

Jonah - The Runaway Prophet (An Introduction to Jonah)
Introduction to *Jonah*
Jonah 1:1-3

Reading: 1Timothy 2:8-15

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Turn w/ me in your **OT** to **2 Kings 14:23-25**:

1. We find ourselves in the middle of the **8th** Century B.C., in the period of the *Divided Monarchy* (*Israel*, 10 tribes, Northern Kingdom, Samaria; *Judah*, Southern Kingdom, Jerusalem & the Temple).
 - a. *King Jeroboam II* rules in *Israel*. An *evil* ruler, in the fashion of his namesake.
 - b. Yet (vv. 25-26) the Lord God allows the covenant people to *expand*, & *prosper* outwardly under Jeroboam's **4 decade** reign.
 - c. But on the stage of international *politics & diplomacy*, *prosperity* seldom means unchallenged *peace*. *Israel* has enemies.
 - d. Take, for example, the despised *Assyrians*. By now, their capital city is *Nineveh*.
 - i. *Nineveh* is mentioned in the Bible for the first time in *Genesis 10:11*, just one generation following the *Flood*.
 - ii. *Sennacherib* made the ancient city, situated on the eastern bank of the *Tigris River*, the Assyrian *capital*.
 - iii. Ancient, classic writers tell us the city was shaped like a great *trapezium* (**4** walls, w/ **2** sides running parallel and 2 not); in its day, the *largest* metropolis in the known world.
 - iv. Then the *Medes & Persians* destroyed *Nineveh*, the great city, in **612 BC**. (Over **100** years after our account.)
2. Did you notice v. **25**? There was **prophet** in the *North*, in *Israel*.
 - a. The prophet's name was *Jonah* ("*Dove*"), the son of *Amittai*, from *Gath Hopher*. (Just a few mile from *Nazareth*.)
 - b. And, v. **25**, God had used *Jonah* to speak to *Israel*.

- c. Now I said Israel prospered under Jeroboam II, but only outwardly. Inwardly (spiritually) Israel was impoverished: *unfaithful, unkind, spiritually ignorant*.
 - d. But *not* so, *Jonah*. Jonah ministered in the *North* but worshipped in Jerusalem's *Temple* in the *South*. He knew God's *Word*, well. Jonah was *God's man*: God's *prophet*, God's *truth-teller*, God's *preacher*.
 - e. And Jonah was not alone: there were other prophetic players in this general period of prophetic history: *Amos & Hosea*.
3. *Jonah wrote a book*...perhaps you've read it (kids, perhaps your parents have read it to you!)?
- a. It is the **5th** book in the **OT Minor Prophets (Twelve)**.
 - b. Some puzzle over its literary classification (*genre*): is it *history*? Is it *parable*?
 - c. *You've read it!* Jonah's style is straightforward & unadorned *historic narrative*, with clear *prophetic* message to Israel.
 - d. But what about all those supernatural things (miracles)? You know: killer storms, drawing straws, repenting pagans, bushy vines, little worms, & the biggest fish story of all time!
 - e. Is Jonah really *prophecy* wrapped in a *true story*? Beloved, do miracles really happen?
 - f. Here was **Jesus'** take: "*An evil & adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet **Jonah**. For as **Jonah** was three days & three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days & three nights in the heart of the earth (Mt 12:39-40).*"
 - g. The Son of Man believed the story of Jonah.

4. God's Spirit *stirred* Jonah to capture his *unique & fascinating* prophecy for the benefit of a specific, initial *audience*.
 - a. It wasn't written for *pagan Nineveh*.
 - b. Jonah's *first reader* was spiritually *impoverished* & spiritually *introverted* Israel.
 - c. There are *two big truths* that God wanted Israel to get:
 - i. *First*, the truth about *God* (the *Hero* on every page of your Bible):
 1. The story of Jonah tells us that *God is King* – He *rules powerfully* over His world, and *rules closely*.
 2. The King is *loving & merciful* – not just to *Israel*, but the *nations* whom He has made *for His glory!*
 - ii. But the *second theme* in Jonah is this, the unvarnished record of the *prophet who ran away*. [The *prophet* of Israel that became a *picture* of Israel.] – **2X**
5. And those **2** ideas about *God & Jonah* guide us to the *big point* of this *little book*: whether you are Jew or Gentile, *seemingly religious or apathetic or outright pagan*, **salvation is from the Lord (2:9)**.
 - Jonah is the great *missionary book* of the **OT!**

6. Turn w/ me to **Jonah 1:1-3**. (Jonah is the **5th** of the Minor Prophets. Find *Daniel*, then page past: *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, & Jonah*.)

The record of Jonah begins with...a bad day in the life of the prophet:

1. **First: a stunning command.** “Go where!?!”
2. **Second: a shocking response.** “No way!”

...pray...

Almost the *very first thing* we find in Jonah is this *stunning commission*...

1. Actually, **v. 1** starts out in very ordinary **OT** fashion: *The word of the Lord came to Jonah the Amittai saying...*
 - a. *Nine* of the other **15 OT** prophets begin just about like that: *Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*).
 - b. And the man from Gath Hopher *was* a prophet. No surprise there...

3. But then came God's *command* (**read v. 2**).
 - a. The commission unfolds in three Hebrew *imperative* verbs (commands).
 - i. *Arise (get up)!*
 - ii. *Go!*
 - iii. *Cry out!*
 - b. Go *where?* Preach against *who?* *Nineveh!?!*
 - i. Nineveh the *wicked*. The language in **v. 2** is like that in *Genesis*, where the wickedness of *Sodom & Gomorrah* rose up to *God in Heaven* above, inciting Him to *judgment*.

- ii. Nineveh the *great city*.
 - a. The idea of Nineveh being a *great city* is seen several times in Jonah (1:2; 3:2, 3:3, 4:11; an imp't idea).
 - b. **Great** – as in *important*. The *capital city* of mighty Assyria.
 - c. **Great** – as in *powerful*. Assyria was powerful & threatening.
 - d. **Great** – as in full of people. Many commentators believe that's God's point. A city filled with multiplied thousands of spiritually darkened men & women who desperately needed to *mercy & grace*.
 - i. *Beloved, do you remember that Jesus sent His followers out with these words, “the fields are white unto harvest...?”*

4. Jonah was *stunned*...

- a. *Never* had anything like v. 2 ever been recorded.
- b. Others had preached *about* the nations; others had preached *against* the nations.
- c. *Never* before had a prophet in *Israel* (or *Judah*) been commanded to arise from the *safety of their homes* to go & to *preach judgment in the streets of a foreign city*.

5. What did this all *mean*?

- a. Jonah knew: God intended to *spare Nineveh*, the despised Assyrians, the enemy of Israel.
- b. From the start it was obvious to Jonah that God intended to pour His *mercy & grace* on *great & wicked* Nineveh.

“You want me to go where? And tell them what?”

But God’s command is only the first surprise. The second is Jonah’s shocking response. “No way!”

1. Well, Jonah *gets up*, all right...and he *goes*; or to be more specific (v. 3.) the prophet *flees*!
2. Jonah’s *response* in v. 3 to God’s *commission* has an interesting structure in the Hebrew.
 - a. Hebrew manuscripts have several tiny *lines & dots & shapes*, all telling you something about the text.
 - i. One of them is a little *arrow-head* that sometimes sits underneath a sentence: the *athnach*.
 - ii. The *athnach* divides a sentence into two *logical* pieces.
 - iii. An *athnach* appears in v. 3 under the first *occurrence* of the word *Lord*. It helps see the *two parts* of Jonah’s response: his sinful *purpose* & his dangerous *plan*.
 - b. The first part, Jonah’s *purpose*: *But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord*.
 - Jonah was *willfully disobeying* God; *refusing* to go to Nineveh.
 - c. The second half, Jonah’s *plan*: *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*.
 - i. **Nineveh** lay to the *east*; **Tarshish** to the *west*.
 - ii. First stop, **Joppa**: about **30** miles west on the coast of the *Mediterranean*. (About the same distance as from here to *Warrensburg*.)

- iii. From **Joppa**, catch a Phoenician ship to **Tarshish**.
(Most ships in Jonah's day were crewed by *Phoenician* sailors.)
 - iv. Where was **Tarshish**? (Besides the *other way* from Nineveh! ☺)
 - 1. The name was derived for the word for *smelting* – refining ore.
 - 2. So probably an ancient *refining center*. The ancient Greek historian *Herodotus* thought it might be *Tartessus*, on the coast of southern *Spain*. But perhaps it was in *Crete* or *Turkey*.
- d. Do you see in v. 3 how both the *purpose* & the *plan* end: *away from the presence of the Lord*.
3. Shocking: **no one** among the prophets had ever told God no!
- a. Yes, **Elijah** had *balked* & **Jeremiah** had *cried & complained*.
 - b. But to *flee*? Who would do *that*? You wouldn't do that...would you, beloved?
4. As Jonah's shocking response *unfolds*, you have to ask yourself a couple of questions: *how & why*?
- a. Whenever I've read this story to my kids, we always *smile* & ask ourselves this question: *how...how did Jonah think he could run away from God?* How dumb! God is *everywhere!* *Everyone* knows that!
 - i. My *commentators* improved my thinking this week. Jonah wasn't a *theological blockhead*...
 - ii. Think about it: Jonah was a *prophet* (2 Kings 14). Jonah was *worshipper* of the true God, in His Temple in Jerusalem (**2:4, 7, 9**). Jonah knew the *Psalms* (chapter 2 is an intricate tapestry of several interwoven quotes from Israel's hymnbook).

- iii. **Psalm 139:** *Where can I go from your Spirit, where can I flee from Your presence.* David wrote that **250** years before Jonah got on that *ill-fated Phoenecian cruise-ship*. Look at 2:2! *I called...from the depths of Sheol...you heard my voice!*
- iv. When **v. 3** says (*twice*) that Jonah was putting God's presence behind him, we're being told that Jonah has *resigned* his prophetic office. He's *torn off* his mantle.

b. *Why* did Jonah run?

- i. Perhaps Jonah understood that God had promised to *judge Israel* by the hand of the Assyrians (cf Hos 9:1-3). So why help *them*!
- ii. But here is the *fundamental* reason why Jonah ran: **4:2 (read)**. Jonah didn't want Assyria *spared*, but He knew God would if they *repented*. Jonah wanted to see Nineveh destroyed. He preferred God's judgment in others rather than His grace. Are we all like that, especially when we have a stake in the outcome?
- iii. If the *Spirit of God* is going to descend on Nineveh in saving *grace & compassions*, the runaway prophet doesn't want to be *anywhere close*.

“Go to Nineveh? No way!”

The story of Jonah is the great missionary story of the OT.

As I prepared for this message, I was reminded how Jonah, the great missionary story of the **OT**, speaks to our mission of becoming a *Go & Tell* congregation!

We are like Jonah: Christ has pointed us towards the *ripening fields*...

- a. Will you pray for *opportunity*. For *boldness*. For *resolve*?
- b. And will you *rise up* from prayer, and *go* to Nineveh, and *speak*?
- c. By God's grace, may there be no *runaway prophet* among us!

...pray...