



Sunday, June 30, 2024

Jonah 1

As we step into the first message in our summer series through the book of Jonah, I'm reminded that for many of us this is a story that we learned when we were younger that painted a vivid picture of a man being thrown off a boat, swallowed by a whale in which he somehow survived three days and three nights in its belly before being vomited out on dry land. For some, the story of Jonah and the whale actually gets confused with the tale of Pinocchio, in which the main character also gets swallowed by a whale and is stuck in its belly, but he escapes by lighting a fire that causes the whale to sneeze. While both stories share this main similarity, it's important to understand that they are worlds apart and that the fictional story of Pinocchio is not a modern-day retelling of the story of Jonah. And so, the character of Pinocchio cannot be confused with the character of Jonah, as they originate from entirely different narratives with distinct purposes.

And although the prophet-swallowing whale is a (literally) big focus in the book, the story of Jonah, is much bigger than a man being stuck in the belly of a whale for 3 days, surviving and making it to dry land. There are multiple layers to this story that as we walk through - even today - will help bring clarity to the overall themes of obedience, repentance, and God's incredible grace and mercy. Jonah's journey teaches us about the importance of aligning our will with God's will and how this is so fundamental to our spiritual growth and maturity.

And although it's so common for us to focus on Jonah and his role in this book, it needs to be understood that what this book does more than any other book in the entirety of the Bible, is to show us God's heart for the cities. It is far more than just a tale of a prophet and a big fish; it's a powerful reminder of God's relentless love for all people and His desire for their redemption.

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 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 from the presence of the Lord.

4 But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up.

5 Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep.

6 So the captain came to him, and said to him, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish."

7 And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this trouble has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. 8 Then they said to him, "Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

9 So 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, "Why have you done this?" For the men knew that he fled 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 be calm for us?"—for the sea was growing more tempestuous.

12 And he said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me."

13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. 14 Therefore they cried out to the Lord and said, "We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O Lord, have done as it pleased You." 15 So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows.

17 Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

The gist of the story is pretty simple. There was a prophet from Israel named Jonah who was commanded by God to go to the city of Nineveh and call them to repentance because of their wickedness. Instead of obeying God's command, Jonah decided to flee in the opposite direction and board a ship bound for a place called Tarshish. However, God sent a great storm upon the sea, endangering the ship and its crew. When the sailors realized that Jonah was the cause of the storm, they reluctantly threw him overboard, and the storm ceased. Jonah was then swallowed by a great fish, where we learn that he spent three days and three nights. In Chapter 2 we will learn what Jonah did during the time he spent in the belly of the beast, but what I'd like to do today is highlight a number of things that stand out to me in chapter 1 as significant to this story being a true literal story and not a mythical tale or figurative story. Part of the reason that some have suggested that this story did not in fact happen is that it can be hard for us to wrap our minds around the physical impossibility of a human being in the belly of a fish - no matter how large it might be - and still live after 3 days and 3 nights. In the history of humanity, there has never been an example of a human being swallowed by an animal and surviving after 3 days.

And so, the first thing that helps to show us that this miraculous feat did actually happen is the words of Jesus, Himself. In Matthew 12, the Pharisees are coming against Him and trying to trip Him up. Jesus responds by using the story of Jonah as an example. In it He references the time that Jonah spent in the belly of the fish as a reference to the time that He will spend dead and then come back to life again after His crucifixion:

Mathew 12:40 says:

'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.'

The Pharisees all knew about the historical story of Jonah and that it was indeed a supernatural feat. Jesus was now using it to show them that He too would undergo a supernatural feat where all would think that He was dead, but then He would stun the world with His resurrection - just like Jonah must have stunned the world when He crawled up on dry land. Jesus simply would not have made this inference if the story of Jonah did not exist as a literal event.

The second thing I want us to see is that this isn't the first time that we are introduced to Jonah. Granted, the Bible doesn't say a whole lot about Jonah outside of these four chapters dedicated entirely to his story, but we do get an important glimpse from the book of 2 Kings where we first learn about Jonah as a prophet. In it we learn that Jonah prophesied that King Jeroboam would restore the boundaries of Israel. And later on in the same book, we see this prophecy come to pass.

In 2 Kings 14:25 we read that, *'He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.'*

This is so important, because this gives credibility to Jonah's role as a prophet. But what's interesting to me is that back in the book of Kings, the prophecy that Jonah was commissioned to give to king Jeroboam was a good message. It was not a message of destruction, condemnation, or even repentance. It was a message of hope - great hope. That the Lord was bringing His protection and promise back to Israel. Up until that point, Israel had suffered some major defeats and was struggling economically. So for the king to receive a message like this at that time would be beyond exhilarating. And for Jonah, he was the one who got to deliver this incredible message to the king. Everyone likes to be the bearer of good news right? Earlier on in the summer, when it was really hot, my boys set up a lemonade stand at the end of our driveway. And when I came home from work they were literally fighting over who got to tell me how much they made! When my daughter does well on an exam, she can't wait to tell me because in both scenarios, they can't wait to see my expression and share in their excitement. It's a very different story if the mark on the exam isn't where it needs to be.

Contrast this most recent message with the message that Jonah is now being called to give to one of the most hated and wicked cities in all of the region, and you can begin to understand Jonah's resistance here.

In verse 2, we specifically read that this is a tough assignment - that God wants Jonah to preach to the people of Nineveh and call them out of their wickedness. In fact, if we fast-forward to chapter 3 we clearly see that they were so wicked that they were about to face judgment for their wickedness:

Jonah 3:4

'Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.'

And I can imagine the initial response of Jonah here being one of shock and awe. You want me to do what?!? Do you know who these people are?!? Do you know what they've done?!? And instead of being obedient to the assignment that God had for him, Jonah ran the opposite direction, hopped on a boat and went to Tarshish - about as far away from Nineveh as someone could get.

Which raises an honest question: we know that Jonah is a prophet, and we know that history and scripture both teach us that the role of a prophet is to provide messages of all kinds. Some messages

would be good and other messages would be hard. But Jonah already knew this and had been prepared for this, so why would he run from this and not step into it?

I think the initial response of many suggest that Jonah was afraid. And this makes great sense. Because this was such a wicked, wicked city, and the message condemning their wickedness was going to be such a hard one to deliver, then there would potentially be great fear of ones safety. You see, back in the day, Nineveh was so wicked, that many have compared it to the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. No doubt that they would stop at nothing to harm or even kill a prophet of the Lord claiming that judgment was coming in 40 days. And so for many people after reading this they naturally assume that Jonah was running from the call of God for fear of his own personal comfort being compromised as well as his safety.

But I actually think that there's something else going on here that's entirely different and it all stems from the message of judgment that Jonah was called to pronounce. Notice the specific term in Jonah 3:4: 'Yet forty days and Ninevah will be overthrown.' Notice it doesn't say, yet forty days and I will destroy Nineveh? This is crucial to the overall understanding of the message here because it shows an interesting element of the judgment of God here. If you remember from our Revelation series, we refer to this as the permissive wrath of God. God doesn't need to strike Nineveh down with lightning or an earthquake due to their wickedness because they are already bringing it upon themselves. In the permissive wrath of God, humanity declares that they want to be their own god and therefore reject Almighty God. God does not force anyone to love Him, so He permits humanity to make that choice. However, in doing so, they ultimately put themselves on the trajectory towards destruction because when you reject Almighty God and think that you can do a better job than Him, then there is no moral foundation to keep you aligned and operating healthily. And so, it's saying that given the current trajectory of your path and choices, you've literally only got 40 days left before you collapse and implode on yourselves or are overthrown by an invading city.

You see, historically, at this point in time, Nineveh had suffered a number of military defeats that had created massive holes in their governmental structure and economy. It had also suffered a number of diplomatic set-backs on the international stage. They were losing ground and on the verge of famine and domestic up-risings were starting to become the norm. The government was shaky, weakened by internal conflict. Add to that, they had recently witnessed a solar eclipse which they interpreted as an omen of pending doom. They were in a rough state to begin with.

So the message is not, 'in forty days I will destroy you', but: Nineveh, you're heading towards a cliff and if you don't change course right now, you're going to fall off it and fall to your doom. And so,

the fact that God would even bother to speak this to them means that He knows that there is a possibility that they might be ready to listen. And if they listen, then there is a possibility that people just might turn from their wickedness and repent. And if the people repent, they will find grace. So the message that Jonah would be pronouncing upon Nineveh is actually a message of hope - great hope that they can avoid the road to destruction that they are on.

God wanted the city of Nineveh to avoid falling off that cliff. He wanted the people of Nineveh to be redeemed. He wanted to save them. And He was going to use Jonah to deliver this great message of hope. So in light of this, I don't think that Jonah was afraid of harm or even losing his life or even the discomfort of delivering a difficult message.

So why in the world then would Jonah run from this and not run to it?

Because he didn't want Nineveh to be saved. He hated them. He wanted them to walk off that cliff. He wanted them to suffer the full judgment of God.

Chapter 4:3 actually confirms this and it's a startling realization that Jonah's will was far from God's will. So far in fact, that he had lost the ability to obey even when it got uncomfortable. So much so, that he tried desperately to get away from the presence of God by buying a ticket on a boat to Tarshish. We're talking a distance of approximately 4500 kms away from where God was calling him - approximately a full month of travel from where he was in Israel at that time. This wasn't a knee-jerk reaction from Jonah. This was a very calculated move based on his desire for the city of Nineveh to face judgment rather than mercy.

But as we see, no matter how hard he tried to get away from the presence of God, he simply could not. The Bible teaches us in the book of Psalms that

Psalms 139:7-10

'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 Sheol, 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.'

You see, as a prophet of God, it is highly likely that Jonah would have known the Psalms and this section would have likely been brought back to memory as he was lying down on the boat, sleeping deeply while the storm was raging.

The men on the ship started crying out to their gods and then woke Jonah up telling him to do the same but to no avail as the storm grew worse. They turned to casting lots assuming that it must mean that someone was at fault and naturally it fell to Jonah. Jonah told them the story of everything that had happened and how he was running from the Lord and convinced them that they should throw him into the sea in order to appease the storm. The crew reluctantly agreed and as they threw Jonah overboard the storm immediately subsided. We don't know if the crew saw Jonah being swallowed up by the fish, but we do know that as soon as his body hit the water, the storm ceased. I want you to see something incredible here that helps to bring connection to the passage in the Psalms that we just read.

Look at vs. 16

'Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows.'

Although the specific language used here is a little bit different, make no mistake, this verse is all about repentance and redemption. Follow the progression: when the storm started, they all started praying to their gods to no avail. Jonah confessed that he had sinned and action must be taken and the storm subsided, resulting in this crew now giving their allegiance to a new god, the One, True God, Jehovah.

If this isn't a message about the grace of God, I don't know what is! In the midst of his rebellion, God was still using Jonah to build His Kingdom. As the Psalmist said: Even though he was (literally) making his bed in the uttermost parts of the sea, somehow, Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me.

Watch this:

Even in the midst of his disobedience God still used Jonah for His glory. That's insane! And it's not the only time in scripture that we see this either. In the story of Joseph, despite his brothers' malicious intent in selling him into slavery, God used their actions to position Joseph to save many lives during a nation-wide famine. Similarly, in the New Testament, Peter denies Jesus three times, yet Jesus later restores him and uses him mightily to build the early Church.

This is a beautiful picture of the grace of God. And if it does anything for you and me here today, it is a reminder that we are always standing in tension between obedience and disobedience - between my will and God's will - and some seasons we swing to obedience and some seasons we swing to disobedience, but what this is teaching us is that in the midst of our struggle, somehow God still uses us for his glory.

The bottom line however is that Jonah was disobedient and as a result the crew got saved. How do we reconcile the fact that it seems that Jonah's disobedience was a good thing and perhaps therefore necessary because the crew got saved as a result of it?

Very simply, God's sovereignty allows Him to use anything to achieve His purposes - even human disobedience. While Jonah's disobedience led to the sailors' salvation, it does not mean disobedience is good or necessary; rather, it highlights God's grace and ability to bring good out of any situation.

It is incorrect to think that if we are disobedient, the kingdom of God will not be established because God has already proven that He does not need us to build His kingdom, but rather chooses to use us. Instead, obedience needs to be viewed as an act of the will that draws us closer and closer into relationship with God, establishing deep elements of love, hope, and trust.

A great way to picture this is the relationship between parents and kids. When I ask my kids to do various tasks around the house, my primary desire is not just for the task to be completed, but for the children to learn trust, respect, and love through their obedience. As a parent I place an incredibly high value on my relationship with my kids and want them to understand and share in those same values. Similarly, God desires our hearts before our hands; He wants us to obey out of love and trust, deepening our relationship with Him. When our actions stem from a genuine connection with God, they actually become expressions of our love and devotion, not mere obligations.

And so, over the next few weeks we will see Jonah start to realize this as his heart begins to soften after spending 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of the fish. Before we close this morning though, there are three points that I'd like you to consider:

3 Points to consider as we close:

Some of you can relate to Nineveh in the sense that you too are heading towards a cliff and if you don't respond to the Grace and Mercy of God and repent, it will mean destruction for you. Just as Nineveh faced impending doom but eventually found redemption through repentance, you too have the opportunity to turn away from your current path and embrace God's forgiveness and

love. Don't wait until it's too late. God's grace is available to you now—choose to accept it and let it transform your life.

For others, you might find yourself identifying more with Jonah, struggling with obedience and perhaps resisting God's call. Remember that God desires your heart before your hands. Your obedience is not just about tasks and actions but about cultivating a deeper relationship with Him. Respond to His call, not out of obligation, but out of love and trust, allowing your actions to naturally flow from your genuine connection with Him. Start there. Take this opportunity to recommit yourself to God's will, knowing that He can use you in powerful ways when you align your heart with His.

And lastly, for some of us here today, it is a reminder of the reality that there may be people in our lives that we would rather see judged than saved. Just as Jonah struggled with the idea of God's mercy towards Nineveh, we too can harbour feelings of resentment or unforgiveness. But God calls us to reflect His heart of compassion and grace and as such, challenges us to pray for those individuals, seeking their salvation instead of their judgment. Let us ask God to transform our hearts, removing any bitterness, and to give us the same love and mercy He has shown us, so that we may be true witnesses of His grace.

Josh Hageman

Lead Pastor

Kingsview Community Church

Stoney Creek, ON

www.kingsviewchurch.com

<https://www.facebook.com/KingsviewCommunityChurch/>