

Jonah: You Can't Hide From God

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Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word; and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Background

Everybody knows about Jonah and the Whale. People who have never cracked open a Bible know the story—it's a part of our cultural folklore.

Jonah and the whale made it into the great American novel *Moby Dick*. It's in *Pinocchio*. Jesus speaks of Jonah in the gospels—that Jonah was a sign of his resurrection.

In Judaism, Jonah is read on the holy day of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) because of the theme of repentance found in the book.

Jonah is different from all the prophets—and one of my favorite books in all of the Bible. The book is a story about a prophet, rather than a collection of prophecies by a prophet. The book is divided up in two: by God's first call to Jonah that he ran from and then God's second call to Jonah that he answered.

Jonah's name means "dove." His first appearance in the Bible isn't in the book of Jonah. We first encounter Jonah in an obscure passage in 2 Kings. Jonah is a prophet from the Northern Kingdom, who functions as a kind of chaplain of the senate. He loves his country. He doesn't prophecy doom, but prosperity. In his prophecy he assures his king that the Northern Kingdom's borders will increase and they will prosper.

In other words, Jonah is the perfect candidate to demonstrate that our Sovereign God's concerns go way beyond the borders of Israel. God loves everyone—desiring to show mercy, not just to Israel, but also their enemies.

Jonah's been dubbed the reluctant prophet—he could even be called the rebellious prophet. He ran from God, but he couldn't hide from God. Ironically—looking at numbers—he was the most effective of all the prophets, with the whole city (even the animals!) repenting!

We need to be honest here—Jonah is a real sour puss. He loves to pout and complain. Jonah expects God to do things on his terms.

Jonah's generous --with judgment, and stingy with grace. But here's the good news: God still accomplishes his purposes through Jonah, through us, despite us! God's mercy prevails.

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-16 (NRSV)

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." But Jonah set out 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 his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."

The sailors said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were even more 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 so.

Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?"

For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you."

Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.

Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Jonah: You Can't Hide from God

The story starts off saying “the word of the Lord came to Jonah.” This was Jonah’s prophetic call.

“Jonah, get up and go at once to Nineveh!”

Nineveh? Funny God. Let me give you a foreign relations brush up. Nineveh is the capital of Assyria—our arch-enemy. They’re the evil empire. It would be foolish to even talk with them. Plus, they’re mean and smell weird.

Go to Nineveh, Jonah. So God sent his flag-waving prophet to proclaim judgment to Assyria’s capital. The same Assyria that would eventually wipe Israel off the map.

So Jonah got up and went. But then—he snapped. Instead of going to Nineveh by land, Jonah took a boat and went to Tarshish. Nineveh is 550 miles EAST of Joppa by land. Tarshish is 2500 miles WEST of Joppa by sea. Jonah’s willing to fork out a lot of dough to pay for these last-minute travel tickets. It would take the ship about a year to travel those 2000+ miles.



Jonah’s going to do whatever it takes to get away from God. He wasn’t ignoring God or arguing with God. Jonah was going the COMPLETE OPPOSITE DIRECTION. Willful, deliberate, flagrant rebellion against God.

But also Tarshish was so much more glamorous than Nineveh. It was THE HOLIDAY DESTINATION of the day. Tarshish was on the southern coast of Spain. It was remote and exotic. Excitement and adventure awaited Jonah there. It was Shangri-La. 1 Kings says that there was gold, silver, ivory, monkeys, and peacocks in Tarshish. It was a distant paradise. An escape. The commercials said: What happens in Tarshish, stays in Tarshish. Tarshish is where you went to get away from it all. And Jonah was hoping he could get away from God’s presence there.

As our Call to Worship from Psalm 139 says, you can’t run or hide from God’s presence. But we still try. There’s a lot of Jonah in us. We think we can make ourselves disappear from our problems. From

God. We want to choose and decide on our own life itinerary. And our feeble attempts must make God chuckle. We're created in God's image—it's in our DNA.

As St. Augustine says, "God is closer to us than we are to ourselves!" There's no escape.

Do you have any personal Ninevah's you're running from? God's call upon your life? A difficult person or people-group you think is beyond God's grace? An unpleasant or even scary task? An unresolved situation? An internal change or bad habit you need to face?

Joseph Campbell has a great saying that speaks perfectly to this: "the cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek."

Like Jonah, I fear the cave and I crave my comfort. It's human nature to avoid conflict or to avoid things that are painful or make us uncomfortable. It's much easier to withdraw or seek escape. This is one of my life-challenges to work on and work through. What has really helped me begin to face my fears is to say, "what new conflict or problem situation will be created if I avoid this conflict here? Will it be even worse than this conflict in front of me now? What will bring me more comfort, or what will give me less pain—to face my Ninevah now that God is calling me to face or avoid my Ninevah and as a result face bigger problems down the road because I avoided my Ninevah.

Facing our Nineveh's helps grow us, helps us find that spiritual treasure to mature us and take us to new places. It's also important to think about not only what our Nineveh is, but also what our Tarshish is. In other words where do you go to escape from God or run from responsibilities? An addiction? Familiarity? Self-deception? Busyness? Numbing tactics like shopping, eating, drinking, hours on social media?

We prefer Tarshish over Ninevah—10 times out of 10. Those exotic, mysterious, remote places—the romantic place where we don't have to face real life. Face our real selves. Face God.

Where's the ship of your life pointed right now?

Jonah not only sought horizontal distance from God by going WEST when he should have gone EAST. Jonah was on a vertical descent from God. Jonah is going down and down and down in a downward spiral. Five times. Down to the port, down into the ship. Down into a deep sleep. Down into the depths of the sea. And farthest of all, down into the belly of a great fish. No prophet ever sunk this low.

Jonah may have been running from God, but the good news is God was running after Jonah. The Hound of Heaven continued his unrelenting pursuit of the reluctant prophet. So God hurled a hurricane on the sea to get Jonah's attention. The ship was about to break apart and sink.

There's something about storms that wake us up—get our attention. Sometimes they're thrown at us. Sometimes life-storms are self-inflicted by bad decision-making. Either way, storms strip us down to the essentials, to the basics. Just like the sailors hurling the cargo over to stay afloat.

What's some extra cargo you need to toss over that's weighing your ship down? Smug certainties about God or people or how things should be? Our self-righteousness? Too much stuff? Your grand designs and Tarshish itineraries?

We've got to let go. Cut loose. Allow ourselves to be stripped, to be deconstructed by God's storms. Faith is that reckless abandonment to God that Oswald Chambers once talked about. To stop running. To stop grasping, clinging, and white-knuckling our lives and plans. Where we go under the baptismal waters and die to ourselves, and breathe again above the surface in our new life with Christ. Faith is throwing our lives over the side to the hands of God.

Another name for Spirit is wind. The wind of God can be gentle, but the Wind of God can also be fierce at times, like a storm, waking us up and putting the fear of God into us.

In the midst of all this commotion above board in the storm, Jonah was deep asleep below the deck—oblivious. This is a different sleep than Jesus sleeping in the boat during the storm on the sea of Galilee. We've all done Jonah's sleep—in the midst of a life storm—fall asleep at the wheel. Ignoring our problems, repressing them, pushing them down, pretending they're not there, that they'll blow over.

But God was still pursuing Jonah. A voice sounded in the darkness: Wake up and go! How can you sleep at a time like this Jonah? Déjà vu. The captain was using the exact same words in Hebrew that God used when Jonah was first called.

GET UP! ROUSE YOURSELF FROM YOUR SLUMBER, JONAH. GO!

God speaks to us through people—even pagan sailors! We always need to be listening.

But Jonah still wasn't praying or letting on. He stumbled up to the deck. The shipmates decided to draw straws to find out the culprit. Guess who got the short end of the straw? Poor Jonah. Busted. No more hiding. No more evading. So he finally fesses up to the truth—but still rather nonchalantly.

I'm the problem. I worship and have been running from the God of heaven who made the sea and the land and this storm here. My God is sovereign over all—even over storms. My God alone can still these storms. Here's the solution—throw me over.

This was the only time Jonah was unselfish in the entire story. But then again, maybe he would rather face death at sea by drowning, than go to the dreaded Ninevites. The pagan sailors refused to throw overboard at first. But the storm kept raging. They prayed for forgiveness and heaved Jonah overboard. The sea stopped raging.

Because of Jonah's disobedience, these Gentile mariners were seized by a great reverence of the God who created the sea they were sailing on. They offered a sacrifice and vowed to serve the God of Israel. But what about Jonah?

Would being thrown overboard be his punishment for running from God? Was the famous whale or great fish—was that punishment or salvation for Jonah? Would God give Jonah another chance to answer his call? Or would Jonah finally succeed in escaping from God? What would happen to Ninevah? Would the city be destroyed by God?

Unfortunately, we've run out of time. BUT, you can find out on your own by reading Jonah in a Bible near you!

Amen.

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