

Chapter One

Jonah 1:1-3

Jonah Runs

The Christian life can seem like a game of tug of war. We are righteous in Christ, yet we sometimes sin. We have the power of God's holy Spirit within us, but at times we give in to our weaknesses. When we place our faith in Jesus Christ God changed our hearts and moved our wills to a new purpose. The Bible calls this regeneration or the new birth. And it is a miracle where the old you is being replaced by the new you. God's goal is for us to become more and more like Jesus Christ. The trouble is we are not there yet.

Jonah was a man of God, a prophet who felt that tug of war and rebelled against the will of God. For many people, even for many Bible scholars the Old Testament book of Jonah is not history, but a morality play. It's a whale of a tale (sorry!) that teaches a lesson like Aesop's fables. But our Lord Jesus Christ understood the story of Jonah as history and declared that it pointed to his own work of redemption.

In Matthew 12 the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of Israel, refused to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. And so they demanded a miraculous sign to prove that Jesus was the Christ. Here is our Lord's response.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." ³⁹ But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For 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 in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here. (Matthew 12:38-41)

Jesus considered the book of Jonah to be historically accurate. Jonah's death, burial in the great fish and his resurrection was a type of Christ's death, burial and resurrection. In fact Jonah's ministry will be brought up at the great day of the last judgment.¹ The book of Jonah is the story of his encounter and struggle with God. And it is packed full of theological and practical implications for us. It deals with the issues of obedience, forgiveness, fear, prejudice and above all God's mercy and grace.

We run into Jonah for the first time in the Bible in 2 Kings 14. It was eight centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ. And Jeroboam II was king of the northern tribes of Israel. Jeroboam was an evil and idolatrous king. But he expanded the territory of Israel to about what it was during the time of Solomon. This was prophesied by Jonah. And so 2 Kings 14: 25 states,

He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hepher.

Gath-Hepher was a small town near what latter came to be Nazareth in Galilee. The prophets Hosea and Amos also served at this time. Jonah is the story of a prophet who loved God and loved his country and hated the enemies of both. But God called him to go to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, where an evil and cruel people lived. In fact God would later use Assyria to punish Israel. God called Jonah to preach judgment against the city. But Jonah does not want to go. So, let's begin our study of Jonah.

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,
² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me."
³ But Jonah arose 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

¹ We should also bear in mind that in John's gospel we are told several times that the words Christ spoke were not simply his own words, but the words that the Father, God gave to him (John 7:16; 8:28, 46, 47; 12:49; 19:10, 24; 17:8). Therefore to doubt what Christ said about Jonah is to doubt the veracity of God's Word.

from the presence of the LORD.
(Jonah 1:1-3)

The first thing we learn here is that the Word of Yahweh came to Jonah. We read, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah." What a wonderful thing it is to have the Word of God. When God speaks to His people we should listen. We should take it personally, when we are reading it on our own or when hearing it taught. God's Word is alive and powerful and it heals, enlightens and transforms us.

Psalms 107:20 says that God "sent His word and healed them, and delivered *them* from their destructions." In Psalm 119:105 we read "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." And in Jeremiah 15:16 the prophet said, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart."

But Hebrews 4:12 also tells us that God's Word is like a two-edged sword. At times the Word of God comes like gentle rolling waves of blessing, but sometimes it comes in a tsunami of judgment. The Word of God can bring comfort, but it can also speak of judgment and bring discomfort. Now, some people think you should never preach a sermon on judgment or condemnation. But sometimes it is the best thing to do, because it is what we need to hear. Before you can seek treatment for a disease you first need to know that you are sick

The New Testament book of Romans is full of blessings and its doctrinal portion ends by telling us that nothing in life or death or in all of creation can ever separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.² But you will never rejoice over this truth as you should until you know what you were saved from. And so Romans 3 declares that we are all guilty of sin, no one is righteous before God on their own. And Romans 6:23 tells us that the wages of sin is death—permanent death and extinction after the final judgment.

Now that God has our attention then verse 23 continues and gives us medicine saying that the gift of God is everlasting life to those who place their faith in Jesus Christ. So Jonah receives the Word of God, but there is no blessing here, no message of hope and peace, only an announcement of condemnation.

Now the word of the LORD came to
Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,
² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city,

² Romans 8:35-39

and cry out against it; for their wickedness
has come up before Me."
(Jonah 1:1, 2)

Jonah is to go to Nineveh and announce divine judgment. When God said that Nineveh was wicked it was an understatement. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria the most powerful empire in the world at that time. Its founder was Nimrod³ and it was located about 500 miles north east of Israel near present day Mosul in Iraq.

The Assyrians had a reputation for cruelty that is difficult to think about. When their armies captured a city or a country they would skin people alive, cut off their heads and other body parts. They would pierce their prisoner's chins with a chain and lead them like animals. They would pile up the skulls of their enemies into pyramids to show their power and might. Ancient records from Assyria boast of their great cruelty as a badge of courage and power. The prophet Nahum's description of Nineveh is chilling.

Woe to the bloody city!
It is all full of lies *and* robbery.
Its victim never departs.
²The noise of a whip
And the noise of rattling wheels,
Of galloping horses,
Of clattering chariots!
³Horsemen charge with bright
sword and glittering spear.
There is a multitude of slain,
A great number of bodies,
Countless corpses—
They stumble over the corpses—
(Nahum 3:1-3)

The Assyrians had no use for the Jews and the Jews hated the Assyrians. They were hated for their blood thirsty cruelty. They were hated for the idolatry. They were hated for their arrogance. As far as Jonah, a good Jew was concerned they could all go to hell. But we will discover later that God's call for Jonah to go to Nineveh will lead to repentance and mercy. In a time like our own where prejudices and hate overflow this book will teach us about pity and compassion.

³ Genesis 10:11

So, what qualifies as Nineveh today? Think of the of the terrorists of ISIS. What if God called you to preach to them? Nineveh are the people you don't like who can go to hell. They are the people who have offended you and hurt you. They are people not like you, who are beneath you. Nineveh is what takes you out of your comfort zone. Nineveh is danger. Nineveh are those people you hate (OK dislike), but who God loves.

What if God told you to share His Word with someone you know who has caused you grief and pain? We have been called to be a witness for Christ in both what we say and what we do. And there are people at work, at school, in our leisure activities, that we are not friends with for one reason or another, but God loves them.

Or there are people who have material or financial needs and we think "Well, they got in this mess by their own folly why should I help?" Or we say to ourselves "All the people I know are already Christian and go to other churches and seem satisfied how can I be a witness to them?" But what does the Word of God say to us? 1 Timothy 2:4 tells us that God desires for all people to be saved (even the people you don't think will ever be saved). And He desires for all people to come to a full knowledge of the truth (even people who think they know what the gospel is all about). There are people who will want to be saved and to know the full truth of God's Word, if we let them taste it.

On the flip side, if you think that you are Nineveh and that God would never reach out to you. You've done too many wrong things. You have rejected God for too long, whatever it may be, you are wrong! God loves you and is calling out to you. The Word of God says to you "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow."⁴ The Bible says that God made His Son, Jesus to be sin for you so that you could be made the righteousness of God in him.⁵ There are many people yet to be reached. But there is a little bit of Jonah in all of us.

Now the word of the LORD came to
Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,
² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city,
and cry out against it; for their wickedness
has come up before Me." ³ But Jonah
arose 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

⁴ Isaiah 1:18

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:21

into it, to go with them to Tarshish from
the presence of the LORD.
(Jonah 1:1-3)

The Word of God came to Jonah, "Arise, go" and we would expect that Jonah would obey, but Jonah ran away. Jonah fled, because what God wanted and what Jonah wanted were different. Jonah wanted Assyria destroyed, God wanted them saved. So Jonah walked out of his front door and thought "Hmmm – Go to Nineveh 500 miles to the east or to Tarshish 3000 miles to the west? I'll go to Tarshish." Tarshish was on the far western side of Spain.

That's what people do when they do not want to obey God or when they are upset or angry at God—they run away. Jonah lived late in Old Testament history. He lived long after the psalms were written. And so he knew in his heart that he really couldn't run away from the presence of God. In Psalm 139 we read,

O LORD, You have searched me and known *me*.
² You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You understand my thought afar off.
³ You comprehend my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.
⁴ For *there is* not a word on my tongue,
But behold, O LORD, You know it altogether.
⁵ You have hedged me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.
⁶ *Such* knowledge *is* too wonderful for me;
It is high, I cannot *attain* it.
⁷ Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
⁸ If I ascend into heaven, You *are* there;
If I make my bed in hell, behold, You *are there*.
⁹ If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
¹⁰ Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me.
(Psalm 139:1-10)

Did Jonah know the words of this Psalm? I am sure that he did! But the ship to Tarshish looked far more attractive to Jonah than going to Nineveh. There will always be a ship in the harbor ready to take you away from the will of God. When we decide to run from God, Satan is always ready to provide the transportation.

Think about this Jonah had years of faithful service as a prophet of God, but we have only one verse about it in 2 Kings. But Jonah has a few months of failure and we have a whole book about it. Why? Well, I am reminded of what the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians about why we have the Old Testament. He wrote, “all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”⁶

Jonah's story is profound—years of faithful service in the past is not enough. Believers don't retire on their past faithfulness. We are called to fight the good fight; we need to finish the race. So let's be alert to the call of God. And let's be encouraged that God calls us to share His love and grace with others.

Now, how far will God allow Jonah to run? The answer is far enough to teach him a lesson. And we will see that lesson learned soon.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 10:11