



*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.*

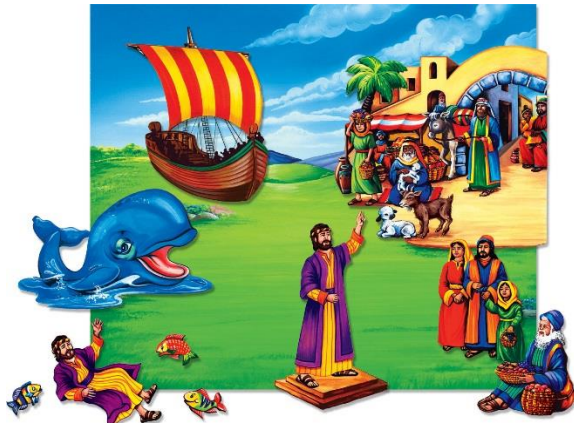
*4 But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone 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.*

Jonah. How do you tell the story without conjuring up thoughts of Sunday School lessons and a flannel graph pieces lying about? By the way, you might think that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that we



have moved beyond flannel graph? I have heard many people, even Children’s Pastors mock flannel graph, but Karen loves it. She uses it all the time in Children’s Church. It’s very interactive for young children. They can carry the little felt pieces and smooth them onto the flannel graph board. It’s a blast for them.

Nevertheless, if you grew up in the church, if your parents read to you out of a children’s Bible, then you have seen these cartoon scenes. Thinking about Jonah this way is the same thing as looking at Noah’s Ark as a fairy tale. Early on in our church’s history we determined that we would never portray Noah’s Ark as a child’s play toy because it can send the wrong message—that the worldwide judgment of God in the form of a flood was a myth or a fairy tale.

In the same way, the world and a great many who sit in the pews of churches believe that the Jonah story is a merely a “whale of a tale.” Swallowed by a fish? Lived inside the fish for three days? Impossible. It’s just an ancient myth handed down through the generations.

Let me ask you this. Can fictional stories communicate great truths? Absolutely. The world is filled with great fiction that has moved people to great action—even God-centered action. Not only that, but Jesus told parables, didn’t he? Parables are, by definition, fictional stories. There was no Good Samaritan who rescued a dying man and nursed him to recovery. So on one hand, the Bible does have tremendous, Holy Spirit inspired stories that are firmly in the category of fiction. But on the other hand, stories that are conveyed as actual events must be understood as such. And to do otherwise, is to do violence to the Word of God.

This is why creation, Noah’s ark, the tower of Babel, Jesus’ incarnation and his resurrection and the Jonah story are all considered to be fables by most of the world. But the Bible does not present any of these as tales of fiction but rather as true history. As powerful as the parable is, there was no actual sower who sowed his seed along the path, the rocky ground, the shallow soil and the good soil. But there was a literal Adam and Eve who began the human race and through whom sin entered the world. Noah did build an ark and the tops of all of the world’s mountains were covered by the ensuing rains and waters of the deep. God did become a man who gave himself up for us, rose from the grave and ascended to Heaven. And there really was a prophet named Jonah who ran from the Lord and was swallowed by a fish.

I know that most of you are convinced of this but it’s important to be reminded that it’s true and to understand why it is true. By way of introduction, let me give you five reasons why this is actual history and not a fairy tale.

First, it presents itself as actual history. The book begins by anchoring the story in Israelite history. “Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai.” In other words, Jonah

was a real person with an actual lineage. Jonah begins in the same way that all Biblical history begins. Each story is told within a historical context. The Bible never says, in 750 BC, the word of the Lord came to Jonah. We don't get specific dates, but we do get lots of historical details.

*He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. (2 Kings 14:25)*

Second, except for being swallowed by a fish, it reads like history. For example, compare Jonah to the apocryphal book of Tobit. Listen to this section.

Then the young man went down to wash himself. A fish leaped up from the river and would have swallowed the young man; and the angel said to him, "Catch the fish." So the young man seized the fish and threw it up on the land. Then the angel said to him, "Cut open the fish and take the heart and liver and gall and put them away safely." So the young man did as the angel told him; and they roasted and ate the fish.

Then the young man said to the angel, "Brother Azarias, of what use is the liver and heart and gall of the fish?" He replied, "As for the heart and liver, if a demon or evil spirit gives trouble to any one, you make a smoke from these before the man or woman, and that person will never be troubled again. And as for the gall, anoint with it a man who has white films in his eyes, and he will be cured." (Tobit 6.2-5).

That's just weird and random. It's not surprising that Tobit did not make it into the Protestant Bible. It's interesting that you have a young man who was almost swallowed by a fish but then a moment later he caught that same fish, threw it on the ground and cut it open. That makes it sound like some kind of Alice and Wonderland nonsense where size and proportions change on a whim.

By comparison, we do have a miracle in the book of Jonah but other than that, it reads like actual history. It names people, places and events just like every other historical section of the Bible. The book is considered to be a prophetic book. That's its genre. Prophecy is the type of literature that it is. However, all prophecy is firmly rooted in history, otherwise it is just fanciful fiction.

The third reason that this is a real story is that miracles should never cause us to stumble. The Bible is filled with miracles and there is no reason to try and figure out how they worked. Can you explain how God took on human flesh but still remained fully God? I can't. Can you explain how Jesus or Lazarus could rise from the dead after being in the grave for 3 or 4 days? Do you understand how manna could appear on the ground six out of seven days for 40 years? We have two choices—either accept all of the miracles or else reject all of the miracles. The one thing we cannot do is choose some and reject others.

The other problem we have with miracles is that we don't always see miracles as actual miracles. What I mean is that we try to come up with natural explanations. There is absolutely no need to figure out by using some bizarre scientific explanation that Jonah could actually survive in the belly of a fish for three days. I don't care how creative you get, it's just a waste of time. Jonah

could not survive in the belly of a fish for three days. It's impossible! That's why it's a miracle. It's not a cop out to call it a miracle, it's simply the truth.

The fourth reason that it is a true story is because there are actually “great fishes” that could easily swallow a man. There seems to be an age old question about Jonah—was it a fish or was it a whale? Most often, Biblical words have precise meanings. As much as the liberal theologians do this, we know that we can't make words mean anything we want them to mean. But in this case, the Biblical word for fish has lots of wiggle room. Here is a good summary.

What conclusion is to be drawn from these linguistic data? Both the Hebrew and Greek languages lacked the precision to identify with specificity the identity of the creature that swallowed Jonah. As Earl S. Kalland affirmed, “The identity or biological classification of this great water monster is unknown.” Both dahg [Hebrew] and ketos [Greek] “designate sea creatures of undefined species”<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, a “great fish” could have been a fish or a mammalian whale. In fact, even the Bible translators used different terminology.

NASB-for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER  
KJV- For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly



In 2011 while, deep sea photographers were diving off the waters of Mexico. In the process, one diver was nearly swallowed by a massive whale shark.<sup>2</sup> Don't you think he could have fit in that mouth? It almost looks like a largemouth bass about to strike, doesn't it?

In 2013, divers filming humpback whales during a frenzied feeding, came

dangerously close to some divers. They both whales surfaces simultaneously where the divers were. It was so close one diver said “I thought the other diver was inside the whale.”<sup>3</sup>

I am pointing out the size of these sea creatures so you know it was nothing like the Tobit example from before—some sort of size-shifting fish that is enormous one second and regular sized the next. The Old Testament in the book of Jonah and the New Testament from the words of Jesus both agree that it was a “great fish.” Whatever it was, it was huge.

Now notice something here. Just because I am showing you examples of whales that could easily swallow a grown man does not mean that I am in any way contradicting point number three. This was still a miracle. It may not have been a miracle that Jonah was swallowed by a “great fish” but it was a miracle that he survived for three days.



The final and to me, the most compelling reason that this is every bit a true story is because Jesus believed that it was.

*38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." 39 But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. 41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here (Matthew 12: 38-42).*

In three sentences, Jesus validated the entire book of Jonah. He spoke of Jonah being in the belly of a fish for three days. And he told of the genuine repentance of the Ninevites. We know that the scribes and Pharisees were notorious for trying to trick Jesus with their many questions. But here, no one said, "Ah excuse Jesus, do you *really* believe that Jonah was in the belly of a whale for three days? Isn't that just one of our Jewish fables? Why do you speak of it as if it actually happened?" No. Not even the unbelieving Jewish leaders dare asked such questions because they knew the story described the actual events of an actual prophet who preached within the walls of the actual city of Nineveh and whose people genuinely repented as a result. Everyone believed every detail of the Jonah story.

But the most powerful way that Jesus authenticated the Jonah story was to compare it to his own death and resurrection. *For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.* In his sovereign planning, the Lord ordained that Jonah would be swallowed by a great fish and be captive there for three days so that it could be used as a comparison to Jesus' death and resurrection. Jonah could have been in the fish's belly for one or two days, or four or five days. If God could have miraculously preserved him for any length of time. But it was exactly three days.

Therefore, if you reject the idea that Jonah was in the belly of a great fish for three days and three nights, then you must also reject the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In every possible way, this is one of the most authenticated miracles in all of the Bible. Which is yet more reason to be careful that we not turn it into a cartoonish mockery of this amazing story. I'm not saying that you should not illustrate it for children but don't make it look as if it should be on the Cartoon Network. That does damage to the truthfulness and power of the real story.



Among other things, what I love about the book of Jonah is the tremendous storytelling. And when I use the word "story" I obviously don't mean that this is a fable. We have already established that. The book bears Jonah's name but this is God's story. God wrote the story with

his own actors, his own sets, his own lighting and special effects and now he is “telling the story” by having it be written down for all eternity. And it’s a compelling, exciting story with tension that builds, plot twists, great lead characters and more. Twice I have used Jonah as a way to teach the inductive Bible study principles and practices that I have been teaching on Sunday evenings. Inductive study methods can be used on any book of the Bible but when you use them with a book like Jonah, the story literally begins to jump off the page. For those who are learning the inductive method, I encourage you to sit down for 15-20 minutes this week and start to list all of the observations you can find in the first chapter. I will be pointing them out as we go but it’s a lot more rewarding to find them yourself.

For the time we have left, I want to set up the Jonah story and then leave you with the theme of the book. Chapter one begins with the Lord’s direct command. *“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”* Nineveh was bad news. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. Today the city that sits in Nineveh’s place is Mosul. As you may know, Mosul was captured in the summer of 2014 by ISIS and continues to be a stronghold for them. Throughout history, Nineveh has been a city that conquers other cities and other nations. The Assyrians ruled Nineveh in Jonah’s day and shortly after Jonah would have died, the northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. After that, Babylon conquered Assyria and took over control of Nineveh. As you know, it was Babylon which destroyed Judah and took them captive for seventy years. Egypt was Israel’s number one enemy until Assyria became the world’s superpower. Nineveh was bad news.

The prophet Isaiah overlapped with Jonah’s prophetic ministry and wrote this about the nation of Assyria.

*When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes* (Isaiah 10:12). So Nineveh was prideful and arrogant.

The prophet Nahum 3 (about 75-100 years after the book of Jonah).

Woe to the bloody city,  
all full of lies and plunder—  
no end to the prey!

Nineveh was bad news. They were Israel’s sworn enemy who were breathing down their necks toward ultimate destruction. And when they did conquer Israel, they were carried away forever. Judah was brought back from captivity seventy years later but Israel just ceased to exist. Nineveh was bad news. And Jonah knew it.

Which brings me to what I think is the big idea—the theme of the book of Jonah. Of course, I already gave it to you on the powerpoint slide. I think the theme of Jonah can be summarized in three words—Swallowed by Mercy. You can see where I am going with this, can’t you? Jonah was swallowed by the great fish. But what he was truly swallowed by was mercy. His bitterness and anger had gotten the best of him yet God still gobbled him up in the mercifulness of that great fish. But the Ninevites were also swallowed by mercy, weren’t they? Even the pagans on the storm-tossed ship were swallowed by mercy. We’ll see this theme played out in the coming weeks.

This is the very essence of what it means to be a Christian. If you know Jesus as Lord and Savior then it means that you were swallowed by his mercy. But it doesn't end there. You may feel like life is swallowing you up at the moment. The circumstances might look like a terrible tempest brewing around you. You may be ready to give up and throw in the towel. But we forget that those tempests and trials are God's mercy in disguise. Think of it this way. Are God's blessings a form of mercy? Of course. Is the Father's discipline a form of mercy? For certain. Therefore, all of it is mercy, we just fail to see it as such.

We need what Paul prayed for in Ephesians.

*That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18 having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe...*

**Rich Maurer**  
**October 11, 2015**

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=6&article=69>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2017167/Open-wide-The-diver-nearly-got-swallowed-whaleshark.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0O43ugg8zU>