



### Jonah 1

*Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” 3 But Jonah rose to flee 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.*

*4 But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. 6 So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.”*

*7 And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. 8 Then they said to him, “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” 9 And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” 10 Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.*

*11 Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. 12 He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” 13 Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. 14 Therefore they called out to the LORD, “O LORD, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” 15 So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.*

*17 And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

I assume you have all been lost on a road trip before. With the majority of people having GPS on their phones, such occurrences are beginning to become less common. The worst thing that can happen is when you take a nap on a road trip and the person who is most “directionally challenged” is driving. Bad things tend to happen in those cases.

But whatever your story, I can guarantee you that no one here has ever been lost 3,000 miles from their destination. This is Jonah’s story.

*Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”*

From Israel, Nineveh would have been about 500 miles to the northeast. There were common trade routes and Jonah may have roughly taken the same path that Abraham took in the opposite direction when he was called to the Promised Land.

*3 But Jonah rose to flee 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.*

The most likely location of Tarshish was at the bottom horn of Spain near modern day Gibraltar, about 20 miles north of Morocco. This meant that Jonah would have planned on taking a 2,500 mile journey all the way across the Mediterranean Sea, which of course was as far as he could have gone in the opposite direction. Tarshish, essentially was the end of the earth.



I said that Jonah was lost, but that isn’t quite accurate, is it? He knew full well what he was doing. He wasn’t lost like you and get lost on the road. He knew where he was supposed to go but he made a decision to purposefully go in the opposite direction of where God commanded him to go. He wasn’t lost directionally but I am arguing that he was lost spiritually. And by lost I don’t mean that he was an unbeliever, the way that Jesus declared “I have come to seek and to

save the lost.” Jonah obviously believed in the Lord but he was lost. He had lost his way. He had lost his very purpose—to speak the word of the Lord. Jonah forgot that...

### **1. God intended that the gospel would reach all nations.**

Including Israel’s number one enemy. We are not told exactly why he did not want the people of Nineveh to repent. Most people assume that he did not want them to repent because they were Israel’s enemies. That seems to be the most logical conclusion. I said that Jonah forgot that the Lord intended that the good news would reach all nations. He didn’t really forget, did he? He knew it in his head but you could say his heart forgot it.

Here’s Jonah’s response to God’s mercy.

*But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, “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 4:1-2).*

There is no question that God worked somewhat differently under the old covenant than under the new. The New Testament is all about spreading the gospel throughout the world. Jesus predicted that the gospel much reach the end of the earth prior to his return.

*And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Matthew 24:14).*

And John recorded the vision of this completed work.

*After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb (Revelation 7:9).*

The gospel will be taken to every people, nation, tribe and language. That much is clear but we tend to lose sight that this was always God’s plan. Before the death and resurrection of Christ, the plan was worked out differently, but it was always God’s plan. Let me review some key passages.

*And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:30-31).*

I love this one from Isaiah, especially since he was a contemporary of Jonah’s. This is one of Isaiah’s “Servant Songs” which speak of the coming Messiah.

*“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant  
to restore the tribes of Jacob  
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.  
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,  
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6)*

The Lord was the God of the Jews. If you only read parts of the Old Testament you might reach the conclusion that the Lord was only God of the Jews and no one else. But that would be a myopic view of God's mercy and plan.

What is interesting and sad about the Jonah story is that Jonah was told to preach a message of judgment against Nineveh. *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."* Since Jonah seemed to hate Nineveh, you might think that Jonah would be happy to preach a message of judgment against them. But he knew that his preaching would result in their repentance which made him all the more angry. Jonah was lost. He hated the fact that God's mercy was awaiting his enemies.

## **2. Judgment is real and repentance is necessary.**

In this story we are reminded that judgment is real and repentance is necessary. But this is what the world fights against the hardest. To be honest, Jonah's message that he proclaimed in Nineveh sounds very much like the men and women who carry street and stand on street corners. The big difference is that Jonah's message did not even carry with it the message of repentance.

Here's what the King of Nineveh said when he heard Jonah's message. *Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.* He had no reassurance of forgiveness but decided to repent anyway. This is the right message to proclaim. It was the message of John the Baptist and Jesus who proclaimed identical messages.

John the Baptist—Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand (Matthew 3:2).

Jesus—Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand (Matthew 4:17).

Judgment and repentance are hard sells. No one likes to hear them and most of us don't like to give them. I am not suggesting that you use Jonah's methods and walk through Viroqua proclaiming the city's destruction. But I am saying that judgment and repentance are necessary parts of the gospel. Most evangelism requires a more tender and personal approach but don't ever be tempted to water down the hard and necessary message.

## **3. God's mercy is a sovereign decision.**

The Lord said to Moses: And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy (Exodus 33:19). The Lord did not consult Jonah before he commanded him to go. And it's a good thing he did not! The command was to arise, go and proclaim. God did not ask Jonah, "So what do you think? Should I send you to Nineveh and proclaim judgment? Do you think they will listen?" This was God's sovereign decision to show mercy.

Other questions would be why not Egypt? Why did God send ten plagues and decimate the nation instead of offering them mercy as he did to Nineveh? Why not mercy for Jericho? Why not mercy all of Canaan? Why not have them repent rather than exterminate them? Why did the people of Nineveh repent when most people do not? It was a harsh message that Jonah preached yet it penetrated their hearts. God's mercy is a sovereign decision. We might wish to know why some people listen and some don't. We might wish to peer behind God's sovereign curtain and

figure out why he did what he did. But even if he allowed us to do so, we would just turn it into another formula for “success.” Some would use this secret knowledge to manipulate people into the kingdom instead of waiting on God’s sovereign mercy.

There much that we don’t know but here’s what we do know. We are commanded to take the gospel to all nations and we are given the promise that some form very tribe, nation, people and language will repent and believe the gospel. Beyond that, I don’t have to know who will be saved or why they will be saved. I just need to do my part and allow God to do his.

#### **4. Unbelievers often behave better than believers.**

This is one of the saddest parts of this story. The pagan mariners were caught in this tempest just as Jonah was, but their overall behavior was far better than Jonah’s. Here’s a list of their efforts. They: prayed to many gods (5); earnestly believed that gods could help (6); hurled cargo overboard (5); involved everyone on the ship to help (6); cast lots (7); rowed harder (13); tried to spare Jonah (13-14); as a last resort, hurled Jonah overboard (15); feared the LORD exceedingly, offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows (16).

By contrast, here’s what Jonah did in the tempest: ran away (3); slept (5); resigned himself to death (12); never once prayed. I am not suggesting that praying to foreign gods was the right thing to do but at least the pagans did all they could do under the circumstances. One could say that they acted more righteously than Jonah did.

Unfortunately, it is not an uncommon occurrence for unbelievers to behave better than believers. To be clear—their good works do not earn them any true righteousness, but this should not be the case. In any environment where believers and unbelievers are gathered together, the genuine Christian ought to be a shining example of good works and right behavior.

#### **5. Fighting against God—yeah, right.**

That’s not a well worded principle, but you get the point, don’t you? It’s foolish to fight against God. In Acts five, the Jewish Council arrested the apostles and were going to execute them. Gamaliel, a well-respected Pharisee, stood up and said, *“So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”*

God is in absolute control during every second of the Jonah story. He began by hurling a great win upon the sea. It was a “mighty tempest.” I already detailed the efforts of the mariners to calm the storm but the more they did, the worse the storm grew. Twice in this short chapter we are told that the storm became “more and more tempestuous.” The tension in this story escalated with every sentence. The mariners were afraid. They scurried about doing everything they could possibly think of. In the end they had a genuine fear of the Lord. Who knows what spiritual fruits this may have borne down the road.

Here are the three main actions from God that showed his absolute control.

He spoke-2

He hurled a great wind-4

He appointed a great fish-17

He is, as Jonah confessed to the sailors, *the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land*. Only an omnipotent God can hurl a great wind. Only the Sovereign of the Universe can appoint a great fish at just the right time to swallow a man whole and keep him in the tomb for three days and three nights.

Jonah may have run from God but at least he did not try to fight against him. He knew that God had hunted him down like the Hound of Heaven, showing mercy despite Jonah's rebellion. Speaking of the Hound of Heaven, listen to the first stanza of Francis Thompson's classic poem. This is a picture of God chasing after his chosen people with love and determination. As I read it, picture Jonah attempting to flee from God.

I FLED Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter. 5  
Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
And shot, precipitated,  
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
But with unhurrying chase, 10  
And unperturbèd pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
They beat—and a Voice beat  
More instant than the Feet—  
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'

This is the Hound of heaven who relentlessly pursues you—not to destroy you, but to offer you mercy. You may hear his feet pounding behind you, you know that he is hunting you. There are two kinds of people he hunts and offers mercy to both. The first kind of person he hunts is like the Ninevites—unbelievers. You may not be as bad as the Ninevites, but judgment awaits you just the same. You may not be overturned in forty days. Maybe it will be in forty years but unless you repent, you will perish. God's sovereign mercy is extended to those who repent—who turn away from their sin and turn to Jesus Christ. Maybe he has sent you a tempest to turn you toward him. Or maybe your life is like sailing on calm seas. Nevertheless, he pursues with everlasting love and is calling you to turn to him.

The other category of people the Hound of Heaven chases after is the believer. If you are running from him, I can almost guarantee you that the tempest is raging in your life. Not every tempest is Fatherly discipline but much of it is. Christian, why do you fight against the Sovereign One who loves you? Why do you flee from the Voice—the only who can possibly save you? Why do you fight when you can be embraced? Why do you flee when perfect love awaits your return?

**Rich Maurer**

**October 18, 2015**