

More Than a Fish Story

The Book of Jonah

Sermon Outline

- I. Background of Jonah.
 - A. Unique to the other prophets—Jonah does not prophesy about God’s impending judgment on Israel for their disobedience, Jonah tells about *his* disobedience to God.
 - B. Jonah is like us! We can relate to Jonah: We all have run from God.
 - C. Jonah has been confirmed in other places of Scripture:
 1. II Kings—Most likely a contemporary of the prophet Amos.
 2. Matthew 12:40—Jesus refers to Jonah’s three days in the fish to His three days and three nights in the tomb.
 - D. The book and person Jonah have been controversial subjects throughout history.
 1. The main controversy revolves around the plausibility of a giant fish consuming Jonah who lived to tell about it.
 2. Some reputable theologians believe that Jonah is an allegory.
 3. If one believes in Genesis 1:1, to believe in the Jonah story shouldn’t be a problem!
- II. There are basically four parts to the Book:
 - A. Jonah is called by God (chapter 1) and Jonah rebels....
 - B. Jonah gets right with God in the belly of that fish (chapter 2) which leads to—
 - C. Revival, God’s original plan (chapter 3) an amazing revival!
 - D. Jonah is selfishly angry, exhausted and depressed, but finally encouraged by God (chapter 4).
- III. The theme of Jonah.
 - A. Not the giant fish, Nineveh, nor Jonah.
 - B. The theme is God—mentioned 38 times in the 48 verses.
 1. The sovereignty of God: 1:14 “*Oh Lord You have done as You pleased.*”
 2. His grace and mercy: (2:4) “*You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning evil.*”

- a. With God, mercy comes long before judgment and wrath.

IV. The narrative:

- A. “Arise and go to Nineveh”—A command; Nineveh the capital of Assyria.
- B. God tells Jonah to prophesy to Nineveh their impending judgment for evil deeds.
 - 1. Another distinction—all the other prophets prophesied to Israel, God’s people. Jonah prophesied to heathens.
 - 2. “Tarshish” – the opposite direction by thousands of miles (Spain).
 - a. Tarshish symbolically—*“If you’re running from God, you’re going to Tarshish!”*
- C. “You can’t run from God!”
 - 1. Sometimes when we run from God...He sends a storm our way.
 - 2. God sends “appointments” into our lives:
 - a. To get our attention.
 - b. To break us down.
 - c. To get you to look up.
 - 3. The great fish was a divine appointment—and it turns Jonah around!
- D. Chapter three—Jonah is repentant and obeys God’s original command.
 - 1. “God IS a God of second chances.” (3:1).
 - 2. Jonah preaches to the people of Nineveh—results? One of the greatest “evangelistic crusades” in history.
 - a. God did it—God prepared the hearts of Nineveh before Jonah preached.
- E. Chapter four—Jonah gets angry: The real reason he tried to flee from God—He didn’t want God to “save” his enemy!
 - 1. Jonah had a “self-centered” outlook, full of self-pity,
 - 2. God illustrates Jonah’s selfishness through a plant and a worm—representing Nineveh (as God’s creation, not Jonah’s!)

You can’t run from God—Running from God is rebellion—you know what God wants but you won’t do it.—The longer our rebellion with God is, the harder it is to get back—There is nothing more futile than trying to run away from God.—You cannot seek God’s love and run from Him at the same time—But God is in relentless pursuit of His rebellious children.—God is sovereign, He is in control of all things, He appoints certain things for our own good—God often increases the severity of our “storms” to get our attention—God is a God of 2nd chances!

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Sermon Notes

Each week my challenge has been to take the least known books of the Bible... called the minor prophets and familiarize them for us... Most Christians have not spent much time in or are familiar with these somewhat obscure prophesies...

This week my challenge is different...for very few people DO NOT, NOT know about this minor prophet and this short book... Most everyone, even non-Christians can tell you something about Jonah... and it usually involves a whale.... So this morning I hope to bring to all of us something greater than a fish story...

Jonah is unlike any other prophet in the Bible... it is unlike any other book of prophesy in the Bible... all the other prophets are prophesying to God's people... Israel... to repent... to change their course... to go back to God...

So Jonah... doesn't write about God's people being disobedient... he writes about himself being disobedient to God... Jonah is a narrative... it is a story... it is a story that I think all of us can glean much from the life of Jonah.... Because:

Jonah is us... *I am Jonah!*...you are Jonah... everybody say... "***I am Jonah!***" ... all of this is all of us!... all of us at one time or another.... Even possibly now... have run or is running from God. Each one of us has had, is having and will have times of rebellion with the very God that we believe in and proclaim as our own God.... All of us!

We try to run from God... and as most of us have found out.... You can run from God.... Only if He lets you... and even then... you don't get away from Him!... running from God for us isn't necessarily a literal running from God as Jonah tried to do.

Anytime we stray from God's word... His plan... and go the opposite direction... we are in effect running away from God...we will dig into all this this morning.

A little background about the Book of Jonah... as you see, it is a very short book... it's only four chapters long, a total of 48 verses... one of the controversial books in the Bible...

Some would like to deny the existence of the man Jonah...the narrative seems a bit outrageous... it certainly has the supernatural in its message... so many prefer to dismiss Jonah as myth. However... Jonah is mentioned other places in the Bible... II Kings tells us he was a prophet of Israel... alive some 800 years or so before Christ...Jonah was most likely a contemporary of Amos the prophet which we looked at a few weeks ago.

Christ Himself refers to Jonah in the New Testament Book of Matthew 12:40—**for just as JONAH WAS IN THE STOMACH OF THE SEA MONSTER FOR THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.**

The controversy really rallies around the whole fish thing... the whale thing... liberal scholars and critics dismiss the Book of Jonah as being true because of the miraculous fish part of the story.... Many think the book is mainly a “fish story”.... And there is something fishy about it... more like a fairytale or some children’s story... I used to get it mixed up with Pinocchio....so it is either an allegory.... A made up story to reveal a truth... or a myth...some made up fantasy. But truth?

You may have heard of Robert Ingersoll...fought in the civil war... he was a civil war vet... a lawyer and politician after that... he was also a humanist... he was very opposed to and an outspoken critic of Christianity.... In fact, he was labeled as *The Great Agnostic* of the 19th century...

Despite the fact that his father was a Presbyterian pastor and assistant to the famous Charles Finney... Ingersoll had grown up in a very devout Christian home but he had gone a very different direction than the rest of the family.

As this outspoken critic of Christianity, the story goes that Ingersoll engaged in a conversation with a woman on an intersection of streets... this woman was with the Salvation Army and she was sharing the gospel of Jesus to people who passed by.... Who had an interest... she was evangelizing.

Ingersoll began making fun of her... the crowd around her began to laugh at her... and he asked her “*You don’t really believe the Bible do you?*” in a caustic way... she answered “*of course I do!*”... “*Well, what about that story of Jonah and the whale... you don’t really believe that story do you?*”

She said “*I do*” ... and he went on and asked her “*How do you suppose he survived all that time in the belly of a fish?*”... she responded “*I don’t know... I guess when I get to heaven I’ll have to ask him.*”

Ingersoll replied... “*what if you get to heaven and he’s not there...he’s actually gone to hell?*”... she replied back “*well then, I suppose you can ask him.*”

Many if not most people have begun thinking of Jonah as something like a fairy tale... a fable... a children’s story to read at their bedtime....I imagine that if we did a “man on the street” interview with the people of Moscow and asked them the question “*do you believe in the story of Jonah?*”... they would overwhelmingly say “*Of course not, but it’s a nice story.*”

Many theologians... solid high view of scripture theologians believe Jonah is allegory...but... Jesus DID mention it as it was fact!... Here’s the thing... if you are having trouble with the fish

story... what are you doing with the rest of the Old Testament??? How about the whole bible?!

I mean really... compared to some of the other miracles of God... the fish thing is a blip!...WHAT ABOUT GENESIS 1?!... IF YOU BELEVE IN Genesis 1you shouldn't have any problem with ANYTHING else in the Bible....

God SPOKE the world into existence!... God separated the Red Sea for the children of Israel to pass through... closing up on the pursuing Egyptians... drowning them all.

God calls for His Son to die on the cross... to be buried... then raised from the dead three days later... and we have difficulty with a fish swallowing a man?... really?... don't get hung up on the fish!... you either accept all of scripture or you need to deal with the fact that your God is limited with what He can do and has done.

There are basically four parts to the Book:

1. Jonah is called by God (chapter 1) and Jonah rebels....
2. Jonah gets right with God... in the belly of that fish (chapter 2) which leads to—
3. Revival... God's original plan (chapter 3) [of Nineveh]...an amazing revival.
4. Jonah is selfishly angry, exhausted and depressed, but finally encouraged by God (chapter 4).

So... what's the main theme of the book?... how about the fish?... that must be the theme.. that's what we all think of when we hear the name Jonah... it is not the fish!...the fish is mentioned only four times in the book.... Then it must be Nineveh... Nineveh the city where God wants revival to break out...and it did... it's NOT Nineveh... Nineveh is mentioned only 9 times.

Then the theme HAS to be Jonah... right?... Jonah is important of course... still... only mentioned just 18 times... **the theme of the Book is God!**.... God is mentioned 38 times in 48 verses....in the Book of Jonah!

"Men have been looking so long at the great fish in Jonah that they have failed to see the great God of Jonah." — G. Campbell Morgan

The theme is God... especially the sovereignty of God... on every page we see that God calls the shots... God has it all in control... what does God do in the Book of Jonah?... anything He wants! Verse 14 of chapter 1 is key... **Oh Lord, You have done as You have pleased.**

But what really stands out in Jonah is a God who is full of mercy... He's compassionate for the lost... He's forgiving of His faulty sinful children...the other prophets key in to God's wrath... His judgment on sinners.... But in Jonah we see a merciful God... something to remember:
MERCY COMES WAY BEFORE WRATH...

Verse 2 of chapter four...is a great summery of God in the Book of Jonah....Jonah is quoting specifically Exodus 34:6... but it is a repeating idea in Psalm 86:15; Psalm 103:8; Joel 2:13; Numbers 14:18...

You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning evil....

Exodus 34:6 **The LORD passed before him (Moses) and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,**

Let’s take a look at the story... we can’t read all four chapters... but let’s walk through and digest some in chapter one then parts of the other three chapters.

Read verses 1&2

Two important words... **Arise and Go**... there is no excuse to not understand what God is saying?... You can’t be any more direct than that... **arise, go**... it’s not, hey, *I’ve got an idea, if you’re not doing anything, think about going to Nineveh... it’s not even why don’t you pray about it Jonah, if you feel led, why don’t you go to Nineveh?* **Arise.... GO!**

God is VERY clear about what He wants Jonah to do...it’s a command.... **Arise...go to Nineveh**

Nineveh—Nineveh was about five hundred miles away from where Jonah was... to the east.... We might think of it as Billings Montana, just a little further... at that time Nineveh was the capital of Assyria...the Assyrians are important.

The Assyrians are at their embryonic stage of becoming a powerful nation...as we’ve mentioned every week... Israel has separated into two kingdoms... Judah in the south and Israel in the north... and remember it is the Assyrians that will eventually bring the northern kingdom Israel to their demise.... The Assyrians have ALWAYS been hostile to Israel.

Assyria was the last place Jonah would want to be... the Assyrians were enemies of the Hebrews... Jonah would have in his mind that some of his family and ancestors were killed and probably tortured by the Assyrians.

And verse 2 tells us that they were very wicked... **“Their evil has come up before me”**...God knows the evil going on with the Assyrians... He wants Jonah to go and preach to them... their wickedness included idol worship... extreme cruelty to prisoners of war...there are extremely graphic and gruesome accounts of Assyrian torture and treatment to many people groups... and God was fed up with them... so he tells Jonah... **arise and go to Nineveh the great city**...

Nineveh has since been discovered and it is believed that there were at least a million people in that city.... No small town!... the very last verse in chapter 4 mentions 120,000 **“persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand...”** Most scholars think those are all very young children....

Interesting about Jonah... all the prophets of the Old Testament were given orders to prophesy to their own people... Jeremiah... Amos... Isaiah.. all of them preached to the Hebrew people...

Jonah... is told to go on a mission... to a heathen nation and preach to them... this certainly was unnatural!

Simple... direct orders from God... get up and go preach to Nineveh! And preach to them...

Read Verse 3

Tarshish—This isn't like on your way to billings you stopped off in Missoula... Tarshish was the absolute opposite direction... it would be like us going from here to Honolulu Hawaii!...

Tarshish was on the coast of Spain!... 2500 miles away... the opposite direction!... this is full on running from God!... and remember... *the further you run... the longer you're in rebellion... the harder it is to get back to God.*

So... what does Tarshish mean for us?... if you are running from God... YOU are going to Tarshish!... Rabbi Sheldon Blank (a modern day orthodox rabbi) said "***What is Tarshish?...It is anywhere but the right place... it is the opposite direction... the direction a person takes when he turns his back on his destiny***"...

I would exchange God for the word "destiny!" We go to Tarshish is so many ways... One of my commentaries goes further in detail...***Anytime you are willing to look at, touch, grab on to, inhale, anything that God told you not to do, you are going to Tarshish!***

Why was Jonah doing this?... why did He decide to "run" to Tarshish?... did you catch it?...two times.... **to flee from the presence of the Lord (3)**. Willingly... decisively... Jonah ROSE and began running from God... running from the presence of the Lord.

How messed up is that thinking?... running from the presence of the Lord!?...Undoubtedly Jonah had read the Psalms.. written some 200 years earlier... and knew the story of David... undoubtedly he had read Psalm 139:

**Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend to heaven You are there,
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.
If I lift up the wings of the dawn
and go to the remotest parts of the earth
EVEN THERE YOUR HAND WILL BE!**

When you are running from God it is likely your thoughts will become irrational... You begin to think you can do some things YOU CANNOT DO!... flee from the presence of the God!... I'm going to Tarshish!

Read verse 3

Joppa is modern day Tel Aviv on the Mediterranean coast of Israel....Jonah should have stopped and said “*What am I doing here?... I shouldn't be here!*”...but he didn't... I'm sure he thought... “*everything is falling into place... found a boat... nice crew...the ticket didn't cost all that much... it's all working out just fine!*”... *Running from God is working out just fine!*

Here's a principle I heard years ago from a since fallen now dead preacher so I won't bother with his name... but this is good “***If you're dead set on going against God and doing something He does not want you to do*** (knowing what God wants you to do but you won't do it)... ***eventually God will open His hands and let you do it!***”

Well... God didn't totally open His hands with Jonah

Read verse 4

Note how the storm became.... The storm didn't just naturally come as storms do... God sent this storm 1. To get Jonah's attention. 2. To get Jonah back on the right track...3. To wake him up from his rebellion. ...**sometimes when we run from God...He sends a storm our way.**

How bad is the storm?... the ship is about to break up!... now get this: **Verse 5: Then the sailors became afraid...**Sailors became afraid... Isn't that something!?... that's like a New York taxi driver afraid to drive in Moscow Idaho!... what's it take to make sailors afraid of a storm?... a storm unlike anything they've ever encountered!... and look at their response... every man cried to his god...

Read verses 5-17

So God **APPOINTED** a great fish... a word about the word **APPOINTED**.... It reeks of sovereignty... God appointed means God can and does do whatever He wants to do... God is calling ALL the shots here in Jonah.... And He is in yours and my life as well... appointed also points to the fact that God has a plan...

452 times in the Bible...God appointed something.... He appointed a sign for Cain in Gen. 4:15...Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age at the APPOINTED TIME of which God had spoken to him.... And 400 more....

Why appointments from God?

1. They are calls to get our attention. the storm didn't quite do it, Jonah needed a giant fish swallow him up!...”do you have My attention yet?”

2. Appointments are for the reason of breaking you down. Verse 17 says **Jonah was in the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights**.... Why?... besides foreshadowing Jesus being in the tomb for three days and night... I think it was to break Jonah down... to get him in a position to repent!

3. Appointments are for the purpose to get you to look up. Jonah is literally on the bottom of things... in chapter 2 God had gotten Jonah's attention.... Jonah is looking up.

Read Chapter 2:1-10

God speaks it happens... I always wondered what kind of vomiting this was... Officially there are six kinds of vomiting of which I won't bring them up... but the way I envision it, it must have been the most violent of the six...projectile vomiting... to get Jonah all the way to dry land!

This is where my flannelgraphs in Sunday School stopped... there were no flannel graphs for chapters 3 and 4 of Jonah... the first verse in chapter three sounds to me like God is saying to Jonah... **Ok, one more time, let's go back to 1:2 and try this thing again...from the top... let's get it right this time!**

3:1 **Now the word of Yahweh came to Jonah a second time, saying...** I would underline "second time" in your Bibles... This week I read about a vice president of Bank America was asked "*what would happen if one day you decided to embezzle some of the funds of the bank...you got caught...but you apologized and truly felt sorry for what you had done... what would happen to you?*"

"*I'd get fired and go to jail!*".....What? no second chance?... this verse has become the classic verse where God has revealed Himself the God of second chances... some claim this verse to be one of the most important verses in the Old Testament. This certainly is good news for all of us here this morning.

If you are here and you've been running from God... you haven't been listening to God...you've been really blowing it... He's ready to speak to you right now!

Read 3:2-3

No one knew anything about Nineveh outside of what is in the Bible until 1817 when Nineveh was actually discovered and uncovered... a very large city... Jonah says it takes three days to walk around it... that would be maybe up to 100 miles across...

Read verse 4

Do you see why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh?... something like Zelensky going to downtown Moscow, Russia and saying "*hey everybody my God is going to cast judgment on you in 40 days!*"....

SO this guy Jonah.... Walks into the cities... probably stunk real bad being in the fish and everything!... some think he looked like an albino having turned white from the fish's gastric gasses.... Must have been a sight!..... and he preaches to them judgement

What happens next is the most understated thing in all of Scripture... what happens in incredible... this is much bigger than the fish part... Jonah preaches to this massive city... what happens between verses 4 and 5 is not a hundred years... or twenty years... there's not even a week of deliberations.... "*well, thanks for the information Jonah... we'll give it all some thought!*"

No... Jonah preaches to the people.... then

Read verse 5

They believed and they repented of their sins!...not one or two... not just a few... the entire city of Nineveh hears the word... then believes... mourns over their sins by putting on sackcloth and ashes....even the King of Nineveh repents... he calls for a national fast and calls for all to turn from their evil ways!

What Jonah didn't realize... What we are not shown is how God prepared the hearts of the Ninevites... God had been working on the Assyrians way before Jonah got there... in fact... from outside historical sources...

1. There is evidence that there were two major plagues that killed thousands of people within a five-year span... that shook up the Assyrians... *"must be some kind of judgement!"*

2. 100 Miles north of Nineveh, three different mighty warrior tribes banded together and were destroying everything they could find and they were heading towards Nineveh....

3. There was a solar eclipse at the same time which, due to their superstitions, was a bad omen

It's like the world today... start adding up all the drought, earthquakes, tsunamis, wars, killings, terrorists.... You start wondering if God is up to something!... **GOD WORKS BEHIND THE SCENES TO PREPARE PEOPLE'S HEARTS TO HIS MESSAGE!** We need to understand that!

Read 3:10

Now... you would think that as a preacher... after you preached... somewhere around a million people repent and seek God after a message of only eight words!... his Monday morning wouldn't be a blue one!

I agree with what J. Vernon McGee said commenting on chapter four... *"I have no problem with the fish, but I have lots of problems with this man Jonah!"*....chapter four is perplexing at the least.

It's one of those shifts in a story that happens after a "but"

Read 4:1

Jonah is **ANGRY** that the Assyrians repented... turned from their sins.... Turned from their evil ways... worshipped **HIS GOD**...and then **HIS GOD RELENATED FROM BRINGING ON HIS JUDGMENT ON THEM**

He tells us the real reason why he didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place... why he wanted to go to Tarshish.... To flee from God... it was because he knew what?... verse 2... that **God is gracious, compassionate...slow to anger... and abundant in lovingkindness... and one who relents concerning evil.**

Why is Jonah angry?... What in the world did he have to be displeased about?.....This chapter is here because God wants to show us something about our humanness... let's get right to it:

1. Jonah had a self-centered outlook

Jonah didn't run because he was afraid of going to Nineveh... he wasn't afraid of the Ninevites...he ran because he didn't want God to have anything to do on behalf of the Ninevites!...Jonah was angry because God helped the very people he detested.... HIS GOD WAS HIS GOD!...you want to go down fast?... stay in self-centeredness... here's a fact... **THE CENTER OF EVERY BROKEN RELATIONSHIP IS SELF-CENTEREDNESS.** You can't have the relationship with God that He desires if you are centered on yourself... and once you are trapped in your own self-centeredness... the next step down is:

2. An attitude of self-pity

Read verse 3

That's self-pity!.. **SELF-PITY IS SELF-CENTEREDNESS GONE BAD....** *Take my life God!* Really?... *Hey Jonah...God just saved your life!...God just used you for one of the greatest revivals in world history...what more do you want?... you'd rather die?*

In self-pity one's complete focus is on themselves and one loses sight of all that God has done for you...all of His mercy... His grace... His lovingkindness... His faithfulness...

By the way... notice when things get a little tough for Jonah his answer is *kill me!... throw me into the sea...* and now... *just kill me God!.. death is better for me than life!*

Read verse 4

“Jonah... you don't think I should have saved those people of Nineveh?...did YOU make those people Jonah?... Are they yours?...why are YOU angry?... do you have a right to be angry?... YOU have been the recipient of MY GRACE AND MERCY...what right do YOU have to be angry when I show the same to others?”

What was Jonah's answer?... he didn't answer!

Read verse 5

Not just is Jonah self-centered having a pity party... but he's self-absorbed!... self-absorbed people like to be alone so that no one can interrupt their faulty thinking...*I'll just go out here so I don't have to listen to anybody!*

Isn't it interesting that when you know you're living wrong...you know that you are doing what you know God does not want you to do... you want to be alone... you don't want ANYONE pointing out your problem!

So Jonah makes himself a shelter and sits on the hill and just watches...*I'll just sit here and watch what happens to the city...*

God doesn't leave him alone... this is interesting

(6) So Yahweh **APPOINTED** a plant....there's that word again... **APPOINTED**... **to get our attention**....to **break you down**....**for the purpose to get you to look up.** And it came up

over Jonah to be shade over his head to deliver him from his miserable evil... that was sure nice of God!... but nice wasn't His point... but **Jonah was extremely glad about the plant...**

To get to the point... **Read verses 7-8**

Then God said to Jonah... do you have reason to be angry about the plant?

Read verses 10-11

Jonah, Jonah, Jonah.... You had nothing to do with the plant.... You didn't plant it... you didn't care for it.... you didn't cause it to grow.... You think it's all about you!... it was my plant... I made that plant as I did all the people of Nineveh.... What gives YOU the right to be angry?

- You can't run from God
- Running from God is rebellion—you know what God wants but you won't do it.
- The longer our rebellion with God is, the harder it is to get back
- There is nothing more futile than trying to run away from God.
- You cannot seek God's love and run from Him at the same time.
- But God is in relentless pursuit of His rebellious children.
- God is sovereign... He is in control of all things.... He appoints certain things for our own good.
- God often increases the severity of our storms to get our attention.
- God is a God of second chances.