

Jonah: Chapter 1

Summertime Monday Night Bible Study (RAW)

Introduction:

My former Senior Pastor, Jerry Lankford's, second question rang in my ears, "Well, why aren't you doing it, then?" His *first* question was, "Mark, have you been called to ministry?"

We have probably all had "Jonah moments" in our lives. We have run from God's call, we have ignored His voice, and we have failed to do as He instructs. How we *respond* to "Jonah moments" is life changing.

Jonah was an interesting character. Jonah's name means "dove" and his father's name means "faithful [is Yahweh]."

We initially read in the Scriptures about Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25, where Jonah the son of Amittai from Gath-hepher spoke the Word of God during the evil reign of Jeroboam.

Although some later scholars have attempted to portray the Book of Jonah as a parable, this is highly unlikely due to multiple reasons, including that Jonah was mentioned as a prophet in 2 Kings; that Jonah is part of the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament; that miracles are not uncommon with God; and, most importantly, that Jesus corrected the religious leaders of His day by saying that Jonah was in "the belly of the huge fish" (Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32). Jesus's Word is good enough for me!

In the Book of Jonah, we will uncover four major themes: 1) God's love for the Gentiles; 2) God's grace; 3) God's sovereignty over His Creation; 4) God's calls on our lives. So, let's pray and dive right in!

Jonah 1:1-3

We see here at the beginning that Jonah was required by God to go the City of Nineveh to preach. It is interesting because Jonah is one of three Old Testament prophets told by God to go to prophesy to *foreign* lands, the others being Nahum and Obadiah.

Imagine for a moment how Jonah must have felt when he received the LORD's message; after all, Nineveh was just *the worst!* Nineveh was first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 10:11-12, when Nimrod built cities in Mesopotamia and Assyria.

Nineveh eventually became an extraordinarily idolatrous city in the Assyrian nation, filled with idols, anger, and murder. Their leaders were known for beheading their enemies, for flaying of captives, for mutilating of live prisoners, and for burning their opponents, among other various cruelties. The prophet, Nahum, called Nineveh the "city of blood" (Nahum 3:1). The Assyrians invaded Samaria and Judah – they were certainly no friends of Israelites.

This nation's evil was overwhelming: its guilt was sure and absolute. Yet this nation, idolatrous and bloody, was exactly where God told Jonah to "Get up!" and "Go." Jonah responded by doing the exact inverse of God's plan – Jonah went the opposite direction towards Tarshish! You would think that an Israeli prophet might love to preach "against" the city's evil, but not Jonah. He did not want anything to do with the Assyrian capital city.

Ironically, Jonah did not seem to have a problem addressing his *own* people. Jeroboam II, the evil Israelite king, had previously heeded

Jonah's advice and enlarged the nation's borders. However, Jonah's previous "ministry success" did not have any bearing on his willingness to serve *this* time – he was willing to confront his *own* nation's sin, but he was most certainly not willing to help those who were his enemies.

- We are a *lot* like Jonah in this regard. Jesus knows it too, and He knew it when He was here on the earth. He reminded those on the Mount: "You have heard it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven'" (Matthew 5:43-45).
- We make excuses in our minds: "But, Lord, do you not hear what they are saying?" "Do you not see what they are doing?" And what is Jesus's reply to us? "You are blessed when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12).
- Ouch. You see, it is easy to look at Jonah in judgment regarding his willingness to follow God's plan until we realize that we have often been very similar to him in our own lives.

Here in our passage, we see that Jonah takes off for Joppa as he is heading to Tarshish as opposed to doing what God said and going to Nineveh. We see in Verse Three that it twice says that Jonah was trying to flee from the presence of God.

Now, we know, as Jonah knew, that it is impossible to run from God's presence: after all, He is *everywhere*. King David said it too: "Where can I go to escape your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" (Psalm 139:7-8). Jeremiah 23:23-24, Acts 17:26-27, and Ephesians 4:6

also reiterate this point: God is present everywhere – He is near us at all times! And don't forget this: just as Jonah was told to go, so are we as Christians. It is literally Jesus's mandate for us (Matthew 28:18-20): "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

There is no running from God's presence, and there is no running from God's call. Yet Jonah tried to do so. He rebelled against God's call, and he tried – hard – to run. Poor ignorant Jonah. And poor neglectful us.

Jonah 1:4-5

Jonah was told to "Get up!" and "Go..." Instead, he went *down* to the ship and then went *down* into the ship. He fell into a seemingly apathetic sleep – a sleep so deep that some scholars have wondered if depression had seeped into Jonah's life because of his disobedience and misery.

And what happened because of Jonah's sin?

- The LORD caused a great wind that "threatened" (literally, *was thinking about*) to break up the ship. What? You mean our sin can cause threatening harm to others? Absolutely!
- God is holy and His plans are absolute. Our sin – even our secret sin that no one else but God knows – *certainly* can cause havoc in others' lives.
- You might say to this scenario, "Well, this doesn't seem 'fair' to the sailors who were sailing with Jonah." By who's standard, though?

- Did God not have the right to confront Jonah’s sin – and *their* sin? We can see from these verses that Jonah was in obvious rebellion, and we can also see that these sailors were idolatrous – they were calling out to their own [false] gods!
- Habakkuk (1:13a) says, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil, and you cannot tolerate wrongdoing...” 1 John 1:5 states, “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light, and there is absolutely no darkness in him.” And Jesus said to several of His Revelation churches: “But I have this against you...” Then Jesus said, “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation, Chapters 2-3).
- We should not sin – our holy God is patient, to be sure, but He is also sovereign, just, and holy. “Don’t be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a person sows he will also reap” (Galatians 6:7). William L. Banks said, “Rebellion never escapes God’s notice, and it is foolish for me to think they can resist God’s will with impunity...The Lord may let a man go to a certain point before He steps in, but when He does move, He moves with no uncertainty.”

This is what we see here in Verses 4-5: Jonah – *and* the sailors – have rebelled against God, and God’s patience has apparently worn thin with all of them, but His righteous anger seems especially hot towards God’s anointed and called prophet. Jonah’s sin was an affront to God, just as our rebellious sin is an affront to God. In this case, God caused a terrible storm which was bad enough to break the ship apart.

- So here we have two entities throwing things against the other – One is God who is the cause of the storm; the other consists of sailors who are throwing their precious cargo into the open sea. These hardy sailors are scared for their lives, and rightly so. After

all, since God was causing the storm, they could have thrown every humanmade object into the sea and it would have done *no* good at all.

Jonah 1:6

Isn't it wild that the whole ship was praying, and that the prophet of God was sleeping? Not only that, but it was Jonah's sin that was causing the storm at this time. And this poor captain found him asleep, and ironically said the same thing to Jonah that God had earlier said, "Get up!" And although the captain probably did not really understand what he was saying, Jonah *was* the only one who could call out to his God and find relief from the storm.

There are many days when I get aggravated at myself because I am asleep at the wheel – not literally, but I am sleepwalking through life, so to speak. I don't think I am alone in this – some Christians cannot even make it to worship on Sundays, much less walk with Jesus every day.

The late, great Christian artist, Keith Green, once sang these lyrics:

Oh, can't you see it's such sin?
The world is sleeping in the dark
That the church just can't fight
'Cause it's asleep in the light
How can you be so dead
When you've been so well fed?
Jesus rose from the grave
And you, you can't even get out of bed
Oh, Jesus rose from the dead
Come on, get out of your bed

As Christians, we are not to be asleep but awake – awake to the hope of our salvation, to the work we are called to do, to the callings God has placed on each of our lives!

- We are not so unlike Jonah, are we?

Jonah 1:7-10

The men on the boat with Jonah were pagans with paganistic worldviews: they believed that misfortune and harm were caused or brought on by their false gods.

- Unfortunately, we as Christians sometimes fall into the same trap when things do not go the way we want them to. We blame God or get upset with Him.
- Others get more than upset – this is one of the main reasons that some people are skeptical about God. They see human suffering, and like Bertrand Russell, conclude that “either God is not good, or He is not sovereign.” Neither are true, obviously: the skeptic is not considering the nature of God nor is he considering the concept of free will. God *is* good and it is by His standard in which “good” is even defined. Even if the atheist does something which might be a good act, by what definition does he define that act? There is no *basis* for good if God is not in the equation.

In this case, the men were obviously fearful and praying to their unhearing and unseeing false gods. Then they asked Jonah a litany of questions:

- Who is to blame for our calamity?
- What is your business?
- Where are you from?
- Which country and tribe do you belong?

These men were apparently trying to figure out which god to call upon by learning where Jonah was from. They did not understand His God at all. According to the authors Redmond, Curtis, and Fentress, the men in the boat with Jonah “are just as much in danger before God as the people of Nineveh. It is not that the people of Ninevah are in danger because they are more evil. They are in danger because they do not know Israel’s God and are sinners before Him.”

Jonah answered the men in the boat by declaring the absolute truth to them: “I am a Hebrew. I worship the LORD, the God of the heavens, who made the sea and the dry land.” Jonah may have had a bad attitude, but he also knew who he worshiped. We see, too, in that moment, that Jonah finally proclaimed the message that he should have been communicating to those in Ninevah. It is the same message that is communicated to us: Without God our Creator, we die. When we rebel against God, he turns us over to our own deceptive mindset.

Where else do we see this in Scripture? One example is found in Romans 1:29-32, which says, “They are filled with all unrighteousness, evil, greed, and wickedness. They are full of envy, murder, quarrels, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, arrogant, proud, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, senseless, untrustworthy, unloving, and unmerciful. Although they know God’s just sentence – that those who practice such things deserve to die – they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.”

- Just like these men, we are separated by spiritual death from God unless we know Christ. These men had no idea who to pray to, and their lives were indicative of such by their false worship to false gods. Jonah, conversely, was running from the one true God who could save them! And us.

- When they had even an inkling of an idea regarding who Jonah belonged to, the men were gripped by fear: the very sea that was threatening their lives was created by the God Jonah served! They may not have known Him personally, but they were right to be afraid.

Jonah 1:11-16

These verses contain a lot – a whole lot!

- After the men heard that God had made the sea and that He was angry, they asked Jonah – the primary cause of their problem – what they should do.
- So, what did Jonah say?
 - Did he repent to the LORD? No.
 - Did he tell them he was in disobedience to the LORD and ask them to turn around? No.
 - Was he sorry he had run from the LORD? No, apparently not.
 - Did he commit to the LORD that he would go to Ninevah? No.
 - Did he even cry out to the LORD on behalf of these men? Again, no.
 - Did he admit he was the cause of the storm? Yes, he did that.

You know, it is one thing to admit that one is at fault, and it is a whole other thing to take responsibility and to repent for one's sin. Jonah was seemingly feeling sorry for himself, and he absolutely knew he was the cause of the problems these men were facing, but he preferred to die than being obedient to the LORD and then deliver God's message of repentance to the very people Jonah knew to be his enemy.

- Two things are evident thus far in this account: 1) Jonah is self-loathing and prefers death to obedience. 2) God has grace for those whom Jonah hates.
- James Bruckner says it like this: “Jonah does not seem to be capable of simple repentance. He could have sought forgiveness during the story (as the Ninevites do later) and committed himself to go to Ninevah. But perhaps he believes that too much ‘water has passed under his ship’ by this time. Perhaps he is not sure that his repentance would bring forgiveness. He prefers to believe (wants to believe?) in a God who only judges and does not forgive. He would rather die in the sea than suggest to the sailors that they turn around and return him to Joppa to complete Yahweh’s call to Ninevah.”

Whoa! Talk about a problem relevant to today! Many of us struggle with a right understanding of repentance and conversion.

- On the one hand, many of us think we have done “too much” for God to really forgive us. We pray our prayers and offer even sincere repentance, but there is this constant, nagging doubt that the Lord may have not really forgiven our sins.
- On the other hand, many of us fail to realize that repentance is a necessary part of the grace which God offers us. We believe we can essentially do anything we want and then expect a Holy God to accept our unholy lives.
- Neither view is correct. Instead, godly conversion takes place when we realize that we cannot cover our own sin; we acknowledge Jesus as the only one who can cover our sin; and, in repentance, we humbly ask Him to do so – believing with all our heart that He is the risen Christ. “For you are saved by grace

through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift – not from works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

- We love to hear this about grace, but we should not neglect the verse which follows this amazing truth: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). God has a sovereign plan for our lives, *and* He has *called* us to these good works because of our love for and obedience to Him!

But Jonah was having none of this. He was determined to die in his dejection, apparent depression, and his unwillingness to obey God's prepared good works designated for him.

Almost unbelievably, these Gentile pagans would have none of it. When Jonah said that they should throw him into the sea, they had *compassion* on the disobedient Jew and attempted to row back to shore regardless of the danger to their lives.

It was only *following* these attempts, when the angry sea created by the Lord was too much to overcome, that the men gave up their attempts. Then they did what the Ninevites would eventually also do – these men apparently repented before God and called out to the One True God: "Please, LORD, don't let us perish because of this man's life, and don't charge us with innocent blood. For you, LORD, have done just as you pleased." It seems that these men finally understood that God is the One who is above all other gods, and they quit crying out to their false gods and acknowledged the LORD.

- Don't you wonder if the Jews of that time who later read this account wondered at the repentance of all these Gentiles?! We *know* that the Jews of Jesus's day struggled with such thoughts – even well after Jesus had arisen from the dead and despite the Scriptures' assurance that the Gentiles could be saved.

- We need look no further than when Peter went to Cornelius's house and the Spirit fell on the Gentiles there. Following this event, Peter was confronted by his fellow Jews because he had entered the Gentile's home; thus, he then had to recount the whole story for them. Their response was quite different following Peter's recollection of the event: "When they heard this they became silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'So then, God has given repentance resulting in life even to the Gentiles'" (Acts 11:18).
Imagine that!

Obviously, unrepentant Jonah could not imagine such grace from God. So, the seas persisted, the men cried out to God, and kerplunk, off went Jonah into the sea.

The majesty of God awed the men in the boat, just as the majesty of God the Son awed the disciples years later, "And they were terrified and asked one another, 'Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!'" (Mark 4:41).

In Jonah's day, these men in the boat were also afraid of the incredible awesome power of the LORD. Despite Jonah's indifference towards the Ninevites, God still saved a whole boatload of Gentiles.

- Although I am not personally a fan of "Turn or Burn," "Get Right or Get Left," "Hellfire and Brimstone" preaching and teaching, it should *still* be noted that we humans *are* to fear the greatness, majesty, and overpowering awesomeness of the Lord our God.
- We see many Scriptures which describe similar responses to God's overpowering presence: 2 Chronicles 5:15, John 18:5-6, Matthew 17:6, Acts 9:3-4, Ezekiel 3:24, Numbers 22:31, Ezekiel 43:2-3, Ezekiel 44:4, Daniel 10:9, and one of my favorites, Isaiah 6:5, "Then I said, 'Woe is me for I am ruined because I am a man of

unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Armies.”

- A.W. Tozer said in his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, that “The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshiping men.” This is, sadly, so very true, and Tozer’s words were from so many years ago.
- We in the modern-day Church need to realize again what the men in this account in Jonah did, and then what Tozer stated in the 40’s: God is amazing and majestic and worthy of holy living and holy worship and sincere praise! Oh, forgive us, LORD!

These men realized several things, as noted by Redmond, Curtis, and Fentress:

- 1) The men became aware of their own inability to save themselves.
- 2) They recognized they would be accountable for the Prophet’s blood.
- 3) They realized they must do things in the way that God requires.

We too, must come to this realization in our own lives. We must come to God as *He* requires, in surrender, faith, trust, and repentance in His one and only Son, Jesus Christ. Regardless of the storms in our lives, Jesus is the *Only* Way to the Father (John 14:6-7): “Jesus told him, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’”

Jonah 1:17

One of my primary concerns in the Church, and indeed at times in my own life, is that we so depend on God’s grace that we forget the concept

of God's discipline. God will absolutely allow sickness, unrealized dreams, and many other issues in our lives if we are living in rebellion. As Hebrews 12:6 says, "...for the Lord disciplines the one he loves and punishes every son he receives" (see also 1 John 1:5, James 1:14, and Habakkuk 1:13).

Jonah apparently never repented before he was tossed into the sea. But God, in His own mercy and in His own sovereign will, chose to send a big fish to save him. This was an actual fish, and Jonah was an actual person (interestingly, there was a kayaker this past week who was swallowed by a whale and then spit out). It happens!

Since we New Testament Christians know the rest of the Story, we can see the parallel between Jonah's time in the fish and Jesus's time in the grave.

- Eventually, Jonah reluctantly went to the people to share about God.
- Jesus, conversely, voluntarily gave up His rightful home in Heaven to come to this Earth to be with us and to share the Good News. And that is fine way to end our first week together – the Good News of Jesus Christ!

Questions to Ponder

(directly quoted from *Christ-Centered Exposition*)

- 1) When Jonah reveals that he worships the Lord, how is he being both sincere and hypocritical? In terms of what Christians believe and practice concerning the Great Commission, how might it be

possible for a believer or a congregation to be both sincere and hypocritical in following the Lord?

- 2) How does this episode demonstrate that being tolerant of other's religious beliefs does not mean that believers must accept religious plural roads to salvation?
- 3) What acts in the story demonstrate a process of real conversion on the part of the sailors? Is it unreasonable for churches to expect believers to demonstrate evidence of conversion? Do you think the sailors' experience agrees with what the New Testament teaches about conversion?
- 4) What are some ways in which Jonah's account resembles the account of Christ? What might the resemblance say about the plan of God for all mankind? What might the resemblance say about the character of Scripture?
- 5) In light of God's heart for these polytheistic sailors and untold billions of lost people in the world, and in light of God's mercy toward Jonah and us, what actions should characterize a believer's or a church's heart for the lost? Do you think your financial planning, leisure schedule, and prayer life are more reflective of Jonah's heart or the Lord's heart?

Jonah Chapter 1 Sources

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