

**Text:** Jonah 1:1-10

**Title:** Introducing Jonah

**Truth:** It is a *very bad* idea to disobey God.

**Date/Location:** June 19, 2022 at FBC

## Introduction

The extent of many people's knowledge of the book of Jonah and its theology is expressed in this song attributed to Ron Hamilton:

Come and listen to my fearful tale  
Of the ocean blue,  
How a man got swallowed by a whale—  
Yes, I know it's true!

Jonah, Jonah, Did not obey God immediately—  
Jonah, Jonah, Down in the depths of the deep blue sea!

Then a great big fish that God had made  
Swallowed Jonah whole,  
But the Lord heard Jonah when he prayed,  
"Rescue my poor soul!"

If you try to run from God, BEWARE-  
You'll discover too,  
That the Lord above is everywhere,  
Watching all you do.

I will not criticize this ditty, because what it says is not incorrect. It expresses the historical event of Jonah's flight from God, his disobedience, his prayer, and God's omniscience. I believe, however, that it is incomplete *if used as a summary of the message of the prophet Jonah*. There is a whole lot more to this little book of four chapters than the children's Sunday school lesson.

## I. Initial Considerations

A. The book of Jonah was most probably written sometime between 793 and 753 B.C. during the reign of Jeroboam II, a wicked king of the northern kingdom (2 Kings 14:25) who was the 14<sup>th</sup> out of 20 kings of the northern kingdom. Hosea and Amos would be roughly Jonah's contemporaries. Jonah is sent to the north and east to the

people of Nineveh. It was odd for an Israelite prophet to be sent to another people.

B. Jonah came from the northern region of what you picture in your mind as the nation of Israel.

2 Kings 14:25 He [Jeroboam II] 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.

Jonah evidently had more prophetic ministry than just to Nineveh. His homeland was Gath Hepher, which was on the border of Zebulun (Joshua 19:13). This is not the same as Gath, which was in the Gaza region, home to Philistines. Gath Hepher was about 60 miles north of Jerusalem, directly to the west of the southern portion of the Sea of Galilee.

- C. Notice that Jesus was a prophet (and far more than a prophet) from Galilee—the town of Nazareth, which was not far from the ancient Gath Hepher. But the reputation was that nothing good came from there (like John 1:46). And the Pharisees opined to Nicodemus that no prophet ever came out of Galilee. But they were wrong, because one of the most well-known prophets did—Jonah!
- D. The human author of the book was likely Jonah, even though He wrote in the third person. The details included in the book about Jonah’s inner thoughts, prayers, and interactions with God are most easily explained if the book is autobiographical. If it was written by someone else, they had intimate knowledge of the circumstances so must have been close to the prophet. In any case, its place in the canon of Holy Scripture is not questioned by theologians with a high view of Scripture.
- E. What about the “fish story”? It is not the most important part of this prophecy, but it is the most recognizable and probably most ridiculed. God certainly is able sustain a man through and by using unusual circumstances in the kind of situation that is described in 1:17. Christians embrace the entirety of the Scriptures, so this

portion is not particularly problematic for us. This is doubly true because Jesus Himself put His stamp of approval on the account when He spoke of the “sign of the prophet Jonah” which He would accomplish at Jerusalem with his crucifixion and burial (Matthew 12:39-41, 16:4; Luke 11:29-32).

A man named Michael Packard, a lobster diver, was briefly swallowed by a humpback whale. The Cape Cod Times reported on the incident June 11, 2021 shortly after it happened. Packard was spit out of the mouth of the whale after 30-40 seconds, which has an esophagus unable to swallow a human-sized object. He sustained relatively minor injuries. The New England Historical Society reports of a man named Peleg Nye who, November 16, 1864, was grabbed by a sperm whale which his crewmates and he were hunting. He nearly died after the whale took him down under and he took water into his lungs. Quaker Edmund Gardner had a similar experience in 1816. He was left with a crushed hand, and other teeth wounds from the whale on his skull, collar bone, and arm. It did not take much effort to find those three cases in just the last 200 years. Over the 2,500 years before that back to Jonah, there are very likely other cases. But all similar situations are measured by this history about Jonah.

## **II. Jonah’s Commission, v. 1-2**

- A. The exact same phrase, “Now the word of the LORD came to...”, introduces some of God’s revelations to Samuel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel (1 Sam. 15:10, Jer. 28:12, Ezek 6:1, 12:1, 38:1). This is a longer version of the phrase “the word of the Lord came” which introduces 104 prophecies in the Old Testament: to Abram, Jehu, Elijah, Isaiah, Haggai, and Zechariah. The phrase is most often used in Ezekiel.
- B. God gave Jonah very specific instructions:
  - 1. Arise and go to Nineveh. This was the capital of the Assyrian empire. This city existed from very early times after the flood (Gen. 10:11). It was evidently a huge city at this time, with many thousands of residents (see 4:11). I do not take the two verbs as separate actions—more like a single action to “get up and go.”

Of course Jonah has to physically move to the place of his ministry.

I believe Matthew 28:19 has that flavor: “go and make disciples” is not necessarily laying down the expectation that every Christian first “moves” somewhere and then makes disciples. But Christians are to “do something to make disciples” whether that is traveling somewhere around the world or across the apartment building hallway or the street the driveway. I am not suggesting that Jonah had an Old Testament version of the Great Commission, for he was told to pronounce judgment against the city for their evil, not to make disciples!

2. God’s second instruction to Jonah was that he cry out against the city, meaning its inhabitants. God is telling Jonah to proclaim to the city—in fact, against the city—because of what He will explain next.

C. God gave a reason: The wickedness of the city had risen to Heaven and it had caught God’s special attention. The world is full of evil, but that is not especially noteworthy since it is everywhere. When there are particularly bad things going on, the stench is notable to God. He saw the pains of His people in Egypt (Exodus 3:7). He saw that the intents of the hearts of man was only evil continually (Gen. 6:5).

Just how evil was Nineveh? After Jonah’s writing, in 722 B.C., they would take the northern ten tribes captive and decimate that part of Israel. In 701 B.C. they invaded the southern kingdom and troubled King Hezekiah, but God removed the threat (Isaiah 36-37). Prior to this, they are called by one author the “Appalling Lords of Torture.”<sup>1</sup> They impaled, skinned, amputated, crucified, beheaded, and burned alive their enemies. All this and more was part of their campaign of terror to subdue their enemies.

D. Sometimes God’s people are called to go to evil places to bring His message—of judgment in the case of Jonah and Nineveh (Jonah 3:4), or of salvation and judgment in our case (Romans 11:22).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/assrians-torture-60fabb7a9642>

### III. Jonah's Disobedience, v. 3

- A. God told Jonah to *arise* and go to Nineveh. Instead, Jonah *arose* to flee to Tarshish by way of Joppa. His direction was almost 180 degrees of the compass opposite of where God told him to go. Tarshish may have been in Spain on the other side of the Mediterranean, but wherever it was located, it was not next door to Nineveh!
- B. Jonah thought he would flee from God's presence. Good luck! And since there is no such thing as luck, and God is omnipresent (Psalm 139:9-10), there was no hope for Jonah's doomed attempt to get away from God.
- C. To implement his plan, he went *down* to Joppa, paid the fare for the boat, and went *down* to the boat. In verse 5 the text tells us Jonah had gone *down* into the hold of the ship. His physical direction—*down*—matched his spiritual declension. Later in 2:6 Jonah traveled *down* to the foundations of the mountains.

The best thing to do if you come to your senses as you are going *down* is to come right back *up* again, immediately.

- D. Why did Jonah flee from God? He must have felt that the assignment was unpleasant. But why? We have seen that these people are evil. But they are also Gentiles. They are pagan idolaters. If nothing good could come out of Nazareth, then it is ten times worse out of Nineveh at this time in world history. There may well have been some ethnocentrism or racism in the part of Jonah. He wanted them to be judged by God because *they deserved it*. We will see how Jonah was angry when they repented and God delayed His judgment.

By the way, you and I also deserve God's judgment. Thanks be to God for His mercy. I wonder if there are some people for whom we are like Jonah and they like the Ninevites—people whom we really would not care to see saved, people we would love to see judged. People whom we would refuse to witness to? If so, are we really like Jesus?

## IV. God's Punishment for Jonah, v. 4-10

Be sure to know that if you are disobedient toward God, God will have something to say about it at some point. He did to Jonah. You cannot simply disregard God's instruction and get away with it. The chastisement and discipline may not come right away; it may come mixed with conviction and mercy and very gently lead you to the right path. Or, it may come strongly to get your attention. The latter is Jonah's case.

- A. The text is clear that God sent difficult weather to trouble the ocean-goers and their passenger Jonah. In modern terms, we prefer to leave God out of the equation, instead explaining that the weather "happened" to be. The Hebrew mindset was certainly not ignorant of the fact that there were intermediate causes in weather patterns, but they saw it as being ordained and arranged by God Himself. And that is ultimately the case.
- B. The storm was so severe that the sailors were fearful that the ship would break up, sink to the bottom, and they would drown. So, they made use of both natural and supernatural means. They threw heavy items overboard to increase their buoyancy. And they called out to their "gods," as if they existed, to help them.
- C. Meanwhile, Jonah was clueless to the situation on deck. How he could be sleeping deeply in such a situation is beyond me. I would be so motion sick I could not function. Perhaps he was physically tired by his flight from the "hounds of heaven," traveling to Joppa, finding a ship, and mentally exhausted from disobeying God.
- D. The desperate situation on the sea led the captain to find their stow-away and appeal to him to call on his "god" as well. It may be, he reasoned, that "your god" will look on our situation and help us. As far as the captain was concerned, Jonah's god was no different than all the other gods of his crew, thus I have spelled the word "god" with a lowercase *g* in these recent paragraphs.
- E. When they got a few moments, they decided to use a game of chance to determine who the at-fault person was. They drew straws, so to speak, and Jonah got the shortest one. What they did

was to cast lots—roll the dice, draw cards, whatever. We do not know exactly what this looked like, but that does not matter.

This is no way to determine God’s will today, or to get revelation from God. But God was pleased to use it in this situation to point the finger at the wayward prophet.

- F. Once Jonah was selected by lot, the sailors wanted to know everything about him. Why was the storm upon them? What was Jonah’s job? Where was he from? What country? What people group?
- G. Jonah answered in verse 9 that he is a Hebrew—a Jew. He worships God, the one Who resides in heaven and made the sea and dry land. He told them, according to verse 10, that he was fleeing from God.
- H. Well, that was it for the sailors. The God who made the sea was angry with Jonah. If God made it, He controls it, and this is not a good situation.

## Conclusion

The fearful mariners ask Jonah *why* in the world he did this. Out of the mouth of pagans! Look at this situation. The unbelievers recognize that if you believe in God, and claim that He created everything, and say that He is the Lord of all the earth, then you should be obeying Him. It is only logical. How could you not? And it is the same way today. When the unbeliever has a clearer vision of what religion is supposed to do for your conduct than does the follower of Christ, there is a problem.

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