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C0817 – May 7, 2008 – Jonah 1:1-3 – Jonah Flees The Prophetic Office

Let's open our Bible to Jonah. This book has been taught here on three occasions I'm aware of, 1993, 1998 and 2003, so some of you will be walking through familiar territory. Jonah is one of the most ridiculed and laughed at books of the OT. Unbelievers get a real kick out of Jonah and the great fish. We want to deal with this objection and the way we do that is by our strategy of envelopment. This is the indirect approach, like B.H. Liddell Hart, the tactician who used backdoor tactics to undermine his opponent's offensive capabilities. What he would do is attack the supply lines, control the communication lines, use a flanking maneuver to de-stabilize the enemy so that he took control over the situation. That's how we want to use the word of God when it's under attack. We encircle and interpret the opponent in terms of the word of God. That's the strategy Paul used in his evangelism. In this case you're going to use something similar to a flanking maneuver that destabilizes your opponent. Very graciously, very kindly you respond to someone who laughs at this story with a simple question. "Is it harder to believe that a man was swallowed by a fish or that man used to be a fish?" See, evolution is the absurdity, not the story of Jonah. People think if they just get enough time in their it wipes away the absurdity. It doesn't. So this should shock them a little bit. It doesn't guarantee conversion but it will fend them off and hopefully get them to think.

This objection that the natural man has with miracles, and there are many in Jonah, it's not just the great fish, but the objection is not that miracles are against reason. The problem is that miracles are against apostate reasoning, reasoning that exalts itself against the knowledge of God. This is always the battle, is human view point reason supreme or is divine view point revelation supreme. Reason or revelation, reason or revelation. Which takes the

priority? Where is your starting point because you're either going to start with reason or revelation and work your way from there. Human view point assumes human reason is infallible and sufficient, so that we can go out and, independent of revelation use our finite brain to determine and legislate reality, attain knowledge. Now that's autonomy, man in rebellion against God's word. That's the epitome of unbelief. Then there's the divine view point. Divine viewpoint starts with revelation, I know not because I am infallible and sufficient but because God's word is infallible and sufficient and I start with that base and work out, that's how I attain knowledge. So it's a battle of starting points. Do I start with human reason or with the word of God? That's the objection we face with the pagan world outside the Church.

The objection we face within the Christian world is how are we going to interpret Jonah? Are we going to use the Accommodation Strategy, and fit our interpretation to natural law and come out with the view that Jonah is a non-historical allegory or parable or are we going to use the Counterattack Strategy, accept the word of God straightforwardly as an accurate record of history? That question is answered in how the NT authors quote Jonah. Turn to Matt 12 because here Jesus begins to quote Jonah. You always want to check how the NT authors interpret the OT. That's a guideline for interpreting these passages. It limits how far you can stretch the text. And in Matt 12 the nation Israel has just committed the unpardonable sin. That was a national sin that required the Messiah's presence so it can't be committed today. Every once in a while you get someone saying, "Oh, suicide is the unpardonable sin, you'll go straight to hell" or something like that. Don't listen to them, that's a heresy, Jesus Christ paid for all individual sin on the cross. So the unpardonable sin is not an individual sin but a national sin. And this sin has just been committed when the leaders of Israel formally rejected the Messiahship of Jesus. And Jesus says, "Look guys, that's it, you want to see a sign, I'm going to give you one more sign." It's the greatest sign in the NT that Jesus was the Messiah. Anyone know the sign? The sign of Jonah which is resurrection. Verse 40, "for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Now, if Jonah in the fish is just a parable then isn't Jesus in the tomb just a parable? See, you can't play with the text like that or you end up wiping out other passages. There's a one to one correspondence between Jonah and Jesus. Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the fish was a sign to the Ninevites so Jesus' three

days and three nights in the tomb was a sign to the nation Israel. So either Jesus was off his rocker here or He accepted that Jonah was indeed in the belly of the sea monster. And so certain was He of the Jonah event that He could say it prophesied of His own burial and resurrection. And that's one reason this book is considered prophetic. You read it like a historical narrative but something prophetic is also being developed. The most obvious example is this event in Jonah's life which is picked up by Jesus as a prophecy of His own death and resurrection. To see more of this turn over to Luke 11:29. That generation kept seeking a sign and Jesus kept telling them the same thing. One more sign I'll give you, one more sign, verse 29, "As the crowds were increasing, He began to say, "This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and *yet* no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah." There were many signs before the nation rejection of Jesus but after that one sign remained, the sign of Jonah. Matt 16:4, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah." And the sign of Jonah is the sign of resurrection. And when you move into the Book of Acts after the resurrection what's the witness to? Time and again, Peter and John, "we are witnesses of the resurrection," Matthew and James, "we are witnesses of the resurrection." So, the historicity of Jesus death and resurrection depends on the historicity of Jonah and the great fish.ⁱ

So, we can't just say this is allegory, you can't Accommodate our interpretation to fit natural law. We could Capitulate, and say, yes, that's what it's saying but I don't believe it, the Bible's a myth or we can Counterattack, which means yes, that's what it's saying and yes I believe it. Why? Because I know God and God is omniscient. He knows, He was there so I rest in Him, He's sovereign, He controls the universe, this is not a problem for Him. So I rest not in natural law, not in human wisdom but in the character of God, that he has preserved this true historical account.

Let's start with verse 1, **The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai. Jonah** is the key character in the book. He's **the son of Amittai**. We don't know anything about **Amittai** except his name means "truthful". Jonah's name means "dove." He was a prophet, what the Israelites called "a seer" or a *nabi*. That's why he's located with the Twelve Prophets. They placed this book in the second section of the OT canon. They had three divisions of the OT, same divisions Jesus recognized in the NT when He said,

“Law, prophets and psalms.” Technically you have the *Torah*, the first five books, that’s Law. Then you have the *Kethubim*, the writings, consisting primarily of wisdom literature like the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Psalms, but also oddly enough books like Daniel were part of *Kethubim* because Daniel was known primarily, not for his prophetic role, but for his wisdom. Then you have the *Nabi'im*, the Prophets, and the Twelve were all lumped together in the 4th century BC under Ezra and the Great Synagogue, a group of scribes. So Jonah is located here with the Twelve Prophets. It may seem a little out of place since at first reading you think you’re just reading a historical narrative. But there are prophetic elements, Jonah becomes a type of Christ, he was a common name brought up by Jesus during His earthly ministry. Then we have the fact that Jonah’s experience of rebellion, exile, chastisement and repentance depicts the nation of Israel’s experience of rebellion, exile, chastisement and repentance. So it’s a historical narrative but also a prophecy.

Now, we want to look at one of Jonah’s prophecies that takes place outside of Jonah. Turn to 2 Kings 14:25. This is in the days of Jeroboam II. So we’re in the 8th century BC. I date this book about 762BC, I don’t think any later than that is very plausible, we’ll see why later, it has to do with the fact that that generation of Ninevites repented but the next generation of Ninevites took Israel into captivity in 722BC. So you have to have at least 40 years, one generation between Jonah’s generation and the next generation and that takes you to at the minimum 762BC. Now Jonah was very a popular prophet because of this oracle, 2 Kings 14:25, “He [Jeroboam II] restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher.” So, here’s one of Jonah’s prophecies and Jeroboam heeded the prophecy and restored the border of entrance from Hamath, that’s here in modern day Syria.

This place is called Lebo-Hamath in the Hebrew which means “entrance to Hamath.” Lebo-Hamath is the far north boundary of the Promised Land of Israel. In the times of Solomon the border went up that far but they had shrunk back by the time of Jonah and Jeroboam restored them according to his prophecy. The border he restored came all the way down to the Sea of Arabah, that’s the Dead Sea. So all this region came under Israeli

sovereignty. This had major repercussions because the restored boundaries extend over into Transjordan and that brought several trade routes, major ancient highways under Israeli sovereignty. This brought economic prosperity and luxury items into the northern kingdom. So Jonah became very popular. He was the prophet with good news. So, Jonah was probably quite wealthy. He was living it up, high-fiving everybody in the streets, "Way to go Jonah, you're the man." That's the backdrop for his rebellion. He didn't like his prophetic office very much when he had to go to the Gentile dogs. He'd just prefer God wipe them out like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Notice one more thing here in v 25, Jonah's residence, he was from Gath-hepher, this was a part of the territory allotted to Zebulun (Jos 19:13).

Gath-hepher is in the northern kingdom, near the Sea of Galilee, about a five or six hour walk, he lived only two or three miles from Nazareth where Jews grew up. Turn over to John 7:52 for an interesting remark. This is a debate going on between Nicodemus and the Pharisees. There are hints in the NT that Nicodemus became a believer and this is one of them. In the course of this debate the Pharisees sense he's allied with Jesus and they make this remark. "They answered him, "You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee." In other words, "Do a Bible study Nicodemus and you will see that no prophet arises out of Galilee. Therefore Jesus can't be the Messiah." Yet where did Jonah arise from? Gath-hepher, in the Galilee. So these Pharisees were mistaken. All they said was not according to Scriptures and if you search you will see Jonah the prophet from Galilee. So let's turn back to Jonah.

This is an interesting book. Here's a guy, he holds the prophetic office, the highest office in Israel apart from the king, he's the king's top adviser, he communicates God's word directly to the king, he's popular, he's got everything he needs, you think, God's really blessed this guy. Then you see in verse 2 he's commanded to go up to Ninevah, and in verse 3, **But** and there's the contrast, **But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord** and then look at the end of the verse. What phrase do you see repeated? He went **to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord**. If the Bible repeats something what does that tell you? It's important. Well it's this bit of fleeing from the presence of the Lord that's the main idea of verses 1-3. You know what this is? This is ancient language of the kings and their

servants. The servant would stand in the presence of the king until the king sent them on a mission and then they'd come back and report to the king. Well that was the prophetic office. Jonah stood in the presence of the Lord, he was the Lord's servant and when the Lord told him "go, do this or that" then Jonah was to serve the Lord, carry out the mission and report back. Another part of that ancient practice was that if you don't carry out the mission you better not come back there's a death penalty for that. Think ahead in the Jonah story. How did Jonah tell the sailors to calm the waters? Throw me overboard. Death penalty. You think Jonah knew he'd violated his office when he went down to Joppa, paid the fair and went down below deck. You better believe he understood what he was doing. He was no longer welcome in the presence of the Lord, he had rejected his prophetic office. That's what the ancient phrase repeated here meant. When you fled from the presence of your master it meant you quit your job. "I don't want to be a prophet anymore Lord, this isn't fun." See, this is the Christian who always wants life to be easy and things are going so smooth and one little bump in the road comes along, God asks us to do something we don't want to do and so we flee. We cease to be the servant of God and begin to be the slave of sin. That's Jonah and that's why we need doctrinal training. It's the training that gives you the strength and stability to navigate the bumps in the road. Nowhere does the word say, "Ditch Christianity when things get tough," that's what the Book of Hebrews is all about, Hebrew Christians who've fallen under persecution and their solution is, "Hey, let's not practice Christianity for awhile and when the persecution lifts we'll become Christians again." No, no says the author of Hebrews and they get five warnings not to fall back in the Christian life but to press forward, apply doctrine in the midst of persecution. Well, obviously Jonah is abandoning the word of God here. He's quitting, he has rejected his prophetic office. That's the full impact of that phrase.

So he heads down to **Joppa**, it's been surrounded today by the modern city of Tel Aviv. Joppa is here on the Mediterranean.



This was the port used in the time of Solomon. When Solomon was building the Temple with the cedars of Lebanon what they would do is cut the trees up north in Lebanon, put them on ships and haul them down to Joppa, then take them across land to Jerusalem. So this was an important port city. The interesting thing about this departure point is that it's here that Jonah fled to so he wouldn't have to go evangelize Gentiles. And when you get in the NT Book of Acts you find Peter here seeing a vision to go evangelize Gentiles (Acts 10:9-14). That set him off to Cornelius' house. So Jonah disobeyed but Peter obeyed. Both events are tied to Joppa and Gentile evangelization.

And where is he headed to? A place called **Tarshish**. This is more difficult to locate because there are several cities with this name. There seems to be a common source that these cities go back to. If you turn to Gen 10:4, the Table of Nations we can get back to the source. Place names are often carried with natives of an area and given to a new area. One of the things we haven't mentioned in the Framework but which sticks out when you look at a Middle East map are two large rivers mentioned in early Genesis. Anybody recall the names of those rivers? The Tigris and Euphrates. Actually Genesis mentions four rivers but two of those are the modern Tigris and Euphrates. Sometimes you hear someone say "Oh the Garden of Eden was between those two rivers." That comes from the local flood group, that Gen 6-8 were just a minor disturbance in Mesopotamia, no high energy catastrophic plate movements. Actually, those rivers are not the same as Genesis 2, those were named by Noah and his descendants, as they went out from the Ark on the postdiluvian earth they remembered pre-flood rivers and gave them the same names. So, you can't find the Garden of Eden, the entire geography of the earth was radically changed by the Global Flood. But what you see is a name

transference from one place to another. That's common and the same is true for Tarshish. There's one in India, one in Carthage, one in Southeast Turkey and this one. The origin of this name goes back to Gen 10:4, in verse 2 who are these the sons of? Japheth. Which way did Japheth go out from Ararat? Europe, and v 4 records some of his grandsons, "The sons of Javan *were* Elishah and Tarshish," so Tarshish is a Japhethite, he went into Europe and it's possible that he and his descendants settled in Spain. There's a place there by that name. So scholars think Jonah was going to Spain. A city there also named Tartessus. By the time of Jonah this was a very wealthy city, it was at the mouth of the Mediterranean so it was a major trade center, and Ezekiel notes how it was full of silver and gold. So Jonah may have been thinking about retiring there, living in luxury. In any case Israelites were not noted seamen and Jonah's willingness to embark on such a long and dangerous voyage is evidence of his stubborn determination to abandon his ministry and retire in Tarshish.ⁱⁱ

Now, the command in verse 2, **Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me. Nineveh** is in northern Iraq across the river from Mosul, the oil processing center. Today there are Sunni's and Kurd's living there.

We want to back up to the origins of this city. Gen 10:11. This is the first mention of the city of **Nineveh**. If you back up to verse 6 you see that this section is giving a genealogy of which son of Noah? Shem, Ham or Japheth? Ham. So these people are Hamites. V 8, "Now Cush," he's the fountainhead of Ethiopia, he was a black Hamite, not all of them were black, you have white and black Hamites but Cush was black and he "became the father of Nimrod; he became a mighty one on the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the LORD." The beginning of his kingdom was Babel and Erech and Accad and Calneh, in the land of Shinar." Alright, so Nimrod began to build his kingdom and you notice the prominent city there is Babel. That city gets a healthy treatment in chapter 11. But you notice something happens in v 11, notice the movement, the verbs of going, "From that land he went forth into Assyria, and built Nineveh and Rehoboth-Ir and Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city." What we think is that he founded the four cities in v 10 in the land of Shinar, then the Tower of Babel incident occurred, that building project was halted and he went out from there into Assyria and

built the cities of v 11, one of which is Nineveh. This whole region of Assyria became known to the Jews as “the land of Nimrod,” and they believed that the first people to live in this city were from Babylon. So that shows you how seriously they took this Table of Nations. Their knowledge about these peoples went back to Gen 10. So, that’s the origin of this city and the people Jonah is commanded to go to; they’re Hamitic. Let’s turn back to Jonah 1:2. We want to learn more about this city in the time of Jonah.

Jonah is commanded to go to **Ninevah, the great city**. This “exceeding great city” lay on the eastern bank of the river Tigris, along which it stretched for some 30 miles, having an average breadth of 10 miles or more from the river back toward the eastern hills. This whole extensive space is now one immense area of ruins. Occupying a central position on the great highway between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, thus uniting the East and the West, wealth flowed into it from many sources, so that it became the greatest of all ancient cities.ⁱⁱⁱ Jonah 3:3 notes that Nineveh was an “exceeding great city, a three days walk.” That probably refers to the circumference of the city. It was about 60 miles in circuit. At the four corners of an irregular quadrangle are the ruins of Kouyunjik, Nimrud, Karamless and Khorsabad. These four great masses of ruins, with the whole area included within the parallelogram they form are generally regarded as composing the whole ruins of Nineveh.^{iv} What you see here is Kouyunjik only. It has some interesting features, you have the Palace of Ashurbanipal. You have Tell Nebi-yunus and that’s the traditional site where Jonah was buried. They haven’t been able to excavate that because the Muslim’s built a mosque over the site in commemoration of the prophet Jonah.



But to get the quadrangle you go SE along the Tigris River 18 miles until you reach Nimrud. Then if you go northeast about 15 miles you get to Karamless. The northernmost city is Khorsabad which is north of Kouyunjik. Four lines connecting the cities form an irregular quadrangle, that whole area was known as Nineveh, “an exceedingly great city.” Jonah 4:11 indicates a great number of inhabitants, “the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand,” That’s probably talking about the children alone, so we’re talking a population center of 600,000 to 1 million. And to think of the fantastic results of Jonah’s preaching. As far as we can tell the entire city repented of their wicked deeds. Turn to Matt 12:41. So radical a change took place in the Ninevites that Jesus notes it in the NT. “The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.” So, that generation of Ninevites responded to the message of repentance when Jonah preached but the nation of Israel did not respond to the message of repentance when Jesus preached. That’s a remarkable Gentile-Jew contrast.

Though the city was occupied from prehistoric times and rebuilt repeatedly by kings of the Middle Assyrian period, the city reached the height of its fame at the turn of the eighth century B.C., when Sennacherib made Nineveh the capital of the expanding Assyrian Empire. When Assyria subsequently held sway over Egypt, under Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, Nineveh was the most powerful city in the world. Nonetheless, its end was but decades away. The end of Nineveh is proclaimed by two contemporary biblical prophets, Zephaniah and Nahum. Though Zephaniah’s prophecy is brief and incidental (Zeph. 2:13-15), the book of Nahum in its entirety is directed against the city, under the title ‘An Oracle Concerning Nineveh.’ Nahum’s poetic work describes the fall of Nineveh in unexcelled imagery and power.^v In 612 B.C. the city fell to the combined forces of the Babylonians and the Medes. Some twenty-five centuries later the discovery of the great library of Ashurbanipal in the ruins of Nineveh would furnish the clues for the recovery of the intellectual and spiritual treasures of ancient Mesopotamia.^{vi} In his palace was housed the famous library of such importance for the study of Assyriology. The temple of Nabu contained a library dating at least to the time of Sargon II, but the royal library of Ashurbanipal far surpassed it in size and importance. Sargon and his successors had collected many tablets,

but Ashurbanipal sent scribes all over Assyria and Babylonia to gather and to copy tablets, so that tens of thousands of tablets accumulated. The Nineveh collection covers a great range of materials: business accounts, letters, royal records, historical documents, lexicographical lists and bilingual texts, legends, myths and various other kinds of religious inscriptions, such as hymns, prayers, and lists of deities and temples. Among the tablets were 7 that preserved the Babylonian creation story *Enuma elish* and 12 which bore the Babylonian flood story, the *Gilgamesh Epic*. I mention those because we've studied in the Framework both *Enuma elish* and the *Gilgamesh Epic* and there are others like the Adapa legend and the Etana legend which were discovered in Ashurbanipal's library. These are all pagan distortions of the true biblical events.

What was Jonah to do? **cry against** that city. What does that mean? Chapter 3:2 elaborates when God commissions Jonah the second time. He is "to proclaim to it the proclamation" which God would tell him which is evidently v 4, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Forty is the period of testing in the Bible. Israel was tested in the wilderness for forty years. Jesus was tempted for forty nights and forty days. And the Ninevites were given forty days of testing. This is a momentous portrait of grace before judgment.

their wickedness the same word is used of the men before the Flood in Gen 6:5. God gave 120 years of grace before judgment before the Flood and 40 days of grace before judgment in Nineveh. The difference in time due to the time needed to reach all the inhabitants with the proclamation.

So, our main idea tonight and we didn't get into the Assyrians as much as I wanted to. This was a vicious, bloodthirsty people and we want to get into that some but we'll have to pick that up later. The main idea in the first three verses is that Jonah fled the presence of the Lord; he rejected the prophetic office. That's the gravity of the situation. We have a believer in major negative volition to the word of God. He heads down to Joppa, pays the fair to Tarshish, a city in Spain and goes down below. Maybe he was going to retire but there was no way he was going to go to the "land of Nimrod" and warn those Hamitic Gentile Ninevites of the coming judgment. No way. So God has to chasten him and we'll get into that story next week.

ⁱ It's also prophetic in the sense that what Jonah experiences closely mirrors Israel's experience. Jonah disobeys God just as the nation Israel disobeys God. Jonah goes into exile just as the nation Israel goes into exile. God chastens Jonah just as God chastens the nation Israel. Jonah repents of his disobedience just as the nation Israel will one day repent of her disobedience and so forth. There are numerous parallels between Jonah and the nation Israel.

ⁱⁱ Smith, J. E. (1992). *The Minor Prophets*. Joplin, Mo.: College Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Easton, M. (1996, c1897). *Easton's Bible dictionary*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

^{iv} Easton, M. (1996, c1897). *Easton's Bible dictionary*. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

^v Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). *Harper's Bible dictionary*. Includes index. (1st ed.) (707). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

^{vi} Achtemeier, P. J., Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature. (1985). *Harper's Bible dictionary*. Includes index. (1st ed.) (707). San Francisco: Harper & Row.

[Back To The Top](#)

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