

Nineveh, the true and unfamiliar story.

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We all know the story of Jonah and the whale, how Jonah was told to go to Nineveh and preach. We think we know the entire story, but in my classic style, I want us to look at the story of Nineveh in its entirety. I want us to look beyond the story of Jonah, although it is a major part of the story.

In these lessons, we will start in Genesis, and then move to Jonah and end in the book of Nahum. We will also be looking in the book of Kings, Isaiah, Zephaniah and Matthew. We are going

to learn about Nineveh the city and the spiritual parallels that we can gather from its story.

Nineveh, the bloody city

We find the first mention of Nineveh in the book of Genesis.

Cush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one on the earth. ⁹ He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; therefore it is said, "Like Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD."
¹⁰ And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. ¹¹ From that land he went to Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah, ¹² and Resen between Nineveh and Calah (that *is* the principal city). Gen 10:8-12 (NKJV)

These verses are part of the infamously boring genealogies of Genesis, but when we look at a map in conjunction with these descendents, we can get an interesting picture. Cush was the descendant of Ham, the son of Noah that was cursed. Nimrod, descendant of Cush settled in the area of Shinar which is modern day Iraq. Nimrod was most famous for the building of the city of Babel, which later had the Tower of Babel and the confusion of speech. As I have mentioned in studies in this class, the ancient city of Babel became the city of Babylon, the city of Satan. So the fact that Nimrod founded Nineveh as well lends to the story that Nineveh was an evil city as well.

From roughly 1800 B.C. (these dates cannot be confirmed with any sense of accuracy, but the ranges are broadly accepted) the city of Nineveh was the seat of worship for the goddess Ishtar.

Ishtar was the Mesopotamian goddess of fertility, love, sex and war. Her worship centered on the act of ritual prostitution for she was thought to be a type of prostitute for the gods, man, and

nature. Her “love” was often deadly for those who fell for her ways. According to the “Epic of Gilgamesh” the Mesopotamian god Tammuz paid for his love for Ishtar with his life. As the legends go, the animals that fell for her “love” were often wiped off the earth entirely, or fell into domestication by man. Men that fell for her “love” were often relegated to the status of slaves and servants.

Nineveh settled into its role as a center of worship for Ishtar and was a central stop on trade caravan routes from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea and with its location on the banks of the Tigris River; its importance was known from an early time.

Around the 14th century B.C., Nineveh was taken by the Assyrian Empire and around 900 B.C., because of its location, became the center of the Assyrian Empire.

After this, the Assyrian kings kept building palaces and temples in the city, making it the place for the kings of Assyria.

It was during this time, sometime around 792 to 753 B.C., Jehovah God sent the prophet Jonah to preach to Nineveh (this story we will look at in detail later) to call them to repent of their wicked ways. You see, Nineveh was a wicked city. The Biblical book of Nahum calls it a bloody city. The Assyrians were always on the prowl for lands and people to conquer and often Israel was the target. This continued until a new threat to the Assyrian empire came to power. The mountain tribes of Urutu plagued the Assyrians until Tiglath–Pileser III came to power around 745 B.C., presumably after the preaching and revival of Jonah.

Succeeding Tiglath–Pileser III was a king that put Nineveh at the forefront of architecture and class. Sennacherib built a palace that rivaled any other in the region. This palace had over 80

rooms and each room was said to have had a large statue. The palace itself was 1650 ft x 794 ft. The foundation was over 72 feet tall and was made up of over 160 million bricks. The walls themselves were another 66 feet tall. This must have been something to see.

On the walls outside the palace were carvings of battles fought and won by Sennacherib. He was proud of his accomplishments. Let me share a quote concerning him:

The stone carvings in the walls include many battle scenes, impaling and scenes showing Sennacherib's men parading the spoils of war before him. He also bragged about his conquests: he wrote of Babylon "Its inhabitants, young and old, I did not spare, and with their corpses I filled the streets of the city." He later wrote about a battle in Lachish "And Hezekiah of Judah who had not submitted to my yoke...him I shut up in Jerusalem his royal city like a caged bird. Earthworks I threw up against him and anyone coming out of his city gate I made pay for his crime. His cities which I had plundered I had cut off from his land."

This concerning Hezekiah is found in the book of Chronicles:

After this Sennacherib king of Assyria sent his servants to Jerusalem (but he and all the forces with him *laid siege* against Lachish), to Hezekiah king of Judah, and to all Judah who *were* in Jerusalem, saying, ¹⁰ "Thus says Sennacherib king of Assyria: 'In what do you trust, that you remain under siege in Jerusalem?' ¹¹ Does not Hezekiah persuade you to give yourselves over to die by famine and by thirst, saying, "The LORD our God will deliver us from the hand of the king of Assyria"? ¹² Has not the same Hezekiah taken away His high places and His altars, and commanded Judah and Jerusalem, saying, "You shall worship before one altar and burn incense on it"? ¹³ Do you not know what I and my fathers have done to all the peoples of *other* lands? Were the gods of the nations of those lands in any way able to deliver their lands out of my hand? ¹⁴ Who *was there* among all the gods of those nations that my fathers utterly destroyed that could deliver his people from my hand, that your God should be able to deliver you from my hand? ¹⁵ Now therefore, do not let Hezekiah deceive you or persuade you like this, and do not believe him; for no god of any nation or kingdom was able to deliver his people from my hand or the hand of my fathers. How much less will your God deliver you from my hand?"

¹⁶ Furthermore, his servants spoke against the LORD God and against His servant Hezekiah. ¹⁷ He also wrote letters to revile the LORD God of Israel, and to speak against Him, saying, "As the gods of the nations of *other* lands have not delivered their people from my hand, so the God of Hezekiah will not deliver His people from my hand."

¹⁸ Then they called out with a loud voice in Hebrew to the people of Jerusalem who *were*

on the wall, to frighten them and trouble them, that they might take the city. ¹⁹ And they spoke against the God of Jerusalem, as against the gods of the people of the earth--the work of men's hands. 2 Chron 32:9-19 (NKJV)

The end of this story is interesting to me because in the following verses, the Bible is clear concerning the downfall of Sennacherib:

Now because of this King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah, the son of Amoz, prayed and cried out to heaven. ²¹ Then the LORD sent an angel who cut down every mighty man of valor, leader, and captain in the camp of the king of Assyria. So he returned shamefaced to his own land. And when he had gone into the temple of his god, some of his own offspring struck him down with the sword there. ²² Thus the LORD saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib the king of Assyria, and from the hand of all *others*, and guided them on every side.

2 Chron 32:20-22 (NKJV)

Sennacherib left shamed and when he went into the temple of his god, presumably Ishtar, he was assassinated by his own family.

This started another violent turn in the history of Nineveh, but this time there would not be a call to repentance, because about 100 years after the prophecy of Jonah, Jehovah raised up another prophet, Nahum, that did not have a message of repentance for Nineveh, but one of judgment.

This judgment came with the weakening of the Assyrian empire. Around 633 B.C, Nineveh was attacked by the Medes and after a long struggle, the Ninevites overcame the attack, only to be attacked again by the combined forces of the Medes, the Babylonians and the Susianians in 625 B.C., culminating in the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C.

The destruction of the city as described in the book of Nahum as being destroyed by floods and fire match up to the archeological finds of the ruins.

Nineveh itself remained uninhabited until 627 A.D. when the Eastern Roman Empire fought the Susianian Empire (Persia) and took the city. In 637 A.D., the Arabs wrested control of the territory and built the city of Mosul on the opposite bank of the Tigris River.

Today the ancient city of Nineveh lays in two mounds, or ruins.

The first ruin is known as Kouyunjik, which has been extensively explored with many temple artifacts and cuneiform tablets, the lost palace of Sennacherib and precious treasures found.

The second is known as *Nabī Yūnus* or the prophet Jonah, because of the shrine that the Arabs built on that site to that prophet. Only recently have Arabic archeologists began excavating at that site with many sculptures found and the popular belief that this was the location of the cities arsenal.

As we get further into this study, we will find that Jonah was an important prophet not just in Jewish and Christian religions, but also in the Islamic religion as well.

So now that we have an idea on the background of Nineveh, we can move on to the Biblical portion of this account.

Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me." Jonah 1:2 (NKJV)

We read these familiar words and think we know the story. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, he didn't want to so end of the story, right? Wrong.

You see, Nineveh represented to not just Jonah, but every other Jewish person, the worst of the enemies. The Jews hated even the thought of the Ninevites or the Assyrians even being around.

Now Jonah is told to go to Nineveh? That just doesn't make real good sense.

I told you we are going to look at some spiritual parallels, well, here is one.

If you have been saved for any length of time, God has directed you in some form or another to do something that you really didn't want to do. So if you will give me a little liberty here, in a way, God told you to go to Nineveh. That brings me to my point, what is your Nineveh. It may not be the capitol of a hated enemy, but it may be confronting that one that has hurt you so deeply. It may be to do something for God that takes you totally out of your comfort zone. It may be to preach, to teach, to sing, to witness, to let go of that grudge you have held onto for so long, regardless, God has called us to go, are we willing to listen and act on that call?

Acting on the call can be a scary experience. We don't know what to expect, what we will do, what we will say.

Rest assured from one that has been there, God will never leave you alone as long as you are standing for Him. I have to admit that I have stood and tried to do it my way and God was not in it and I fell on my face, but when my life was centered on and in God, he stood with me.

So, what is your Nineveh? Whatever it is, you need to be ready to stand and face it like the child of God that you are.

Jonah, the reluctant prophet

What is Jonah remembered most for? Being swallowed by the whale, right?

I want us to get away from that aspect of Jonah for a little while this morning and look at the man Jonah. We are going to do it two ways. First, we are going to look at what he means to other world religions and finally in the Bible and what we as Christians can learn from his example.

Jonah in Islam

Like many major role players in the Jewish religion, Jonah is regarded highly in the religion of Islam. The reason for this is that the religion of Islam places great importance on the people being faithful to the messages that god (Allah) has placed before them.

Jonah is known by the Arabic name Yunus, or the one with the whale.

According to tradition, the prophet Muhammad was looking for a city to have as a home base if you will. He went to the city of Ta'if to see if its leaders would allow him to base there. He was chased out of the city by the homeless and children. Muhammad took refuge in a garden, apparently owned by some of his fellow tribesman, and in keeping with traditions, they sent their servant to attend to the needs of Muhammad. The exchange that happens next is interesting. Muhammad asks where this servant was from and he replied Niniwah (Nineveh) to which Muhammad replied, the town of Yunus son of Matta and went on to describe himself as a prophet of god (Allah) like Yunnus.

Jonah in Judaism

The book of Yonah (Jonah) in the Hebrew scripture is included in the section known as the Minor Prophets. Following Rabbinical tradition, Yonah (Jonah) was the boy brought back to life by the prophet Elijah (found in 1 Kings 17:17–24), this we cannot be sure of, but makes for an intriguing theory. In the Hebrew scripture, Yonah shares many similarities with Elijah, especially concerning strict judgment of God's enemies.

In the book of Jonah, the theory of God forgiving sins is shown in a great way, this is known as Teshuva, the ability to repent and

be forgiven by God. In fact, every year at the feast of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as the Haftorah at the afternoon mincha prayer the book of Yonah is read.

Yonah is known as “the son of truth” because his father’s name, Amitai, means truth.

Jonah in Christianity

Jonah is remembered in Christian circles, mostly for the same reasons as he is in Jewish circles. The fact that he was an unwilling prophet, rebelled against the clear direction of God, repented, was forgiven and given a second chance which he after the fact blew, gives Christian believers hope that all though they may mess up, they can and will still be forgiven by God.

Several times in the gospel accounts Jesus referred to Himself as a type of Jonah. (We will look at these in detail shortly)

So you see, this man Jonah was much more than fish bait, he is an important figure in not only Christian religion, but other religions as well.

The Biblical Jonah

We are introduced to the prophet Jonah first in the Book of 2 Kings

He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who *was* from Gath Hepher.
2 Kings 14:25 (NKJV)

So Jonah was not just mentioned in the epic of the whale, he was apparently an important figure in the prophetic world.

Jonah's hometown

In the verse we read above, we learn that the hometown of Jonah was the city of Gath Hopher. All we really know about this city is that other than being Jonah's hometown, the name of the city means "the winepress of digging." The city is also known as Gittah-hopher. The city sets a few miles northeast of Nazareth in the region of Galilee.

The man Jonah

We have spent a lot of time looking at Jonah from several external views. Now let's move into his book and meet the man.

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, Jonah 1:1 (NKJV)

In the Old Testament, when the phrase "the word of the Lord" appears, invariably it is referring to some work that God has laid out for His faithful servants.

Let's take the time to look at other places, this "word of the Lord" is mentioned:

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield, your exceedingly great reward." Gen 15:1 (NKJV)

Then Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more. Num 22:18 (NKJV)

Then the boy Samuel ministered to the LORD before Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; *there was* no widespread revelation..... Now the LORD came and stood and called as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel answered, "Speak, for Your servant hears." " Then the LORD said to Samuel: "Behold, I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle.

1 Sam 3:1 (NKJV) and 1 Sam 3:10-11 (NKJV)

As for God, His way is perfect; The word of the LORD is proven; He is a shield to all who trust in Him. 2 Sam 22:31 (NKJV)

Then the word of the LORD came to Solomon, saying: ¹² "Concerning this temple which you are building, if you walk in My statutes, execute My judgments, keep all My commandments, and walk in them, then I will perform My word with you, which I spoke to your father David. ¹³ And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake My people Israel." 1 Kings 6:11-13 (NKJV)

For the word of the LORD is right, And all His work is done in truth. ⁵ He loves righteousness and justice; The earth is full of the goodness of the LORD. ⁶ By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth. Psalms 33:4-6 (NKJV)

Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: ⁵ "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations." Jer 1:4-5 (NKJV)

Prophets called, kings set aside, great men sent forth, God's people protected, these are but just a few of the quotes that I could have included, but you get the idea that the concept of the "word of the Lord" is no small thing.

In our New Testament life, we have preachers and teachers expounding on the truths of "the word of the Lord" but mostly our revelation is from the word of God which is our Bible.

So now the question must be raised, why Jonah? Wasn't there some other prophet that God could have sent? I believe this all goes back to the view of the prophet Yonah in the Jewish religion. To the Jews, Yonah was the perfect example of repentance and God's forgiveness.

Let me share a personal tidbit. I used to be down on myself about my past. There are things that I am not proud of and there are things I used to wish I could go back and change. One night I was praying, complaining is more like it, about these things, it seemed that God told me, "If you had not made all of those mistakes, you would not be who you are today and I could not

use you like I need to.” I am convinced that all those mistakes in our past prepare us for the work that God has set before us. Each experience we have gives us the insight to help others avoid that trap.

That is why God chose Jonah. Maybe he was given a task by God and really blew it. God sent the word to Jonah again thinking he would learn from his mistakes, but we thousands of years in the future learn so much more from Jonah’s story.

From here, the story of Jonah takes a left turn in a hurry. Next week we are going to look at Jonah’s call and the trouble it caused for other people.

God's work for Jonah, his response and the consequences of Jonah's actions

I want to pick up with the verse we left off last week.

Jonah's call

The LORD gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai:² “Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are.”

Jonah 1:1-2 (NLT)

As we discussed in the very first lesson, Jonah the prophet was given a message of repentance for the city of Nineveh, the capitol of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians were the enemies of Israel and now God is telling Jonah to go there?

One thing I have learned about God is that anyone and everyone will have the chance to repent. The Bible teaches that:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. John 3:16 (NKJV)

The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. 2 Peter 3:9 (NLT)

God wants everyone to repent. How can that be, God was telling Jonah to go to their worst enemies? Let's look at some more verses:

**"You have heard that it was said, '*You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.*'
44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.** Matt 5:43-45 (NKJV)

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. 10 For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. Romans 5:8-10 (NKJV)

For it pleased *the Father that* in Him all the fullness should dwell, 20 and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. 21 And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled 22 in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight-- Col 1:19-22 (NKJV)

So this whole concept of loving you enemies is one that permeates the core of Christianity.

Back to our story, Jonah was told by the word of the Lord to go to Nineveh and preach or prophecy or cry against it. The words for Nineveh were not good ones. As a teacher and preacher there have been times that I have had a lesson or a message that I would have rather not have given, I am sure Jonah was thinking I don't want to go there and say that, it is a recipe for disaster.

So what does Jonah do next? Simple, he runs away.

The escape to Tarshish

The title sounds like a movie title. I can picture it now, the man is trying to escape from a fate worse than death. Maybe it is an arranged marriage, maybe he was involved in a crime ring and he is trying to get out of town before the police close in on him. It is midnight, totally dark. No one on the streets. All of a sudden lightening flashes and the thunder rolls and he thinks, that's just great I'm going to get soaked, but at least no one else will be out. He makes it to the docks and finds a boat about to leave. He pays the captain to let him get on board and the captain is saying, don't you even want to know where we are going and our guy says it doesn't matter as long as it is away from here...

I know that is a little corny, but the basic idea is exactly what Jonah did. He received clear direction from the Lord about what to do and he decided he would run away. Let's look back in Jonah's book:

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.

Jonah 1:3 (NLT)

We can only assume that Jonah was still in Gath Hepher when God sent His word to him. If that is the case the journey from Gath Hepher to Joppa is about 80 some odd miles. There is a river to cross, mountains to climb, and a trek across the plain of Megiddo, so it was not a short trip by any means, it probably took a couple of days. Literally, the journey to Joppa was the exact opposite direction he would have needed to go to get to Nineveh. To go to Nineveh, he would have gone northeast, to go to Joppa, he went southwest.

Now the question is, where is Tarshish? Some Bible scholars feel that Tarshish is a generic term that can mean any type of distant sailing vessel. Thus the term Tarshish does not mean an exact geographical place, but a distant land.

Flavius Josephus states that there was a city in southern Asia Minor (modern Turkey) that was known by the name Tarshish. I accept that conclusion, but I don't believe that was Jonah's destination. He would still be going to the Assyrian empire, his enemies.

In the Septuagint and the Vulgate (ancient Latin versions of the scriptures) and the Targum of Jonathan (ancient Hebrew writings), the phrase Tarshish is understood to be the north African city of Carthage.

Many modern scholars like Bochart and Hertz believe that this Tarshish is actually the city of Tartessos in Southern Spain. They cite a prophecy against Tyre in the book of Ezekiel:

"Tarshish *was* your merchant because of your many luxury goods. They gave you silver, iron, tin, and lead for your goods. Ezek 27:12 (NKJV)

I hold to the theory that the Tarshish mentioned here was the city in Spain. My reasoning is simple. Jonah was running away from

God. He wanted to get as far away as he possible could and this location was as far as he could possible get.

Another thing I have learned the hard way is something I heard one time, “you can’t run from God, because every time you run from God you run right into Him.” That is a very true statement.

We have Jonah running, but not getting too far.

The storm is here

Here in the southeast U.S., one thing is for sure, the summers are hot and humid and most every day there is a chance for a good afternoon thunderstorm. Sometimes these storms blow down trees, tear shingles off the roof, and can cause some serious damage.

Imagine yourself in about 750 B.C.; you are on the Mediterranean Sea on a wooden sailing ship and all of a sudden a massive storm blows up. Let’s look in Jonah and read about this storm:

But the LORD hurled a powerful wind over the sea, causing a violent storm that threatened to break the ship apart.⁵ Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors shouted to their gods for help and threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Jonah 1:4-5 (NLT)

I don’t believe this was any ordinary storm or the sailors would not be panicked. They screamed and shouted and cried to their gods.

What really strikes me about the verses we just read is that the Lord caused the storm. Remember what I said earlier, anytime you try to run away from God you run into Him? That is what is happening here. Jonah ran away and God sent the storm after him, the only problem is that the sailors were caught in the crossfire.

The verse states that the ship was in danger of breaking up and they were throwing everything they could to lighten the ship's load and keep it from sinking.

Imagine all this activity on the ship, the sailors working furiously, calling to their gods, trying to save themselves, but something is missing. Where is Jonah?

To find the answer, we must go back to the text.

Jonah in the belly of the ship

It stands to reason to me that Jonah, running from the Lord, was in a state of panic and expected the judgment of the Lord to follow. When the storm came, I can picture him running below decks to hide. Let's read the text:

But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep. Jonah 1:5 (NKJV)

When we do wrong, the last thing we want is the consequences of our actions. Jonah goes to hide. This is where he is found.

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."
Jonah 1:6 (NLT)

The captain is now in a state of despair. Everything they have done is not working, the storm is getting worse, I'm sure the ship is making some strange noises. It is interesting to me that the captain tells Jonah to pray to his god, maybe he will listen.

I know people that claim to not believe in God, that when tough times come, the first thing they do is cry out to God asking for

help. There is an old military saying, “There are no atheists in foxholes.”

This sea captain typifies the idea that all of us seek the blessings of a higher power, often we just don’t know where to look. This man was willing to say that his gods were not good enough and was asking someone else to pray to theirs.

We have a God that has the answer to all things we face. He even has a way out for these sailors, we will see shortly.

The casting of the lots

We talked a little in the last section about when bad things happen. Usually when things happen, what is the first thing we want to know? Why me, or if it is a group of people we want to know who to blame.

This idea is played out in the upper room and the last supper with Jesus and His disciples.

As they were at the table eating, Jesus said, **“I tell you the truth, one of you eating with me here will betray me.”** Greatly distressed, each one asked in turn, “Am I the one?”
Mark 14:18-19 (NLT)

The disciples all wanted to know who would do this thing.

The sailors wanted to know who brought the trouble on board with them. There is a myth with sailors that a passenger on the boat that brings trouble with them is known as a Jonah.

So the sailors all gathered together and cast lots to determine the guilty party. You may want to know what is casting lots. It is a type of dice game that at certain points of the game someone is eliminated.

Let's read the text:

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.
Jonah 1:7 (NLT)

Questions that need answers

The lot fell to Jonah, he was the culprit. It was his entire fault. Evidently there was not a lot of questions asked when he boarded the boat, now, the questions are asked.

“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.”¹⁰ 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.
Jonah 1:8-10 (NLT)

Jonah explained who he really was and why he was doing what he was doing. It seems odd to me that these pagan sailors had more of a spiritual insight than the prophet and asked why did you do it.

This really set the sailors on edge, especially with what takes place next.

Throw me into the sea

As we have already stated, Jonah admitted it was his entire fault, told his story and brought innocent people into danger.

Jonah was, in my opinion, a very act first ask questions later kind of guy. The sailors are now asking what do we do now. Jonah has one more shoot from the hip answer:

And since the storm was getting worse all the time, they asked him, “What should we do to you to stop this storm?”¹² “Throw me into the sea,” Jonah said, “and it will become calm again. I know that this terrible storm is all my fault.” Jonah 1:11-12 (NLT)

This sounds a bit extreme doesn't it? It's my fault, throw me into the sea. He knew it was because of him this storm was here, and he thought if he removed himself from these men, they would be out of danger.

The sailors would not even consider this idea. They thought they could work harder and they would free themselves, but this was not the case:

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. Jonah 1:13 (NLT)

Finally they knew they had no other choice. They called out to Jehovah God and asked for forgiveness for what they were about to do:

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.” Jonah 1:14 (NLT)

Into the sea

The sailors picked up Jonah and splash:

Then the sailors picked Jonah up and threw him into the raging sea, and the storm stopped at once!¹⁶ The sailors were awestruck by the LORD's great power, and they offered him a sacrifice and vowed to serve him. Jonah 1:15-16 (NLT)

Two things really stick out to me about these verses, one, we get the imagery that as soon as Jonah hit the water the storm stopped.

Two, the sailors were so taken by the power of Jehovah that they vowed to serve him.

The power of God cannot be denied and He displays His power for all to see.

The great fish, whale, shark, sea monster,
thing...whatever it was

We covered in the last chapter about Jonah being cast into the sea. What happens next is one of the strangest happenings of this story.

The great fish

Now the LORD had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights. Jonah 1:17 (NLT)

In the ancient Hebrew texts, this verse is actually the first verse of chapter 2, but regardless, it is a critical statement to this story.

The phraseology that we have stated in English as a great fish actually comes from the Hebrew *dag gadol* which literally means big fish. In the Greek translations, we find the phrase *ketos megas* which means literally huge, huge fish. Also in the book of Job, there is a creature mentioned called Leviathan.

For as long as there have been sailors, there have been stories of sea monsters and sea serpents.

Science is discovering more and more new species in the deep ocean. There are species of shark and whale that have a mouth large enough to hold a human, but more often than not the throats are not large enough to swallow him.

There is a theory that this might be an undiscovered creature and that is a possibility.

Another possibility is that this creature was made by God just for this feat. The KJV renders the verse:

Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. Jonah 1:17 (KJV)

This preparation theory, we will look at later in detail.

There are some theories that Jonah was not swallowed by this creature, but trapped in seaweed and was saved from drowning by the creature as it knocked him loose.

I cannot hold that theory because the Bible says he was swallowed and that he prayed to God from the belly of the whale.

The miracle of the fish

We could spend a long time speculating as to the identity of the fish, or whatever it is, but we need to move past what if's and look at the miracle that took place here.

The miracle that took place is not that Jonah was swallowed. For all we know it could have been a goldfish that swallowed Jonah. The real miracle is that Jonah survived the encounter.

The sign of the prophet Jonah

The miracle also was a sign for the Messiah. During Jesus ministry, the Pharisees and Sadducees were always pressuring Jesus for a sign to prove His self, in response, Jesus replied that the only sign that He would give to them was the sign of the prophet Jonah. I am sure that this revelation made the people scratch their heads. We have already stated the fact that reading the account of Jonah was central to the Jewish religion so they were probably thinking what in the world is He talking about.

The reply of Jesus takes two parts and I want us to look at both.

This exchange is found in Matthew chapter 12. I want us to now go there and pick up the text:

One day some teachers of religious law and Pharisees came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to show us a miraculous sign to prove your authority.”³⁹ But Jesus replied, **“Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign; but the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah.⁴⁰ For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights. Matt 12:38-40 (NLT)**

We, believers in the 21st century really don't have to use too much imagination as to what Jesus was talking about. Jesus would be crucified and buried in the garden tomb and be there for three days, and on that third day, He would be raised victorious. Jesus compares His time in the grave to the time that Jonah was in the fish. This would not be missed by the listeners in the first century because they were familiar with the account of Jonah, but they were wondering what He meant.

While they were pondering that Jesus lets loose with his second part of the sign:

“The people of Nineveh will stand up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, for they repented of their sins at the preaching of Jonah. Now someone greater than Jonah is here—but you refuse to repent. Matt 12:41 (NLT)

Jesus recounts the basic point of the story of Jonah, how Jonah preached and the people heard and repented. Jesus says that this generation would not accept His offer of repentance. In that way, the people of Nineveh were more ready for God’s offer of forgiveness than the Jewish race. As we continue with this series, our portrait of Jonah gets a bit murkier, but with the help of the Spirit of God, he becomes an effective orator. Jesus states plainly that one greater than Jonah is here.

Quickly, I want to make a list of how Jesus is greater than Jonah:

1. Jesus is the Son of God.
2. He was proclaimed at His earthly birth by angels, visited by shepherds and also by the Magi.
3. He was proclaimed by John the Baptist as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”
4. He grew up in obscurity, but has become the most well known personality in history.
5. He was crucified, buried and rose back to life on the third day.
6. Unlike Jonah, Jesus willingly went to do the work set before Him by the Father, and never regretted it.

I know this list could be so much longer and more detailed, but you get the picture.

Let’s get back to our adventure with Jonah. We have Jonah in the sea; the great fish thing has just swallowed him, end of story, right?

No, right here is where it really gets interesting.

Jonah's prayer

Chapter 2 of the book of Jonah starts out with a pretty simple statement:

“Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from inside the fish.” Jonah 2:1 (NLT)

That is an innocent enough statement, Jonah prayed. Absolutely nothing wrong with that, in fact, I think we need to do more of it. Ask any Christian what is the most lacking aspect of their Christian life and most likely they will tell you one of two things; one they need to study the Bible more, or two they need to pray more, but I digress.

This statement sticks out to me as shocking in a book with shocking events, but why is that?

To me, the shocking part is the timing of Jonah’s prayer.

Let’s recap for just a minute.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh. He did not pray about it, just jumped on the ship and headed for Tarshish.

The storm came on the sea and while the sailors were praying to their gods, this man of God was asleep, hiding in the hull of the ship.

He announced to the sailors that he was to blame and said to throw him into the sea, the sailors prayed to God to forgive them of this, but Jonah did not pray a word.

Jonah was in the sea, possibly caught up in a patch of seaweed and then swallowed by the fish, now he decides to pray.

I wonder what would have happened if Jonah would have prayed instead of running?

So now we have this prophet in the belly of the fish, fearing for his life, now he sees the true result of his insubordination and starts to pray. The prayer that follows is a beautiful piece of Hebrew poetry, but also the cries of this man's heart. I want us to now take the time to look at his prayer and what we can learn from it.

We are going to look at the prayer in its parts.

"I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, And He answered me." Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, *And You* heard my voice. Jonah 2:2 (NKJV)

Verse two starts out by stating that Jonah cried out because of his affliction. Have you ever noticed that we tend to pray when we get into trouble is when we pray seriously? I have noticed for myself that it is easier to pray when everything is good and easy, but when the trouble hits; we don't know what to pray.

Here Jonah is facing sure death and he cried out to God.

This repetition of the words cried may seem strange to our English language. In the Hebrew, they are actually two different words. The first instance is the Hebrew word *Qara'* (kaw-rav'). Its meaning is to call, call out, recite, read, cry out, proclaim or to address by the proper name. This is the simple aspect of calling out. This call will eventually turn into a scream.

Jonah also states that he cried out to God from the belly of Sheol. This time the cry is another Hebrew word, *Shava'* (shaw-vah'). Its meaning implies a shout or screams for help.

We talked about the concepts of Jonah calling out, but there is another question that we need to address and that is what or where is Sheol?

Many translations of the Bible render the word Sheol into grave and some render it as death.

In the Jewish religion, Sheol is the gathering place of the dead, small or great, rich or poor, slave or free all gather there waiting for the final judgment.

Sheol is also mentioned in the New Testament. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, it is described as the place where Lazarus went, the Bosom of Abraham.

Also when Jesus was on the cross, he promised the thief that this day you will be with me in paradise.

When Jesus died on the cross, he descended into paradise and led out the righteous dead into Heaven with Him. (This is another lesson for another day!!) So now when the body dies, the soul either goes to punishment or into the presence of the Lord.

So that being said, Sheol does represent the grave, or death in this context.

Jonah is staring death in the face and he prays, here is the thing, after Jonah so blatantly disobeyed God, God will answer him.

Let's move on and look at some more of Jonah's prayer:

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. Jonah 2:3 (NLT)

We can read this verse and get the idea that Jonah is blaming God for this happening to him, but I don't think that is the correct assumption. I really believe that Jonah knows that he and he alone is to blame for the predicament he is in. I believe that Jonah is acknowledging the fact that God is in control of the forces of nature that are attacking him now, but this is not where I want to stop. Let's look at verse 4

Then I said, 'O LORD, you have driven me from your presence. Yet I will look once more toward your holy Temple.' Jonah 2:4 (NLT)

This concept is one all too familiar to Christians today. When all is well and good, no storms or trials, we tend to forget God, but let one thing go wrong, a bad grade on a report card, a bad report from the doctor, anything that will upset our calm life and we then turn our gaze back to God. That is the essence of this part of Jonah's story, the man of God turns his back on God, but when he starts facing trouble, he turns back to God.

Now we move to the most personal part of Jonah's prayer:

"I sank beneath the waves, and the waters closed over me. Seaweed wrapped itself around my head.⁶ I sank down to the very roots of the mountains. I was imprisoned in the earth, whose gates lock shut forever. But you, O LORD my God, snatched me from the jaws of death!⁷ As my life was slipping away, I remembered the LORD. And my earnest prayer went out to you in your holy Temple. Jonah 2:5-7 (NLT)

Jonah tells God about his situation. He was in the water, wrapped in seaweed, he felt like he was on the bottom of the ocean, but then God came and "snatched him from the jaws of death." It was at this point that Jonah remembered who he was and what he was supposed to do and prayed earnestly to God for deliverance.

There are two more verses I want to discuss before we move on. They are my two favorite in the entire book and I hope you will see why when we finish.

"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. ⁹ But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord" Jonah 2:8-9 (NIV)

The first verse, can refer to a believer or an unbeliever.

The first phrase is interesting, "Those who cling to worthless idols."

There are many excuses that people use not to believe in God or accept Christ as their savior. Reasons like I just can't believe that God will freely forgive me or that Jesus was a good teacher, but not the Son of God. Some may feel that their wealth means more to them than anything that God can give them. Their jobs are too important, they have too much fun. All of these are idols. An idol does not have to be a god that you worship. An idol is anything that you put before God. What idol is an unbelieving world holding onto instead of turning to God?

On the flip side of this issue, the believer can have an idol as well. Remember that I said that an idol is anything that you put before God? The believer can and does put things before their walk with God. Jonah put his hatred for the Ninevites before the work of God. What have we put before our work for God? That is something to think about especially because of the next line, "forfeit the grace that could be theirs."

It is easy to picture the grace that an unbeliever forfeits because it is the Grace of God they turn away from. As we will see later in this study, the Ninevites are given the choice to turn away from their idols and embrace the grace and forgiveness of God.

The believer on the other hand is a bit tougher to understand. We have experienced the grace and forgiveness of God. We have experienced the salvation of God. But one thing we fail to understand is that the grace of God is not confined in just salvation. God gives us grace to live, grace to die, grace to endure, grace to prosper, grace to be healthy, the list could go on and on, but let me state clearly that all we have and all we are is simply because of some aspect of God's grace. When the believer forfeits the grace that could be theirs does not mean they forfeit their salvation, but they could forfeit their prosperity, or their peace, or their health.

To end this section, my question for you is simply this, what have we forfeited because of our disobedience to God? What have we missed out on?

Jonah now goes on to say something that we as Christians should strive to emulate:

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. Jonah 2:9 (NLT)

Jonah states that he will do what he knows he is supposed to do. He knows that all he is, is because of God's blessings on him.

From this, God knows that Jonah is serious and honestly means his repentance. In the next chapter we will look at Jonah's second call.

Out of the belly, into the city

We spoke in an earlier lesson how Jonah was swallowed by the fish. Jonah prayed his prayer of repentance from inside the fish, but is that where the story ends?

The story does not end here, it is another beginning. This is the first account of a second chance mentioned in the book.

Yes Jonah messed up. Jonah ran away from his responsibilities. But God, in His mercy forgave Jonah and gave him another chance. That should give us hope to know that even if we mess up royally, God is more than willing to forgive and restore us.

This forgiveness and restoration is all well and good, but Jonah is still in the belly of the fish, probably with a piece of half chewed seaweed on his forehead.

Now we need to get Jonah out, so what happens next?

Then the LORD ordered the fish to spit Jonah out onto the beach. Jonah 2:10 (NLT)

The fish took Jonah, maybe in my imagination back to where he started, to Joppa. From here, the story of Jonah starts again.

Then the LORD spoke to Jonah a second time:² “Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you.” Jonah 3:1-2 (NLT)

Put yourself in Jonah’s shoes for just a minute. You ran away, got in a boat, went through a storm, got thrown into the sea, was swallowed by a whale, spent three days in the whale’s belly, now spit out on the beach, what would you do?

From the text we gather that Jonah sat on the beach, probably trying to sort out everything that had just happened. I probably would have done the same thing, but God had other plans. God

told Jonah to get up and go. From the text we have read so far, I can see God firmly planting his foot on Jonah's backside to get him moving.

You know, I see a lot of us in that picture. So many times we go through so much, and we think that we have to take a break and let it all sink in. I think of the disciples. They fit this example to a tee. They had just experienced the Passion Week, saw the resurrected Jesus, listened to Him, restored by Him, commissioned by Him, and now they witnessed one of the more glorious events in the Bible. I'm sure they just wanted to take it in, to think about it, to try to understand it, but they were given a heavenly "kick in the pants" to get moving. Let's read in the book of Acts:

"After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him.¹⁰ As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them.¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!" Acts 1:9-11 (NLT)

After these verses we read that they were constantly in prayer until the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began to spread the work of Christ.

Something else I want to talk about here. One of the most unbelievable things in this book is not Jonah being swallowed, or even the evil city of Nineveh repenting and being spared. It is the fact that Jonah in his blatant disobedience toward God was given another chance.

So many denominations base the facts of our salvation on the fact that if we mess up, if we "fall" there is no chance to be restored. (This is a concept that, forgive me, I will not get into in this lesson but understand that this premise is completely false and unbiblical.)

I believe that God is a God of another chance.

There are many instances of God giving His people another chance throughout the Bible. Remember this one:

The LORD observed the extent of human wickedness on the earth, and he saw that everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil.⁶ So the LORD was sorry he had ever made them and put them on the earth. It broke his heart.⁷ And the LORD said, "I will wipe this human race I have created from the face of the earth. Yes, and I will destroy every living thing—all the people, the large animals, the small animals that scurry along the ground, and even the birds of the sky. I am sorry I ever made them."⁸ But Noah found favor with the LORD. Gen 6:5-8 (NLT)

Humanity was wicked and God was going to destroy the race, but this man, Noah, found favor with God and because of his faithfulness, God did not destroy the entire human race.

What about King David. His nation was at war, but instead of being the leader he should have been, he stayed behind to sleep in his own bed. One night as he was walking on the roof, he saw a young lady taking a bath on a nearby rooftop. Instead of closing his eyes and walking away, he stared. What happens next is a story of sex, intrigue, and murder. To make a long story short, David had relations with the lady and a child was conceived. To cover this up, David had her husband "killed" in action and he took her as a wife. This was not hidden from God. God sent the prophet Nathan to David with these words:

Then the LORD sent Nathan to David. And he came to him, and said to him: "There were two men in one city, one rich and the other poor. ² The rich *man* had exceedingly many flocks and herds. ³ But the poor *man* had nothing, except one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food and drank from his own cup and lay in his bosom; and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴ And a traveler came to the rich man, who refused to take from his own flock and from his own herd to prepare one for the wayfaring man who had come to him; but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." ⁵ So David's anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this shall surely die! ⁶ And he shall restore fourfold for the lamb, because he did this thing and because he had no pity." 2 Sam 12:1-6 (NKJV)

This story made David very angry, let's see what follows:

So David's anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this shall surely die! ⁶ And he shall restore fourfold for the lamb, because he did this thing and because he had no pity." 2 Sam 12:5-6 (NKJV)

After David said this, Nathan dropped the bombshell:

Then Nathan said to David, "You *are* the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. ⁸ I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your keeping, and gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if *that had been* too little, I also would have given you much more! ⁹ Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife *to be* your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the people of Amon. ¹⁰ Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' 2 Sam 12:7-10 (NKJV)

From these words, David realized the need to repent of his sins:

So David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. 2 Sam 12:13 (NKJV)

From this terrible event in the life of David, we find one of the more soul stirring Psalms:

Psalm 51

For the choir director: A psalm of David, regarding the time Nathan the prophet came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins.² Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin.³ For I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night.⁴ Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. You will be proved right in what you say, and your judgment against me is just. ⁵ For I was born a sinner— yes, from the moment my mother conceived me.⁶ But you desire honesty from the womb, teaching me wisdom even there.

⁷ Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.⁸ Oh, give me back my joy again; you have broken me— now let me rejoice.⁹ Don't

keep looking at my sins. Remove the stain of my guilt.¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a loyal spirit within me.¹¹ Do not banish me from your presence, and don't take your Holy Spirit from me.¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and make me willing to obey you.¹³ Then I will teach your ways to rebels, and they will return to you.¹⁴ Forgive me for shedding blood, O God who saves; then I will joyfully sing of your forgiveness.¹⁵ Unseal my lips, O Lord, that my mouth may praise you.¹⁶ You do not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer one. You do not want a burnt offering.¹⁷ The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.¹⁸ Look with favor on Zion and help her; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.¹⁹ Then you will be pleased with sacrifices offered in the right spirit— with burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings. Then bulls will again be sacrificed on your altar.

Psalms 51:1-19 (NLT)

Even in the New Testament, this concept of another chance is played out. Remember the story of Peter?

Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: *'I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'*³² **But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.**"³³ Peter answered and said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble."³⁴ Jesus said to him, **"Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."** Matt 26:31-34 (NKJV)

From this, we enter the story:

Now Peter sat outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came to him, saying, "You also were with Jesus of Galilee."⁷⁰ But he denied it before *them* all, saying, "I do not know what you are saying."⁷¹ And when he had gone out to the gateway, another *girl* saw him and said to those *who were* there, "This *fellow* also was with Jesus of Nazareth."⁷² But again he denied with an oath, "I do not know the Man!"⁷³ And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, "Surely you also are *one* of them, for your speech betrays you."⁷⁴ Then he began to curse and swear, *saying*, "I do not know the Man!" Immediately a rooster crowed.⁷⁵ And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, **"Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."** So he went out and wept bitterly. Matt 26:69-75 (NKJV)

Peter realized what he did. After this, we come to one of my favorite stories in the Gospels.

So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, **"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?"** He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, **"Feed My lambs."**¹⁶ He said to him again a second time, **"Simon, son of**

Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "**Tend My sheep.**" ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "**Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?**" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "**Do you love Me?**" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "**Feed My sheep.**" John 21:15-17 (NKJV)

With this, Peter was restored to his position in fellowship with Christ.

Then there was Paul, or should I say Saul. He persecuted the church, caused the death of many Christians, came to a saving knowledge of Christ and became one of its most outspoken proponents.

God will restore us when we fall. He does not want to destroy us for our mistakes, there is but one thing we need to do:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9 (NKJV)

God wants us to confess our sins, to admit that we don't have the answers, but turn to the one that does, and that is Jesus Christ.

Let's get back to our story with Jonah.

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.
Jonah 3:3 (NKJV)

Jonah goes to Nineveh. If we remember back to the first lesson, Nineveh was a large city on a major trade route.

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey *in extent*.
Jonah 3:3 (NKJV)

The exact meaning of this Hebrew phrase is uncertain, but it could mean that the city was so large that it took at least three

days to see it all. So Jonah is finally in Nineveh, now the preaching can begin, but that is next week's lesson.

In forty days

As with most every proclamation of God's impending judgment in the Bible, there is a period of time that God allows for a chance of repentance. Sometimes the people repent, sometimes not.

God sends this prophet to Nineveh with a simple message:

On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!" Jonah 3:4 (NLT)

One of the worst feelings in the world is the feeling of when you are caught doing something wrong and you know it.

Here, the city of Nineveh, known for its ritual prostitution, its violence, its idolatry is called on the carpet. God's word for Nineveh is simple, I will destroy you.

Here we find another reason that Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. Jonah wanted the enemies of God destroyed, but God through this message is giving them the opportunity to repent. As we will see in the first few verses of chapter 4; this was Jonah's reasoning for not going to Nineveh the first time.

So, now we have the reluctant prophet in the city, finally, he proclaims his message, and here's the strange thing, the people

believed. One reason that I feel the people believed so easily is the fact that the Assyrians had been fighting the mountain tribes for so long and the people may have assumed that the tribes would get the upper hand eventually; we just cannot be for certain.

So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Jonah 3:5 (NKJV)

Fasting is something that has lost its meaning in our western Christian mentality. We hear the term fast and immediately think of not eating after a certain time at night for a blood test or some medical procedure the next day. In the Biblical sense, however, the fast was a special occasion to prove the person's sincerity to God about the circumstance they were praying for. They people proclaimed a fast to show they were serious about what they were about to do.

One thing I must mention here is that the term used for God in verse 5 in the text implies Jehovah God, but is not any Hebrew word specifically connected to Jehovah God. Maybe these people had a "religious experience" but its effects were not long lasting because there is no record of any prolonged period of belief in the God of the Hebrews in Nineveh. Maybe they knew about God, but truly did not know God. Contrast that information with the account of the sailors believing in God. In Jonah 1:16, we find that the word, LORD, is in all caps which means that the sailors called on God using His covenant name, Yahweh, probably denoting a sense of true dedication on their part.

News of these events soon reached the king. He could have easily crushed this religious reform, but no, he accepted the message as well.

Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat in ashes. ⁷ And he caused *it* to be proclaimed

and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. ⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who can tell *if* God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish? Jonah 3:6-9 (NKJV)

This pagan king had an insight that many preachers today need. He understood that when God says something, He is not just saying, He means it.

The king issued the edict that everyone, regardless of station or life must wear burlap and sit in ashes so that God may pass this judgment over them. (The wearing of burlap and sitting in a bed of ashes were both symbols of ancient mourning rites.)

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. Jonah 3:10 (NKJV)

This decision of God not to destroy Nineveh rested entirely on His grace and mercy.

We can find two other instances where God sent a message of judgment and destruction, but accepted the repentance of the people and put off that judgment.

The Sovereign LORD showed me a vision. I saw him preparing to send a vast swarm of locusts over the land. This was after the king's share had been harvested from the fields and as the main crop was coming up.² In my vision the locusts ate every green plant in sight. Then I said, "O Sovereign LORD, please forgive us or we will not survive, for Israel is so small."³ So the LORD relented from this plan. "I will not do it," he said.

A Vision of Fire

⁴ Then the Sovereign LORD showed me another vision. I saw him preparing to punish his people with a great fire. The fire had burned up the depths of the sea and was devouring the entire land.⁵ Then I said, "O Sovereign LORD, please stop or we will not survive, for Israel is so small."⁶ Then the LORD relented from this plan, too. "I will not do that either," said the Sovereign LORD. Amos 7:1-6 (NLT)

Also in the book of Zephaniah, we read these words:

Gather together—yes, gather together, you shameless nation.² Gather before judgment begins, before your time to repent is blown away like chaff. Act now, before the fierce fury of the LORD falls and the terrible day of the LORD's anger begins.³ Seek the LORD, all who are humble, and follow his commands. Seek to do what is right and to live humbly. Perhaps even yet the LORD will protect you— protect you from his anger on that day of destruction.

Zeph 2:1-3 (NLT)

In the book of Jeremiah, we read these words:

If I announce that a certain nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed,⁸ but then that nation renounces its evil ways, I will not destroy it as I had planned. Jer 18:7-8 (NLT)

This is exactly what happened in Nineveh, the people repented, God saw that they were sincere, and He put off his judgment for another day.

In the next lesson, we will look at the reaction of the prophet Jonah.

Jonah's reaction

Chapter four in the book of Jonah starts out with an interesting verse:

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. Jonah 4:1 (NKJV)

The question is, what displeased Jonah? For that we must look back in our last lesson at the closing verse of chapter three:

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.
Jonah 3:10 (NKJV)

As a society, we want justice, we want the guilty punished, we want them to pay for what they did, we won't admit it, but we want them to suffer. That is where Jonah is.

Jonah finally went to Nineveh, delivered his message, it was effective for the people did repent, and now he was angry because God did what He said He would do.

In a lot of ways, I can see Jonah's point of view. Why should the evil prosper. Why should the ungodly seem to be blessed? Many other personages in the Bible struggled with this as well.

The prophet Habakkuk dealt with this issue, for he wrote:

The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw. ² O LORD, how long shall I cry, And You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" And You will not save. ³ Why do You show me iniquity, And cause *me* to see trouble? For plundering and violence *are* before me; There is strife, and contention arises. ⁴ Therefore the law is powerless, And justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds. ⁵ "Look among the nations and watch-- Be utterly astounded! For *I will* work a work in your days *Which* you would not believe, though it were told *you*. ⁶ For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, A bitter and hasty nation Which marches through the breadth of the earth, To possess dwelling places *that are* not theirs. ⁷ They are terrible and dreadful; Their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves. ⁸ Their horses also are swifter than leopards, And more fierce than evening wolves. Their chargers charge ahead; Their cavalry comes from afar; They fly as the eagle *that* hastens to eat. ⁹ "They all come for violence; Their faces are set *like* the east wind. They gather captives like

sand. ¹⁰ They scoff at kings, And princes are scorned by them. They deride every stronghold, For they heap up earthen *mounds* and seize it. ¹¹ Then *his* mind changes, and he transgresses; He commits offense, *Ascribing* this power to his god." ¹² Are You not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction. ¹³ *You are* of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, *And* hold Your tongue when the wicked devours *A person* more righteous than he? ¹⁴ *Why* do You make men like fish of the sea, Like creeping things *that have* no ruler over them? ¹⁵ They take up all of them with a hook, They catch them in their net, And gather them in their dragnet. Therefore they rejoice and are glad. ¹⁶ Therefore they sacrifice to their net, And burn incense to their dragnet; Because by them their share *is* sumptuous And their food plentiful. ¹⁷ Shall they therefore empty their net, And continue to slay nations without pity? Hab 1:1-17 (NKJV)

In the book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah has these words about the fall of Israel:

How lonely sits the city *That was* full of people! *How* like a widow is she, Who *was* great among the nations! The princess among the provinces Has become a slave! ² She weeps bitterly in the night, Her tears *are* on her cheeks; Among all her lovers She has none to comfort *her*. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her; They have become her enemies. ³ Judah has gone into captivity, Under affliction and hard servitude; She dwells among the nations, She finds no rest; All her persecutors overtake her in dire straits. ⁴ The roads to Zion mourn Because no one comes to the set feasts. All her gates are desolate; Her priests sigh, Her virgins are afflicted, And she *is* in bitterness. ⁵ Her adversaries have become the master, Her enemies prosper; For the LORD has afflicted her Because of the multitude of her transgressions. Her children have gone into captivity before the enemy. ⁶ And from the daughter of Zion All her splendor has departed. Her princes have become like deer *That* find no pasture, That flee without strength Before the pursuer. ⁷ In the days of her affliction and roaming, Jerusalem remembers all her pleasant things That she had in the days of old. When her people fell into the hand of the enemy, With no one to help her, The adversaries saw her *And* mocked at her downfall. Lam 1:1-7 (NKJV)

In the book of Psalms, we read these words:

Why do You stand afar off, O LORD? *Why* do You hide in times of trouble? ² The wicked in *his* pride persecutes the poor; Let them be caught in the plots which they have devised. ³ For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire; He blesses the greedy *and* renounces the LORD. ⁴ The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek *God*; *God is* in none of his thoughts. ⁵ His ways are always prospering; Your judgments *are* far above, out of his sight; *As for* all his enemies, he sneers at them. ⁶ He has said in his heart, "I shall not be moved; I shall never be in adversity." ⁷ His mouth is full of cursing and deceit and oppression; Under his tongue *is* trouble and iniquity. ⁸ He sits in the lurking places of the villages; In the secret places he murders the innocent; His eyes are secretly fixed on the helpless. ⁹ He lies in wait secretly, as a lion in his den; He lies in wait to catch the poor;

He catches the poor when he draws him into his net. ¹⁰ So he crouches, he lies low, That the helpless may fall by his strength. ¹¹ He has said in his heart, "God has forgotten; He hides His face; He will never see." Psalms 10:1-11 (NKJV)

The wicked plots against the just, And gnashes at him with his teeth. ¹³ The Lord laughs at him, For He sees that his day is coming. ¹⁴ The wicked have drawn the sword And have bent their bow, To cast down the poor and needy, To slay those who are of upright conduct. Psalms 37:12-14 (NKJV)

We could go on and look at many other instances where Godly men had issues with the fact that the wicked seemed to prosper.

Jonah left the city angry that God would allow these people to repent. I'm sure he envisioned himself going to Nineveh, delivering his message right before the judgment of God fell.

Jonah's next words are very intriguing to me:

So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You *are* a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. Jonah 4:2 (NKJV)

This is only the second time in the book of Jonah when it states that he prayed. The first time, he was in trouble, and now, he is mad. I'm sure he wanted to give God a piece of his mind, but in the verse, we get a glimpse of the true nature of God. Let's look at those for just a moment.

1. God is a gracious and merciful God.
2. God is slow to anger.
3. God is abundant in loving-kindness.
4. God relents from doing harm.

Jonah did the same thing that I believe we are all guilty of, we put God in this little box, and expect Him to pop out like a genie

in a bottle and do whatever, whenever we demand, but that is not how it works. If anything, we should be in that box letting God fully control our every action and reaction. We could get tied up here, but we must move on.

Just kill me now, LORD! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.”
Jonah 4:3 (NLT)

Jonah was angry because his message was effective. Could you imagine, for a moment, Billy Graham preaching at one of his great crusades, gives the invitation and thousands come forward only for him to stomp off the stage angry that someone accepted God's offer of salvation? That is in effect what Jonah did. Jonah was angry because God passed the destruction of Nineveh over through His mercy. Sadly, he could not notice the parallel that he too was spared destruction through God's mercy.

This concept of “let me die” or “I'm so mad I could just die” is not singular to the account of Jonah.

If you remember anything about the story of Elijah, most likely you know of the “battle” between the prophets of Baal and the prophet of God on Mt Carmel. The prophets of Baal called out to their God all day with no response. Elijah, when it was his turn, rebuilt the altar, and offered the sacrifice to God properly, then the fire fell. That day the prophets of Baal were defeated and God proved that He was God. Queen Jezebel heard about this and sent word to Elijah that He would be dead before the next day was through. (1 Kings 19)

From here, Elijah ran and hid. He was alone in the mountains when he complained to God:

And when he saw *that*, he arose and ran for his life, and went to Beersheba, which *belongs* to Judah, and left his servant there. ⁴ But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die,

and said, "It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I *am* no better than my fathers!"
1 Kings 19:3-4 (NKJV)

From here, we know the rest of the story, how the angel woke him up and made him eat, he traveled to Mt Horeb and there experienced the earthquake, the fire and the whirlwind. But what impresses me, is that although this great man of God felt this way, God continued to use him in a mighty way.

The same is true for us, we may have experienced a crushing defeat, but God still has a plan for our lives.

Let's get back to our study, God responds to Jonah in an interesting way:

Then the LORD said, "*Is it* right for you to be angry?" Jonah 4:4 (NKJV)

In this one verse, we see an age old question, is anger okay. One thing we must understand about anger, it will fester and grow like an infection if left alone. On the other hand, I want to submit that anger can be a good thing. If someone puts us down for our shortcomings, maybe the anger at that situation motivates us to do a better job. Anger is not all bad, but left uncontrolled is like a fire. Picture yourself camping. It is a cool night so you build a fire. As long as you are tending that fire, keeping it contained and not too big, it is helpful for keeping you warm, you can cook on it and it gives light. But turn your attention away from the fire and it can get out of control in a hurry. We have all seen the news footage of wildfires in California and all the damage they cause. Did you know that most of these are caused by someone carelessly having a camp fire?

We must learn to control our anger.

Let's get back to the question. Did Jonah have a right to be angry about this? Absolutely not, by Jonah's own admission (v2) God is just living up to His character. That is what God is trying to get Jonah to see here.

From here, we take a little pause in our story. I can see Jonah mad and storming out of the city, not waiting for any of the townspeople to ask him about a relationship with God, he just wants out. This is where we find Jonah:

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. Jonah 4:5 (NLT)

I can picture Jonah sitting on a cliff outside the city hoping that God would change his mind and destroy Nineveh anyway. That will happen but not for about another 100 years.

From here, we are going to leave Jonah on the cliff and in the next lesson look at four things that are mentioned briefly but give us an important part of the story of Jonah.

Preparations

Throughout this study I have hinted at a theory that is developed throughout the book of Jonah and I call it the preparation theory.

To understand it, I want to mention that there are four things that are specifically mentioned that God prepared in the book. They are:

1. The fish (Jonah 1:17)
2. The plant (Jonah 4:6)
3. The worm (Jonah 4:7)
4. The wind (Jonah 4:8)

All four of these things were “prepared” to teach God’s man a lesson and clearly, as we will see in the closing lessons on the book of Jonah, he just didn’t get it.

I want us to look at these four things and what spiritual parallels we can gather from them.

The fish

Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah 1:17 (NKJV)

I know what you are thinking, we already had a lesson on this thing and here you go again. You are right, we did have a lesson on it, but I do want to mention one more thing that I did not mention in that lesson.

We talked about the fish swallowing Jonah, but did you know there is something else in the Bible that is mentioned as “swallowing”?

In this account several men tried to usurp the authority of Moses. They tried the theology that everyone is holy themselves and does not need a man, especially Moses telling them what God wants them to do. Moses challenges them and God will show who is right:

And Moses said: "By this you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works, for *I have not done them* of my own will. ²⁹ If these men die naturally like all men, or if they are visited by the common fate of all men, *then* the LORD has not sent me. ³⁰ But if the LORD creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the pit, then you will understand that these men have rejected the LORD." ³¹ Now it came to pass, as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground split apart under them, ³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men with Korah, with all *their* goods. ³³ So they and all those with them went down alive into the pit; the earth closed over them, and they perished from among the assembly. ³⁴ Then all Israel who *were* around them fled at their cry, for they said, "Lest the earth swallow us up *also!*" ³⁵ And a fire came out from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering incense. Num 16:28-35 (NKJV)

God did send a new thing to deal with this rebellion. So this idea of the fish being something just for the purpose of swallowing Jonah is a possibility.

What we need to realize is that when we willfully disobey God, that means when we do not do what is right even though we know better, we should expect something to happen to us.

The plant

And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant. Jonah 4:6 (NKJV)

The identity of this plant is uncertain, but the Hebrew word used here is *kikayon*. It is believed that this is some type of extremely fast growing gourd with rather large leaves.

The text tells us that this plant helped ease the misery of Jonah during the heat of the day. There is nothing better on a hot summer day than to find a nice shady spot. Here Jonah relaxed and waited. Eventually, Jonah fell asleep.

The worm

But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it *so* damaged the plant that it withered. Jonah 4:7 (NKJV)

I can picture this worm; most likely some form of caterpillar that ate through the stem of this plant. As fast as the plant came up, it withered and died.

So the little comfort that the plant gave Jonah was gone. The bright desert sun started to take its toll on this prophet.

The wind

And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "*It is better for me to die than to live.*" Jonah 4:8 (NKJV)

This is the last thing that we read that God prepared; a strong east wind. This wind swept across the desert picking up bits of sand blowing it on Jonah, drying his skin even more just simply making him miserable. Even more than that, the sun was hot, there was no shade anywhere to be found, and so what does our prophet do? He wishes for death.

You see in just the day or so that Jonah had the plant, he loved it because it gave him comfort. Now that it was gone, his comfort was gone.

Now God speaks to Jonah again.

Then God said to Jonah, "*Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?*" And he said, "*It is right for me to be angry, even to death!*" ¹⁰ But the LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. Jonah 4:9-10 (NKJV)

God questions Jonah about the plant.

Let me ask a question. Say that you have the bare minimum cable package. Comcast makes a mistake and suddenly you have every channel known to man. They discover the error and fix it. Although you have only been paying for the basic package all along, do you have the right to be angry that your channels were cut back?

What about this one; you get your bank statement and after you get your check book up to date, you see that somehow there has

been an extra \$1000 in your account. You take that money out and spend it. Then one day you get a letter out of the mailbox that says you must repay that money; do you have the right to be angry that you have to pay that money back?

Yes, any normal human would be upset at these situations, but we must realize that if you want every cable channel, you need to order and pay for them. If you want \$1000 in your bank account, you need to work and save and put it there.

God calls Jonah out, again. God said that you have pity on this weed that came up overnight and died overnight, but you did nothing to keep it alive. Jonah could have watered it or something, but instead he felt the sense of entitlement that he deserved this.

From an early age I learned that if I wanted anything, I have to work for it and that has been a good philosophy for me. It is an ethic that I want to instill in my children. Jonah, it seems, had no such ethic.

God is trying His best to teach Jonah a lesson through these four things that He prepared.

In the end, we can sum it all up by one phrase, Jonah didn't get it.

Finally God lays it all out on the table:

And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left--and much livestock?" Jonah 4:11 (NKJV)

In effect, God told Jonah that there were 120,000 people in Nineveh that needed compassion and mercy. Whether these

were children or a reference to the spiritual ignorance of the Ninevites, we are not sure.

In the previous verse, God questioned Jonah about the weed; Jonah said he had every right to be angry about the weed. God now asks, if Jonah took pity or had compassion about the weed, something he had no control over, why should God that had complete control and love for His creation not have pity and compassion on the city of Nineveh.

We have had a lot of twists and turns in this study.

What can we gather from all of this?

I believe that it is safe to say that God will forgive us when we mess up. God forgives us, but we will suffer the consequences for our actions. After the last verse in Jonah, he is not mentioned again as a major player in the Bible, just mentioned as a foot note. The other chance we are given, are we going to take advantage of it and make the best of it, or are we going to blow it like Jonah?

Thank you for your time and attention during this study, my prayer is that something that was said has touched your heart.

Keith Blackwell.