

Jonah 1:1–3 (CEB)

The LORD's word came to Jonah, Amittai's son: ²“Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to my attention.”

³So Jonah got up—to flee to Tarshish from the LORD! He went down to Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to go with them to Tarshish, away from the LORD.

[After Jonah runs away from God, he boards a boat. Before long, God sends a storm to threaten the boat and all its occupants. The sailors cast lots to see who has offended the gods and the lot falls on Jonah, who confesses that he has brought the storm on them all.]

Jonah 1:11–17 (CEB)

¹¹They said to him, “What will we do about you so that the sea will become calm around us?” (The sea was continuing to rage.)

¹²He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea! Then the sea will become calm around you. I know it's my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

¹³The men rowed to reach dry land, but they couldn't manage it because the sea continued to rage against them. ¹⁴So they called on the LORD, saying, “Please, LORD, don't let us perish on account of this man's life, and don't blame us for innocent blood! You are the LORD: whatever you want, you can do.” ¹⁵Then they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging. ¹⁶The men worshipped the LORD with a profound reverence; they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made solemn promises.

¹⁷Meanwhile, the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

[Trapped in the belly of the fish, Jonah prays to God for his rescue.]

Jonah 2:10–3:5 (CEB)

¹⁰Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

The LORD's word came to Jonah a second time: ²“Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you.” ³And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the LORD's word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days' walk across.)

⁴Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, “Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant.

Few stories in the Bible have as many “preachable” moments as this “kids story.”

Imagine that God called on you one day and told you to do something crazy, like building an ark or preaching the Good News in the central square of Pyongyang. What would it take for you to believe it was God? What would it take for you to actually do as God says? God has told us much about how we ought to live, yet we manage to ignore most of it. Why would it be any different if it was a really, really, big command?

I'd like to think that I'd respond in the manner of Noah. God simply laid it all out for him and then, “Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him” (Genesis 7:5).

However, I fear that I'd be more like Jonah . . . God calls and Jonah runs. God says head east to Nineveh and Jonah heads west to the Mediterranean hoping to catch a slow boat to, well, anywhere but Nineveh. God wants him to carry a word of warning to Israel's enemies, but Jonah will have none of it.

Nineveh was one of the oldest and greatest cities of ancient Mesopotamia. Sometimes known as the “cradle of civilization,” Mesopotamia is the region bounded by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, lying across a great desert to the east and north of Israel. During the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (920BC to 587BC), Mesopotamia was dominated by Assyria in the north and Babylonia in the south.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire at its height and also its fall in 612BC. Thus, the city was a symbol of Assyria’s power and its collapse. For the Israelites, Nineveh was a potent symbol of those who sought Israel’s destruction, making Jonah’s story of Nineveh’s repentance that much more striking and puzzling.

Why does Jonah run when God tells him to go the great city? Is it simply that he is afraid of the Assyrians? Does he fear his own inadequacies? Fortunately, we don’t have

Repentance

Repentance is an often misunderstood term. We tend to think of repentance as being sorry for something we did. But it is a much larger idea.

To repent is to turn around, to turn 180° from the direction we are heading and, instead, head toward God. To repent is to abandon our own agendas and embrace God’s agenda. In their repentance, the Ninevites “turn from their evil ways and the violence that is in their hands” (4:8). For the Israelites, to repent is to turn back toward their covenant life with God. For the Ninevites, to repent is to turn toward lives of justice and mercy, toward what they know is right even though they have not been given God’s law.

Repentance is a deliberate, conscious choice to begin walking in God’s way. It is a long-term sustained resolve to be obedient to God’s teachings as revealed to us and as written in our hearts. Jesus’ invitation at the very beginning of his ministry is an invitation to “repent and believe in the Good News” (Mark 1:15). It is a call to turn back to God, to return to the covenant with God, truly loving God and neighbor.

to speculate as to his motives. In 4:2, Jonah reveals his reason for running; he runs because he knows that God is compassionate. Jonah knows God’s character but simply doesn’t much like it. As Douglas Stuart puts it, “Regardless of any other religious or political notions Jonah may have had, it is evident that he hated the fact that Yahweh was truly consistent in being merciful and patient—that is, consistent *among* the nations as well as *within* Israel. . . [God] is a God of grace of whom it is hopeless -- indeed, hypocritical -- to expect a display of grace only to his own people. It was God’s grace that Jonah resented so violently; except, of course, when he was the recipient.”¹

The scandal of grace

Jonah may have given up on God, but God was relentless in his faithfulness. No matter how far or how fast Jonah ran, he couldn’t escape God’s outpouring of grace. When Jonah is tossed into the sea, a whale² swallows him so he doesn’t drown.

And Jonah prays. Boy, does he pray, as he lies there in the belly of the “great fish.” After three days and three nights, he prays. What could be more natural? Even those who find prayer challenging would find it easy to pray in Jonah’s circumstances. Jonah says to God, “In trouble, deep trouble, I prayed to God. He answered me. From the belly of the grave I cried ‘Help!’ You heard my cry.”³ Jonah’s prayer is simple and direct.

Jonah had run away from God with about as much determination as a person could muster. When God commanded him to go and preach to the city of Nineveh, Jonah headed out to sea instead. When a terrible storm came, Jonah was willing to be tossed into the sea rather than call on God. Jonah didn’t

¹from Stuart’s commentary on Jonah in the *Word Biblical Commentary* (1998).

²Yes, I know that Scripture says it is a great fish. But I’d bet that the ancients figured that a whale was just that – a very large fish. Our taxonomic systems differed from theirs. A whale is a whale by any name.

³This rendering of v.2 is from Peterson’s *The Message*. “Sheol” (v. 2 in the NRSV) is the home of the dead.

even turn to God when he was first swallowed up by the fish! But, in the end, after three days and nights, Jonah prayed and God answered.

Thrown up – still on a mission from God!

So rather than making lunch of Jonah, the whale coughs him up – so God could set Jonah back on the path to Nineveh.

Jonah does go to the great city, preaches God's message and then witnesses the entire city repent of its sin,⁴ thus averting the calamity seemingly promised by God (see the textbox below).

You'd think that after being rescued from the belly of the whale, a single word would characterize Jonah from that day forward: grateful. Instead, he is angry with God for sparing the Ninevites. He is angered by this outpouring of repentance and forgiveness. Jonah seems blind to the grace poured out on him, and without which he'd either be lying at the bottom of the ocean or of a whale's belly.

By the end of the story, we are left to conclude that Jonah is pretty much unteachable. God gives him yet another chance to embrace grace, but he doesn't.

Yet . . . yet . . . Jonah is God's prophet, chosen by God to carry God's message to one of the most powerful cities in the world.

Like Jonah, we too can be tempted to think that we have a monopoly on God's grace. We are too quick to put others (insert the name of whomever you think represents the worst of humankind) outside the circle of grace, to imagine that God hears only the prayers of believers, to resent so-called "deathbed" conversions, to divide God's world into "us" and "them." My own experience is that there is something of Jonah in us all.

Nonetheless, as God rescued Jonah, God rescues us. As God stuck with Jonah, God sticks with us. Jonah was a mess. I too am a mess. Yet, in spite of myself, God loves me and won't let go, no matter how hard I squirm or fight. God is not merely a God of the second chance, he is a God of countless chances. The faster we use them, the faster they come. Praise be to God.

The Joy of Ambiguity

Reading Scripture is an art and often we have to be open to surprises and uncertainties about the meaning of a passage. For example, in 3:4, Jonah cries out, "Just forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown," which we take to mean that if Nineveh doesn't repent, then it will be destroyed. Jonah is carrying God's word in this (3:3) and certainly Nineveh's destruction is on Jonah's mind . . . but is it what God has in mind? The Hebrew word translated "overthrown" in the NRSV is *hapak*, which has several meanings. It can be used to mean destruction (as in overthrown) but it is also used in the Old Testament to refer to turning bad into good, such as mourning into joy. *Hapak* can mean "overturned" and "inverted," in addition to "overthrown." Thus, the word of God that Jonah brings to Nineveh can be read "Nineveh shall be overthrown" or, just as easily, "Nineveh shall have a change of heart." I prefer to hear this as God's surprising word of Nineveh's coming repentance. Nineveh will be turned upside down by the grace of God. Since Jonah doesn't seem to have an ear that hears "Amazing Grace," perhaps he only hears a promised destruction of Israel's enemies.

⁴I've always thought Nineveh's repentance was a much more astounding event than Jonah surviving three days in a whale.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. There are a lot of angles in the very short story of Jonah. As you look back over his story, which part strikes closest to your heart right now. Jonah's fear of what God has asked him to do? God's choice of "Jonah-the-mess" in the first place? Perhaps it is God's unyielding faithfulness to Jonah? Maybe God's outpouring of grace on the Ninevites? You might share some reflections on how this story speaks to you now.
2. One of the glories of Scripture is its inexhaustibility. I've been to the book of Jonah many times, yet each visit yields some fresh insight or new challenge. I guess this shouldn't surprise me. The Bible is far more than a collection of ancient writings; we Christians proclaim that it is Scripture. As Scripture, the Bible is the product of the community of God's people and we read it as a believing community. We affirm that God's Holy Spirit guides and illuminates our reading and understanding. How is your reading of the book of Jonah different from the reading of a non-believer, even if that non-believer is an Old Testament scholar? What might a non-believing scholar learn from you about this story? What might you learn from that same scholar?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: More on Jonah

Monday, Jonah 1 Jonah tries to run away from God.

Tuesday, Jonah 2 Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving

Wednesday, Jonah 3 The conversion of Ninevah

Thursday, Jonah 4 Jonah's anger is revealed and he fails to learn another lesson.

Friday, Matthew 12:38-42 The sign of Jonah

Saturday, Psalm 28 Prayer for help and thanksgiving for it

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the story of Jonah.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *Ten things you don't have to believe to be a Jesus-lovin', Bible-believin' Christian*. This is a trip through some of the non-essentials of the Christian faith.