

Jonah – Oct 9, 2022

Today we're starting a new series about the Old Testament book of Jonah. Which may seem familiar to some of us, right?

Lets do some quick **word association**. Finish this thought: Jonah and the... *xenophobic nationalism*.

Oh, you said "whale." Yes, there is a giant fish that swallows Jonah alive. But it might surprise you to learn that that is *not*, in fact, the main point of the story at all.

The book has a lot more to do with an **Israelite prophet's hatred** toward an enemy nation and how he wrestles (quite poorly, I might add) with **God's inexplicable grace** towards them.

The book has to do with calling, it has to do with resurrection... *and* there's a giant fish.

Regardless, I think Jonah has a lot to teach us. So go ahead and grab a Bible and turn with me to chapter 1.

While you do that I want to start by explaining how we're going to approach this book. It all comes down to a **question of genre**.

You know, literary genres: Like, poetry or mystery or drama. What is the genre of Jonah?

When we read the book, it is natural to think that it's **just some kind of history book**. Like it's just here to tell us the facts of what happened a long time ago.

But I would argue that history is not, in fact, the genre of Jonah. I believe the book of Jonah is actually a parable.

Parable: a story designed to illustrate a deeper truth or moral lesson

Jesus taught in parables all the time. The parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable of the lost son.

Jonah is a parable like those. **It's a story designed to be meditated on.** We are meant to ponder the deeper truths within it.

Now, to be clear, I'm not saying that the events of Jonah are necessarily fictional; that they didn't happen. Bible scholars debate this all the time.

Some say, "It has to be real because Jonah son of Amittai was a real person."

And others say, "Yeah, but look at the story. It's full of **exaggerated behavior**, inappropriate actions, outlandish situations, and ludicrous commands. It doesn't even have an ending.

"It reads like a story designed to get our attention and get us thinking, just like the parables of Jesus."

Did it happen? Did it *not* happen? I don't think it matters. I mean, was there really a Good Samaritan? It doesn't matter. It's a *parable*.

So, we are not going to get caught up in questions of Mediterranean marine biology or the historicity of Nineveh's repentance. We are simply going to take the story at face value and ask, "What does the author want us to hear?"

How is God speaking to you and to me through this story?

JONAH FLEES

So let's begin today with chapter 1. Here's how this parable begins:

Jonah 1:1-3

The LORD gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are."

But Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the LORD. He went down to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to escape from the LORD by sailing to Tarshish.

One of the things you notice right off the bat when you read this book is that Jonah is not exactly the hero of the story. In fact, he's more like **an anti-hero**.

Maybe even the villain.

Think about it. Jonah is **a prophet called by God**. And, as we'll see in a couple of weeks, he's actually an effective one. His message is received and acted upon. That's more than a lot of Israel's prophets can claim.

But, throughout the entire story **Jonah behaves exactly the opposite of how a prophet should**. He gets angry at God for showing mercy. He blames God when things don't go his way. And, as we just read, when God gives him a job to do, Jonah flees.

"The Lord gave this message to Jonah... but Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction."

Now, compare that to the way some of **the other prophets of Israel** responded when they were called by God. Like the prophet Elijah:

1 Kings 17:8-19

Then the LORD said to Elijah, "Go and live in the village of Zarephath, near the city of Sidon. I have instructed a widow there to feed you." So he went to Zarephath.

Or how about Isaiah?

Isaiah 6:8

Then I heard the Lord asking, "Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?" I said, "Here I am. Send me."

Compared to how prophets *usually* act, Jonah's not exactly a role model. He flees.

Now, at this point it's worth asking **why Jonah flees**. Why *not* go to Nineveh?

Well, two big reasons. First, as we'll see later in the series, Jonah doesn't *want* Nineveh to hear about God's judgment because he knows they might actually repent and be spared.

He doesn't want God to have compassion on them. **He wants them to burn.**

But there's another, probably more obvious reason he doesn't want to go: **fear**. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, one of the mightiest empires of the ancient world. And in the Bible they are one of the primary bad guys for the Israelites.

Constantly invading, always a threat... **A terrifying presence** always looming in the north. So for Jonah to be called to go straight to Assyria's capital is kind of a scary gig.

And for what it's worth, I'd be scared too. **Assyrian propaganda** was messed up.

They'd put up these big carvings showing how they'd take prisoners of war and rip out their tongues and flay them alive or having to grind up their own fathers' bones... It's twisted stuff!

Imagine God wants to send you to *that* place. No wonder Jonah's afraid!

God calls Jonah to preach in Nineveh, and Jonah says, "no thanks. I'm out." He books passage on a ship and heads to **Tarshish**, the very end of the ancient world.

THE STORM

So file all that away. Let's keep reading and see if we can find more about what the author is trying to tell us with this story.

Jonah 1:4-9

But the LORD hurled a powerful wind over the sea, causing a violent storm that threatened to break the ship apart. Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors shouted to their gods for help and threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship.

But all this time Jonah was sound asleep down in the hold. So the captain went down after him. "How can you sleep at a time like this?" he shouted. "Get up and pray to your god! Maybe he will pay attention to us and spare our lives."

Then the crew cast lots to see which of them had offended the gods and caused the terrible storm. When they did this, the lots identified Jonah as the culprit. "Why has this awful storm come down on us?" they demanded. "Who are you? What is your line of work? What country are you from?"

What is your nationality?"

Jonah answered, "I am a Hebrew, and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

Here in verse 9 we get a revelation about Jonah. Turns out **he knows that God made the sea and the land**. So what makes him think he can get away from him?

It's like what Psalm 139 says:

Psalm 139:7-10

I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence!... If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me.

God as Creator of all is religion 101 for the Israelites. But Jonah's going to pretend like that's not true.

Yet again, Jonah is being depicted as a pretty miserable excuse for a servant of God. He's an anti-hero in this parable. **He's not a role model; he's a cautionary tale.**

And how about the fact that he's fast asleep while the rest of the crew is fighting for their lives? He knows this whole storm is because of him, yet he's willing to let them suffer. Stay classy, Jonah...

MAN OVERBOARD

Let's keep reading.

Jonah 1:10-17

The sailors were terrified when they heard this, for he had already told them he was running away from the LORD. "Oh, why did you do it?" they groaned. And since the storm was getting worse all the time, they asked him, "What should we do to you to stop this storm?"

"Throw me into the sea," Jonah said, "and it will become calm again. I know that this terrible storm is all my fault."

Instead, the sailors rowed even harder to get the ship to the land. But the stormy sea was too violent for them, and they couldn't make it. Then they

cried out to the LORD, Jonah's God. "O LORD," they pleaded, "don't make us die for this man's sin. And don't hold us responsible for his death. O LORD, you have sent this storm upon him for your own good reasons." Then the sailors picked Jonah up and threw him into the raging sea, and the storm stopped at once! The sailors were awestruck by the LORD's great power, and they offered him a sacrifice and vowed to serve him. Now the LORD had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights.

Alright. There's a lot we could dig into here, but there's one main thing I want to point out.

If you were an ancient Israelite, all your life you would have been **conditioned** to think of a prophet of God as the hero of the story and Gentiles like these sailors as heathen dogs - as the bad guys.

But the author of Jonah **overturns all those expectations**. It's the prophet of God who refuses to obey and it's the heathen sailors who end up worshipping God. *They* are the ones who, in verse 16, sacrifice to him and vow to serve him.

This **inversion of expectations** is classic parable material. We are supposed to meditate on this. To chew on it.

And what we'll see is that the author is planting seeds here that he's going to harvest later in the story. "Hmmm... it's the *Gentiles* who turn to God."

HERE I AM, SEND ME.

There's a lot more of the story to uncover, and we'll do that in the weeks ahead. But for now I want us to stop here and ask this question: is there anything we can take away from this *first* part of the story of Jonah?

What do we do with this *anti*-hero of a prophet? **What's the message for our lives?**

I suppose you could read this and think, "Well, I guess the moral of the story is that if you don't do what God asks you to do he's going to blast you with a storm."

But I don't think that's quite it.

Yes, in the ancient understanding of how the world works, **if you disobey the gods, then they'll punish you.** And so in the narrative logic of the story, Jonah deserved to die for not following his call. That's what any ancient reader would expect.

"You brought this storm on yourself. You're gonna die."

But that's not what happens, is it? Ultimately, **God doesn't show judgment toward Jonah, he shows *grace*.**

When Jonah is tossed into the sea, which everyone knows means certain *death*, God provides a giant fish, and restores Jonah to *life*.

The same thing is true about the city of Nineveh a couple of chapters later. This great, evil empire deserves to be wiped off the face of the planet, but when they repent, what does God do? He spares them. He rescues them from death.

This story is not about the wrath and judgment of God; it's about his mercy and compassion and grace.

And this, I think, is where it all comes back to us. We serve a God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. He showed us his character as a God of love and grace and self-sacrifice.

Just like Jonah, in our selfishness and sin **we have broken this world** and earned for ourself a watery grave, but just like Jonah, *we too* have been rescued from death because of the grace of our God.

But that's not all the grace of God does for us.

Because just like we talked about all last month, we, like Jonah, are called to be **God's messengers** in this broken world. Despite our flaws, he is sending *us*.

We may not be called to preach to Assyria, but every one of us has a Nineveh to which we are called to go.

- Maybe your Nineveh is the **injustice** in our world.
- Or the **hatred** people feel towards one another right now.

- Maybe your Nineveh is **pain** of people around you: physical, emotional, mental.
- Maybe it's their **isolation**.
- Is your Nineveh the **decay** of the creation itself?
- Or maybe it's the credibility gap itself – keeping people **separated from God**.

You get what I'm describing. I'm talking about the six broken places of our world. Every one of us has a calling, a *destiny*, to be God's instruments in healing them, even if they seem like insurmountable empires.

The problem is, sometimes these callings are terrifying. Giving your life to healing injustice, for example, may require you to **give up your comfort, your money, even your safety**.

It's tempting to say, "ah, I'm sure someone else will do it. I'm heading the other way."

That's what I wrestled with. Back in **2007** when I first felt God calling me to address injustice with my life I was terrified. I remember weeping uncontrollably as I thought of what it might cost me to follow that call. If I said 'yes,' I knew my life would never be the same.

I wasn't *wrong*. I spent the next 8 years of my life living in slums and refugee camps and mountain villages and going to dangerous places... Over those 8 years I got lost, I got sick, I got robbed... worst of all, I got *uncomfortable (I got sweaty!)*.

But that was what God was calling me to do. Sometimes God's call on our life is scary.

This is what the first chapter of Jonah has me thinking about. If God is calling us to be his messengers in this broken, messed up, scary world, **how do we respond to that call?** How do *you*?

Do you go? Do you obey the call? Or do you turn tail and run to Tarshish? (I hear they've got great beaches.)

What is your *posture* toward God's call on your life?

Are you willing to go where God sends you or are you running the other way?

Are you like Jonah who fled from the presence of the Lord or are you like the prophet Isaiah, who heard the call of God and said, “**Here I am, send me...**”?

At the end of the day the grace of God brought Jonah back to his call. I believe he’ll do the same for you. But what if he didn’t have to get a giant fish involved?

IRA VENGLOVSKA

I want to tell you the story of someone in my life who **answered the call of God** and continues to answer the call of God on her life, despite plenty of reasons not to.

I’m talking about my dear friend Ira Venglovska, the director of our partner ministry Mission to Ukraine.

25 years ago Ira felt God calling her to dedicate her life to serving marginalized people in Ukraine: women facing crisis pregnancy and children with disabilities.

Ira knew that such a call would **cost her an awful lot**. It would cost her economic security, it would threaten her reputation, and it would lead to many years bearing the weight of the her culture’s brokenness while wading into some really dark places.

Nevertheless, when she felt that call, her response was “**Here I am, send me.**”

And because of her faithfulness, **God has grown Mission to Ukraine** into a powerful and culture-shaping ministry. They have brought care and compassion to thousands of families in Zhytomyr and they have become leaders in disability care across their entire nation.

But then came the Russian invasion of Ukraine this past February. All of a sudden, God’s call on Ira’s life involved more than just the challenges I already mentioned. Now it involved leading a non-profit through **a time of war** and the very real prospect of facing **violence or even death**.

So what did Ira say to God when Russian missiles were striking just down the street from Mission to Ukraine's facility?

She said what she always says, "Here I am, send me."

Mission to Ukraine **kept their doors open** and they have not stopped serving families in need at any point through this war.

The running joke among their staff is that, "at Mission to Ukraine there is no war," because, led by Ira, **they have refused to compromise** the mission God has put them on earth to do.

Do you know what they're raising money for right now? **A bomb shelter**. Before the war they were in the process of building a new facility and now they are adding a shelter so they can continue to serve families and children with special needs even while facing the thread of nuclear war.

If Jonah is an *anti*-hero when it comes to the call of God, tucking tail and running, then Ira is undoubtedly **one of my greatest heroes**. She is a living example of what it means to say "yes" when God calls.

And guys, I've got a surprise for you... My hero Ira is here with us this morning. Would you please welcome her?

- **Question 1:** Ira, as the war has been raging in Ukraine, how would you describe what God is calling you to?
- **Question 2:** How do you deal with the fear that must come when facing violence, insecurity, and an uncertain future?
- **Question 3:** How can we at Grace pray for you and Mission to Ukraine?