

Jonah

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. (Jonah 1:3a ESV)

And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. (Jonah 4:2 ESV)

And the Lord said, “Do you do well to be angry?” (Jonah 4:4 ESV)

And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11 ESV)

Arise and Go

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Jonah 1:1-16

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Introduction:

Good morning! Turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Jonah.

The story of Jonah is not a story about a big fish – though it does feature a big fish. This story is meant to teach us one grand over-arching lesson: We do not get to decide who is beyond the scope of God’s mercy.

The main character in this story is not a fish. The main character in this story is not even Jonah. The main character is God! He calls and sends. He hurls winds and waves. He sends big fish and little worms. And He does it all to teach His people that we cannot fall into the trap of believing that God is a national deity that we can privately enjoy while the world goes to hell in a handbasket. We are a missional people! We are blessed to be a blessing!

This story is a rebuke. This story is a reorientation. This story is a reminder of who God has saved us to be. Throughout the centuries, the book of Jonah has been used by God to awaken His people from their apathy and to get them back onto their mission. I expect no less as we turn our attention to it over the next four weeks.

To that end, look with me to Jonah 1. In the Hebrew bible, chapter 1 ends at the end of verse 16, and that is the division we are going to follow this morning. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” ³But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

⁴But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.”

⁷And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸Then they said to him, “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

¹¹Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. ¹²He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” ¹³Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴Therefore they called out to the Lord, “O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.” ¹⁵So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. (Jonah 1:1-16 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The book of Jonah is unique in that it is the only book in the minor prophets where there really is no word of prophecy spoken. Think about that. How can you put a book in the “minor prophet” section of the Bible if it doesn't contain any prophecies?

The Israelites understood that, in this book, *Jonah's life* is the prophetic word. This story is a rebuke – not to the Ninevites – but to the people of God who, like Jonah, had lost sight of who God had saved them to be. The *story is the sermon*, and the book of Jonah really is a masterpiece in storytelling. Therefore, if we are going to understand the prophetic word of this passage, then we need to dive into the story.

Diving Into the Story

First, if we're going to understand this story then we need to understand:

1. The man

We so often read these stories with no regard for the people who feature in them. We're about to spend four weeks talking about how Jonah colossally missed the mark. We're about to reflect on his shortcomings and his blind spots and, as we often do, we might even find ourselves walking away from the text thinking, "Jonah was a real piece of work. I'm glad I'm nothing like him."

But, before we study his mistakes, let's take a minute to acquaint ourselves with the man.

This is not the only time that we find Jonah, son of Amittai in the Old Testament. In 2 Kings, while the reign of Israel's king, Jeroboam, is being described, we read:

He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant **Jonah the son of Amittai**, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. (2 Kings 14:25 ESV)

He was a son. We know his dad's name. Jonah had a family – a family who would be affected by his actions – a family who he undoubtedly loved and desired to protect.

He had a home. He lived in Gath-hepher. He knew the people in his community, and he undoubtedly felt a degree of loyalty to them.

He was a prophet and he seemingly had some semblance of notoriety. His prophecy was known even to the king. I imagine he understood that office to be a great honour. Jonah's life was about bringing God's word to the people of Israel.

All of that should be taken into account as we consider the next detail in the story, and that is:

2. The assignment

God spoke to the man Jonah and said:

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” (Jonah 1:2 ESV)

It’s worth noting at this point that Nineveh was not just around the corner from Jonah’s home in Gath-hepher. Jonah was at least 600 miles away from Nineveh in a day and age when travel was long and treacherous.

However, the challenge of the distance was not the issue for Jonah. The issue was the destination. Though it was not always the capital city of Assyria, Nineveh was always one of its principal towns.¹ God was sending Jonah to warn Assyria about their incoming judgement.

This is where it is helpful to be a whole-Bible reader. If you were reading through the Bible for the first time, you might say, “So what? Go and warn Assyria, Jonah! What’s the problem?” Well, the problem is that Assyria was a nation that had historically made life miserable for Jonah’s people.

As one commentator notes:

Since the middle of the ninth century, the country had been forced to pay tribute as a vassal of the Assyrian king. It was a land that inspired terror in Israel.²

Assyria was a nation that employed terror tactics to keep their vassal states in line. They cut pregnant women open, they threw babies at walls, they impaled their victims and stood them up as warning signs for those who might consider rebellion in the future. You have likely heard me say before that they Assyrians were like the Nazis of their generation.

What’s more – and this is the crazy part – Assyria would later go on to annihilate the northern tribes of Israel in future years. As a reminder: Jonah lived in a northern tribe! Jonah ministered to the northern tribes!

¹ H. L. Ellison, Frank E. Gaebelein, ed. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary. Volume 7. Daniel-Minor Prophets*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 368.

² Joyce Baldwin, Thomas Edward McComiskey ed. *The Minor Prophets - Volume Two – A Commentary on Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 552.

Put all of that together now. Jonah's assignment was to get up, to travel 600 plus miles, and to march into one of the most prominent cities of his terrorist enemy to warn them that God's judgement was coming.

That was a difficult assignment because Jonah WANTED God's judgement to come! And, if you were in Jonah's shoes, you would too.

No more Assyria means no more paying tribute! No more Assyria means no more living in fear! Can you imagine what it would have been like for Jonah to return home after this assignment? "Where have you been all this time, Jonah?" "Well, I was just up in Nineveh. God was about to destroy them in His righteous judgement. I couldn't bear the thought of that, so I gave them a stern warning and now God has decided to spare them. Assyria is saved!" Jonah could very well have been kicked out of his city! He could very well have been disowned by his father.

I imagine that Jonah's name would have been equivalent to a curse word in the days when those same Assyrians swept through and slaughtered the Northern Kingdom. Have you ever thought about that?

"Arise, Jonah. Go to Nineveh."

Now that we understand the man and the assignment, perhaps we can better understand the next detail of the story which is:

3. The rebellion

God said, "Arise! Go!" But we read in verse 3:

But Jonah rose to flee (Jonah 1:3a ESV)

He got up, and he went in exactly the opposite direction! He went down to Joppa and purchased his way onto a ship that was headed to Tarshish. Jonah was a prophet – he understood God's sovereignty and omnipresence – but in his rebellion he deceived himself into believing that he could somehow escape the presence of God. We read as much in verse 3. Look again:

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish **from the presence of the Lord**. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, **away from the presence of the Lord**. (Jonah 1:3 ESV)

He wasn't simply removing himself from the assignment... He was attempting to remove himself from any chance of ever being asked to pick up that assignment again. He was frightened. He was hard-headed. He was filled with hate. And he was hiding.

But, as we learn in Jeremiah 23, God is not someone that you want to play hide-and-seek with:

Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? ²⁴ Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 23:23-24 ESV)

There is no hiding from our God. Jonah told himself that he could escape from the Maker of heaven and earth, but God was unwilling to cooperate with Jonah's self-deception. Very quickly, he reminded Jonah that He was just as present on the sea as He was on the dry land. In verse 4, we read:

But **the Lord hurled a great wind** upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. (Jonah 1:4 ESV)

God has a way of getting our attention, doesn't He? You have never once been hit by a storm that didn't first pass through the fingers of your Heavenly Father. Every gust of wind – every season of difficulty – serves a purpose in God's grand design. All things work for the good of those who love God³. And, sometimes, those storms blow in to remind us that we have strayed from our assignment. Sometimes God sends us a wakeup call.

But Jonah attempted to ignore his wakeup call. Literally. While the sailors frantically hurled cargo overboard in an attempt to keep from taking on water, Jonah slipped down into the cargo hold and fell into a deep sleep. While you might be tempted to envision Jonah in this scene as an oblivious, exhausted man caught sleeping while everyone else was working, I would suggest that we are meant to see something deeper. I think we are meant to see here a man who is caught in the grip of despair.

At this point in the story, Jonah is done.

³ Romans 8:28

Have you ever been in that place? He is so far into his rebellion – he is so discouraged and disillusioned – that the storm is raging and the people around him are suffering from his sin, but *he doesn't care*. He is numb to it all. He's hiding under the pillow. He's done.

When the sailors finally uncover the truth, Jonah simply tells them to throw him into the sea. He's not interested in repenting. Jonah's hatred for Nineveh was so great – his resentment of his assignment went so deep – that he would rather die than obey.

The Hebrew word “*yarad*” which means “he went down” is repeated again and again in this passage. As soon as Jonah turned away from the Lord's plan for his life, the whole story is a story of descent. He went *down* to Joppa. He went *down* to the boat. He went *down* to the cargo hold. And he eventually descended into the depth of the sea. I love what one old commentator says here:

Oh that we all might lay this to heart! The path of the one who acts in self-will is always a downward one, let the profession be what it may. One may boast of acting for God, and talk of having His approval; but if self is served instead of Christ, the feet will soon slide, and the steps will be down, down, down⁴

Isn't that the truth. Down. Down. Down.

In the midst of this rebellion, we find one more significant detail in this story, and that is:

4. The irony

The sailors play a unique role in the story. When the storm rolled in, what was their first response?

Then the mariners were afraid, **and each cried out to his god.** (Jonah 1:5a ESV)

These sailors were polytheists which means that they worshiped multiple gods. Each man would have had a particular god that he turned to most frequently. In their desperation, they cried out to their gods in the hopes that someone might catch the ear of a god with the power to save.

When they saw that Jonah was sleeping, they woke him up, but – and this is interesting – it wasn't because they wanted help with the cargo. No, we read in verse 6:

⁴ H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, (New York, NY: Bible Truth Depot, 1928), 200.

So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? **Arise, call out to your god!** Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.” (Jonah 1:6 ESV)

“We need more prayer on this boat!” the captain said. “Maybe *your* god will be the god to deliver us!” The unbelievers with no knowledge of the power and might of our God were more eager to call upon His name than God’s prophet.

They proceeded to cast lots to try to determine why the storm had come, and the lot fell on Jonah. This began an interrogation: “Who are you? Who are your people? From where have you come and where are you going?” To which Jonah replied:

I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. (Jonah 1:9b ESV)

Here, we are reminded that you can possess excellent theology and still be an absolute hypocrite.

“I fear the God of heaven who made the sea.” Really!?! Then why did you try to run away from Him ON THE SEA?! And why did you take a nap while our ship was threatening to break into pieces? And why did a group of pagan sailors need to compel you to pray?

The irony here is that, while the sailors did not have a relationship with YHWH, they were still legitimately horrified to hear that Jonah had rebelled against Him. The text says:

Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. (Jonah 1:10 ESV)

Commentator Joyce Baldwin notes the irony of this chapter. She observes:

They fear indeed, whereas Jonah merely mouths the word.⁵

⁵ Joyce Baldwin, Thomas Edward McComiskey ed. *The Minor Prophets - Volume Two – A Commentary on Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1993), 560.

The irony continues as these unbelievers – these men who have not grown up with the knowledge of the Lord – show the compassion to Jonah that he refused to show to the Ninevites. Remember: They are at risk of *losing their lives* because of Jonah’s sin. They just threw their cargo overboard, which means that *they won’t be getting paid* at the end of this trip. Yet, with their livelihood destroyed and their lives in jeopardy, they are *still* reluctant to throw the napping, indifferent rebel overboard. They get on the oars and attempt with all their might to row back to the shore, but God won’t allow it. He’s not done with Jonah. Finally, after their best efforts and only after pleading with God for mercy, they give in to Jonah’s request. We read in verse 15:

So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. (Jonah 1:15-16 ESV)

The sailors learned that day what Jonah professed with his mouth but failed to believe with his heart – that God is the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

Thus, the first chapter of Jonah ends with the disobedient prophet sinking into the sea. So deep was his rebellion and so great was his hatred for Nineveh.

As I said off the top, the prophetic message of the book of Jonah is in the story itself. So, with the time that we have left, I want to ask the question: What is God teaching us through this story?

What Is God Teaching Us Through This Story?

First, He is teaching us that:

1. His will is non-negotiable

Our challenge after reading this story is that we are tempted to make the excuse: “Well, Jonah *knew* God’s will for his life, and he ran from it. But *I* don’t know God’s will. How can I be running from something I don’t know?”

But you do know God’s will for your life. Don’t you? Are you a follower of Christ? Well, then God’s will for your life is not some unattainable mystery. Jesus stated it clearly:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and **make disciples of all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:18b-20 ESV)

You are a disciple maker. Now, that will look different for each of us as God calls us to different spheres of influence, but make no mistake – His will for your life is that you would drop your excuses, kick your apathy to the curb, and help the people in your sphere of influence to know and serve the Lord.

I wonder how many of us, like Jonah, have been attempting to resist God’s will for our lives. Perhaps you’ve had a strong sense for years that God would have you serve on the mission field. Perhaps you’ve sensed for years that He’s calling you to foster care. Perhaps you sense that you’ve neglected your responsibility to take seriously your leadership in the home. Perhaps you’ve sensed for years that He’s calling you to be more intentional with your neighbours, or more involved with the local church, or more courageous in your workplace.

Let this text remind you that God always gets His man. Don’t waste another second running from your assignment.

He will send storms and discomforts and enormous fish and *whatever else it takes* to remind you that you are not your own but belong to God! You don’t get to choose your assignment. To follow Christ is to lay EVERY aspect of your life on the table and to proclaim: “Here it is. It is all yours! Do with it what you will.” Jesus said:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 16:24-25 ESV)

To follow Christ means dying to your former plans for your life. It means dying to the fears that have been holding you back. It means dying to the comfort that you’ve turned into an idol. If you follow Christ, then your life is HIS.

If you forget that, you can rest assured that he will remind you. God has a plan for your life – a plan that is beyond anything that you could ever draw up yourself – a plan that will not be thwarted by anything... Not even your obstinance.

I wonder if there aren't some Jonah's sitting in the room this morning.

Are you hiding? Are you trying to surround yourself with enough noise and enough busyness that you can drown out the clear call that you've heard?

Arise. Go.

God is also reminding us in this story that:

2. His call can feel impossible

This isn't unique to Jonah. One of the reasons why we so often feel the urge to hide from God's call on our lives is because that calling feels impossible! God calls us to do the kinds of things that we could NEVER do in our own strength. Things like what we find in Matthew 5:44:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44 ESV)

Now, some of us have never had an enemy so we don't understand just how impossible this command is. We've never felt the sting of persecution like the one that Jonah is reacting to in today's text.

But some of us have. Some of you have been mocked and ridiculed for your faith. Some of you have legitimate enemies – people who did things to you in the past that forever changed you. Jonah was willing to die to ensure that his enemies would face the judgement that they deserved. Do you feel the same way?

What a sharp contrast that is with our Saviour who was willing to die so that his enemies would be *saved* from the judgement that they deserved. *That love* – that scandalous, undeserved, taken-advantage-of love – is the love that he has called us to extend to our enemies.

Who is sufficient for these things?

God called Jonah to preach to the enemy of his people. He called Elizabeth Elliot to preach to the men who murdered her husband. He is today calling some of our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan to preach to the Taliban.

He has a calling for each and every one of us – a calling that will feel impossible. But rest assured; He who called you is faithful. As you step out in obedience, He will show His strength where you are weak. He will mobilize His church in mission because, the ultimate lesson that God is teaching us through this story is that:

3. His heart is for the nations

The book of Jonah exists because God’s people are so quick to forget this reality: God’s heart is for the nations! This has always been the case! When God made His great promises to Abraham, He told him:

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, **so that you will be a blessing.** ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and **in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.** (Genesis 12:2-3 ESV)

Blessed to be a blessing! That was God’s intention for His people. But time after time they lost sight of their mission. Time after time they built up bigger walls and turned their focus inward rather than outward. As one commentator notes:

Israel had been separated from the nations, not to dwell in a cold, formal exclusiveness, in utter indifference to the fate the peoples about them, but to be a light in a dark world, making known the mind of God and manifesting the character of Jehovah to those who were sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death.⁶

Make no mistake, this problem is not an Israelite problem. We face the EXACT same temptation, don’t we?

We build up a big wall around our families and we say, “My life is about THIS and I’m going to protect THIS at all costs.” We build up a big wall around our circle of friends and we say, “I’m not letting ANYONE into this bubble.” We build up a big wall around our church community and we say, “Look at how sweet our fellowship is! We’re not going to risk letting anyone spoil THIS!”

⁶ H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, (New York, NY: Bible Truth Depot, 1928), 197.

Now, don't overhear me this morning. Family *is* important and friendship *is* important and church community *is* important. Yes. Those relationships are gifts from God, and it would be wrong NOT to enjoy them. Yes. We *glorify* God by delighting in those relationships! Yes, yes, yes!

But if you allow those good things to become God things and if you become so inward focused that you no longer have a heart for the outside world... Well you might just get swallowed by a whale.

Jesus loved his inner circle. But never to the exclusion of the world. You were once on the outside. Lost. Without hope in this world. You were on the road to an eternity apart from God.

But, by the grace of God, someone somewhere remembered that God's heart is for the nations! Someone somewhere remembered that God so LOVED the world that He gave His Son! Someone somewhere took that impossible leap of faith and brought the good news to you! And hearing, you believed. And believing, you were saved. You were washed. You were made new. You were blessed!

Why? You were blessed to be a blessing. God poured grace into your life and now He has called you to OVERFLOW to the world! He's going to direct you to people. He's going to direct you to places. He's going to ask you to do impossible things! And He's not going to let you forget who He's saved you to be!

So go across the field after the service and invite that new person to your house for lunch. Go across your street and invite your neighbour over for a barbecue. Go across the ocean and tell the Taliban about Jesus.

I don't know who God is sending you to, but I do know that God is sending each and every one of us somewhere. He's laying someone on your heart right now, isn't He?

God's will is non-negotiable. God's call can feel impossible. But God's heart is for the nations. So, don't run. Don't hide. Arise. Go.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.