

## **A Rightful Fear of The Lord**

---

The Book of Jonah / Jonah 1:1-16

---

### **Introduction:**

Today, we are beginning a series through the book of Jonah. As we begin, it is helpful to identify the genre of Jonah, as that will guide our approach. Jonah is a unique book in the midst of what we commonly know as the minor prophets because it contains some similarities to the books surrounding it but also some differences. Like other prophetic books, it opens with the declaration of a prophet receiving the word of the Lord and specific instructions for what to do with it. In typical fashion, this word involves a warning of destruction and call to repentance. However, unlike other minor prophets, the book doesn't focus on the words of God spoken by Jonah but delivers a narrative about the prophet and his God. The narrative is told by an unknown author, who doesn't disclose when Jonah received the word of the Lord, and various literary devices are employed to communicate truths through the story. The language used, literary devices employed, and miraculous elements have caused some to suggest it should be read as an allegory or parable. But it doesn't hold allegorical indicators, and while those things can be characteristics of parables, it is missing clear evidence of that genre. Further, the language used, literary devices employed, and miraculous elements are things we find in other books and stories that are viewed as clearly historical, and the opening gives every indication that it should be viewed as historical. There is more evidence for us to consider this book historical. Jesus, in Luke 11:29-32, contrasts the response to Him with the men of Nineveh repentance in the book of Jonah, alongside the clearly historical account of the Queen of the South's response to Solomon from 1 Kings 10, providing strong evidence that Jesus viewed Jonah as historical. We also find records in the writing of Josephus, a Jewish historian, and Cyril of Jerusalem, an early church father, that treat the book as historical as well. This all leads to conclude, with others, that this is historical narrative, either being what is called didactic narrative, that presents truths in the form of narrative, or biographical narrative, which is a literary style found in portions of Jeremiah and 1 & 2 Kings. The goal of our time together, though, is not to focus too much on the genre, but the meaning and message it brings. Its unique style and literary form guide our hearts to a clear and purposeful truth, as we peer into the wrestling of a prophet with his call from God. With that said, let's dive into our first narrative scene, in verses 1-3, where,

### **Jonah Attempts to Flee from The Lord's Call**

The first three verses set the foundation and focus of this narrative by including and excluding some particular details. Look at the way it opens in verse 1, "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai." The word of the Lord coming to a prophet is common to prophetic books, leaving an expectation of what comes after. We are also told who the word of the Lord came to, "Jonah the son of Amittai." This book gives little information about Jonah's background, but we can discover more from the mention of him in 2 Kings 14:23-27. There we discover he was the prophet who brought the word of the Lord to King Jeroboam II that helped to secure and enlarge the national borders of Israel during their conflicts with Assyria. This would have made the prophet Jonah a national hero in Israel. Yet, consider what we are told about King Jeroboam II in 2 Kings 14:24, "And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." Remember that word evil, and understand that after this declaration, in 2 Kings 14:25-27, we learn about Jonah bringing God's word to restore Israel's borders, because God promised not to blot out the name of Israel. God was compassionate towards Israel in spite of its sin, and Jonah was the prophet sent by God, during that time of evil, to proclaim God's compassion on them. Look at Jonah 1:1-2 again, "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.'" This would shock the original audience. Verse 2 contains a very similar commission that other prophets receive. We see similar statements to Elijah in 1 Kings 17:8-10 and Jeremiah in Jeremiah 13:6-7.

Yet, there is a significant difference. God's prophets were sent to Israel, even when they were speaking against another nation, it was from within Israel's borders. Jonah is the first prophet, up to this point, to be sent to a foreign nation outside of Israel. Not only that, but Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire which oppressed and opposed Israel. Church, feel the weight of this call. The same prophet sent to proclaim God's compassion on Israel, securing and increasing its national borders, was being sent to its oppressor to call out against it. And note the final phrase, "for their evil has come up before me." The term for evil can mean wickedness or calamity and there are debates about what it refers to here. What I believe we are called to see is its connection to 2 Kings 14:24 that we read earlier, because it is the same word for evil. Jonah was sent to King Jeroboam II when the Lord saw his evil, to deliver the word of the Lord involving God's compassion on the people of Israel, and now he is being sent to Nineveh to deliver the word of the Lord to them. At this point, we don't know what that word is and we won't find that out until chapter 3, but can you feel the tension for the Hebrew reader? Is Jonah being called to take a similar message to Nineveh as he did to Israel? Sit in that tension for a moment. Then, notice what happens in verse 3, "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." The first word in verse 3, "But," is another shocking moment. Normally what follows God's call on a prophet is, "and the prophet went," because, when the sovereign Lord called, the prophet obeyed. We also see a particular phrase repeated twice in verse 3, "from the presence of the Lord." This is likely not suggesting Jonah thought He could flee from God's presence but, as several commentators suggest, a Hebrew idiom that indicates that Jonah is in complete rebellion against the Lord's call (Eric Redmond, William Curtis, and Ken Fentress, *Exalting Jesus in Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk*, 7). This becomes a theme of this first chapter. We won't learn why Jonah flees until chapter 4, leaving us to begin to ask why God's prophet would rebel like this. Could it be because he feared the Assyrians more than he feared God? Could it be because he understood his calling might lead to God showing compassion on Israel's enemy? The main goal is to leave us shocked at his attempt to flee the Lord's call. This is magnified when we consider other prophets' comments on God's call on their lives. In Amos 3:8, the prophet Amos says, "The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?" In Jeremiah 20:9, the prophet Jeremiah says, "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." Church, Jonah's response is not the response of the Lord's messenger. And it gets worse as we see Jonah go to great lengths to flee his calling, chartering a boat in the opposite direction of Nineveh. The shock and awe of this response is meant to be felt as we continue on in this narrative. Consider the next scene with me, then, in verses 4-6, where we see,

### **God's Response & Mariners Sensing their Need**

Again, this scene holds that strong word of contrast, "But," as a trigger for God's response to Jonah. Look at 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." Note the words Lord (in caps) and hurled in verse 4, as repeat words are used by the author to get our attention. The narrative is clear, the Lord, Yahweh, said, "I don't think so, Jonah," and stirred up a great wind, causing the sea to rage in such a way that the ship was threatening to go down. In this moment, see God's intentionality in getting Jonah's attention. Notice what happens next in verses 5-6, "Then 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. 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." Note the fear of the mariners and their response to that fear. The theme of fear drives this chapter forming what many believe to be a chiasmic structure.

The author starts with the fear of the sailors to the storm in verse 4, shows Jonah saying he fears Yahweh in verse 9, followed by the men being exceedingly afraid in verse 10, and concludes with the sailors fearing Yahweh exceedingly in verse 16. In between are struggles with the storm and conversations between the mariners and Jonah. This structure helps us to see the fear of the Lord as the main theme of this passage. In verse 4, the mariners fear is only of the raging sea, leading them to only cry out to their various gods. Then, we see the authors description of the mariners hurling cargo into the sea like God's hurled the sea against them. Now, notice the contrast of their response with Jonah's. They were afraid and panicking, but Jonah was fast asleep. We don't know if Jonah went down into the inner part of the ship when the storm started, or whether he was already asleep, but, either way, the point is Jonah was at peace with his commitment to avoid God's call on his life. Now, pay attention to the intentional phrasing of verse 6. The captain comes to Jonah and uses the same words as the word of the Lord in verse 2, "Arise, call out," only he is asking Jonah to call out to his god in hopes that he might be the one who could save them. Through the narratives focus on God's act of bringing the storm against them, and the connection to God's call from verse 2, it is clear that this storm is the means God is using to get Jonah's attention. And ultimately, we will discover it is evidence of God's compassion on Jonah, where instead of justly bringing swift punishment for Jonah's rebellion, he sends this turmoil to lead Jonah to recognize the futility of trying to flee the presence of the Lord. Church, see God's compassion already on display to his rebellious servant. The next scene, in verse 7-10, shows how Jonah responds as

### **Jonah Confesses his Role in their Peril**

Verses 9-10 are the pivotal moment of this chapter as they hold the central part of the chiasmic structure, pointing to the main point. And the emphasis is clear. Notice first what the mariners do and say in verses 7-8, "And 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. 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?'" First, we see the mariners seek help to determine who was to blame for the calamity they are facing. Casting lots was a common way to determine guilt or seek guidance in ancient times (Joyce Baldwin, "Jonah," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey, 559). Yet, Proverbs 16:33 shows us the one behind what is taking place, saying, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." They may think they are discovering this truth outside of God's sovereign guidance, but the Lord is working through it to do as He pleases. When the lot falls on Jonah, they begin to wonder who he is, what he does, and notice the final question, "of what people are you?" Look at Jonah's confession and their response in verses 9-10, "And 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.' 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 confesses himself as a Hebrew, which is a common way other near eastern people would have identified Israelites, naming himself among Yahweh's people. And then he claims to fear and worship Yahweh, while confessing God's supremacy overall. Though, his actions are a far cry from his confession. Yet, these mariners understand its significance as their fear exceeds Jonah's. By the time this story was set, Yahweh's name would have spread to all nations, with many having at least a general understanding of His power. And note the recognition of them knowing Jonah was "fleeing from the presence of the Lord." It would seem the author wants us to get a sense of these mariner's understanding of Jonah's rebellion. What we discover is that Jonah's confession likely lead to far more than a general understanding. Consider the final scene with me in verses 11-16, where we see,

### **The Mariners Learn to Fear the Lord**

As we observe these verses together, look out for repeated words from the previous verses. Notice what takes place in verses 11-12, "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. 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 mariners frantically ask Jonah what they should do since the storm is getting stronger, and Jonah consigns himself to what he believed to be his ending. So, he tells them to hurl him into the sea, knowing the storm was because of his disobedience and they would be saved. This third use of the word hurl connects us back to God's initial action of pursuing Jonah. Yet, look at the wrestling of these men in verses 13-15, "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. 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.' So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging." The mariners try to avoid Jonah's solution and row to the shore, but God has other plans. While we aren't told God causes the sea to grow more tempestuous against them, context reveals that and the mariners even understand that truth in verse 14. Note how they pray to God using His covenantal name, Yahweh. They cry out for mercy because of what they are about to do and appeal to God's design in the storm, saying "for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." They understand the sea's additional raging is designed to lead them to heed Jonah's council. Their words echo the truths of Psalm 115:3 and 135:6, where the psalmists say, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." And "Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps." The nature of their prayer suggests they are becoming aware of who God is and expectant that He will hear their cries. Then, as soon as they throw Jonah over, the "sea ceased from its raging." The Lord heard their cries for mercy and saved them, leading to the culmination of this event in verse 16, "Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows." Note the threefold response of these sailors. Where in verse 10 they were only "exceedingly afraid," here they "feared the Lord exceedingly." The term for fear is the same as Jonah's confession in verse 9 that indicates worship. This is further emphasized by their sacrifices and vows made to Yahweh. While we are not told explicitly, T. Desmond Alexander is likely right when he comments, "The double occurrence of God's name in verse 16 emphasizes that the sailors are now familiar with his identity. Thus, in spite of Jonah's disobedience, they acknowledge his God as their own" (Donald J. Wiseman, T. Desmond Alexander, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 26, 117). Through Jonah's initial disobedience, God received worship and honor from a foreign people as they are taught what the fear of the Lord is. See the compassion of God for all peoples on display in His corrective actions against Jonah. When they needed mercy, they cried to God, and he saved them, leading them to worship and make vows to follow God. This is what happens when we trust in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We recognize that we cannot save ourselves and find that only Christ's death on the cross can. So, we turn and cry out to God for His mercy. And God, in His great compassion, meets us with mercy and grace through the forgiveness of sin, leading us to rightly fear and worship His holy name.

### **Conclusion:**

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of response, let me suggest a few possible responses to what we have seen. First, for those like the mariners who do not yet know the compassion and mercy of God. Turn, like they did, and cry out to God for mercy and forgiveness of your sin. Trust that Jesus died and rose from the grave and believe in Him for your salvation. Second, for those like Jonah, who may see the evil in this world and be ashamed to take God's message of salvation to them. Turn from that sin and ask God to soften your hearts for this lost and dying world. Recognize your calling to speak truth to those around you and pray for their repentance. Finally, for all of us, see our sovereign and compassionate God and ask if this is the God you fear and worship.