

JONAH

The Unwilling Prophet

Sin runs rampant in our world. Daily headlines and overflowing prisons bear dramatic witness to that fact. With child abuse, pornography, serial killings, terrorism, anarchy, and ruthless dictatorships, the world seems to be filled to overflowing with violence, hatred, and corruption. Reading, hearing, and perhaps even experiencing these tragedies, we may look forward to God's judgment on such people. We may even find ourselves wishing for vengeance against these violent nations and peoples. We may even think they are beyond redemption. But suppose that in the midst of such thoughts, God told you to take the Gospel to the worst of these offenders. How would you respond?

Jonah was given such a task. Assyria, a great, but evil empire, was Israel's most dreaded enemy. The Assyrians flaunted their power before God and the world through numerous acts of heartless cruelty. So when Jonah heard God tell him to go to Assyria (Nineveh being the capital city) and call the people to repentance, he refused.¹

Today, and next week, we will be learning about a prophet of God who rebelled at doing what God told him to do.

So let's turn to the story in our Bibles and read the first two chapters:

Jonah 1—2, NRSV

*1 Now the word of the Lord came to **Jonah** son of Amittai, saying,*

*2 "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and **cry out against it**; for their wickedness has come up before me."*

*3 But Jonah set out 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 his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.*

4 But as the ship was sailing along, suddenly the Lord flung a powerful wind over the sea, causing a violent storm that threatened to send them to the bottom.

5 Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors shouted to their gods for help and threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. And all this time Jonah was sound asleep down in the hold.

6 So the captain went down after him. "How can you sleep at a time like this?" he shouted. "Get up and pray to your god! Maybe he will have mercy on us and spare our lives."

*7 The sailors said to one another, "Come, **let us cast lots**, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and **the lot fell on Jonah.***

8 Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us."

¹ *Life Application Bible, The Living Bible.* Tyndale House, Wheaton, Illinois, 1988.

What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

9 *"I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*

10 *Then the men were even more 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 so.*

11 *Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous.*

12 *He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you."*

13 *Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.*

14 *Then they cried out to the Lord, "**Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish** on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you."*

15 *So **they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.***

16 *Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.*

17 *But **the Lord provided a large fish** to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

1 *Then **Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish,***

2 *saying, "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol (the place of the dead)² I cried, and **you heard my voice.***

3 *You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows (a great wave or surge of water)³ passed over me.*

4 *Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?'*

5 *The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head*

6 *at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit (grave)⁴, O Lord my God.*

7 *As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.*

8 *Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.*

9 *But I with the voice of thanksgiving will **sacrifice** to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"*

² Parentheses added.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Parentheses added.

*10 Then **the Lord spoke to the fish**, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.*

Quite a story, isn't it? And we're only half way through it. Now let's look at it more carefully.

First some background. The Book of Jonah dates from the 8th century B.C., probably around 760 B.C.⁵ It would be only 40 short years before the Assyrians would destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Yet the Prophet Jonah was told by God to go from Israel to save the enemy's capital, Ninevah. Ninevah was probably the largest city in the world at the time with a population of 500,00 or 600,000 people.

Jonah lived and ministered during the golden age of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Under King Jeroboam II, a weakened Israel saw a dramatic resurgence of power, and Jonah had a significant role in this recovery. Second Kings 14 tells us that while Jeroboam "*did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat [the first Jeroboam],*" nevertheless, "he ... restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, *in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken by His servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-Hepher.*" To give you a better idea of the amount of territory described here, it would be very similar to the state of Illinois. So if you've done a lot of walking around the state of Illinois, you'll have a good idea of the size of Israel in the best of times. It was considerably smaller in other times.

Jonah apparently had a patriotic and popular ministry. He must have enjoyed the favor of both Jeroboam II and his fellow citizens. No wonder the divine command to go to Nineveh, the capital of the empire that for decades **had terrorized the people of Israel**, came as a jolting shock.

The prophet had acted as God's spokesman when the message from God was good for his people. But he was unwilling to carry a message to an enemy who might do his country harm!⁶

Jonah 1:1-3:

*1 Now the word of the Lord came to **Jonah** son of Amittai, saying,*

*2 "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and **cry out against it**; for their wickedness has come up before me."*

*3 But Jonah set out 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 his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.*

⁵ Richards, L., & Richards, L. O. 1987. The teacher's commentary. Includes index. Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill.

⁶ Richards, L., & Richards, L. O. 1987. The teacher's commentary. Includes index. Victor Books: Wheaton, Ill.

So we see that Jonah reacted immediately to the divine commission given him by God. *“Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish”* (Jonah 1:3). He went, all right, but he went in the opposite direction from what God had commanded!

There is no indication of how God spoke to Jonah. To the true Old Testament prophets, the *way* God spoke to them was not so important as the simple *fact* that He did speak to them. *“Nineveh, that great city”* of Mesopotamia, located on the east bank of the Tigris River in what is now Iraq, had been a dominant city-state from ancient times. A city-state comprised its occupied area and the surrounding territory, including the neighboring villages under its control. We might liken it to the greater metropolitan area of Chicago which includes the suburbs. It was more than five hundred miles from Palestine; a long way to travel by foot. The sins of Nineveh are not described here, but the city was widely known as a center of fertility cult worship, and for its cruelty to the victims of warfare.

God’s purpose in commanding Jonah to make this missionary trip to Nineveh was in part perhaps to **shame Israel** by showing them how a pagan city could repent at the preaching of a stranger, whereas Israel would not repent even though God sent them many prophets whom they knew. The heathen (people who do not acknowledge the God of the Bible) city of Nineveh did repent of their sin after Jonah reluctantly preached the Word of God to them. But the Jewish Pharisees in Israel refused to repent when God’s prophets spoke to them. And several hundred years later they rejected the preaching of the greatest of all the prophets and the Son of God, Jesus Christ. They refused in spite of overwhelming evidence that Jesus was the Messiah.

Both Jonah and Israel, after having been chosen by God to spread His truth (Isaiah 43:10-12); 44:8), rebelled against His commands (Exodus 32:1-4; Judges 2:11-19; Ezekiel 6:1-5; Mark 7:6-9). However, in spite of their continued disobedience, God has preserved the people of Israel over the centuries of exile and dispersion, and has returned them to their land so that they may finally preach His truth when the time is right (Jeremiah 30:11; 31:35-37; Hosea 3:3-5; Revelation 7:1-8; 14:1-3).

Jonah was about to learn that God’s love and mercy is offered to all of humanity (Jonah 4:2,10,11), not just His covenant people the Jews (Genesis 9:27; 12:3; Leviticus 19:33,34; 1 Samuel 2:10; Isaiah 2:2; Joel 2:28-32).

In Jonah’s mind, to flee to Tarshish was to run as far away from home as possible. Joppa was the seaport nearest to the central part of Palestine, and, in ancient times, one of the few places along the eastern coastline of the Mediterranean Sea where a port could be established. Jonah mistakenly thought that by going as far as possible away from Nineveh, he could nullify the Lord’s command.

Jonah 1:4-6:

4 But as the ship was sailing along, suddenly the Lord flung a powerful wind over the sea, causing a violent storm that threatened to send them to

the bottom.

5 Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors shouted to their gods for help and threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. And all this time Jonah was sound asleep down in the hold.

6 So the captain went down after him. "How can you sleep at a time like this?" he shouted. "Get up and pray to your god! Maybe he will have mercy on us and spare our lives."

This was no ordinary storm. It was "hurled" or "flung" on the sea. There were violent winds that threatened to sink the ship. This storm was probably also out of season, **sent by the Lord for a special purpose**. Since storms on the eastern Mediterranean Sea usually don't occur until late Autumn, the sailors must have thought they had plenty of time to sail to Tarshish without danger. It would be like a hurricane hitting the coast of Florida on New Year's Day. Under normal conditions, it just never happens.

In those days ships were small and not strong enough to withstand severe storms. These sailors were most likely men from the cities of Phoenicia, for that country was the major seafaring power of the ninth and eighth centuries B.C., and Tarshish was a Phoenician colony. Because the men were pagans, believing in many gods, in this crisis each began to pray to his own favorite god. Isn't it interesting that pagans immediately realized this storm, with its unusual intensity was sent by deity? How often today does anyone consider that hurricanes, tsunamis, or earthquakes could be a way God is trying to get our attention?

A heavily loaded ship is easily capsized in heavy seas. A lightened ship would ride the waves better. This is the reason the crew threw all the cargo and supplies overboard. The skipper, making a careful inspection of his ship, found Jonah sleeping. Surprised that Jonah was so unconcerned, he told him to pray. "Your God" literally means "the God," a term often used in the OT for the true God of Israel. The captain was so desperate that he was ready to try any god in order to be delivered from the dangers of the storm.

Jonah 1:7-10:

*7 The sailors said to one another, "Come, **let us cast lots**, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and **the lot fell on Jonah**.*

8 Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

9 "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

*10 Then the men were even more 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 so.*

Among pagan nations, casting lots was a popular form of trying to find out what God wanted or was saying and still is. The Hebrews also sometimes used lots, under God's

guidance, to select people for some position or task (see Joshua 7:14; I Samuel 10:20, 21; Acts 1:26). **Special stones** were probably cast for the lot. The position of the stones identified the answer being sought. Once Jonah had been singled out, he became the center of attention. He was given the third degree by the sailors. “*Who are you? What is your occupation? Where are you from?*” Jonah honestly told them the whole story. He witnessed to the fact that he was a worshiper of the great universal God of the world and **had disobeyed Him**. Like most pagans, these men were superstitious, and they greatly feared that the wrath of God would fall upon them for their failing to worship Him properly.

Jonah 1:11-14:

11 Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous.

12 He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.”

13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.

*14 Then they cried out to the Lord, “**Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish** on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.”*

The sailors were undecided about how to solve their problem. They had among them a man with whom God was angry, and they were far from any place where he could be put ashore. Jonah finally saw the great danger he had brought upon the sailors by his disobedience, and, condemning himself, **he told them to throw him overboard**, into the sea to what they all knew would be certain death. The sailors, not willing to treat human life so lightly, started rowing hard in one last desperate effort to reach shore in the storm. Their concern for one life stands in marked contrast to the attitude of Jonah, who admitted that he had fled from the Lord because he did not want to see the Ninevites saved from destruction. These men were religious enough to pray earnestly when in danger. The sailors finally reasoned that since God had sent the storm to punish Jonah, there was nothing they could do but throw Jonah out into the throes of the storm. They begged Jonah’s God not to hold them responsible for his death.

Jonah 1:15,16:

*15 So **they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.***

16 Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

They decided that Jonah alone should suffer for his sins and, following his advice, they threw him overboard. The immediate calming of the storm seemed to confirm their decision, and they were shaken to the core when they realized how narrowly they had escaped the wrath of the great God. **These pagans were immediately convinced that the Lord of Israel was the true God.** Forsaking their idols, they made a sacrifice of

thanksgiving and pledged themselves to Israel's God. Can you see how God used Jonah's refusal to obey to bring these other men to knowledge of the true God? Certainly, as we learned in our study of Romans, God can bring good out of a bad situation.

Jonah 1:17, NKJV:

17 Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Even in punishment, Jonah was not forgotten by God. To be swallowed by a great fish may not seem to us to be an act of divine kindness, but the fish was God's means for saving Jonah's life and bearing Jonah safely ashore. The creature that swallowed Jonah was not necessarily a whale. In fact the verse says that "*the Lord had prepared a great fish.*" The text makes it clear that the fish was "*especially*" prepared by the Lord. So it could well have been a fish that God prepared specifically for this purpose and could have been specially designed to sustain human life for a period of approximately three days.

Isn't it sad that God's miraculous provision for Jonah has become a point that non-Christian skeptics have used to ridicule Scripture and to discount the historicity of this book? Yet, in Matthew 12:40 we read that Jesus Christ Himself affirmed the truth of Jonah's stay in the belly of a great fish.

JONAH CHAPTER 2

Jonah 2:1-4:

*1 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish,
2 saying, "I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol (the place of the dead)⁷ I cried, and you heard my voice.
3 You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows (a great wave or surge of water)⁸ passed over me.
4 Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?'*

Jonah had not prayed while the storm was raging and the sailors were frantically crying out to their gods. Now he felt the desperateness of his situation. Why is it that God's children wait until they are in dire straits before they pray?

Jonah at least knew to whom to pray. The sailors had their own various gods but forsook them when they found out how powerful the Lord was. Jonah, however, had always known the true God. That was his difficulty. He knew God's concern for people, and yet he had fled. Now that he was in trouble, **it was this same understanding of divine love** that led him back to God. According to the Hebrew way of thinking, genuine hearing

⁷ Parentheses added.

⁸ Ibid.

involved response. For people, hearing God involved obeying Him. For God, hearing people involved delivering them. “*Belly of Sheol*” refers to the fact that the inside of the fish was a kind of grave.

In verse 3 we see that Jonah knew why he had been punished and recognized God would be perfectly just in dealing with him. However, Jonah saw more than justice; **he saw God’s love, also, and with hope he pled for mercy.** This is actually a prayer of thanksgiving, for Jonah recognized that God had spared his life, and he recounts how close he came to death as he sank down through seaweed and sand bars to the bottom of the sea.

Jonah 2:5,6:

5 The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head

6 at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the Pit (grave)⁹, O Lord my God.

The experience of being swallowed was so horrible that Jonah here returns to a graphic description of it. Several phrases in this verse are difficult to translate with clear sense. The word “**bottoms,**” which occurs in some translations seems to refer to the bases or foundations of the mountains in the ocean. The beating of the sea waves on the shore suggests the existence of bars that prevent the sea’s encroaching upon the land (cf Job 38:4-11). Jonah could not see any way out of his trouble, yet he looked to God. **Salvation is an act of God in the face of the impossible,** and Jonah, in his words, recognized the concern of God for him personally.

Jonah 2:7-9:

7 As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

8 Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.

*9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving will **sacrifice** to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!”*

When the prophet had all but given up hope, he turned to the Lord for help. Ordinarily, prayer was to be offered in the courts of the Temple at Jerusalem. But Jonah knew that God’s presence is not limited to any earthly temple and that the Lord is aware of the needs of His children wherever they are.

In contrast to pagan concepts, the true act of sacrifice is an expression of gratitude to God, rather than an effort to appease his wrath. With the sacrifice, a complete committal to God’s will was made. In the words, “*What I have vowed I will pay,*” the prophet indicated that he was yielding to God’s desires for him. He had become certain of one

⁹ Parentheses added.

· cf. *confer* (compare)

thing: Salvation is a gift of God and not an achievement of man.

Jonah 2:10:

*10 Then **the Lord spoke to the fish**, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.*

One simple sentence but what a mighty demonstration of God's sovereignty and God's power! God has the ability to communicate with all of His creation. He simply gave the fish instructions as to where to go and vomit Jonah out. And in contrast to Jonah, the fish obeyed promptly.

There are several interesting groups of characters that we've encountered so far in the first two chapters of this book:

Jonah—the prophet turned rebel.

The Ninevites—a city full of corrupt people indulging in vice, violence and witchcraft.

The sailors—men who did not know the true God, but who, when they saw His works, turned to Him.

Nature—winds, rain, waves, and a great fish, all of whom obeyed God's command immediately.

Which group do you identify with? Are you rebelling against God's will as revealed in the Scripture? Are you living in sin of one sort or another? Are you becoming aware of God's works and wanting to turn to Him? Are you immediately obedient to His commands to you? Wherever you are, God loves you and has a plan for you. Whichever group you identify with, God will receive you if you turn to Him. Let today be the beginning of a new and closer walk with God for you.