

Jonah • Fleeing from the Presence of the Lord

Introduction

Within the person of Jonah are the most startling contrasts; he is completely different than any other prophet in Scripture. He's a prophet of God, yet a runaway from God. He's a man that is drowned (dead) and yet is still alive. He preaches repentance and yet is dismayed at seeing repentance take place. There are much larger lessons in Jonah than the great fish. Most importantly, however, is to understand that Jonah is a literal record of history and is definitely **NOT** a parable or allegory. Everything factually happened exactly and as plainly as stated. How do we know this for sure? Because Christ Himself quotes these events as historical fact. (See Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32) This is one of the deepest pre-messianic teachings in the Old Testament, and the greatest example provided by God to the Northern Kingdom of Israel of what should happen upon hearing His Word.

¹The 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.” ³But 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.

[Read 1:1-3]

Q: What is the historical context of Jonah? Where does he live?

A: Jonah lives in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. (See 2 Kings 14:25. The city of Gath-hepher is in Zebulun.) This is the divided part of the kingdom that never ceases in its rebellion against God and will ultimately be conquered and carried away into captivity in the future by Assyria according to God's judgment.

Q: What might be the most distinctive feature about the book of Jonah? What does every other prophet in the Old Testament mention that Jonah does not?

A: Israel—Jonah never mentions Israel. This is the only prophet sent exclusively to a people group outside Israel, in this case Nineveh. This is a startling contrast in that here is a “heathen” people that are ready to repent at the first word from God, wherein the Northern Kingdom of Israel, who boasted of being God's chosen, continues to choose to **NOT** repent in spite of all the prophets and messengers sent to them. It is a shadow of the work of God to come in the general rejection of Christ by the Jews and His acceptance by the Gentiles. Equally fascinating, is that Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, who will be used of God in the future to exact judgment on Israel.

Q: What is significant about God's use of the phrase “their wickedness has come up before Me”?

A: It means that Nineveh's sin has become so great that it requires God's direct attention for punishment, much along the lines of Sodom and Gomorrah. These are not people in need of a simple “correction” but are completely given over to their sin and pursuit of false gods.

Q: Why does Jonah select Tarshish as his destination?

A: Tarshish is located in Spain, at what would then be the very western edge of the known world, at the completely opposite end from Nineveh to the east. It's the furthest point away from Nineveh he could possibly choose.

Q: What are the 2 things that Jonah does that no other prophet has ever done?

A: First, this is the only biblical instance of a prophet concealing a message entrusted to him; second is his absurd attempt to flee “from the presence of the LORD”. As we will learn in more detail later, he is not acting out of fear but disobedience and personal preference.

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.
If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
Even there Your hand will lead me,
And Your right hand will lay hold of me.
—Psalm 139:7-10

[Read 1:4-9]

⁴The 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.

⁵Then 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. ⁶So the captain approached him and 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.”

⁷Each 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.

⁸Then they said to him, “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?”

⁹He said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.”

¹⁰Then 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. ¹¹So they said to him, “What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?”—for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.

¹²He 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.”

Q: Why do we know this was no ordinary storm?

A: "...the sailors became afraid..." Professional seamen knew this to be no ordinary storm.

Q: Who took the first correct steps spiritually? How would this have a personal affect on them later?

A: The heathen sailors, who each called on their respective false gods to save them. This would have a profound effect as they would learn firsthand that salvation only comes at the hand and power of the One True God of Israel, not from their false gods.

Q: How is it possible that at such a time, someone would act like Jonah, going below and sleeping?

A: It probably shows that he was conscious of his guilt, shrinking in the presence of others and seeking concealment from them.

Q: What has changed for the sailors in v.6?

A: They've called upon their own gods and received no response, so they're now looking for another god that can save them.

Q: How does the casting of the lot to find the guilty party sound familiar?

A: It was what Joshua did to reveal Achan as the one that had brought God's wrath on all of Israel for breaking His commandment (Joshua 7:16-21), just as the sailors fear that Jonah has brought God's wrath on all of them. As with Achan, Jonah is implored to confess his sin with his own mouth.

Q: How is Jonah's brief message to the sailors in v.9 so effective?

A: It attributed to God not just the power to remedy the current situation but the Creator of the sea itself. Their search for the God in charge was over.

[Read 1:10-17]

Point (v.10): Why is it that non-Christians instinctively **KNOW** how Christians should live and behave even better than Christians themselves? Why is it that they know Christians aren't living right even when Christians don't?

Q: How is Jonah a type of the Messiah?

A: He is the one man who offered himself to die on behalf of everyone else in order to allay God's wrath.

Q: How is Jonah an example of true repentance?

A: The truly repentant are more concerned for the atonement of sin than for the punishment that it demands, seen by his willingness to be sacrificed for his sin.

¹³However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them. ¹⁴Then they called on the LORD 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 You, O LORD, have done as You have pleased.”

¹⁵So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. ¹⁶Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

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

¹Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish, ²and he said,

“I called out of my distress to the LORD,
And He answered me.
I cried for help from the depth of Sheol;
You heard my voice.

³For You had cast me into the deep,
Into the heart of the seas,
And the current engulfed me.
All Your breakers and billows passed
over me.

⁴So I said, ‘I have been expelled from
Your sight.
Nevertheless I will look again toward
Your holy temple.’

⁵Water encompassed me to the point of
death.

The great deep engulfed me,
Weeds were wrapped around my head.

⁶I descended to the roots of the
mountains.

The earth with its bars was around me
forever,

But You have brought up my life from
the pit, O LORD my God.

⁷While I was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD,
And my prayer came to You,
Into Your holy temple.

⁸Those who regard vain idols
forsake their faithfulness,

⁹But I will sacrifice to You
with the voice of thanksgiving.
That which I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation is from the LORD.”

¹⁰Then the LORD commanded the fish,
and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.

Q: Why didn't they just immediately take Jonah at his word and throw him overboard?

A: If you've come around to believing that this is the result of Jonah's God being angry at him not doing as God said, killing Jonah might not seem the logical thing. In fact, it might be logical to conclude that to kill Jonah would bring God's wrath upon them personally for making sure Jonah could **NEVER** complete God's mission. They made their best-faith effort to make sure they really knew the mind of God on this issue.

Q: How do we know that Jonah's survival in the great fish was a miracle?

A: First, he should have been suffocated and digested but was not. Second, Christ Himself calls it a “*sign*” or miracle (Matthew 12:39). Like other prophets that experience a sign or special conditions, he becomes an effectual symbol to those who will hear his message of leaving the death of sin for the life of God's salvation, in this case to both Israel and Nineveh.

[Read 2:1-10]

Q: If Jonah was such a sinner, according to Old Testament Law, what appears to be missing from his actions to atone for sin and be reconciled?

A: Sacrifices. Instead, Jonah simply prays. It's a powerful testimony that (a) it's a right heart that God desires most and (b) that the sacrifices are the **END** of the process to celebrate God's mercy, not the process itself that covers sin. Without a changed heart, the sacrifices mean nothing.

Point: Review Solomon's dedication of the Temple and see how it applies to Jonah's prayer, particularly for v.4:

But will God indeed dwell with mankind on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You; how much less this house which I have built. Yet have regard to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplication, O LORD my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You; that Your eye may be open toward this house day and night, toward the place of which You have said that You would put Your name there, to listen to the prayer which Your servant shall pray toward this place. Listen to the supplications of Your servant and of Your people Israel when they pray toward this place; hear from Your dwelling place, from heaven; hear and forgive.

—2 Chronicles 6:18-22

Q: How does Jonah's experience pre-figure the Messiah?

A: He is “dead” for 3 days but returned to life, typifying resurrection from the dead.

Q: How does Jonah typify the “prayerful penitent”?

A: When he truly repents and acknowledges God from his heart, regardless of the hopelessness and certain death of his situation, God saves and brings back to life. It's a further example of how God uses life's circumstances to bring us back to Him.

¹Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.” ³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD.

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk. ⁴Then Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk; and he cried out and said, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

⁵Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.

⁶When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. ⁷He issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. ⁸But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. ⁹Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish.”

¹⁰When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

¹But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, “Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. ³Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.”

⁴The LORD said, “Do you have good reason to be angry?”

[Read 3:1-4]

Point: *When called to repentance by God, we are called to return to His original instructions, HIS original calling. Our temporary disobedience does not alter His Word or will. It was the same when God replaced the tablets Moses broke in the presence of the people breaking God’s Law:*

Now the Lord said to Moses, “Cut out for yourself two stone tablets like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets which you shattered.

—Exodus 34:1

Application: *Is there anything you have been called to do that still needs to be done? Do you somehow think you can change God’s mind in some way?*

[Read 3:5-10]

Q: What is significant about the people’s response?

A: They “believed in God”. In other words, they were not sidetracked by the presence of a prophet but responded to the message correctly as the very Word of God.

Q: As with the sailors first, then Jonah himself, and now Nineveh, how does repentance take place?

A: It’s the recognition of the One True God followed by prayer from a submissive and changed heart.

Q: What does the extraordinary step of involving their animals tell us about the Ninevites?

A: Their repentance was so sincere that they submitted to God everything, even their personal wealth and possessions. They brought everything into submission to God; they held nothing back.

Application: *How sincere is our repentance? How far do we go to submit everything to God? Could this have something to do with sins from which we “repent” but keep creeping back into our life? Is there anything we keep in reserve from God?*

[Read 4:1-4]

Q: Why is Jonah so disappointed? What might explain this contrary reaction?

A: As a prophet to Israel, he probably thought the example of the destruction of Nineveh would serve as a first-hand example leading to Israel’s own repentance. However, God had already done that many other times. Jonah did not get that God now used Israel’s future conqueror as the ultimate example of the **RIGHT** way to respond to God’s Word. Jonah might be feeling failure of achieving his ultimate desire of leading Israel to repentance while providing comfort to his enemy.

Application: *Are you willing to go wherever and do whatever God’ desires, regardless of your personal ministry desires? Have you submitted to Him **EVERYTHING**—even control over your ministry?*

⁵Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city. ⁶So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. ⁷But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. ⁸When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."

⁹Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?"

And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."

¹⁰Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. ¹¹Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

[Read 4:5-11]

Q: What is Jonah's problem? Why is he still waiting to see the judgment of God come upon Nineveh?

A: Although v.10 states "...God relented concerning the calamity...", Jonah appears to not fully believe that the repentance he has witnessed will deter God's wrath and that it will still come.

Point: *Jonah's problem may be that he does not understand the most important role of a prophet of God: To lead people back to repentance. If Jonah thinks the main role of a prophet is to do signs, speak God's Word, and witness that Word take effect, he is probably missing the importance of the number one role of a prophet. He may be judging his ministry's success or failure by the wrong unit of measure.*

Q: How might you summarize Jonah's point of view versus God's?

A: Beside the fact that God's is obviously more merciful and loving, the main contrast is how Jonah seems to view differently the purpose of God's warnings of and actual judgment. Jonah doesn't seem to recognize that God desires far more the opportunity to exercise love and mercy than to merely demonstrate He is God. Jonah seems to be fixated on seeing the landscape of the earth changed, whereas God seeks to change the landscape of the heart.

Overall Application

- *Jonah appears to be the most successful Old Testament prophet/evangelist on record—everyone he meets repents and turns to God. Yet, he has a difficult time interpreting the success of his ministry. By what do you measure the progress of your work for God's kingdom? Could you be missing the point sometimes by insisting things turn out the way **YOU** expect rather than according to **GOD'S** expectations?*
- *From whom might you be withholding the Gospel? Is there someone "difficult" for you to talk to, perhaps even an enemy? Why don't you see and love them as God does?*
- *In the shadow of these Last Days, do you see it's even more important to preach the Gospel of salvation while there's still time? Can you see the power of repentance or do you really desire the fireworks of His judgment?*