

Jonah Disobeys the Lord

Jonah 1:1-3

Jonah 1:1-3 - *“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “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.”*

Background Notes

What do you remember most about Jonah? Probably everyone knows that Jonah was swallowed by a big fish and survived - right? Well, the book of Jonah is more than just a “big fish tale” - it’s the **true** account of an Old Testament prophet of God named Jonah. God called Jonah to go and preach in the city of Nineveh, the capital of the ancient Assyrian Empire. Jonah didn’t want to preach God’s message to the pagan people of the cruel Assyrians Empire, so he tried to flee from the Lord by running in the opposite direction. But God disciplined His servant, Jonah, and brought him back by special transport – a big fish! Then He graciously re-commissioned Jonah as His prophet.

So Jonah finally went and preached to Nineveh. As a result, one of the greatest spiritual awakenings in the history of mankind took place! The people of Nineveh repented, from the king right on down to the least of the people, and God withheld His judgment upon this great city because they believed Jonah’s message and repented of their wickedness.

Because of the miracle of Jonah’s special transport through the Mediterranean Sea in the stomach of a fish, many people have a hard time accepting the historicity of the book of Jonah. They conclude that maybe the story of Jonah was an Old Testament “parable” that was designed to teach us some moral and spiritual lessons. The story of Jonah can certainly teach us a lot of moral and spiritual lessons, but it’s **not** a parable – it’s a true story!

There are several reasons that back up the historicity of Jonah’s book. It was not written in the distinctive style of Hebrew poetry, as we would expect if Jonah were an Old Testament parable. Unlike the other Minor Prophets, Jonah wrote his book primarily in prose - because it’s real history. Jonah’s father, Amittai, was named (v1). The mention of his father indicates that Jonah was a real person, not a fictitious character in a parable.

In addition, the prophet Jonah was mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25: *“He [King 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.”* The prophet Jonah was a real

person who prophesied during the time of King Jeroboam II of Israel. Jonah lived in a real town, Gath Hepher, that was located not far from the Sea of Galilee in the northern kingdom of Israel.

But the most important of all for understanding that Jonah was a real person and his book was a true historical account is that the Lord Jesus believed that the account of Jonah was real history (see Matthew 12 and Luke 11).

So Jonah was a real person, and the story of Jonah is a true story. It's real history, including the miracle of the "whale" swallowing Jonah. By the way, that Hebrew word could include either a "whale" or a "big fish." So we could say that the story of Jonah being swallowed alive by the big fish is not an imaginary "whale of a tale" - but the true "tale of a whale"!

Doctrinal Points

1. God calls His people to go to Nineveh.

"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me" (v1-2). God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach out against the wickedness. God knew about the wickedness of Nineveh. God knows about all wickedness. It is not hidden from God.

Why didn't Jonah want to go to Nineveh? Was he afraid? Maybe. Preaching out against the wickedness of the pagan citizens Nineveh was not as easy as preaching on a quiet Sunday morning in a church where most of the people are believers! Suppose the Lord called you to stand on a street corner in a tough area of Chicago and preach out against the wickedness of the city - would you be scared? I think I would be a little afraid!

Remember - in the ancient world, the Assyrians were known for their sadistic cruelty. In the ruins of Nineveh, inscriptions and *bas-reliefs* (inscribed pictures) have been found that depict the Assyrians in a time of war committing hideous atrocities, such as impaling their victims alive on sharpened poles, and even skinning them alive. So fear could very well be one reason why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh!

However, I think the main reason why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh was that he was a patriot. The Assyrians were the major world power at that time. They were pagan, and they were an enemy of Israel. There is an inscribed picture of King Jehu of Israel paying tribute to an Assyrian king. And the Assyrians would eventually conquer the northern kingdom of Israel (see 2 Kings 17).

So Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh because he wanted God to judge the Assyrian Empire. He knew that God was gracious and might spare Nineveh if the people repented - and that's exactly what Jonah said when God spared Nineveh!

Jonah 4:2: *“Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm.”* Jonah did not want God to show mercy to Nineveh!

There’s a teaching for us here. God calls His people to “go to Nineveh” today. Our “Ninevehs” are the places and peoples that we find distasteful or that we dislike - or even that we fear. “Ninevehs” may be the places and the peoples we would like to see get *zapped!* We’d like to see God judge them. We don’t like to go to “Nineveh” - but our enemies are not God’s enemies. God loves all people, and He calls us to go to Nineveh.

Is there a “Nineveh” out there that you fear? When I was in college, I was part of the campus InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. I was chosen to go to one of the largest fraternity houses on my secular campus and give a testimony. Let me tell you, I didn’t want to go! I was afraid! This was a “Nineveh” for me. I really wanted to run the other way - especially when I saw these unbelieving students waiting for me – ready to attack the Christian faith. Well, God graciously helped me to go and speak in that “Nineveh” - and He will help you to go to the “Ninevehs” that intimidate you!

Maybe there’s a person or place in your life that, like Jonah, you would like God to judge and punish. Maybe it’s a person who has really wronged you and caused you great pain. Maybe it’s a group of people at your workplace who have taken unfair advantage of you. You can’t stand them; you would like to see them judged by God Himself! Or maybe you’re afraid that God is calling you to take the gospel to an atheistic foreign country.

What is your Nineveh? Like Jonah, we’re reluctant to preach the gospel to people we dislike because they just might believe the message, and repent, and escape the judgment of God – and we really don’t want that! But God calls His people to go to Nineveh.

2. God’s people disobey when they “flee to Tarshish.”

“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” (v3).

Tarshish is thought to have been located somewhere in what is now southern Spain. If you look at your Bible maps, you’ll see that Jonah went in the opposite direction. Jonah was running away - in disobedience to God!

Have you ever “run away to Tarshish”? What about right now? Is there something in your life that you know what the Lord wants you to do, but you decided to “buy a ticket to Tarshish” instead? Maybe the Lord wants you to forgive a brother or sister but you don’t want to - so you “run away to Tarshish.” You put distance yourself and the situation the Lord wants you to deal with. Maybe you have even literally moved away from your problem, as Jonah did.

Running away is disobedience to God - and that’s what the Bible is teaching us here. God’s people disobey when they flee to Tarshish.

Practical Application

You can always find a ship that's going to Tarshish.

"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" (v3).

How convenient! "Why, thank you Lord for providing a ship! This trip must be Your will." Does that sound familiar in your life?

So Jonah paid the fare. This was no small sum. He may have had to mortgage his house to get the money. But Jonah was on the run, so money was no object. So - *"he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord."* What a vivid picture of the lengths to which a person will go to avoid the unpleasant situations the Lord ask us to face! Listen - if you don't want to obey the Lord, you can always find some excuse, or find some way to board *"a ship going to Tarshish."*

Let me ask you - who provided this ship that was going to Tarshish? Does Satan provide the ship for running away - or does God provide the ship? Probably the best theological answer to this question would be that Satan provides the tempting ship, but God permits him to provide it, and we make the decision to board the ship.

James 1:13-15 says, *"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin."* Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh - he desired to go in the opposite direction. This desire led to the sin of disobedience. In his disobedience, Jonah went down to Joppa on his own initiative, looked for a getaway ship, paid the fare and boarded the ship.

Satan and the world will always provide a "getaway ship" that will be available for anywhere you want to go in disobedience to God. God allowed Jonah to find a ship going to Tarshish, and that's where Jonah decided to go. The Lord was not going to manipulate Jonah, and the Lord will not force you to obey either.

But don't think that you can get all the way to Tarshish! The Lord has ways to get your attention and turn you around, as He did with Jonah. But if you don't want to obey the Lord in some matter, it will be easy to turn away from fellowship with the Lord. It will be easy to disobey, because you can always find "a ship going to Tarshish."

I trust that no one who is listening to this Talk has bought a ticket to Tarshish. Remember, you can always find a ship going to Tarshish