

We Got a Runner
Series: A Whale of a Tale
Jonah 1
September 27, 2020

Welcome again to worship.

Today, we are beginning a new message series entitled "A Whale of a Tale." We are looking at the Book of Jonah. Turn to page 4 in your bulletin.

A pastor noticed a little girl holding a storybook entitled "Jonah and the Whale." The pastor thought he would see if the little girl believed the story about Jonah. So, the pastor asked: "Do you believe that really happened?"

The little girl replied, "Yes, I believe the story of Jonah is true."

"You mean you really believe that a man can be swallowed up by a big whale, stay inside him all that time, and come out of there still alive and okay?"

She said, "Absolutely. This story is in the Bible and we studied about it in Sunday school today!"

Then the pastor asked, "How can you prove that the story about Jonah is true?"

She thought for a moment, and then said, "When I get to Heaven I'll ask Jonah."

The pastor then asked, "What if Jonah's NOT in Heaven?"

She put her hands on her little waist, and sternly said: "Then YOU can ask him!"

Of all the stories in the Bible, the one which people find hardest to swallow (pun intended) is the account of Jonah and the whale. Skeptics have a field day ridiculing the account of a man who was swallowed whole by a whale and lived to tell of it after 3 days and nights. They say the story was never meant to be understood literally, but as an allegory; you know, just a story.

The problem of viewing Jonah as an allegory is that the Bible nowhere treats it as such. The story itself is written as a historical narrative, with absolutely no indication that it was intended as myth or allegory. It doesn't begin with "Once upon a time." It reads as history because it is.

Jonah was a real person. His name means "dove." He was from a little town called Gath Hepher, four miles from Nazareth.

He was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II in the middle of the 8th century B.C. He counseled the king against Syrian threat and prophesied his expansion of Israel to its former borders. He ministered in a time of great economic prosperity. But it also a time of incredible moral poverty - idolatry, greed, ritual religion. He's referred to in 2 Kings 14.

In addition, Jesus Himself treated Jonah as historical. If one denies the facts of the story of Jonah, he or she must then assume ignorance or deception on the part of Jesus, who believed its authenticity. This would, in effect, destroy His claim to being God.

Jonah was a real person and this is a real historical account probably written by the prophet himself. It is a small book. It only contains 48 verses (1,300 words) and can be read in less than 15 minutes. It's a strange book. We see freak storms, big fish, cows in sackcloth, and a worm. It's a structured book. The chapters are set up in parallels. Chapters 1 and 3 are parallels as are 2 and 4. It contains the biggest revival in human history! It might be small, but it is powerful.

So, let's take a look at Jonah 1.

The first thing we see is this: **Rebellion Leads to Complete Rejection of God.**

Let's read verses 1-2:

The LORD gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai¹: "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are."²

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. It was northeast of where Jonah lived. It was a large city situated on the banks of the Tigris River. The modern city of Mosul in Iraq is generally thought to be the same as ancient Nineveh. Mosul was in the news a few years ago when ISIS captured the area and destroyed a number of ancient buildings, including the Mosque of the Prophet Jonah.

God told Jonah to go to Nineveh to pronounce judgment because, as the NRSV and other translations put it, "their wickedness has come up before me." Think about that phrase. With all the wickedness in the world that God sees, Nineveh's was the worst, and as the Message Bible puts it: "... and I can't ignore it any longer."³

Nineveh rejected God to the point that the stink of their sin reached heaven.

Let's look at verse 3:

But Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the LORD. He went down to the port of Joppa [Joppa, which is now part of Tel Aviv, a beautiful port city on the Mediterranean Sea], where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to escape from the LORD by sailing to Tarshish.⁴

The Bible indicates that Jonah wanted to go in the opposite direction from where God wanted him to go. How opposite? Well, Nineveh was in present day Iraq. Tarshish is believed to be referring to a city on the Atlantic Ocean coast of Spain. Iraq – Spain. You couldn't get any further away.

Now, why would he do such a thing?

Well, one possible explanation is that often the pagan gods were thought to be regional. That is, their influence and power would only extend so far.

Twice in verse 3 it says that he is trying to go get away or escape from the Lord. He is not just rebelling now. He actively is trying to ditch the Lord. Jonah thinks the only possible way to escape obedience to the Lord's command would be to escape the Lord altogether!

The phrase "[away] from the Lord" is a Hebrew idiom that indicates Jonah is in full rebellion against the Lord. Jonah is trying to do more than escape going to Nineveh. Jonah is trying to reject the temple choirs, the sacrifices and offerings, the holy of holies, the ark of the covenant, the law, the priests, God Himself, and everything about God!⁵

The second thing we see is this: **Rebellion Invites the Wrath of God.**

Verses 4-5:

But the LORD hurled a powerful wind over the sea, causing a violent storm that threatened to break the ship apart. Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors shouted

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² Jonah 1:1-2 (NLT2)

³ Jonah 1:2 (MSG)

⁴ Jonah 1:3 (NLT2)

⁵ Christ-Centered Exposition, Jonah 1:1-6

*to their gods for help and threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. But all this time Jonah was sound asleep down in the hold.*⁶

In His anger toward Jonah's sin, God hurled a great wind on the sea. This was no minor storm. These seasoned mariners were scared for their lives. They began praying as they have never prayed before, calling on their god, any god, who could still the chaotic forces of the sea. If they were typical sailors, some of them were so hard and salty they probably have never prayed so earnestly – if at all! – until God unleashed this storm on them.

They were hurling cargo as God was hurling a great wind. (It is pretty obvious who is going to win the battle of hurling.) Such evasive actions are ridiculous when you are dealing with the Lord. The Lord does not want their cargo; He wants the obedience of His child! They don't know this yet, so in fear of death, they kept hurling.

If ever we think the Lord simply glosses over rebellion to His Word, we are mistaken. Rebellion never escapes God's notice, and it is foolish for people to think they can resist God's will with impunity. God may let a person go to a certain point before He steps in, but when He does move, He moves with no uncertainty. Or He does not have to put us in a storm; He can simply put life in neutral until we decide that we are going to do God's will no matter the size and power of the Ninevehs we face. To rebel is to invite His wrath.

The third thing we see is this: **Rebellion Denies Sinners the Hope of God.**

Verse 6:

*So the captain went down after him. "How can you sleep at a time like this?" he shouted. "Get up and pray to your god! Maybe he will pay attention to us and spare our lives."*⁷

Interestingly, while the whole ship was full of fear and gone to prayer, Jonah was asleep! He was sleeping so sound that the captain must awaken him.

Sadder than Jonah's nap is that these men wanted to escape death, and the only one who has the means of escape was sleeping. With every snore, the sailors and Jonah were coming closer to their ends. The sailors thought that calling on one of their gods and chucking the cargo would help. The captain wanted Jonah to wake up and call on his "god." Nothing was working.

By sleeping, Jonah was denying perishing men an opportunity for the hope of the Lord's salvation. All around him are people who want a solution to escape death, but Jonah is trying to flee from the presence of the Solution!

The fourth thing is this: **Revelation leads to understanding.**

Verses 7-10:

*Then the crew cast lots to see which of them had offended the gods and caused the terrible storm. When they did this, the lots identified Jonah as the culprit. "Why has this awful storm come down on us?" they demanded. "Who are you? What is your line of work? What country are you from? What is your nationality?" Jonah answered, "I am a Hebrew, and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land." The sailors were terrified when they heard this, for he had already told them he was running away from the LORD. "Oh, why did you do it?" they groaned.*⁸

⁶ Jonah 1:4-5 (NLT2)

⁷ Jonah 1:6 (NLT2)

⁸ Jonah 1:7-10 (NLT2)

This is how one knows God is in absolute control of this situation. Verse 4 says God hurled the storm on the sea. Verse 17 will show God arranged for a fish to get Jonah. And when they cast their lots, God makes certain that the lot implicates Jonah. This is not chance; it is the Lord manifesting His will and showing His sovereign rule over all things – over Jonah’s life, the sailors’ lives, the storm, the sea, the ship, the lots, and everything else.

Jonah revealed to them the Lord. He literally said, “Yahweh, the God of the heavens, I fear, who made the sea and the dry ground.”⁹

These sailors, who were calling on a pantheon of gods, did not know the one true God any more than do the Ninevites. Jonah revealed that they are in trouble with the God who rules over all – over heaven and everything on earth, and all the land and all the sea. They had real problems.

Fifth, **Repentance leads to true conversion.**

Verses 11-16:

*And since the storm was getting worse all the time, they asked him, “What should we do to you to stop this storm?” “Throw me into the sea,” Jonah said, “and it will become calm again. I know that this terrible storm is all my fault.” Instead, the sailors rowed even harder to get the ship to the land. But the stormy sea was too violent for them, and they couldn’t make it. Then they cried out to the LORD, Jonah’s God. “O LORD,” they pleaded, “don’t make us die for this man’s sin. And don’t hold us responsible for his death. O LORD, you have sent this storm upon him for your own good reasons.” Then the sailors picked Jonah up and threw him into the raging sea, and the storm stopped at once! The sailors were awestruck by the LORD’s great power, and they offered him a sacrifice and vowed to serve him.*¹⁰

The sailors needed a big solution. They knew the problem: their idols did not work, and the storm was getting worse by the minute. It makes you wonder why they did not call on the Lord immediately!

You may know people who, with everything falling down around them, refuse to call on the Lord for salvation. They say to you, “I don’t need to go to church” or “You can’t say that your life is better than mine because of your Jesus.” Then they hit the bottle, work harder to avoid going home each evening, or continually cut out people from their lives so they can have a false sense of peace created by an absence of real relationships. What such persons need to do is stop trying to find their own feeble solutions and instead cry out to the Lord for His help.

The sailors eventually became aware of their own inability to save themselves, and they turn to the Lord. These pantheistic sailors realized Who the One True God is, and they worship Him, just as the disciples did in Matthew 14 when Jesus calmed the waters.¹¹

Finally, **Repentance leads to rescue.**

Verse 17:

*Now the LORD had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights.*¹²

⁹ Christ-Centered Exposition - Exalting Jesus in Jonah 1:7-10

¹⁰ Jonah 1:11-16 (NLT2)

¹¹ See Matthew 14:24-33

¹² Jonah 1:17 (NLT2)

This verse is troubling for some people. How in the world can a fish swallow a man and that man stay in the belly of a fish three days and three nights? In the scientific age, we started saying, “Something like this is not possible.” Of course it’s not possible – it’s a miracle! Miracles by definition are outside the normal course of nature.

The first fact to deal with is that the Hebrew words which are translated “whale” in the King James Version actually mean “large fish.” The sperm whale is known to swallow whole animals that are larger than a man. A man named James Bartley is known to have survived a day and a half in the belly of a whale before being rescued.

Keep in mind what is going on in this story. As Jonah said, the Lord is the Creator of the heavens and of the seas, and the dry land, and thus Ruler over all. Certainly, God could speak to whatever creature He wants to and assign it to swallow Jonah. The passage actually indicates that the Lord already “had arranged” a fish to come and get Jonah before the sailors had thrown Jonah off the ship. Because the Lord is sovereign, He knew exactly when and where Jonah would hit that water.

The Lord rescued Jonah, just as he rescued Peter as he began sinking into the stormy waves of the Sea of Galilee.

My question to you is this: are you running from God? Have you said “no” to a calling of the Lord and instead gone the complete opposite direction? Jonah’s mission was to share the word of God with the people of Nineveh. Jesus gave us a similar mission: “Go and make disciples of all the nations...”¹³ Are you sharing with your non-Christian friends about the love of Christ?

Jesus said of the story of Jonah:

For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. “The people of Nineveh will stand up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, for they repented of their sins at the preaching of Jonah. Now someone greater than Jonah is here—but you refuse to repent.”¹⁴

We do not get to choose what we will or will not do for the Lord. God has given each of us a mission. We can either run towards it or away from it.

Friends, choose wisely.

¹³ Matthew 28:19 (NLT2)

¹⁴ Matthew 12:40-41 (NLT2)