

JONAH

(760 B.C.)

Intro: As we begin our study of Jonah we discover that it is tucked away in the Old Testament in a collection of 12 books known as the Minor Prophets. There is nothing minor about these 12 prophets, in fact, all of their messages are very major. As we read the Book of Jonah we discover that Jonah was a prophet commissioned by God to carry His message of mercy and forgiveness to perhaps the most wicked people on earth, the Assyrians. But Jonah ends up fleeing from God's call. The irony here is that Jonah tried to run from God who is omnipresent. Jonah could run, but he couldn't hide.

Everything and everyone in Jonah's story obeys God—*except for the prophet himself*. A ferocious storm, an aquatic beast, a plant, a tiny caterpillar, and the East wind all respond to the LORD's sovereign command. The wicked people who hear God's message of impending judgment repent of their wicked ways. But Jonah tries to run away from God's command to carry His message of impending judgment to the people of Nineveh, the great city.

The Book of Jonah is in reality a book about God. While Jonah's name appears eighteen times in the text, God's name appears thirty-nine times (twice as much). Above the deafening roar of the storm, the desperate cry of the sailors, and the dutiful prayer of Jonah, stands God.

The theme of Jonah is the boundless compassion and inescapable grace of God (cf. Exodus 34:6-7). Portrayed here is the mercy and forgiveness of God toward anyone who confesses their sin. We learn that God is deeply concerned about the salvation of sinful men. We find this same truth in the New Testament book of 2 Peter. Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

The story of Jonah unfolds in seven episodes. The first three episodes are paralleled by the second three. The seventh and final episode is unparalleled, and thus presents the climax to the story, ending with God's penetrating question to Jonah, "Should I not pity [the people] of Nineveh?"

Look at the chart: The Seven Episodes in Jonah

- First Episode: Jonah's Commissioning And Flight (1:1-3)
 Second Episode: Jonah and the pagan sailors (1:4-16)
 Third Episode: Jonah's grateful prayer (1:17-2:10)
 Fourth Episode: Jonah's recommissioning and compliance (3:1-3a)
 Fifth Episode: Jonah and the pagan Ninevites (3:3b-10)
 Sixth Episode: Jonah's angry prayer (4:1-4)
 Seventh Episode: Jonah's lesson about compassion (4:5-11)
God: "Should I not pity the Ninevites?"

First Episode: Jonah's Commissioning And Flight (1:1-3)

vv. 1-3—The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, **2** "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." **3** But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. 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.

The book begins with God's self-revelation to the prophet Jonah. It does not begin with a title, as do the other prophets. The expression "The word of the LORD came to Jonah" is used 7 times in the book. The exact manner in which the word of the LORD came to Jonah is not stated. God spoke to His prophets in many diverse ways. For the most part He used dreams and visions, but at times He spoke more directly.

Little is known about Jonah apart from what is recorded in his book. Jonah was a Hebrew (1:9) and son of Amittai (1:1). The name Jonah means "dove." It symbolizes the people of Israel, who were "silly and senseless." **Son of Amittai** means "son of My faithfulness"; Jonah would remain the object of God's faithful love.

An additional reference in **2 Kings 14:25** states that Jonah was a servant of Yahweh, a prophet, and a native of Gath-hepher, a small town to the north of Nazareth in the tribal territory of Zebulun in Galilee (Josh. 19:10, 13). Hence, Jonah came from the Northern Kingdom, and according to this same reference in 2 Kings 14:25, he served as a prophet in the Northern Kingdom during the reign of King Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.).

Jonah is unique among the Old Testament prophets, in that he is the only prophet on record whom God commissioned to carry a message of judgment to a heathen

nation. The prophet Nahum would later deliver a message of Nineveh's certain overthrow, but he wrote from Jerusalem. In addition, God used Jonah's ministry to the Ninevites to reveal His compassion for all people, specifically Gentiles (Gen. 12:3; John 3:16).

v. 2—God commanded Jonah to “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness [*ra'ah*, evil] has come up before Me.”

Jonah's commission was clear, he was to “go at once” to the great city of Nineveh and cry out against their wickedness and coming judgment. This “exceeding great city,” as it is called in the Book of Jonah, lay on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, opposite the modern-day city of Mosul, in northern Iraq. The ancient city of Nineveh was first discovered in 1847 by the British adventurer **Sir Henry Layard**. Two years later, in 1849 Layard rediscovered the lost palace of Sennacherib near the same location. He unearthed 80 rooms lined with colossal basal-reliefs. He also unearthed the palace and famous library of Ashurbanipal with 22,000 inscribed clay tablets. The study of the archaeology of Nineveh reveals the wealth and glory of ancient Assyria under kings such as Sennacherib (705-681) and Ashurbanipal (669-626 B.C.).

The massive sculptured panels that lined these kings' palaces depict the Assyrians as the cruelest and most vicious people that had ever come on the scene of world conquest. They terrorized their victims, as is seen in their panels depicting crucifixion, clubbing victims to death, cutting off heads, hands, and feet. They would often pile up the skulls of their victims at the cities main gate as a warning to anyone who would dare oppose them.

We read in verse 3 that “Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. 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.

Instead of carrying God's divine message of coming judgment to the people of Nineveh, located roughly 500 miles northeast of Israel, Jonah went down to Joppa and booked passage on a Phoenician ship headed for Tarshish, a seaport in Spain, some 2,000 miles due west.

Is it any wonder why Jonah attempted to flee from God's call to go to Nineveh? While it is never right to disobey God, we can sympathize with Jonah about his

decision to turn and run. Jonah refused to obey God's command to go and preach judgment to the Assyrians of Nineveh because, according to chapter 4, verse 3, he knew that God was a gracious and compassionate God that would forestall judgment if the wicked Ninevites repented of their sin. Jonah sensed that the Ninevites would repent and be spared from God's judgment. The result of Nineveh's repentance would serve as a testimony against Israel who refused to repent, their judgment would be fully deserved. Jonah also seems to have known that God would eventually use Nineveh as "a rod of judgment" to destroy His wicked and unrepentant people of Israel.

Second Episode: Jonah and the pagan sailors (1:4-16)

The LORD's response to Jonah's rebellious defection is recorded in v. 4

v. 4—And the LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.

It is of course foolish if not absurd to think that we can run away from a divine commission (Ps. 139:7-12). God hurled a great wind upon the sea to stop his rebellious prophet in his tracks. The storm, which appeared suddenly and without warning, was about to cause the ship to break up. In contrast to Jonah, the wind, the sea, and even the ship all obeyed God.

v. 5—Then the sailors became afraid, and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down, and fallen sound asleep.

Whereas the sailors, literally "*the old salts*" in Hebrew, became terrified and began throwing the cargo overboard in an attempt to lighten the ship, Jonah had gone down below into the hold of the ship and was sleeping like a baby. It is exhausting to disobey God's will.

v. 6—The captain or **head roper**, was the next one to approach Jonah and he said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish."

The captain marveled that Jonah could sleep through such a violent storm. He ordered him to join the rest of the men in calling upon his god for deliverance from the storm, "so that they would not perish."

v. 7—And each man said to his mate, “Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us.” So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

The casting of lots was very common in the Ancient Near East. Stones were painted or colored. When two stones were cast or thrown, if two dark sides landed right side up the usual interpretation was NO. If two light colored or painted sides landed up, that meant YES. A light and dark side landing up meant throw again. They would have cast the stones with each sailor being eliminated by dark stones. The lot fell to Jonah when two light sided stones came up. We can feel the raw emotion of the sailors as the lot fell to Jonah indicating He was the guilty party. All eyes focused on Jonah.

The sailors then said to Jonah, v. 8—“Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

For the first time in the story Jonah speaks, **v. 9**—And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.”

Jonah identifies himself as a Hebrew who fears the LORD God of heaven, the One who made the sea and the dry land.” Whereas the sailors worshipped *Baal Shamem*, the lord of heaven, Jonah lets them know that he serves the supreme God, Yahweh, the One who controls the heavens, and therefore the One who brought the winds that stirred the sea into a ragging frenzy. Yahweh is the LORD of all creation, who made the heavens, the sea, and the dry land.

Jonah’s admission caused these seasoned sailors, these old salty dogs, to be filled with a “holy fear.”

v. 10—Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, “How could you do this?” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

The sailors had their worst fear confirmed that this raging storm was the result of divine intervention. To attempt to run away from pagan deities was one thing, but to actually try to run away from the God heaven, the Supreme Creator of the universe was insane.

v. 11—So they said to him, “What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?” — for the sea was becoming increasingly violent.

v. 12—And he said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you.”

The unnatural ferocity of the storm and the casting of the lot which fell on Jonah, confirmed what the rebellious prophet already knew. It was on account of him that this exceedingly great storm had come upon them. He now resigned himself to his fate. He instructed the sailors to pick him up and throw him into the sea. Then the sea would become calm for them.

The sailors’ response to Jonah’s confession is truly outstanding. We read in **v. 13** that not only did the men not throw Jonah overboard, they rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.

The sailors found themselves in a frightful dilemma. Not being able to row back to land to off-load their troublesome passenger, they next cried out to the LORD in **v. 14**—and said, “We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life and do not put innocent blood on us; for Thou, O LORD, hast done as Thou hast pleased.”

It is significant that these pagan sailors prayed to the LORD God that He would not let them all perish on account of having to offer up Jonah’s life by casting him into the raging sea. They further prayed that God would not hold them accountable for His prophet’s life. For after all, He is the One who hurled this great storm down upon the head of Jonah.

After fully exhausting themselves physically by trying to row against the increasingly violent storm, and praying that God would forgive them for what they were about to do, **v. 15**—They picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.

As soon as Jonah hit the water God calmed the fierce storm. This caused the sailors to be even more frightened, **v. 16** Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

It is doubtful that sacrifices were offered at that time. They probably offered up a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God for delivering them from certain death at sea. It stands to reason that the sailors vowed to offer sacrifices to Yahweh, the God of Israel, as soon as they were able. We are not told if these sailors had a conversion and accepted the God of Israel. It is sad but true, that these sailors may have merely come to fear the power of God, but never accepted Him as LORD and Savior.

Third Episode: Jonah's Grateful Prayer (1:17–2:10)

v. 17—And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.

We do not know what kind of “great fish” God appointed to swallow Jonah, though there are whales and sharks capable of swallowing a man. Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, until the LORD commanded the fish and it vomited Jonah up on the dry land (2:10).

While I can't prove it, I am of the opinion that God had the fish vomit Jonah up where he began his fateful trip, on the beach at Joppa.

Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish before God released him from the belly of the fish. The expression “three days and three nights” was used by Christ in Matthew 12:40 as a prophetic statement of Christ's death, burial and resurrection. Don't miss the obvious here, the Lord Jesus authenticated Jonah's harrowing story. And what is more, He validated Jonah's being in the belly of the great fish for three days and three night.

Next week, Lord willing, we will look at the prophet Jonah's Psalm of Thanksgiving from inside the belly of the great fish in 2:1-10

Conclusion: Jonah teaches us that God is deeply concerned about the salvation of sinful men. I love the LORD's concluding question to Jonah in 4, verse 11 ***“Should I not pity [the people] of Nineveh?”*** We find this same truth in the New Testament book of 2 Peter. Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord is not slow concerning His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”

1. God loves all of the people in the whole world and wants everyone to be saved (John 3:16).

2. When we know that God wants us to do something it is important that we do what He wants us to do.
3. When we confess our sins to God and He forgives us, we should be happy when God forgives the sins of other people.

God is patient not wishing for any to perish. If you are here this morning and have never accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior from sin and death, invite Him to come into your heart today and He will. Don't reject God's mercy and grace. Christian, are you more concerned for plants than lost people. May I remind you of the commission Christ left us in Matthew 28:19-20 to go, to win, to disciple, and to send. May God help us to recommit our lives to obediently carry out Christ's Great Commission to win the lost to faith in Him.

Join me in prayer:

Closing Video: *Give Me Your Eyes*