

Isaiah Wilson / General Adult

Jonah / Jonah 1:1-3

Introduction: Rescuing Jonah from Children's Church

Most of us know the story of Jonah. When you hear his name, you probably think of a giant fish. Maybe you picture a cartoon cucumber singing songs about second chances.

But here's the problem: if that's all we know, we've missed the point.

The fish appears in only two sentences in the entire book. Making the fish the main thing is like watching a movie and only remembering the car chase. You miss the plot, the characters, and the message.

So what is Jonah really about?

The book of Jonah reveals God's character. It shows us what God is like and what He's doing in the world. And it does this by telling a satirical story about a deeply flawed prophet who hates the very things God loves.

This isn't a children's story. It's a punch in the gut for adults. It exposes the worst tendencies that grow inside religious people: pride, hard-heartedness, judgmentalism, tribalism, and an inability to let God's grace surprise us.

Part 1: Where Jonah Fits in the Bible

Jonah in "The Twelve"

In the ancient Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh), the 12 "Minor Prophets" (Hosea through Malachi) were arranged as a single book called **The Twelve**. Jonah is the fifth book in this collection.

This matters because the original readers would have read Jonah in context, right alongside books like Hosea, Joel, Amos, and Obadiah. They would have noticed immediately how different Jonah is.

A Different Kind of Prophetic Book

Most prophetic books follow a pattern. Look at how the book of Micah begins:

Micah 1:1 ESV

¹ The word of the LORD that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

What follows is seven chapters of Micah's poetic prophecies. His words. His visions. His sermons.

Now turn to Jonah. It starts the same way:

Jonah 1:1 ESV

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

You expect a collection of Jonah's prophecies. But that's not what you get. Instead, you get a story *about* Jonah. God's word to us isn't found in Jonah's sermons. It's found in the message of the whole story.

This is the first clue that something unusual is happening.

Part 2: The Literary Genius of Jonah

A Beautifully Designed Book

The book of Jonah is carefully structured with symmetry and pairing.

Chapters 1 and 3 tell the story of Jonah's encounters with non-Israelites:

- First, pagan sailors (chapter 1)
- Later, the Ninevites (chapter 3)

Linking Chapter 1 with Chapter 3:

Chapter 1:

- Arise
- Gentiles (Sailors)
- Perish
- Gentiles respond

Chapter 3:

- Arise
- Gentiles (Nineveh)
- Perish

- Gentiles respond

The chapters aren't next to each other but there are enough repetitions that we should *think* of them together. In both stories, there's a comic contrast. Jonah is selfish and rebellious. The pagans are humble and repentant.

Chapters 2 and 4 contain Jonah's prayers:

- Chapter 2: A prayer of (sort of) repentance from inside the fish
- Chapter 4: A prayer where Jonah angrily calls God out for being too merciful

Linking Chapter 2 with Chapter 4:

Chapter 2:

- Jonah and the Lord
- Prays

Chapter 4:

- Jonah and the Lord
- Prays

This structure isn't accidental. The author is setting up contrasts to make a point.

The Style of Satire

Jonah is written as satire. Think of it like Saturday Night Live. Satire uses humor, irony, and exaggeration to critique well-known figures. It makes you laugh while exposing character flaws.

Here's what happens in Jonah:

- The **prophet** (the man of God) rebels against God and hates His mercy.
- The **pagan sailors** (who should be immoral) have soft hearts and turn to God in humility.
- The **king of Nineveh** (ruler of the most murderous empire on earth) humbles himself after hearing a five-word sermon. Even his cows repent.

Everything is backwards. The good guy is bad. The bad guys are good.

Comic Book Style: Everything is HUGE

The Hebrew word for "great" or "huge" (*gadol*) appears 15 times in this short book. Everything is over-the-top:

- A huge storm
- A huge fish
- A huge city
- Huge repentance
- Huge anger

The author even says Nineveh is so huge it takes three days to walk through it. Ancient readers would have laughed. Nineveh was about seven miles around. The author is making it sound like a 45-mile-wide city. That's comic exaggeration.

Why? To show that everything in this story is on a massive scale, including God's mercy.

Part 3: Jonah's Backstory - Already Suspicious

Before the story even begins, the informed reader is already suspicious of Jonah.

Jonah Appears Once Before

Jonah shows up one other time in the Old Testament, during the reign of King Jeroboam II. Here's what 2 Kings says:

2 Kings 14:25-27 ESV

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel.

²⁷ But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.

So far, so good. Jonah prophesied that Israel would regain territory, and it happened.

But here's the problem. The passage also says this about Jeroboam II:

2 Kings 14:24 ESV

²⁴ And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin.

Jeroboam II was one of Israel's worst kings. And Jonah prophesied blessing for him.

Amos Reverses Jonah's Prophecy

The prophet Amos later confronted Jeroboam II. And God, through Amos, reversed Jonah's prophecy:

Amos 6:13–14 ESV

¹³ you who rejoice in Lo-debar, who say, “Have we not by our own strength captured Karnaim for ourselves?”

¹⁴ “For behold, I will raise up against you a nation, O house of Israel,” declares the LORD, the God of hosts; “and they shall oppress you from Lebo-hamath to the Brook of the Arabah.”

God says the same territories Jonah promised would be lost because of Israel's sin.

So before Jonah's story even starts, the reader knows: this is the prophet who promised victory to a wicked king. This is the guy who got it backwards.

We're already supposed to be suspicious.

Part 4: Jonah 1:1-3 - The Call and the Flight

Now let's look at the opening verses.

Verse 1: The Word of the Lord

"Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying..." (Jonah 1:1, ESV)

The name "Jonah" means "dove." The name "Amittai" means "my faithfulness" or "my truth."

So the main character is "Dove, son of Faithfulness."

That's ironic. Because Jonah will prove to be the most faithless character in the entire story.

Verse 2: The Mission

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

God sends Jonah to Nineveh.

Who were the Ninevites?

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. Assyria was the most brutal, violent, oppressive empire the ancient world had ever known. They were infamous for their cruelty. When they conquered a city, they would skin the leaders alive in front of everyone before deporting the survivors.

For Israel, Assyria was the ultimate enemy. They were a direct threat to Israel's existence.

And God is sending a nationalist prophet to the heart of that empire.

Why does God send Jonah?

Because Nineveh's wickedness has "come up before" God. The language here pictures God as a king surveying His realm. He sees injustice and oppression rising like smoke. And He won't ignore it.

God is about to do something about Nineveh. And He wants Jonah to be part of it.

Verse 3: The Great Escape

"But Jonah rose to go 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)

Jonah doesn't just disobey. He runs. And he runs as far as humanly possible.

Look at a map. Nineveh is east of Israel. Tarshish is at the western edge of the known world (likely modern-day Spain). It was the last port before the Straits of Gibraltar and the vast ocean beyond.

In the Bible, Tarshish is like saying "Timbuktu." It's the edge of the earth.

Jonah doesn't just avoid the mission. He flees in the exact opposite direction as far as he can go.

And notice the phrase "from the presence of the LORD." It appears twice in verse 3. The author wants you to see Jonah's goal: he's trying to flee from God's presence.

That's absurd. Jonah is a prophet. He should know Psalm 139:

"Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!" (Psalm 139:7-8, ESV)

You can't flee from God. But Jonah tries anyway.

Part 5: Why Does Jonah Run?

We assume Jonah is afraid. Nineveh is known for skinning people alive after all.

But that's not why Jonah runs.

Look at what Jonah says later in chapter 4, after he finally preaches and the city repents:

"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)

Jonah didn't run because he was afraid the Ninevites would kill him. He ran because he was afraid God would forgive them.

He knew God's character. He knew God is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love. He knew that somehow, this mission would end with mercy for his enemies.

And he would rather die than see that happen.

Part 6: The Psychology of Disobedience

Jonah's disobedience reveals something about the human heart.

Competing Visions of Life

Jonah has a plan for his life. He has a vision of what his prophetic career should look like. And being the prophet who brings forgiveness to Israel's worst enemies is not part of that plan.

God's vision for Jonah's life is different. God wants Jonah to participate in an incredible, world-changing movement of grace.

But Jonah can't see it. His vision is too small.

What is Jonah Missing?

Jonah is missing the chance to be part of something bigger than himself. He's missing the opportunity to see God's grace extend to people who don't "deserve" it. He's missing the joy of watching enemies become worshipers.

He's so fixated on his small vision that he's blind to the bigger story.

Part 7: The Big Idea

Here's the central message of the book of Jonah:

God's kindness and mercy extend even to our worst enemies. And God invites us to love our enemies the way He does.

This is the challenge. This is the punch in the gut.

Jonah represents the people of God. And the book exposes the worst tendencies that grow inside religious communities:

- Pride
- Hard-heartedness
- Judgmentalism
- Tribalism
- An inability to accept the shocking width of God's grace

We read this story and think, "Wow, Jonah is ridiculous."

And then we realize: *this is about me.*

Part 8: Application - Where Are You Running?

Your Personal Tarshish

Most everyone has a "Tarshish" in their life. There's some area where you know God is calling you to change, to forgive, to act, or to trust. But you're running in the opposite direction.

Maybe it's a relationship you need to repair. Maybe it's a habit you need to stop. Maybe it's generosity you're avoiding. Maybe it's extending grace to someone you think doesn't deserve it.

Whatever it is, there's a conflict between your vision of the good life and God's vision.

And here's the sad irony: you think you're running *for* your life. But you're actually running *from* life.

The Call of Christ

Following Jesus means letting your vision of the good life

die at the cross. It means trusting that the life Jesus invites you into is richer, truer, and more abundant than anything you could imagine for yourself.

Jesus lived the life none of us could live. He died to absorb the consequences of all the times we ran from God. And He rose from the dead to offer us forgiveness, grace, and a new life.

When we come to Jesus, something has to die. Your plan. Your vision. Your control.

But what you gain is life. Real life.