

## “Three Days and Three Nights”

### Sermons on the Minor Prophets: The Book of Jonah (2)

*Texts: Jonah 1:4-17; Matthew 12:38-42*

---

God called the Prophet Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh (in the heart of the Assyrian empire) and preach his word to the Ninevites. Refusing to go to Nineveh, instead Jonah undertook the fool’s errand of attempting to flee from YHWH, boarding a ship which Jonah hoped would take him as far away from Nineveh as humanly possible. But why was Jonah, known to us as the “reluctant prophet,” so hesitant to go where YHWH was sending him? The answer is both religious and political. Jonah is an Israelite. Assyria is Israel’s enemy and a serious military threat. Jonah knows that his own people (Israel) are hardening their hearts against YHWH and are likely to come under YHWH’s judgment. Jonah also knows that should he go to Nineveh and preach, YHWH might bring about the city’s repentance, sparing it from imminent judgment. As a loyal Israelite, Jonah fears that his preaching might be YHWH’s means of sparing Assyria from judgment. Jonah refuses YHWH’s call to go and preach and attempts get as far away from Nineveh as he can. But his plans are about to change in ways he cannot yet begin to imagine. YHWH will change Jonah’s mind and his destination.

We continue our time in the Book of Jonah, moving this week into the heart of the prophecy (chapter 1:4-17), where we read of Jonah fleeing YHWH’s prophetic call, only to find himself thrown overboard by terrified sailors and then swallowed by a great fish, in which’s belly Jonah spent three days and nights entombed in conditions beyond human imagination. As we discussed last time, when we raised and answered the “Who?” “When?” “Why?” and “What?” questions, the assumption often made by readers and about the Book of Jonah is that the story is so implausible that it cannot be historical. When viewed in this manner the fictional story of Jonah becomes an object lesson or moralistic tale about obeying God’s will so as not to suffer the consequences—like those which befall the reluctant prophet.

But when we look behind the well-known details of the Jonah story and consider God’s greater purpose in calling Jonah to go and preach YHWH’s word in Nineveh, we discover the true message of this prophecy—God’s purpose is to save Gentile sinners outside the limits of his covenant people, Israel. When we established the redemptive-historical context for the Minor Prophets, we saw that while in Canaan, YHWH’s people were to be witnesses of his mercy and righteousness to the Gentile nations all around them. Because of Israel’s failure to drive all the Canaanites from the promised land (as recounted in the Book of Joshua) over time, the people of God became more pagan than Hebrew (the message of the Book of Judges). Israel’s idolatry and failure to keep the terms of Israel’s covenant with YHWH, led to a terrible civil war and a divided nation—Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Given Israel’s rapid and downward spiritual spiral the Northern Kingdom never did serve as a missionary witness to the surrounding Gentile nations. Instead, Israel became a sad example of sin, disobedience, and religious compromise. Israel faced certain judgment as YHWH’s long suffering patience came to an end.

But had Israel been faithful to God’s word and covenant, YHWH would have protected his people from the surrounding Gentile nations, including Syria and Assyria to the north. A very important element to the back story of the Book of Jonah is that YHWH’s call of Jonah is part of YHWH’s greater missionary purpose to ensure that his word is preached to Gentile nations—even to Israel’s enemies. We saw that YHWH sent the prophet Amos to Israel to call the nation to repentance. But YHWH sends Jonah to Nineveh in Assyria—Israel’s fiercest enemy. Although the Jews are YHWH’s chosen people, his redemptive plan includes Gentiles. YHWH will extend salvation to the very ends of the earth.

We risk completely missing the message of the Book of Jonah if we understand it merely to be a moralistic fable about not obeying God's call and suffering the consequences. The Book of Jonah is a prophetic revelation of God's missionary purposes for his people as is typical of the Minor Prophets. Since Israel has failed in its mission to be YHWH's witness to the Gentiles, YHWH calls Jonah to be his witness to Assyria.<sup>1</sup> Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh reflects the fact that he is a loyal Israelite who does not want to see his enemy (Assyria) repent, when he knows his own people will be crushed by the Assyrians unless YHWH intervenes and saves Israel.

YHWH will intervene, but not to deliver Israel from Assyria, but to ensure the gospel is preached in Nineveh. Jonah hates the very thought of his enemies repenting. So much so Jonah flees to Tarshish, telling the reader in chapter 4:3 that he would rather die than see his enemies repent and be delivered from YHWH's wrath. But YHWH's missionary purposes require that someone from Israel like Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach YHWH's call to repentance. Jonah's reluctance to go, reflects Israel's national sin manifest in the nation's collective unwillingness to be YHWH's witness to the Gentile nations surrounding Israel. That YHWH overcomes Jonah's reluctance in the most dramatic of ways reinforces the importance of YHWH's greater purpose—his people are to take the gospel to the ends of the earth—even to Nineveh. Even to Anaheim.

Keeping the greater redemptive historical picture in mind, we can see why YHWH will not let Jonah escape his prophetic call. In verse 4 of chapter one, we learn that soon after Jonah's ship left port, sailing west to Tarshish in Spain, "*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.*" We know from the opening verse of this prophecy that Jonah previously refused to obey YHWH's call, left Israel and traveled to Joppa (the modern city of Jaffa), a seaport on the Mediterranean coast. Jonah booked passage on a sailing ship headed for the Phoenician city of Tarshish at the opposite end of the sea.<sup>2</sup> This was as far as humanly possible for someone like Jonah fleeing Nineveh to go. Nineveh is about 500 miles to the Northeast of Zebulun, where Jonah was based. Tarshish is nearly two thousand miles west from Jaffa.

The Hebrew of verse 4 places the subject first (YHWH) and the verb following—which is unusual. This tells us that YHWH's purpose, not Jonah's disobedience, will determine the outcome of all that follows. Jonah's unwillingness to preach in Nineveh will not thwart YHWH's sovereign purpose. Foolishly thinking he could escape YHWH's prophetic call, Jonah boards a ship, but the crew knows nothing about him, or his desire to flee YHWH, the God of Israel and the creator of all things. YHWH sends a fierce storm (literally he "throws" a fierce storm like someone would throw a spear or a javelin)<sup>3</sup> completely surprising the crew because of the storm's suddenness and ferocity. Experienced sailors know how to read the weather so as to avoid storms whenever possible. Most sailors on a ship like this were usually experienced seamen and ordinarily would not panic should bad weather cause rough seas.

But the storm YHWH throws at them is completely expected and is no ordinary storm. It was sent by YHWH for the purpose of preventing Jonah from fleeing Nineveh. The sovereignty of God over the affairs of both people and nations is a frequent theme throughout the Minor Prophets—Jonah included.

---

<sup>1</sup> Estelle, Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy, 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> Billy K. Smith and Franklin S. Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, vol. 19B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), on Jonah 1:3.

<sup>3</sup> Smith and Page, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, on Jonah 1:4.

Just as YHWH threw this storm to prevent Jonah from fleeing, he will “appoint” the great fish to swallow Jonah alive once he is thrown overboard by the sailors. YHWH, the sovereign God, will accomplish his purpose. His word will be preached in Nineveh.

Israel is a nation with little if any naval or seafaring history. Solomon had a small navy (1 Kings 22:48-49). The prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah spoke of the ships of Tarshish (Phoenician) sailing throughout the Mediterranean. But it falls to the prophet Jeremiah (23:19-20) to remind us that YHWH is the Lord of the storm. “Behold, the storm of the LORD! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the LORD will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his heart.” There is a hint of YHWH’s wrath in Jonah 1:4, though YHWH’s purpose is not to destroy his reluctant prophet, but to save Jonah and the crew, to fulfill his missionary call to Nineveh.

The storm thrown by YHWH was so fierce that the ship on which Jonah sailed the crew feared the vessel might break up. We read three times in the passage of the sailor’s fear. In verse 5, “then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god,” in verse 10, “the men were exceedingly afraid,” and again in verse 16, “then the men feared the LORD exceedingly.” Then as now, professional seamen are a multi-racial bunch and these men cried out to their own deities—as though these “gods” could actually do something about the fierce storm which YHWH threw their way.

One of the emergency measures taken by the crew was to lighten the ship so as that it would better ride out the waves without being swamped. They “hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.” This too indicates the great level of fear in their ranks, since the crew would be held responsible for any lost cargo and/or missing rigging and ballast. The suddenness and ferocity of the storm not only frightened the crew, but the situation is becoming a matter of life and death. We get the sense from the crew’s action in calling out to their gods and jettisoning their cargo that some of these sailors may have been doing so in the sense of offering sacrifices to their respective gods to bring an end to the storm. The Book of Jonah is filled with repetitive Hebrew puns, one of them is that as YHWH’s “throws a storm,” so too the panicked sailors “throw” their cargo overboard.<sup>4</sup> Soon they’ll “throw” their passenger—the source of their woes—into the sea.

Amidst the fear and chaos onboard the ship Jonah is nowhere to be seen. We are told that “Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.” A series of puns appear again. Jonah “went down” to Joppa (v. 3), now he again “went down” into the ship to sleep, with the Hebrew word for “fast asleep.” rhyming with the verb “going down.”<sup>5</sup> Just as Jonah flees YHWH’s calling by “going down” to Joppa, he escapes the fury of the storm by going down in the interior of the ship to sleep. For whatever reason—whether that be exhaustion from his travels, emotional fatigue from fleeing from God—Jonah is dead to the world. He is completely out of it, sound asleep while the sailors topside are struggling mightily to save their vessel, and are beginning to realize this just might be the end.

With some urgency, the ship’s captain found Jonah below sound asleep “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

---

<sup>4</sup> Donald J. Wiseman, T. Desmond Alexander, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah and Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 26, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), on Jonah 1:5.

<sup>5</sup> Estelle, *Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy*, 43.

*not perish.*” We know that sailors can be a superstitious lot—then as now. The captain awakens Jonah and insists that he call upon “his god.” We are not told if the captain knew yet that Jonah was a worshiper of YHWH and aware of YHWH’s great power, or if the captain’s fear was that unless all onboard were praying to one of their collective gods, one of these gods would remain unappeased and cause all onboard to perish. But the irony should not be lost upon us that Jonah is awakened by the captain to pray because the storm is, in actuality, Jonah’s fault—Jonah is fleeing from YHWH’s prophetic call, the very reason for the terrible storm which has placed the ship and its crew in jeopardy.

Praying to gods who do not exist does not end the storm. No doubt greatly panicked, the crew seeks to determine which one of the crew or its passengers has offended his god sufficiently for that particular god to bring the storm down on the lot of them. The suddenness and intensity of the storm points to some sort of supernatural peril—since none of the other measures have worked and the ship is about to break up, pacifying whichever god was angry became paramount to the crew. According to verse 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.*” YHWH brought the storm to pass. So too when the lot is cast, it falls on Jonah. It is just as the author of Proverbs (16:33) tells us, “*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.*” YHWH is directing all things (even the roll of the die) to his appointed end—that his word be preached in Nineveh. The mysterious passenger sacked out below deck is the one who has brought the terrible storm to pass.

Why would the lot fall upon Jonah? Who is this guy? What has he done to bring about such a terrible storm? We read in verse 8 that an exasperated crew begin to interrogate their sleepy passenger. “*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?’*” You can almost see a disheveled and groggy Jonah looking back at them, “what?” The crew repeat the question they asked when casting lots (verse 7). Something like this could not have happened unless someone onboard ship angered one of their gods. Now they know who it is—Jonah. The sailors want to know who this guy is, and what he has done to so infuriate his gods so much that they sent such a fierce storm. “What do you do?” “Where are you from?” “Who are your people?” These questions imply that Jonah made some effort to disguise himself to ensure that the crew did not recognize that he was a Jew and a prophet of YHWH (about whom, all in the region had some knowledge).

For the first time in the story (v. 9), Jonah speaks. “*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.’*” Native Phoenician sailors would have worshiped Baal—the weather god. Jonah identifies himself as a Jew (and an Israelite) and he adds that he worships the LORD (YHWH) who made the heavens and earth. YHWH is not a god like (Baal) who is foolishly thought to manipulate the weather. YHWH made both land and sea. He brings storm. He brings calm. Jonah confesses his faith in the God who made all things. Even the storm about to sink their ship is in subjection to YHWH. Jonah’s words virtually echo Psalm 95:3-5: “*For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.*”

The reaction of the crew is both fear and anger. We read in verse 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.*” If Jonah was right, and there really is a God who created all things—a God most high—then what had Jonah done to anger this supreme Deity so that he sent a storm to kill Jonah along with the rest of them? The sailor’s fear increases upon learning that Jonah’s God could send such a storm. They are also angry that Jonah has brought this God’s wrath down upon

an entire crew of innocents—men who were in no way complicit with Jonah’s attempt to flee from YHWH. As far as they knew, they had done nothing to anger YHWH. But now they knew that Jonah had angered God, and it was up to their passenger to come up with a way to save them and their ship, or else their blood would be on Jonah’s hands should they all perish in the storm.

Throughout this dialogue, the crew is growing increasingly desperate because the storm continues to grow stronger. According to verse 12, *“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.”* Jonah’s actions brought all this to pass, so it was up to Jonah to tell the crew what to do to turn aside YHWH’s wrath. His answer, throw him overboard. *“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.”* At last, we see the first signs of repentance from Jonah. He now realizes that his act of rebellion has placed the entire crew and their vessel in danger. If it costs him his life to save the others, then so be it. The reluctant prophet realizes that attempting to flee from YHWH was a very bad idea. At least Jonah can sacrifice himself to save the others. Now aware of his guilt, perhaps the sacrifice he is willing to offer will gain him forgiveness with YHWH for fleeing his prophetic call. But foxhole religion is almost always filled with theological error even if arising from the sincerest of motives.

Yet it is very interesting to notice that Jonah does not simply jump overboard and sacrifice himself. Instead he pleads with pagan sailors to throw him over the side. The conundrum this raises for the reader is not answered. Either Jonah was too much of a coward to do it himself, or else he is demonstrating remarkable wisdom in allowing the crew to sacrifice him so as to turn aside YHWH’s wrath from them. But is this nature of the Book of Jonah. It is filled with puns and irony, making the reader wrestle with both the questions and the missing answers.

Even pagan sailors often reflect the demands of a universal moral code (natural law). In the panic and chaos, the crew does not want to cause Jonah’s death by pitching the source of their trouble over the side consigning Jonah to a watery grave. They do not want Jonah’s God to become angrier because of what they might do to YHWH’s prophet. So we read in verse 14, that the crew *“rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.”* Whatever Jonah had done was bad enough that his God would not be satisfied until Jonah was removed from the vessel.

The scene is one of fear (the suspiciously supernatural storm is growing stronger), the crew’s anger at Jonah (he has brought all this about—why did he not tell them that he was fleeing from YHWH?) and desperation (as the storm was still growing stronger the men begin to row toward shore, probably because their sails and rigging are damaged). We get the sense that the crew knew whatever was happening, it would not stop as long as Jonah remained a passenger on their ship. The time had come when there was nothing else they could do to save themselves except throw Jonah overboard.

Terror gripped them. 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.’ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.”* The suspected cause and effect of the storm was confirmed. The moment Jonah was thrown overboard the storm ceased, the seas grew calm, and the ship and its crew were spared. Every person on that vessel now knew that YHWH is Lord of the storm as reflected in the words Psalm 107:25, *“for YHWH commanded and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves of the sea.”* In this case, YHWH not only commanded and raised the storm, he commanded and calmed the seas. The pagan crew has just witnessed YHWH’s power and mercy. They are now safe.

Another irony surfaces. YHWH spared the entire crew because they obeyed his word spoken through the prophet (Jonah), who told the crew to throw him into the sea so as to save themselves—quite an irony for a prophet who is running away from YHWH and only speaks YHWH’s word when it ensures his (Jonah’s) certain death. Yet upon witnessing this mind-blowing event these men immediately call upon YHWH’s name and then offered sacrifices to him, demonstrating their own submission to YHWH who revealed himself to them in the storm and through the words of Jonah. This is a foreshadowing of what will happen when Jonah eventually gets to Nineveh and preaches the word of YHWH there, only to discover that the very people whom he hates (the Ninevites) will repent and likewise believe in YHWH.

When Jonah goes over the side, there is only one possible outcome. Jonah will submerge under the waves and breathe his last, only then to enter YHWH’s presence—hopefully, YHWH’s wrath is turned aside, by Jonah’s offering to YHWH of himself a sacrifice to save the innocent crew. Jonah’s thoughts were those of any one of Adam’s fallen race facing immediate and certain death—“Lord have mercy upon me a sinner. Into your hands I commit my spirit.” But no sooner did Jonah enter the watery grave and the sea began to calm, then the impossible occurred—Jonah was rescued by miraculous means. According to verse 17, “*the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*” YHWH’s sovereign purpose and his mercies are seen yet again. God sent the storm, but spared the ship. YHWH calmed the storm and showed his mercy upon Gentile sailors who called upon his name and offered him sacrifices (worship). YHWH rescued Jonah—if in the most unexpected of ways. YHWH “threw” the storm and appointed the “great fish” to swallow Jonah, sparing Jonah from certain death. What Jonah is about to endure—three days and nights in the belly of the great fish—prefigures the greatest event in human history, Jesus’ death on the cross as a payment for our sins and followed by his bodily resurrection from the dead.

Next week, Lord willing, we will take up to Jonah’s prayer while confined for three days and nights in the prison of the belly of the great fish—a prison which we cannot begin to conceive. We will learn of his trip to Nineveh, where the reluctant prophet will indeed preach the word of God with great effect.

Fast forward about 750 years from the storm and Jonah’s entombment in the belly of the fish. Jesus has begun his messianic mission and is preaching to increasingly larger crowds in the Galilee region—which is, ironically, in the very heart of what was once the Northern Kingdom (before being captured by Assyria). As the crowds grow in response to Jesus’ preaching so does the opposition from the Pharisees. Offended by Jesus’ claim to be a teacher sent from God who spoke God’s words to those listening to his preaching, we read of one such encounter in Matthew 12:38–42. According to verse 38, “*some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’*” After all that Jesus has said and done—healing a man with a withered hand, healing two blind men, restoring a young girl to life, along with countless other miracles, the scribes demanding a sign from Jesus was sadly indicative of their lack of faith and open disdain for God in human flesh, who was standing in their midst and teaching them about the kingdom of God. But they refuse to listen and demand more proof.

Knowing the nature of the trick question and refusing to perform miracles on demand (like a Las Vegas magic act), we read that Jesus “*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. 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.’*” Jesus refuses to respond to the impertinence of those who claim to be the teachers of Israel. Jesus will perform no miraculous “signs” for them on this occasion. Instead, he tells them that his messianic ministry will culminate in one final sign which will answer all their questions and demonstrate once and for all who he is—the Son of God, who cannot be held captive by death or the grave.

Jesus speaks of this forthcoming sign, his death and resurrection, as the “sign of Jonah,” declaring well in advance that on Good Friday Jesus will suffer and die for our sins, and then after three days and nights in the grave, will be raised bodily from the dead the first Easter. The “sign of Jonah” is the confirmation that Jesus is who he says he is (God in human flesh) and that in his death he will save us from our sins.

As for the scribes demanding to see Jesus “perform another one” on their command, Jesus warns them, “*the men of Nineveh*”—those to whom Jonah preached and who repented some seven hundred years earlier —“*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.*” Those Ninevites who believed Jonah’s preaching will be called by YHWH as witnesses on judgment day. They will testify that they believed Jonah’s preaching on far less evidence than Jesus has given to the scribes and Pharisees. Here stand the leaders of Israel—in the presence of the greater Jonah who will spend three days and three nights in the grave, only to be raised from the dead—demanding that Jesus perform a trick for their amusement.

They will be given no further sign—except the sign of Jonah. Beloved, we too have been given the sign of Jonah, as our Savior suffered and died for our sins and was raised three days and nights later. The words of Jonah and Jesus call us to embrace the same Savior who sent the storm, delivered the sailors, spared Jonah and then caused Nineveh to repent. This is the same Savior whose purpose is that the gospel has been preached this very day in far away Anaheim.