

Fear or Flight
Jonah 1:1–16
April 16, 2023

Concerning the book of Jonah, G. Campbell Morgan once said, “Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God.”¹

Some of this is not unlike the typical understanding of Noah’s Ark. With good intentions, we teach our children about Genesis 6 and 7. Our children’s books *know* that we’ll use this story. It’s a bit easier to teach than Nahum. So, we’ll grab a children’s Bible and go for it. But if I were to scan most children’s accounts of Noah’s Ark, what would I find? In the pictures, the tigers might smile at the gazelles. In the words beneath the pictures, we probably won’t read God’s words, **I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land** (Gen. 6:7). What do we find in those children’s accounts? A more sanitized version. There’s no stench. We’re not describing the grislier details of the flood. Again, with good motives—we *rightly* don’t want to scare kids—an R-rated scene is edited for the consumption of a child. The animals are put in the foreground, Noah’s cleaned up a bit, and it has a happy ending.²

You could say similar things about the typical understanding of Jonah. The fish is put in the foreground, Jonah’s cleaned up a bit, and it almost always has a happy ending. I read a number of happy ending examples this week. Here is a smattering of concluding sentences—tidy “put a bow on it” conclusions—from children’s books telling the story of Jonah. First, “Jonah went to Nineveh and told them God’s message. The people obeyed and were forgiven. Jonah did the right thing.”³ Another was told from the perspective of Jonah, ending with these words, “God reminded me that He loves everyone. I learned that I should love people like that, too.”⁴ Another example rhymes: “Then Jonah finally understood, for in his heart he knew, that God is merciful and wise, and all forgiving too.”⁵ One more, and this one is especially egregious, “So Jonah came to understand God’s ways and how much he loved his people, and Jonah was glad that Nineveh was saved.”⁶ He was *glad*? Have you read Jonah 4?

While I doubt most of you would say those sentences perfectly capture what you think about the book of Jonah, I tend to think many of our first exposures to Jonah were along similar lines. And so, it’s possible that looking so hard at the fish⁷ has kept us from understanding God, and maybe Jonah as well.⁸ Today’s text is largely about fear, different *degrees* of fear, and different *objects* of that fear, but fear, nonetheless. Note first,

1. Jonah Flees (vv. 1–3)

Verse 1: **Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai.** In the Old Testament, we have 12 minor prophets. They’re not minor in *significance*, of course, but less lengthy than the *major* prophets like Isaiah. The book of Jonah is one of these minor prophets. And this first line—**the word of the Lord came**—sounds like many of the others. For example, Micah begins, **The**

¹ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Minor Prophets: The Men and Their Messages*, 69.

² We don’t talk about Noah *after* the flood.

³ *The Beginner’s Bible for Toddlers*, 128.

⁴ *My First Study Bible*, 299.

⁵ Alice Davidson, *The Story of Jonah*.

⁶ *Bible Stories for Children*, 199.

⁷ Is this fish unimportant? Not at all. Jesus says as much in Matthew 12.

⁸ Which might keep us from grasping the central message of the book itself.

word of the Lord that came to Micah (Micah 1:1). That’s just one instance. But in over a hundred other places, *this* phrase introduces communication *from* God *to* a prophet in the Old Testament.⁹

Sometimes it includes instruction for the prophet. We’ll see that in a moment. But, first, who did the word of the Lord come to? Who is Jonah? 2 Kings 14:25 references him, placing him as a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II, king of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth-century BC.¹⁰ Jonah’s prophesying around the same time as Amos and Hosea.

Why is knowing the timing of this book important? Because it tells us something about the spiritual state of Israel at this time. If you read Amos, you know that this isn’t Israel at its most pure or undividedly loyal to Yahweh and His commands.

It’s also important to know the time period because of what the word of the Lord commands Jonah to do. Verse 1: **Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”** Nineveh was an Assyrian city on the east bank of the Tigris River in modern-day Iraq. In the eighth century BC, Nineveh stood as the epitome of *everything* that opposed Israel. They were brutal and merciless in their military endeavors. They also attached a religious element to their pagan conquest.¹¹ As I read about the Ninevites this week, there were a number of parallels to what ISIS looked like five or six years ago.

The Lord tells His prophet Jonah to **arise, go to Nineveh**. What was he to do once he waltzed into the enemy’s camp? He was to **call out against it, for their evil has come up before me**. Jonah was to walk into that great city—an exceedingly great city according to chapter 3:3—and preach against their evil. The language indicates that what he was commanded to do, he was to do immediately.¹²

Had prophets done perilous things like this in the Old Testament? Yes, *this* is precisely the kind of thing many prophets did. Consider: if we *hadn’t* heard the story of Jonah since we were toddlers, what would we think Jonah might do? We’ve read the other prophets. The word of the Lord comes. Whatever He says, they generally go and announce. But what does Jonah do? Verse 3: **But Jonah rose to flee.**

Verse three goes on to detail what Jonah does, and what he does quickly. The grammar indicates swift action, as verb follows verb after verb. But note three aspects of this fast flight. First, verse 3: **Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish**. Again, Nineveh is in modern-day Iraq. Many have concluded that Tarshish is on the coast of southern Spain. Your geography might not be stellar, but this is probably as far from Nineveh as was physically possible at the time.¹³ So, Jonah flees to the west.

The second aspect of his flight is in the next clause: **Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord**. According to 2 Chronicles 9:21, a round trip to Tarshish took three years. So, it’s not only far from Nineveh, it’s far from Israel. This verse isn’t—nor is the author of this verse—arguing *against* the Lord’s omnipresence, as if Jonah could go far enough west to get “off radar.”¹⁴ However, southern Spain was not a location where tabernacles or tables of the Law would be around the corner.¹⁵ Jonah was, in one sense, fleeing God’s chosen people and the unique place where He’d revealed Himself as an *attempt* to flee from the Lord Himself. Will he be successful? Would we if we tried? Even the children’s books get this answer right.

⁹ Desmond Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, TOTC, 107.

¹⁰ Alexander, 56.

¹¹ See Daniel Timmer, *A Gracious and Compassionate God*, 17; 64–66.

¹² The Hebrew grammar indicates an urgency. See *Daily Dose of Hebrew* on Jonah, as well as Alexander, 108.

¹³ Alexander, 112.

¹⁴ Timmer, 67.

¹⁵ See Kevin Youngblood, *Jonah*, ZECNT, 57.

He goes west, *attempting* to get away from the presence of the Lord, and the third aspect concerns vertical direction. As he goes west, he also goes *down*. I'm preaching from the ESV today for a few reasons, but let me quote verse 3 in the NASB: **So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.** Verse 3 is the beginning of a journey for Jonah. He *thinks* it's away from the presence of the Lord. It's not. He thinks it's westward. It's downward. He goes down to Joppa. He goes down to the boat. In a minute, he'll be down in the bottom of a boat. And next week we'll see just how "down" he goes.

Jonah flees, to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord—supposedly—and down. You say, "*Why* does Jonah flee?" We're not told, yet. Jonah will reveal it later when it's less expected.¹⁶

Jonah flees. Note secondly,

2. The Sailors Fear (the storm) vv. 4–6

Verse 4: **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.** Most of us know the feeling of being huddled up in a closet with a mattress over our head, vulnerable to something we have no control over. That's the horror we face from mighty wind and weather. Derek Kidner wrote about the experience of storms, "It shakes us into seeing that in a world of gigantic forces we live by permission, not by good management."¹⁷ And that's how we feel when we're on solid ground. In this case, the storm—a **mighty tempest**—is while they're on the sea.

Where did this storm come from? The subject of verse 4: **The Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea.** He's the subject of this book, not the fish, not even Jonah. He's accomplishing His purposes among the Gentiles. And, in this case, some of them are frightened by what He's done, though they don't yet know He's done it. Verse 5: **Then the mariners (or sailors) were afraid, and each cried out to his god.** The sailors aren't Israelites. They probably came from various pagan nations.¹⁸ And in this case they cry out to whatever god they believe governs the sea.

In verse 4, the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea. Note the verb of verse 5: **and they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.** They're afraid, they're each crying out to their own god, and they're launching possessions—maybe pricey possessions—into the sea. It's pandemonium on the deck of this ship.

Let's see what Jonah's up to. Verse 5b: **But Jonah had gone down¹⁹ into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.** Listen, we don't know everything going on within Jonah. But clearly something is quite off. Jonah has years of family and friends that he's abandoning. He's snoozing while the ship is about to be torn apart. As you might guess, this is a particularly deep sleep.²⁰ And it's a *staggering* sleep, at least to the sailors. He doesn't seem to care that they're all about to perish.

Verse 6: **So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Or, "How is it that you are sleeping?"²¹** Then, do these next words sound familiar? Verse 6: **Arise, call out to your god!** It's almost parallel to what the Lord told him in verse 2, to arise and call out against Nineveh. In verse 6, "each word mocks him," writes one commentator.²² The Lord can do,

¹⁶ Youngblood, 56.

¹⁷ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, TOTC, 420.

¹⁸ Alexander, 114.

¹⁹ (gone *down*)

²⁰ Alexander, 114.

²¹ NASB

²² Alexander, 114.

and has done, this kind of thing. Because when He pursues, He aims to find. He might even use the words of a pagan to remind us of what He's said.

The captain continues in verse 6: **Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give thought to us, that we may not perish.** At this point, the sailor seems to know nothing of Jonah's God. But while everyone else was crying out to their god, it didn't seem to be working. So maybe Jonah's God would hear.

The sailors fear the storm. Though Jonah's stirred from his slumber, the billows roll. Note, third,

3. The Sailors Fear (what Jonah's done) vv. 7–12

In this next verse, note the phrase, "on whose account." It'll come back a couple times in this section. Verse 7: **And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us."** In the ancient world, many would cast lots to discern the will of whatever god they served.²³ Verse 7 goes on, **So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.** This is yet another demonstration of God's sovereign control.²⁴ He's the One that hurled the storm. And though the lot is cast into the lap, its every decision is from the Lord (Prov. 16:33).

And in this case the lot called Jonah's number, thrusting him into a courtroom of terrified sailors. And they're going to pepper him with panicked questions. Verse 8: **Then 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?"** Clearly, they don't know him. Nor do they know why he's on the ship.

Jonah introduces himself in verse 9: **And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land."** If you think Jonah's declaration has a hollow ring to it, you're not alone.²⁵ With Jonah disregarding God's word, attempting to flee from Him, we have every right to doubt his present-tense claim of fearing the Lord.²⁶ Sure, he's feared in the past. He might fear the Lord in the future. But, in this moment, he doesn't appear to fear Him.

And his *lack* of fear terrifies the sailors. They seem to soon believe that Jonah's God is in fact the **one who made the sea and the dry land.** How convincing must this storm have been? We see their reaction in verse 10 to Jonah's words: **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.**

In other words, Jonah said more than the sentence of verse 9. He told them he was a Hebrew. He told them that his God was the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land. He told them that he feared his God. And, *then*, he told them he was running from His God.

They know, at this point, that the lot wasn't off. They know with certainty that Jonah is the *why* behind the *wind*. So, when it says they were **exceedingly afraid**, it's as if they feared a great fear.²⁷ They feared the storm. Now they fear what Jonah's done.

Verse 11: **Then 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.** Back in verse 4, the storm is

²³ ESV Study Bible, 1687.

²⁴ Alexander, 115.

²⁵ Alexander, 116.

²⁶ Timmer, 71.

²⁷ It's an internal accusative in Hebrew. See *Daily Dose*.

threatening to break up the ship. That's the ferocity of it. Yet here in verse 11, the sea is growing *more* and *more* tempestuous.

They asked, "What should we do to you?" Verse 12: **He 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."** The Lord *hurled* a great wind (v. 4). The sailors *hurled* the cargo into the sea (v. 5). Now Jonah tells them to hurl *him* into it.

4. The Sailors Fear God (vv. 13–16)

Verse 13: **Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.** Jonah tells them to throw him in. They decide not to. Maybe you think, "These pagans seem to be kinder to Jonah than he's been to them." Note what the sailors do next, in verse 14: **Therefore 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."**

Are you starting to see what God is doing in the book of Jonah? These pagan Gentile sailors say things in this verse they wouldn't have imagined saying moments prior. In verse 5, they're crying out to their own lower-case gods. In verse 14, they're calling out to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Their words tell us they're convinced *He* is able to keep them from perishing. They believe *He* is able to *not* lay on them innocent blood. And as they make their requests, they also confess His rule, saying, **for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.**

They say *that* on the deck of a battered ship. The confession is not unlike Psalm 115:3: **Our God is in the heavens; He does all that He pleases.** While we love that verse, can we imagine quoting it in *this* moment, acknowledging His rule *while* the storm continues to rage?

Verse 15: **So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.** In the Old Testament, the control of creation is only given to One person. He causes the storm to hush in Psalm 107, which we read earlier. Psalm 89:8–9 reads, **O Lord of Hosts, who is mighty as you are . . . You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them.** In Job 38, He shuts in the sea with doors, saying, **thus far you shall come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed** (Job 38:11).

What has God done here in Jonah 1? He's revealed Himself—and His power—to pagan sailors. They see Him for who He is. And what do they do? Verse 16: **Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.** Note the progression of fear in Jonah thus far. In verse 5, they're afraid of the storm. In verse 10, they're *exceedingly* afraid of what Jonah's done. In verse 16, they exceedingly fear the Lord Himself. The language is clear; they've trusted Yahweh.²⁸ Or as one man said, "Jonah's anti-missionary activity has ironically resulted in the conversion of non-Israelites."²⁹

²⁸ "This can hardly be something less than whole-hearted conversion to Yahweh," in Timmer, 73.

²⁹ Timmer, 75.

Conclusion

Of course, they're not the last to fear God *after* a storm has passed. In Mark 4, another Man was asleep in a boat. His friends thought *He* didn't care that they were perishing. But when He told the storm to hush, it did. And with the waves calmed—*after* they were—into those sailors' hearts came a different kind of storm.³⁰ Mark records, **And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey Him?"** (Mk. 4:41)

We could answer. He's the God of Job 38, of Psalm 107, the God revealed in Jonah 1. G. Campbell Morgan was right, "Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God." The same thing could be said about how hard we look at Jonah. He's not the main character either. His splashing into the sea didn't still the storm. The One that *causes* the wind is the One that *calms* it.

Jonah's disobedience didn't thwart God's purposes either. A gracious and compassionate God aims to save. He pursued those sailors. He is *still* pursuing Jonah. And He pursues us.

³⁰ Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, 242.