includes these lines—"Whatever the Lord pleases, He does...who makes lightnings for the rain, who brings forth the wind from His treasuries." Psalm 107:23-32 tells of a story in which the Lord reveals Himself to sailors using both overwhelming storms and remarkable calm. The sailors on Jonah's boat are about to experience this revelation firsthand.

Meanwhile, Jonah is sleeping below deck. Many commentators note that Scripture depicts Jonah going down, down, down. "Down" to Joppa, "down" into the ship, down below deck, down into the sea, down into the great fish.

Note that these are experienced sailors and they are panicking—trying everything they know in both the spiritual realm (prayers) and physical realm (throwing cargo overboard) to escape with their lives. One pastor compares this to modern-day world leaders. Their efforts to solve world problems are often well-meaning, but only provoke change to the extent that the real Ruler allows it. When He is determined to do something, His will cannot be thwarted (Isaiah 14:27).

So the captain approached him and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish." Each man said to his mate, "Come let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us." So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" He said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

It is a pagan sailor who prompts Jonah to pay attention to the Lord and plead for help. "Call on your god," they say. These sailors are operating with the mindset still prevalent in most of the world—"We must do things to gain God's attention/favor." God's attention was already on Jonah, of course, and as for us, in Jesus, God has made clear once and for all that His attention is already on us and He does not need to be awakened or convinced to care.

The men cast lots, a sort of dice roll that Proverbs 16:33 makes clear is within God's sovereignty (like everything is). The lots reveal what the reader already knows—Jonah is to

blame. His sin has brought devastating consequences upon those around him—like Achan in Joshua 7 and David in 1 Chronicles 21.

Ironically, Jonah was on this trip because he refused to preach to pagans and here he is, forced to preach to pagans. He tells them that he worships the Lord, clearly stating that the massive storm is within God's control.

The news that the God of the Hebrews is behind the storm only makes things worse for the soldiers. Presumably, they have heard of this God, who split the Red Sea. "How could you do this?" they say. Someday, it will be so clear for all of us. We will say, "How could you/I not act in complete obedience?! Look at the wreckage that sin causes!"

We can almost laugh at Jonah's folly to flee from the presence of the Lord. Psalm 139 says "Where can I flee from your presence?" and mentions heaven, Sheol, the sea depths, darkness, and the morning dawn, and yet, we would arrive and find God already there. This is Jonah's situation. He has fled God only to find God.

So they said to him, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?"—for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy. He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you." However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.

Having been found out, Jonah tells the sailors to throw him into the water, essentially sacrificing himself on their behalf. Commentators are split on whether to admire Jonah for this (look at his self-sacrifice! He dies for them!) or see further evidence of his spiritual decline (why won't Jonah repent and cry out for mercy? He's just committing suicide here.) I lean towards the latter understanding. After all, if Jonah was so eager to sacrifice himself, why not just jump overboard? Why make them throw him over?

The sailors, however, do not want to offer Jonah up to the storm and try with renewed vigor to survive. Again, man's best efforts fail against God's determination, and the storm picks up in intensity.

Then they called on the Lord and said, "We earnestly pray, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O Lord, have done as You have pleased." So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

Finally, the men give in to what seems God's will and throw Jonah overboard. Instantly, the storm stops. Our God is the one who brings storms *and* calm.

In this moment, we are reminded that God's dealings with His people can have great effects on those who are not His people. The men experienced God's judgment because of what Jonah did, not because of anything they had done. Now, they experience God's mercy

because Jonah is overboard. Likewise, today, perhaps the sin and obedience of the church has great impact on society at large.

The sailors respond to this moment with worship and fear. Three times the sailors have been afraid. They were afraid of the storm (v.5), they were greatly afraid when they heard that the Lord was behind the storm (v.10), and now they fear the Lord greatly. They have moved from panic to reverence. “God, You have the power to crush us and Yet you had mercy.”

It’s a story that depicts the Gospel, and the work of Jesus 775 years later in fresh color.

It begins with the sin of one man. One man who goes his own way rather than God’s. At that point, God could have written off humanity, could have let us have the alliance with Satan that we apparently wanted. Rather than simply write off humanity, however, God was so determined to accomplish His work that he set out calling man back to his original purpose.

He sent a storm, his appropriate wrath against sin. The storm raged and raged against all humanity alike. Man’s best efforts were powerless against the storm, whether they attempted to outsmart it or ignore it. Nothing would stop the storm unless someone was willing to be sacrificed to the storm. When sacrifice happened, salvation came to the pagans, to the Gentiles in the boat.

Of course, in Jonah’s case, it was the one who sinned who was the sacrifice. In Jesus’ case, it was the one who had not sinned. As if one of the sailors had said, “I know Jonah brought this on us, but throw me overboard.”

Rest assured, though, sin must be paid for—either by you or by Jesus on your behalf.

As soon as the sacrifice happened, the price of the storm was paid and peace reigned.

Meanwhile the one who sacrificed himself to God’s wrath was in the depths. But for how long? For three days or forever? We’ll find out next week.

Suggested Study Outline¹

- I. Pray
- II. Backdrop—What's come before (see notes)
- III. Read Passage
- IV. Exploratory Questions
 - a. What do we see of God in this passage?
 - b. What do we see of man in this passage?
 - c. What's the most important word in the passage?
 - d. Do you have trouble believing this is a historical story?
 - e. Do you think God ever sends weather events based on human actions today?
 - f. Why does God send the storm—to punish Jonah, to give him a second chance, or to rescue Nineveh?
 - g. Do you think we should admire Jonah for sacrificing himself or see him as turning his back on God?
 - h. Does it seem fair that God's judgment on Jonah nearly costs the sailors their lives (and does cost them financial loss)?
- V. Application Questions
 - a. What do you think God would say of your city?
 - b. Are there any individuals in your life that you tend to avoid with the Gospel?
 - c. Is there any area of clear disobedience in your life you need to repent of?
 - d. Do you have an experience of trying to flee from the presence of the Lord?
 - e. Is there any area of your life where you are trying to ignore what God is doing?
 - f. If you're in sin, who does it affect? Even if it's sin that nobody else knows about.
 - g. The sailors end the story fearing God. Do you fear God? If I could watch your life and read your heart, would that be evident?
 - h. How does God call you to action through this passage this week?
- VI. Other questions/thoughts
- VII. So what we've seen here is that...
 - a. God's grace and truth is not limited to the ones who already have it
 - b. Sin causes wreckage...for me, for my neighbor, for entire cultures
 - c. God has the power and purpose to bring both great storms and great calm
 - d. God is determined to get His message out, and He neglects neither individuals nor societies in that task.
- VIII. Pray

¹ The questions here are suggestions. Pick the questions you want to use or create your own. The goal is to: 1) Get at the true meaning of the text; 2) Engage the student; 3) Push the student to apply the truth of the text. In addition, use sessions like this to ensure the student believes the Gospel and could study Scripture for himself/herself.