

The Gospel of Jonah

Jonah 3:1-10

Introduction

Tiny World: Babies lack what's called **object permanence**. When you play peek-a-boo, you could be on a boat in Bermuda. It's not like "I wonder where Dave went?" It's more like "Dave who?" You put that object behind your back, and it ceases to exist! It's like they're the tiny, drooling CEO of their own little self-centered universe.

- Though you're not babies anymore (middle school boys look like toddlers with a mustache) some of you still live in a world no bigger than yourself.

Me-Church: We live in a dangerously self-obsessed society. Selfishness has always been endemic to the human condition. Cf. yearbook photo.¹ See this in friendships. Many of you don't love your friends (or boyfriends or girlfriends); you only love yourself through them (e.g., music, fashion, etc.).

- My favorite definition of love: "it is good that you exist, good that you are in the world" (Pieper). That is, I am simply glad *you are*. I don't need you to do something, accomplish something, or give me something. *You are simply a joy. That is how God loves us and calls us to love others.*
- Unfortunately, most of us love someone if they love us in return (e.g., "You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours"). If you only love someone as long it makes you feel good or enriches your life, then you don't *truly* love them. **You love yourself through them.** You are using them! It's why so many marriages fall apart; people fall in love, and they never learn to walk in love. "Falling in love is an accident; walking in love is a choice"! We can't tell the difference between the covenant commitment of love and the butterflies of lust. *The real question isn't how you will act when you feel butterflies but how you will act when you don't.*

Nowadays, selfishness is rewarded and celebrated (e.g., "you do you," "live *your* truth," "nothing weakens the tremendous power of the word 'truth' more than putting the word 'your' in front of it," Miller).

- Because I feel a certain way, it must be right and good. "It's a lie that God wants all of your desires satisfied; some of your desires need to be crucified" (Smith).
- Truth doesn't start with you; it starts with the giver of truth – God. "If you draw theological conclusions by asking what you'd do if you were God, then you're going to get the wrong answer." If you say, "I can't believe in a God who _____," then you're not allowing God to define his purposes, but instead putting yourself as god in your life (and you'd be a terrible god). I'd be such a terrible god, I was today years old when I found out the clock app on my iPhone dynamically updates with the correct time. *Do you think I can run my life, much less the universe?*

¹ Cf. Text or e-mail (a thing we old people use), and you interpret what someone says based on how you feel (they must be mad because they didn't use three exclamation points and four emojis).

- Can set the GPS map to revolve around you (the human state) or for you to turn in relation to it. There are two kinds of people: people who think the map revolves around them and vice versa.

Mission: God has not designed you for a life of insignificance. He has a purpose for you. We crave a purpose that extends beyond our individual lives. Having a purpose in life is a scientifically proven necessity.² Why do our souls shrivel without something to live for? Because we are wired for God-ordained purposes beyond ourselves. Not just any purpose (putting identities on a dart board and picking one: athlete, mathlete, Swiftie, band kid, etc.) but a divine calling that fits into God's great story.

- God knows you better than you know yourself. He knows your desires, purpose, and future better than you could, even with 100 years of the best therapy. **If you want to know yourself better, you must know God better. If you want to know your purpose, you must know God.**
- God's story isn't just about saving us; it's about transforming us into agents of his mission. Why doesn't he just teleport us to heaven the moment we believe? Because there's work to do here – work that only we can do.
- “We ask, ‘Where does God fit into the story of my life?,’ when the real question is ‘Where does my life fit into God’s story?’ We talk about ‘applying the Bible to our lives.’ What would it mean to apply our lives to the Bible instead, the real story to which we are called to conform ourselves?” (Chester)

God saved Jonah with a great fish, not just to rescue Jonah but to rescue the hopes of the lost among the nations.

- God hasn't just saved you for yourself; he has rescued you so you can tell others. He has blessed you so you can be a blessing. He has shown you compassion so you can show others compassion. He has given you hope so you can give it to others.
- **God wants to use you to share His message to the world.** God has created you **on purpose for a purpose** to proclaim and display his glory to all people in all places.

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. ⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸ but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” ¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

²<https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/apa-blogs/purpose-in-life-less-stress-better-mental-health>

1. Simple Message (vv. 1-4)

Second Chance: ¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the **second time**, saying, Those two words³ (second time) are some of the most beautiful in the Bible. The fact that the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time shouldn't be too quickly ignored. This entire story could've ended in chapter two, not with a resurrection, but with a funeral. **But we serve a God of second chances** (and third and fourth and fifth...).

- The heroes of the faith are not batting .1000. None of the apostles got an A+ on the test. Abraham, Moses, and David, lie, disobey, and sin against God. Peter, Thomas, and Paul deny, doubt, and persecute Jesus.
- Who better to teach the grace of God than someone who not only *knows about* it but has *personally experienced* its power? "Some things are worthless after they are broken. Christians are worthless until they are broken."
- "If God is our strength, then we need not fear our weaknesses" (Wyatt).
- We serve a God of second chances and persistent grace. If you've been running from God's call, now's the time to repent. You are not too far gone. Jonah was as far away from God's will as you can imagine, yet God still used him.

Dependence: I can either be defensive and try to justify myself, or I can admit my weakness and depend on God (true self vs. false self; resumé self vs. honest self). Until we accept the broken parts of ourselves and bring them to God, we won't experience his healing in the most important areas of our lives. The Bible call us to crucify our sin nature (Rom 8:13). But we can't eliminate things we find in ourselves that we do not first accept as part of ourselves. **That would be denial, not crucifixion. You can't surrender what you don't first own.** "Jesus meets us where we are, not where we pretend to be."

- "Maturity in the Christian life is needing Jesus more, not less" (Allberry).
- Weakness is a feature, not a bug. Godliness is not independence, but dependence.
 - "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27).
 - "But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:9-10).
 - Apparently, God has designed his Kingdom to value service rather than strength, dependence rather than autonomy, and weakness rather than power.
- Do you want to join the military? Well, guess what, you might not be allowed to. The military has standards, you have to be a certain age (17-34), a certain weight, certain mental acuity, medically fit, and so on. They won't enlist you unless you are "fit." "The difference between Uncle Sam and Jesus Christ is that Uncle Sam won't enlist you unless you are healthy and Jesus won't enlist you unless you are sick. What is God looking for in the world? Assistants? No. The gospel is not a help-wanted ad. It is a

³ One word in LXX and MT (δευτέρου, שניי).

help-available ad. God is not looking for people to work for him but people who let him work mightily in and through them” (Piper).

Straightforward Command: ² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” This is a **simple** command, not an **easy** one. Following Jesus isn’t complicated, but it’s still hard. I agree with Jackie Hill Perry when she says that following Jesus has made my life “harder and more joyful at the same time”.

- What is Jonah to do? Call out against Ninevah. 😬 God's word challenges us before it comforts us; it brings bad news before good news. If the bad news isn't severe, then the good news isn't uplifting (e.g., hot vs. cold; if you don't have both you simply have lukewarm, i.e., apathy).
- The gospel is offensive because it calls us sinners. It confronts our idols. If you take the sting out of the gospel, you take the power out of salvation.

Trust and Obey: ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.

- This was the path all along, Jonah had simply been fighting against it. For a lot of us, the problem isn't that we need to know more about God, though knowing matters: “Your heart can't love what your mind doesn't know,” (Wilkin). For a lot of us the problem is we aren't obeying what we already know (EG know it's wrong but...). 🎵 “Trust and Obey” 🎵 What good is it to esteem Jesus, to be a fan of Jesus, to call him Lord⁴ if we won't simply do what he says? We need fewer fans of Jesus and more followers. We need fewer people cheering for team Jesus from the sidelines and more willing to get in the game. **We need less hype and more obedience.** Hear God's Word, do God's Word. You can't obey it if you don't hear it. But it does not good to hear it, if you won't obey it.
- The greatest way to undermine the authority of Scripture is to fail to obey what it says. “It does little good to revere the Bible if you don't know what it says and even less good to know what it says and not obey it.” I don't know who you're supposed to marry or what college you should attend, but I do know God has clearly commanded you to love your neighbor, make disciples, share the gospel, be a committed part of a local church, pray without ceasing, carry the burdens of your brothers and sisters in Christ, etc.⁵

Big Task: Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. It's still a difficult job. **Obeying Jesus isn't easy, but it's worth it.**

- Nineveh is far away (500-ish miles) and a huge city (it takes three days to walk across). The Ninevites are the brutal enemies of the Israelites. Jonah's message is not a cuddly, feel-good message but one that will anger and upset them!
- Israel (Jonah's context) was agrarian, and rural, with small towns and villages. Nineveh was the capital of the largest empire of the day and was a major urban center with a huge, wealthy population. Jonah was a country bumpkin going to the big city.
- Obedience is scary because the task before us is bigger than we can accomplish on our own. It takes us out of our comfort zone.

⁴ Lk 6:46, Matt 7:21-22

⁵ Lev 19:18, Matt 22:39, 28:19-20; Mk 16:15, Acts 1:8, Heb 10:24-25, 1 Cor 12:12-27, 1 Thess 5:17, Gal 6:2

- If I want to be part of something that can only be explained by God's power, then I need to put myself in situations where I depend on his power rather than my own.
- “God positions you not according to your preference, but according to his purpose.”

The City: Do you know that cities play a strategic role in God's mission? That doesn't mean God loves cities more than the countryside or that urban folk are more important than country folk, but God loves people and there are more people in cities.

- Cities are often places of cultural influence and change. People go there to work and train. There are more than 100 colleges in Philadelphia, with hundreds of thousands of college students. One out of every six doctors in the U.S. spends some time in Philadelphia training (e.g., CHOP is a bad name for a children's hospital).
- If you want to get medicine into the whole body, you inject it into a major vein. If you want to maximize gospel impact, then it is wise to inject it into the urban veins of our country.
 - This is what the early church did. The first Christians won the Roman cities, so by 300 AD, most Roman urban centers were Christian (putting social pressure on the emperor to convert to Christianity). The countryside was the last to convert (the term “pagan” originates from the Latin term *paganus*, which means “rural” or “of the countryside”).
 - One of the more strategic places to be a Christian is to be in a major city, not for career advancement but for gospel impact!

Simple Message: ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” I don't think we'd call this a particularly great sermon. It's a simple message, only five words in Hebrew. They have forty days before God is coming to open up a can of ‘you're-in-big-trouble-now!’ The divine, “Don't make me come down there.”

- The gospel doesn't have to be complicated (e.g., beach and ocean). You don't have to be an expert! You are simply called to share the message of God's gospel. **You don't need to innovate the message; simply communicate it.**
 - You don't have to answer every objection, but sharing the truth that God created you to know him isn't hard. Your sin has separated you from God. Jesus made a way back to God through his death and resurrection. Will you turn from your sin and trust Jesus for salvation and eternal life?
- If you can (1) memorize sports stats and strategies, (2) video game maps, (2) learn algebra, (3) recite song lyrics, then you can learn and share the message of the gospel. It's not an **ability** problem; it's an **obedience** problem. You don't need a clever strategy, just an obedient heart.
- Jonah does what God tells him to do and says what God tells him to say. Will you? If you don't tell them, who will?

2. Surprising Response (vv. 5-8)

Surprising Result: ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. The most remarkable thing happened: they *actually* repented. **God saves those we think are too far gone or too wicked.**

Who do you think is beyond God's reach? Do you think they can be saved? Who do you hate and think deserves God's judgment? What would it look like to pray for their salvation? (Neil deGrasse Tyson, Kim Jong-Un, etc). God still does this!⁶

- A surprising conversion occurred last year when Ayaan Hirsi Ali, called "one of the world's most famous atheists" became a Christian. Raised a devout Muslim who became a staunch atheist in adulthood. At the very public "Dissident Dialogues Festival" in New York, while being interviewed by her friend and maybe the most famous anti-Christian atheist, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, Ali said she now finds Christianity is the only thing to give her meaning and purpose. Her miserable condition was from a spiritual bankruptcy that was only remedied by Jesus.⁷

The salvation of the Ninevites might be one of the greatest and least likely revivals in the world's history. But this is our God...

- Tens of thousands were saved in the First Great Awakening, 1730-40 (50,000 in New England alone).
- Thousands of East Africans were saved across multiple countries in the 1930s, and entire countries went from lost to found.
- Welsh Revival saw 100,000 saved in 1904.

God, do it again! Do you know what was the key? They believed God. They trusted God. They didn't believe Jonah. They didn't follow a charismatic preacher. They weren't caught up in the hype of the moment. They saw God for who he was and placed their faith in him. God was the overwhelming, all-consuming reality of their lives.

Repentance: They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. ⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸ but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.

- Their **repentance** was **humble, sincere, and complete**. This wasn't just an emotional moment but a tangible response. They didn't just "feel bad". They took significant action to demonstrate their commitment to change. They put on a scratchy burlap sack and poured ashes on their heads to physically represent the pain and dirtiness of their sin.
- This is a profound act of humility. When revival breaks out, it always shows up with brokenness and humility. This is actual repentance, not just lip service.
- It was so complete that even the animals were covered in sackcloth and ashes. Even the cows had to repent! "Sorry, Bessie, no grass for you today."
- These wicked Ninevites seem to "get it" more than the prophet Jonah. "Jesus came 'to call sinners to repentance.' [Too often] the church is offended that he calls sinners and the world is offended he calls for repentance" (Wax).

⁶ UNC history professor Molly Worthen, a critic of American Churchianity, was surprised when God saved her last year religionnews.com/2023/06/05/molly-worthens-conversion-represents-a-truce-in-evangelical-infighting-will-it-last/

⁷ www.mercatornet.com/one_of_the_world_s_most_famous_atheists_becomes_a_christian | <https://unherd.com/watch-listen/the-god-debate/>

Surrender: The King of Ninevah got off his throne, removed his robe, and covered himself with sackcloth and ashes. What caused the mightiest king of the mightiest empire to surrender? Was it a great foreign army? No, it was the word of God. The word reached the king.

- “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). God’s word “will not return to [him] empty but will accomplish what [he] desire[s]” (Is 55:11). Scripture is authoritative and permanent: Jesus said, “the Scripture[s] cannot be broken” (Jn 10:35). “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12). “For All flesh is like grass / and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers / and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you (1 Pet 1:24-25).
- The first step of salvation is to **believe the Word of God** like the King of Nineveh did. **Believe God knows more than you do.**

3. Merciful God (vv. 9-10)

Not Presumptuous: ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

- It’s **not presumptuous** but **truly humble**. They don’t demand anything of God (as if he has to save them). God doesn’t have to save you, which only magnifies salvation.
- Phil 3:11, “**if, perhaps, I may** attain the resurrection of the dead.” God owes us *nothing*. Once we recognize that, we see how much of a gift salvation is. To be a believer at all is an **undeserved gift**. It should produce **humble confidence**. Humility because I did nothing to earn it. Confidence because it depends on God, not me, so I can’t lose it.

Revival: God goes from destroying to relenting.^{8 10} When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

- In a twist, the Ninevites are not “overturned” but are turned over to God. God hears and he heals.
- The full picture of the gospel reminds us that God doesn’t simply ignore our sin (that’s not just), but he bears our sin. Jesus took the wrath we deserve so that we could have the relief he offered. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).
- “This is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation (cf. payment) for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10).

The Ninevites weren’t seeking revival before Jonah came. Jonah wasn’t pursuing revival until God forced his hand, but God brought revival anyway. Revival is a gracious gift from a merciful God.

- The wrong kind of people get right with God, and there is no reason for it except that God moved among them.

⁸ Repentance toward God brings relief from God. the only one standing in the way of your salvation is you.

- I've been privileged to have witnessed these moments a few times (e.g., pickup truck worship high school, GJBC 40+ baptized and two churches planted, M-Fuge Charleston Church Group time). God, please do it again!
- I never want to get over the miraculous mercy of God.

Conclusion:

God wants to use you to share his message to the world. **God wants to share a simple message through you, His trusting messenger, to communicate His enduring love to a broken world.** If we're going to see revival, it will come from you!

- You might be the Jonah in someone's life. There is someone near to you but far from God who needs to hear the message of salvation, the gospel. Don't be ashamed of the gospel, it's the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16). In the power of his Spirit, God sends us to be ambassadors to a lost world.⁹
- There are an estimated 3.2 billion people, like the Ninevites, lost and without hope. 55 million people die each year, approximately 105 each minute. Considering the high number of individuals in unreached areas, many of these deaths occur without individuals ever hearing the Gospel (Mali)
 - "Most church members see themselves as the mission of the church. But you are not the mission. You are the missionary" (Kersh).
 - "Every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter" (Spurgeon).
- **Salvation:** You can't give what you don't have. You can't share the mercy of God until you receive it. You can't proclaim the gift of repentance until you've repented. The Ninevites repented at the preaching of Jonah, but you have something greater, the gospel of Jesus (Matt 12:41). This is your second chance. Receive the mercy of God.
- **Mission:** Who will answer God's call to say whatever God calls you to say, to whomever God calls you to say it, to go wherever God calls you to go and do whatever he calls you to do?
 - Picture in your mind the person in your life that you need to share the gospel with **this week**. Go and do it!

⁹ Jn 20:21, 2 Cor 5:20, Matt 28:19-20