

## Commentary on the Book of Jonah

### Jonah 1

**1The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying,  
2"Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me."**

**3But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.**

Jonah, a prophet of God, is told directly by God to go and preach to Nineveh (perhaps the largest city on earth at this time) to repent of its wickedness. They are to be warned of their impending doom because God has had enough of their evil deeds. Jonah's job is simple: get up, go to Nineveh, and preach. But he disobeyed and headed as far away from Nineveh as he could get. There was no way he was going to go to Nineveh. He chose rather to go to Tarshish, and he paid a fare to get on a ship headed that way. His purpose was to flee the presence of the Lord, which obviously is impossible. Jonah's heart was so hard that he wanted to not only get away from doing what God had told him to do, but he wanted to get away from God Himself. Yet God would not give up on Jonah. God would make it clear that He cannot be escaped.

**4The LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.**

The book carries a strong theme of the Lord orchestrating events purposefully for the purpose of compassionately pursuing Jonah, trying to show him enough kindness that he might repent. God's kindness and mercy was in the storm and wind which He brought about on the sea. He never left Jonah, nor did He ever forsake him (cf. Hebrews 13:5). God used difficulty to reach out to Jonah. Many storms of life may be understood as God trying to teach us something about the condition of our hearts. These are refining means of God that demonstrate His kindness to us, though they are not fun in the process.

**5Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep.**

The sailors were greatly afraid, feeling as if they were going to perish. They cried out to their gods hoping for a rescue. Yet nothing happened. They tossed their precious cargo overboard in hopes of saving their ship and their lives. Jonah, throughout all of this, was in the bottom of the ship asleep. He was so content and happy to not be doing God's will that even God's thunderous approach couldn't awaken him from his spiritual and physical slumber. But God wasn't done yet. Even this stubborn and selfish heart of Jonah was worth God's time of humbling and breaking.

**6So the captain approached him and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish."**

The captain of the ship found Jonah and awakened him. He asked him how he could possibly sleep through his own death, as it was. Yet Jonah would gladly have died only to not have to do God's will. These unsaved men ask Jonah to call upon His God Whom they do not know and do not fear. Yet they have enough faith to believe that perhaps Jonah's God can save them since their gods have proven worthless. They are humble and seeking help from God Whom they do not know, while Jonah is mocking the God He does know.

**7Each man said to his mate, "Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us " So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.**

Apparently Jonah refuses to answer them, so they go about trying to divine who is responsible for this calamity coming upon them by casting lots. The lot, by God's providential hand, falls to Jonah. Now they know that he is their problem, and they go to him again.

**8Then they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"**

**9He said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land."**

**10Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.**

They go to him and question him about why he might be guilty. They want to know what he does and where he is from. He tells them that he is a Hebrew who fears the one true God Who made the very sea that is about to devour them. He told them that he was running from the presence of God, and this brought great fear into the hearts of these men, though it should have done more so in Jonah's heart. They wondered, if he knew a God Who actually revealed Himself to him, why he would despise such a God. They had heard enough to believe and fear.

**11So they said to him, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?"--for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.**

**12He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you."**

Things grew more stormy and the sea became more fierce because no action had yet been taken. They asked Jonah what they could do to calm the storm. He, wanting to die and

realizing that God's discipline would follow him and leave these men alone, said to throw him into the sea.

**13**However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.

**14**Then they called on the LORD and said, "We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O LORD, have done as You have pleased."

The men, however, did not want to throw him into the sea for fear of being guilty of murder. Thus, they tried to row back to land, making one last effort to preserve themselves apart from divine intervention. But they could not get back to land, for the sea was growing still worse. They called out to the true God of Israel and asked to not be held accountable for casting him into the sea, believing surely that he would die as a result. They rightly understood that God had done what He had pleased to put them in this predicament on account of Jonah.

**15**So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.

**16**Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

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

So they threw Jonah into the sea, and immediately the sea stopped its raging. Obviously, the sailors understood this to be a divine work, and they feared Jonah's God. Even in Jonah's disobedience, God worked good out of the situation for His glory, causing unbelieving, pagan men to call upon the name of the Lord and to fear His name. They even offered a sacrifice to God and make commitments to Him. Some serious faith and repentance was at work here. Yet Jonah did not perish because the Lord had compassion, appointing a fish to swallow him. God, in full control of all things, preserved Jonah's life in the stomach of a fish where he was for three days and three nights. He did not immediately repent despite the repulsive smells and the acid likely eating at his skin. This was one stubborn man, and God knew it would take some ultra-humiliation such as being underwater in the belly of a large fish. But God wasn't done with Jonah.

## **Jonah 2**

**1**Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish,

**2**and he said,

**"I called out of my distress to the LORD,**

**And He answered me**

**I cried for help from the depth of Sheol;**

**You heard my voice.**

**3**"For You had cast me into the deep,

**Into the heart of the seas,**

**And the current engulfed me  
All Your breakers and billows passed over me.**

Finally, after three days and three nights, Jonah called out to God. He recognized his distress, and he had had enough of running from God. He acknowledged that it was God Who had tracked him down and put him in this stomach. He knew that he could not flee from God's presence. Surely, he thought his death was imminent, but God heard his cry from the depths. There is no depth from which God cannot reach to us, forgive us, and use us (cf. Psalm 40:2).

**4" So I said, 'I have been expelled from Your sight  
Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple.'  
5" Water encompassed me to the point of death  
The great deep engulfed me,  
Weeds were wrapped around my head.  
6" I descended to the roots of the mountains  
The earth with its bars was around me forever,  
But You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God.**

Jonah recognized that he had angered God, but he turned to look back toward God. He acknowledged God's holiness and his sin. He needed to be restored by the mercy of God. He wanted to pursue God's holy ways and commands once again. He had almost drowned, being wrapped in weeds and thrust to the depths of the sea. But he praised God for delivering him from this pit.

**7" While I was fainting away,  
I remembered the LORD,  
And my prayer came to You,  
Into Your holy temple.  
8" Those who regard vain idols  
Forsake their faithfulness,  
9 But I will sacrifice to You  
With the voice of thanksgiving  
That which I have vowed I will pay  
Salvation is from the LORD."**

While he was about to perish inside the fish (perhaps due to a lack of oxygen or starvation), he remembered the Lord. Finally, on his "deathbed," he repented. He remembered God, and God heard his prayer. There is no depth to which we can sink that God will not hear our prayer and forgive us if we call to Him in faith and humility. His idol was himself and his selfish pleasures in that he had the pride to think he could run from God and force God to not accomplish His sovereign purposes. Nothing, not even God's prophet Jonah, could stop God from accomplishing His will. This pride and self-centeredness caused Jonah to forsake his faithfulness to God. He had been walking after the Lord, and God wanted to use him to serve Him. But in God's call to him, God had to deal with some heart issues. Jonah then thanked God, acknowledged His salvation (both

of his soul and his present predicament), and yielded his will to fulfilling the commitment which he had made to God (probably telling God he would do whatever he was asked or returning to preaching the words God gave him to say).

**10Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.**

Upon his repentance, God commanded the fish, and it vomited up Jonah on the dry land. God is in control of all things, and He is able to do anything He purposes. Now Jonah was off to Nineveh, probably looking awful and smelling horrific. But he went.

### **Jonah 3**

**1Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,  
2"Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you."**

No new revelation had come to this prophet of God while he had been in rebellion. But immediately upon his repentance and God's restoration of his life, he heard God's voice to him. It is no wonder that we fail to understand God's leading and have wisdom according to His Word when we are in sin. The first thing we must do before God will give us new marching orders is to repent and get back to doing what He has already told us to be doing.

We should note also that God told Jonah to go right to Nineveh. He didn't need therapy or a recovery program. He had repented, and God had changed His heart. He needed to get back to his calling and obey.

God didn't tell Jonah right away what he was to say, but He told him that He would tell him once he got to Nineveh. This is typical of God's leading as He gives us what we need, no less, and no more, just like the manna of Moses' day. We should praise God for His mercy that even when we fail the first time, God may be merciful to give us another chance as He did Jonah.

**3So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk.**

**4Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."**

**5Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.**

Jonah obeyed God and went to Nineveh, walking the three days journey. This was no light task, and it was evidence of true repentance that he would obey God whether he liked it or not. God would soon have to teach him to like it. But for now, he walked through the city and cried out that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days, obviously the message God had revealed to him. The people repented and believed. They feared God and believed that God would do what he said. Jonah simply declared the Word of

God, and the Word of God acted powerfully. The people of Nineveh called a fast, and the entire city repented and put on sackcloth in mourning over their sin, humbly pleading that God would relent. From the greatest to the least of them, poor and rich, young and old, they repented.

**6**When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes.

**7**He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.

**8**"But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.

**9**"Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish."

When the king heard the proclamation from Jonah, he left his throne, took off his royal robe, and donned sackcloth and ashes. He repented and issued a proclamation to the city that there would be no eating or drinking for both man and animals. They were to plead with God in desperation that He would relent of the calamity which He said would come upon them. They were to ask God for grace to change their hearts as they repented and turned from their evil, violent ways. The king's hope was that perhaps God would relent and not bring this calamity upon his people. In this proclamation, the city was effectively saying that they would die praying and calling upon God before they would even eat or drink again. This was a broken people who greatly feared God. Just as with the sailors, God created those who feared Him really without Jonah doing much of anything, except acknowledging the name of God. Here all Jonah had to do was say the message which God had given Him. God's Word did all the work because God had prepared the hearts and minds of these people to respond to the message. God received the glory and Jonah got to be part of what God was doing. This wasn't a self-generated ministry feat to chalk up on his prophetic resume, but it was a miraculous work of God that he could only be grateful to have been a part of.

**10**When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.

Sure enough, consistent with the merciful nature of God, God relented, having seen their repentance. He relented and did not bring the calamity which He had said He would.

#### **Jonah 4**

**1**But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.

So we see that God is compassionate, not wanting any to perish but all to come to know Him (cf. 2 Peter 3:9), even Gentiles who were not His chosen Hebrew nation. God had

always loved all people and desired all to repent and follow Him. God was and is a compassionate God, but Jonah, though he did God's command, was not compassionate. He was greatly displeased that God had relented, and he was very angry. God had been compassionate to him to save him and forgive him even though he had hardened his heart toward God, but he would not open his heart to let God show mercy on those whom he wanted to see destroyed. Jonah needed to learn compassion.

**2He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.**

**3"Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life."**

Here we are let into something that wasn't clear at the beginning of the story. Why did Jonah run from God? It wasn't that he didn't want to do the work of ministry or that he was busy or lazy. It wasn't that he was afraid that he might get killed by preaching to a violent people about their violent ways. He ran from God, as he admits here, because he believed that these people might repent and that God would, in turn, relent of the promised calamity. He didn't like these people, and he wanted them destroyed. He wanted to see the city go up in flames. He wanted to hear the screams and wails and gloat in the wrath of God. But this was wrong, and Jonah needed to understand that even God doesn't gloat in His outpouring of wrath, even though His holiness and perfect love demands that He judge rightly. God wanted these Gentiles to know Him. His love was universal, if only it would be received. Jonah was afraid that it might be received, and thus he fled. Now that God's mercy had indeed been demonstrated, Jonah wanted to die. He was so bitter and merciless that he would rather be dead than watch a pagan nation be forgiven. He wanted them to have their just due- now. He didn't love these people, and his hate was evident.

**4The LORD said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?"**

God's response is merciful and kind, simply asking Jonah if he had good reason to be angry. When we are bitter or depressed, we need to ask ourselves if we have good reason to be as we are. God had been compassionate to Jonah and to Nineveh, and Jonah was angry unto death. There was no good reason for this. Jonah regarded sin in his heart. Interestingly, it appears that Jonah didn't answer God's question. He was angry and defiantly and silently went and sat in protest.

**5Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.**

Jonah decided to sit outside of the city in hopes that fire would rain down from heaven and the city would be destroyed. He wanted to see the destruction so badly that he created an alternate reality in his mind. He knew God had relented, and this was why he

was mad. Why would he possibly think that God would suddenly not be merciful? Yet he sat and made a shelter, watching over the city in hopes of seeing God's wrath poured out. No amount of stubborn will would change God's mind, for God was working on Jonah's heart. In many ways, Jonah was an all or nothing type of person. He either preached his heart out or decided that he could thwart God by sitting, by being depressed, or by fleeing. He had one strong will, but God's will was stronger.

**6So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.**

**7But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered.**

**8When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."**

God pursued Jonah in love once again, desiring to teach him compassion. He appointed a plant to miraculously grow up over Jonah's head as a means of protecting him from the heat and discomfort. The plant made Jonah happy. He loved it when things went his way. He didn't thank God for the plant, but he was happy. God showed him kindness and compassion which he certainly did not deserve. The next day, however, God appointed a worm to devour the plant. These clearly were two supernatural events which Jonah recognized. Yet nothing changed inside Jonah. God appointed a third event, a scorching east wind. This made Jonah so faint that he wanted to die and asked God to take his life.

**9Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."**

Again, God approached Jonah kindly and gently and asked him if he had good reason to be angry about the plant. Jonah this time did answer God and said that he had good reason to be angry and depressed. He liked his plant and now it was gone. This greatly upset him. Ah, but this was exactly what God had set him up to say.

**10Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight.**

**11"Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"**

God's message to Jonah is clear. Jonah was all happy about a little plant which was there for a day and then gone. He didn't work for it, nor did help it to grow. God graciously gave it to him. Yet when it died, he had compassion on it, wishing that its life could have been preserved. The irony of this is that Jonah cared about the life and death of a plant but not about the people in Nineveh. There were 120,000 people who didn't even know



the difference between their right and left hands. Innocent children would have died, let alone many animals. With this many children, certainly at least several hundred thousand people would have perished and headed to hell in their wickedness. This didn't bother Jonah at all, but a plant's death did.

The book ends without telling us if Jonah repented at this juncture. Evidently we didn't need to know that because that wasn't the central message of the book. The main message was that God is a God of compassion, and He demonstrated that by pursuing Jonah in love, working on areas of his heart that were not God-honoring. He didn't give up on Jonah, but Jonah gave up on many humans who needed to know the God that he knew. They needed to receive the compassion that he had received. But he needed to learn to give it himself. Thus, we learn from Jonah's life, victories, and failures that God is consistently compassionate and pursuant in sanctifying us, that God desires none to perish in their sins, and that God wants to use people who are humble, contrite, and who tremble at His Word (Isaiah 66:2). If we have run from God, there is still time to turn back and run to His loving embrace.

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