

# JONAH AND THE MERCY OF GOD

## Jonah 1 and 2 • Char Brodersen

**Introduction:** Good morning, Church! We are continuing our teaching through the Story of the Prophets, and this morning, we are looking at the Book of Jonah.

I wanted to look together at this book for a number of reasons, the first being almost everything we looked at last week concerning the prophets doesn't apply to the book of Jonah.

Last week we considered how the prophets were the Covenant Whistleblowers for the nation of Israel. The Prophets were men and women who were both called by God and sent by God to the kings, the leaders, the priesthood, and to the nation as the whole—to either make clear God's standard or instruction laid out in the Covenant or to warn of, or predict the consequences and judgment when Israel forsook covenant faithfulness. The thing about whistleblowers is that when they come against a government or system, they often wind up dead, so too with the prophets.

Jonah is different. He is a Prophet to the nation of Israel, particularly the Northern Tribes under the reign of the kings of Israel. But his book has little or nothing to do with that. Some of us might already know, Jonah is unique as a prophet in that he is sent outside of the land of Israel, to a foreign superpower of the day. He is sent to the great city of Nineveh and the people of Assyria to preach to them God's impending judgment. This book seems to be missing the typical outline of the prophets: calling Israel back to Covenant Faithfulness, Israel's rejection of their calling, and the final hope in God's redemption in and through Messiah. Or is it?

Jonah tackles all this from a different point of view. It is a reminder and a rebuke to the prophet and specifically the nation of Israel about the character of their God and therefore about their calling. YHWH is the God of all Creation and the God of Redemption—Is that for Israel alone; is it not for all people? He created all people, he loves all people, and his desire is to bring all people to himself. This is the reason God chose Israel in the first place. Remember it was through Abraham and his descendants that God promised he would bless them and make them a blessing to the whole world. The people of Israel had forgotten not only the character of their God, but their calling as well.

The fascinating thing to note about the Book of Jonah is it is technically not a prophetic book in the truest sense and actually functions more like the wisdom literature of Scripture.

How do I mean? The Book of Jonah is really about the mystery of God's mercy. It's not like Torah, where there is clear instruction; it's not like the prophets, with specific correction; it's not like the historical books in recording chronological events about the nation of Israel. It's wisdom literature that meets us right where we are at—in our deep questions about justice, about mercy, and challenges us with the character of God, the state of our own hearts, and leaves us with questions to ponder and wrestle over. The end of Jonah is an open-ended question for the prophet and for the people of God to deeply consider, ponder, and ultimately meant to make us wise and discerning. (This study will serve as a bridge then into our next series on the wisdom literature—so more on that topic next week.)

Before we begin looking at some of the fascinating and comical details of this book, I want to talk about what we know about Jonah and the people he's called to preach to. I think it will bring some insight to his character and his responses to God's instruction to him concerning his task.

## Who is Jonah?

Jonah the prophet lived and ministered during the reign of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel. Outside of the book that bears his name, this is the only reference to him in the Old Testament.

*“In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. He (Jeroboam II) did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher. The Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the Lord had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash.”*

—2 Kings 14:23–27

Jonah apparently had prophesied to a wicked king, God’s merciful word of restoring boundary lines (territories) to the nation of Israel, because God had seen how bitterly his people were suffering.

So the only thing we know about Jonah outside of this book is that he had prophesied God’s mercy and restoration to a wicked king and to a wicked nation—this just so happens to be his king and his people. Fascinating to note that both the prophets Hosea and Amos sharply criticized this same royal administration for its injustice and unfaithfulness. By reputation Jonah would have been known as a patriotic prophet—one who was for Israel’s expansion and expression of their military might.

## What and who is Nineveh?

Nineveh is the chief city and capital of the Assyrian Empire. They are in fact the great enemy of the nation of Israel and Judah during the lifetime of Jonah, and they are exceedingly wicked and cruel. In fact, the king of Nineveh will eventually come and destroy the kingdom of Israel and lead them away captive.

In fact in 1845, archaeologist Austen Henry Layard discovered the palace room of King Sennacherib in Nineveh, which had a 39-foot stone carving depicting the victory over the Israelite city of Lachish in the southern Kingdom of Judah. Etched in its stones are pictures of people being flayed, their skin ripped from their legs, then being hung in public for all to see. There are also etchings of those captured being impaled on large stakes (a favorite technique of torture and psychological warfare that the Assyrians engaged in). They also buried their enemies alive up to their necks while their bodies wasted away in their own excrement. They cut off limbs, gouged out eyes, crucified and even forced victims to grind up the bones of their ancestors to erase any legitimacy or claim to land or rule. Historians have dubbed Nineveh and the Assyrians as a terrorist state.

The people of Nineveh are the chief enemy of the people of God in the days of Jonah. Nineveh represented the brutally violent people who had ushered in the darkest days in Israel’s history.

We might be beginning to see how this prophetic book of this people’s redemption is scandalous and difficult not just for Jonah or the people of Israel, but for us as well.

## Last Thing

The book of Jonah is filled with literary devices seen in repetition of words that serve as hints at the overall message being conveyed, which really brings the story alive (down, great, fear, etc.).

Also, its literary structure is mirrored.

In Jonah 1 and 2, God's Word comes to Jonah, then there is an interaction with pagan sailors which results in their obedience and repentance, followed by a response from Jonah.

This same structure is mirrored in chapters 3–4 as well. God's Word comes to Jonah, Jonah interacts with the pagan city of Nineveh which results in their obedience and repentance, followed by a response from Jonah. Then the book ends.

With that, I think we are ready to look at this complex and beautiful story.

## 1. The Word of the Lord

- A. **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.**
- B. Jonah begins both similarly and dissimilarly than any of the Prophets.
  - i. Similar in the sense that we have read many times, *The word of the LORD came to such and such to tell this people this and that*. It's how every prophetic oracle begins. But this one is unprecedented in the fact that God is calling his prophet to the pagan people of Nineveh, the great enemy of the people of God, and that it records that Jonah got up (so far, so good) and went (good again) in the exact opposite direction that the Lord had just commanded him (not good, totally unexpected).
  - ii. He goes down to Joppa, buys a ticket aboard a boat heading in the opposite direction of Nineveh, at the very end of the known world, Tarshish. And though our English text doesn't use these words, in Hebrew it says, “he goes down into the ship.” The author uses the word “down” multiple times to describe Jonah's flight from YHWH. Jonah's plan is to get away from YHWH and to go to Tarshish, but the author is telling us Jonah is going ... Down. That's right.

## 2. The Interaction with the Pagan Sailors

- A. **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.” 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.**

- i. You may have caught the deep irony of this passage already. Jonah, when found out and called out by the pagan sailors for being the cause of the storm, confesses that he is a Hebrew who worships the Lord God who made heaven, the sea, and the dry land. Yet, in this account, the wind obeys the Lord, the sailors obey the Lord, the great fish obeys the Lord, but who is the one person who is not obeying the Word of the Lord?
- ii. Not only that, but the sailors model such a fear and conviction of the sanctity of life that they want to save the lives of everyone on the ship, even Jonah whose fault it is, and yet Jonah doesn't care about anyone but himself. He is asleep in the bottom of the boat and has to be awoken and pleaded with to call upon his God so that they might be spared. (Also, the text never says that Jonah does call on the Lord, yikes!) Everyone prays except the prophet.
- iii. Finally, there is a progressive revelation that happens with the sailors as well. In verse 5, the storm hits and they are afraid. In verse 10, as they find out who Jonah is and that he ran away from the Lord, they are terrified. (I love their response when Jonah tells them who he's running from: "Why did you do it?!?") Finally, in verse 16 as they throw Jonah overboard and the sea calms, they are awestruck by the Lord's great power. Fear has turned to wonder and worship, and they offered sacrifice and vowed to serve YHWH.
- iv. The great irony is Jonah worships God, yet he does not obey him. Jonah worships God who made heaven, the sea, and the dry land, yet he thinks he can escape him by hiring a boat to the ends of the earth. Jonah worships the God who made everyone, yet he doesn't care what happens to the sailors. Are you picking up on who Jonah worships? Whoever it is and whatever it is, it sure isn't YHWH.
  - a. Finally, Jonah is cast into the depths of the sea, and he sinks down into the depths while the sailors experience the calm of the storm and are saved, directing all their praise and loyalty to YHWH.

### 3. Jonah's Response

- A. I wish we had more time to unpack all that is in this short and powerfully packed prayer—here are a few observations and thoughts.
  - i. Jonah's prayer is actually a conglomeration or collection of a number of Psalms (Psalm 3; 5; 18; 31; 42; 130; 142; 143 and probably a few more). Clearly, Jonah is a prophet who knows the Word of the Lord and has spent time with it.
- B. I would like to suggest maybe a different way of reading this prayer. I used to imagine that Jonah was thrown overboard and immediately the fish swallowed him. But I think there is a different way to see it.
  - i. It seems that verses 1–2 are a summary of what happened to Jonah—he called on the Lord and was ultimately heard.
    - a. It says, ***"Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from inside the fish. He said, 'I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble, and he answered me. I called to you from the land of the dead, and Lord, you heard me!"***

- ii. Verses 3–6: Jonah recalls his descent into the depths directly after being thrown overboard:
  - a. ***“You threw me into the ocean depths, and I sank down to the heart of the sea. The mighty waters engulfed me; I was buried beneath your wild and stormy waves. Then I said, ‘O Lord, you have driven me from your presence. Yet I will look once more toward your holy Temple.’”***
- iii. Verses 5–6a is poetically describing his death as a de-creation—like the chaotic waters of the deep where God hovered in order to bring life. Jonah is under those chaotic waters, sinking down to the realm of the dead and even being locked in the gates of Sheol or the grave. He says he was barred in forever.
  - a. ***“I sank beneath the waves, and the waters closed over me. Seaweed wrapped itself around my head. I sank down to the very roots of the mountains. I was imprisoned in the earth, whose gates lock shut forever.”***
- iv. Verse 6b is the climax where Jonah recalls God’s salvation, when God sent the fish to rescue him from the chaotic deep and the grave.
  - a. ***“But you, O Lord my God, snatched me from the jaws of death!”***
- v. **Finally, verses 7–9: Jonah’s prayer of gratitude that brings us back to the present moment:**
  - a. ***“As my life was slipping away, I remembered the Lord. And my earnest prayer went out to you in your holy Temple. Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God’s mercies. But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, and I will fulfill all my vows. For my salvation comes from the Lord alone.” Then the Lord ordered the fish to spit Jonah out onto the beach. —Jonah 2***
    - (i) Some have seen here a picture of Jonah’s own death and resurrection—he goes down to the deep, sinks beneath the waters, and enters the realm of the death, where the bars of the grave lock him in. But God hears his prayer, brings him up out of the water by the salvation of a great fish, that spits him out on dry land on the third day. A lot of creation-like language is being used to describe Jonah’s transformation, and we should understand this as a rebirth or a resurrection of the prophet.
    - (ii) I read this prayer, we read this prayer, and think, *Wow what a prayer! What a beautiful picture of what humility, repentance, and transformation looks like—look at the beautiful mercy and salvation of God. Hang on a minute.*
    - (iii) Did you notice what Jonah says in verse 8? Who do you think he’s talking about here? It’s not himself, because he says in contrast in the next verse: **“But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. ...”**
    - (iv) I think that this verse is about Nineveh—Jonah is saying—They have made their bed, God—they worship idols; they have forfeited mercy.
      - (a) Here’s what I saw as I studied Jonah this last week. Jonah believes in the revealed character of God—He is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving sin, rebellion, and iniquity. He says so in chapter 4:2. But Jonah only wants that to apply to him, and to his tribe, his nation, his people, and definitely not to his enemies.
        - 1. Yet God saves him anyway and says: *Let’s try this again.*

#### 4. The Word of the Lord

A. “Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time: ‘Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you.’ This time Jonah obeyed the Lord’s command and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all.” —Verses 1–3 (so far so good.)

#### B. The Interaction with the Pagan City

i. “On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: ‘Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!’ The people of Nineveh believed God’s message, and from the greatest to the least, they declared a fast and put on burlap to show their sorrow. When the king of Nineveh heard what Jonah was saying, he stepped down from his throne and took off his royal robes. He dressed himself in burlap and sat on a heap of ashes. Then the king and his nobles sent this decree throughout the city: ‘No one, not even the animals from your herds and flocks, may eat or drink anything at all. People and animals alike must wear garments of mourning, and everyone must pray earnestly to God. They must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence. Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us.’ When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened.”

a. The response is incredible. These wicked, cruel Ninevites model biblical textbook repentance—and they are truly convicted. They don’t know if God will even respond in mercy—they repent anyway. The revival is so effective, even the animals are fasting and in sack-cloth. Wow, this is really, really good!

#### ii. Jonah’s Response

a. “This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the Lord about it: ‘Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, Lord! I’d rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.’ The Lord replied, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about this?’ Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city. And the Lord God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah’s head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy for the plant. [The only time in the whole story that this miserable prophet is happy is for a plant.] But God also arranged for a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away. [Does anyone else picture the Very Hungry Caterpillar?] And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die. ‘Death is certainly better than living like this!’ he exclaimed. Then God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?’ ‘Yes.’ Jonah retorted, ‘even angry enough to die!’ Then the Lord said, ‘You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn’t I feel sorry for such a great city?’”

(i) The End.

## 5. Applying the Book of Jonah

- A. Do you see and hear the radical self-centeredness and selfishness of this prophet? All he cares about is his own comfort and well-being—but he doesn't give a rip if 120,000 people are destroyed. He is so happy over a plant that serves him and so distraught over its demise and so self-focused, he can't see the connection. God has to spell it out for him—I made and cultivated the plant, not you, and look how disturbed you are over it. I made these people and the animals—YOU DON'T THINK I SHOULD BE CONCERNED OVER THEIR WELL-BEING??
- i. Jonah is happy to apply the blessings and mercy of God to himself but not to others.
  - ii. It seems to me that we, as individuals in our interpersonal conflicts, are quick to apply God's forgiveness and mercy to ourselves but not to those who have wronged us. As the Church, we are happy to do this—but what about to our enemies?
  - iii. Remember the story Jesus told about the unforgiving servant? A man was forgiven a huge, unpayable debt by his master, and he was so grateful to be forgiven, but he quickly found a man who owed him a very small amount in comparison, and he treated him cruelly, throwing him in prison and demanding that he pay back every cent. Then that unforgiving servant was found out and was brought before his master and was harshly judged—The Master basically says—you don't get it. I forgave you such a great debt. Should you not have forgiven this small debt?
  - iv. The nation of Israel was called for a purpose—to be a light and witness of God's redemption in the world—they had forgotten that God's mercy is so great, it's big enough for all people, for all nations, for the righteous, and also for great sinners and rebels. This is a message for the people of God even today. God's mercy is big enough to include all people, in all places. Will we be extensions of God's mercy?

**Conclusion:** The book of Jonah leaves us in tension. Not just the tension of the unanswered question put to Jonah; not just our own reflections on how we think and apply God's mercy; but the tension of God's mercy and God's justice. How can God forgive and show mercy to such incredible evil like that of the Ninevites? Can a God like this actually be good or worthy of our worship?

It's interesting to note that Jonah is only mentioned one more time in all of Scripture, and it comes from the lips of Jesus Christ.

*“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees told Jesus, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.’ But he replied to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation craves a sign. Yet no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah, because just as Jonah was in the stomach of the sea creature for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment and condemn the people living today, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. But look—something greater than Jonah is here!’”*

—Matthew 12:38–41

God, in order to show mercy and forgiveness to a broken and rebellious humanity, became one of us. He took on human form in the person of Jesus Christ, and at the cross, he took the just punishment our sin deserves. In his body, he brought all the evil, sin, and injustice the world has ever known or will ever know, and he killed it there in his own body on the tree. And when he died, he traversed the grave—three days and three nights (like Jonah) through death to the grave, the heart of the earth. And on the third day, he came out the other side, resurrected and victorious!



As the writer of Hebrews says,

*“By the grace of God Jesus tasted death for everyone.”*

—Hebrews 2:9

Now God can show mercy and forgiveness to all because sin, evil, and injustice has been paid in full by Jesus Christ.

### **Communion**

As we come to the table of the Lord this morning, we find mercy. That is the heart of our God, to show us mercy. God’s mercy triumphs over judgment. So we come to this table to receive mercy, healing renewal, and correction so that we might align ourselves with our Lord Jesus and walk in his ways. The more we take hold of this truth, the more we believe it, the more we live it. And our old self, the past, our sin, our slavery will become a distant memory as we live into the new self—which has been redeemed by Jesus Christ.

**This table is a weekly physical reminder of God’s mercy for you; but not just for you, for any and for all who will turn to the Lord. But how will they turn if we don’t tell them, if we don’t show them mercy? So this table is meant to compel us not just to receive mercy, but to be mercy, to show mercy to any and to all.**

We know that because of human sinfulness and brokenness, there is not one of us who has lived up to the ideal of what God created us for—to love him supremely and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So as we come to the table this morning, we come as a people in need of forgiveness and in need of redemption and salvation. And that is what Jesus offer us at this table—forgiveness, redemption, and salvation. His life for our life; his righteousness for our sin and brokenness.

### **Prayer—**

*Most merciful God,*

*we confess that we have sinned against you*

*in thought, word, and deed,*

*by what we have done,*

*and by what we have left undone.*

*We have not loved you with our whole heart;*

*we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.*

*We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.*

*For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,*

*have mercy on us and forgive us;*

*that we may delight in your will,*

*and walk in your ways,*

*to the glory of your Name. Amen.*



- \* *Isn't Jonah just a "Big Fish Story"?*
- \* *It's fascinating to note that the author feels no need at all to explain the great fish. In other ancient literature, when we have stories like these, usually the great fish would be explained as a magical fish, and the main character's life is spared by some great quality of their character (humility, integrity, etc.); therefore, the gods show compassion—not so with Jonah. In other stories, there might be a magical plant or potion provided and used that sustains the life—but again, not in this book. The author has no desire to justify the fish or Jonah being in the fish for three days and three nights.*
- \* *Some may think there is no way anyone could live in a fish that long. You're right; in fact, Jonah describes his own death in his prayer multiple times. Most likely Jonah did die and was revived by the Lord.*
- \* *Last thing—the great fish, Jonah being in the fish three days and three nights, Jonah dying and coming back to life—how can any of this be real? First, the Christian faith teaches that God created everything and everyone and that he sustains all life. God is able to raise up human beings out of dust—Is anything too hard or impossible for God? Secondly, the Christian faith stakes its whole claim on Jesus of Nazareth being crucified, buried, and rising from the dead on the third day, never to die again. If we accept and believe these things—talking donkeys and great fish shouldn't be too hard to swallow.*