

Week 1 - God Requisitions; Jonah Runs (1:1-3)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 12:38-42

Introduction

Big Idea: There is a little Jonah in each of us but God is merciful and can still use us in spite of ourselves

Familiarity breeds contempt

You've heard that old saying, right?

Do you think it's true?

Whether familiarity leads to outright contempt is debatable but reading children's books aloud to little kids will certainly make you understand how familiarity can lead to glazing over and a loss of attention to detail

Somewhere around the 500th reading of Goodnight Moon or The Poky Little Puppy it's really hard not to lose interest

While that's fine with children's books, when it comes to the Bible losing interest poses a problem for us

Still, we can become so familiar with some of the well-known biblical accounts that we stop appreciating them which then leads to us missing the messages and lessons they contain

And Jonah is one of those biblical accounts that we have heard so often we can miss what it is all about

Do an internet search for the subject "Jonah" and you will be inundated with graphics showing a little man in a big whale

If you were raised going to Sunday school you probably can still conjure up the image of Jonah and the whale on the old Flannelgraph

And for many people the guy getting swallowed by a whale remains the extent of what they really know about Jonah

And there are plenty of people for whom the whole thing about the great fish makes the story "fishy" because the find the whole "man living in the belly of a fish for three days" thing hard to swallow

But Jonah is a lot more than a fish story – it's an account that concerns real, historical characters and events – even Jesus referenced Jonah as a historical figure in **Matthew 12** as we just heard in our Scripture reading

Today's message is going to serve as something of an introduction as we begin the series

Our text is **Jonah 1:1-3** and we will begin by looking at the **main characters** in the account and their **motivations** and then how Jonah serves as a kind of **mirror** that reveals our attitudes and actions

Let's start with a little background before we tackle the text

Background

The book of Jonah doesn't tell us who authored it but scholars tend to agree that it was likely written by Jonah himself

Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II who was king in the northern kingdom of Israel from 793 to 753BC

This places Jonah's ministry as being after Elisha and makes Jonah a contemporary of Amos and Hosea

As the most powerful king in the history of the northern kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam II's reign was a successful one in spite of his wickedness as God graciously blessed them so that Israel was able to enjoy a measure of prosperity

Assyria had long been a force to be reckoned with and would become the strongest military force in the world in another 50 years or so when they would command a territory that would stretch from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea and from the Caucasus Mountains down into Egypt

But Jonah lived during a brief time of reversal of power as Assyria experienced a period of relative weakness due to suffering epidemics of plague and internal rebellion

And it was during this time of temporary decline that Jeroboam was able to take back land that had been stolen and to restore Israel's boundaries to their greatest extent since the time of David and Solomon

Still, at this same time, Jonah's contemporaries, Hosea and Amos, were warning that God was going to punish Israel for their wickedness and Hosea specifically named the nation that God would use for this as Assyria (**Hosea 11:5**)

In all likelihood the king of Nineveh that is mentioned was Ashur-dan III who reigned over Assyria from 773-755BC and archeologists have found an inscription from this time period that indicates a swing toward monotheism in Assyria during this period – which lends external support to the Jonah narrative

So, with those details in mind, please join me in your Bibles and follow along as I read **Jonah 1:1-3**

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

I. Main Characters

Let's start our look at the main characters with Jonah

A. Jonah

We see in **verse 1** that Jonah is identified as "the son of Amittai" (Amittai means "truthful" by the way)

And that would mean very little to us except for the fact that this isn't the first or only time Jonah is mentioned in Scripture

Keep your finger in Jonah and turn back with me to 2Kings 14 where we will look at verse 25 (**2Kings 14:25**)

There we read that Jonah the son of Amittai was **from the city of Gath-hepher** which was in the portion of the land allotted to the tribe of Zebulun in what later became known as Galilee and lay just a little to the northeast of Nazareth in the Northern Kingdom of Israel

We also learn that Jonah was a prophet who predicted the restoration of the land of Israel to its ancient boundaries through the efforts of Jeroboam II

The territory had been seized generations earlier by the Syrians and the retaking of it came about just as God told Jonah had said which made him very popular – everybody loved him because he had brought them a good prophecy

This means that Jonah was a **known and respected prophet** at the time the word of the Lord came to him regarding Nineveh and that meant the people would pay attention to what Jonah had to say

His name means "dove" and Jonah lived up to his name as his first recorded prophecy certainly was one that brought comfort to Israel – but the call of a dove sounds like moaning and lamenting and Jonah does a fair share of both living up to his name in that way as well

Jonah is also one of only four prophets whose ministries were referred to by Jesus the others being Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah with Jonah being the only one who Jesus likened unto himself when he compared Jonah's time in the belly of the great fish to his coming time in the tomb

Reluctant prophet

The way the book of Jonah begins is a common formula that we see repeatedly in the Old Testament when God spoke to the prophets

"The word of the Lord came to..." and what happens in all cases except for Jonah is that the prophet readily obeys

Most prophets carried the message they were given willingly and even gladly — but not Jonah

Jonah was the only prophet who attempted to run away from God

He didn't want to have anything to do with taking God's message to Nineveh – **Jonah was a reluctant prophet**

So, who were the Ninevites that Jonah didn't want to go to?

B. Ninevites

The Ninevites were Assyrians

The city of Nineveh was the capital of Assyria located on the east bank of the Tigris River about 550 miles from Samaria, the capital of Israel

As I've already alluded, Assyria was a rival to Israel and a thorn in their side

And during Jonah's day they had already conquered a rather large area that bumped right up against Israel and were making incursions into Israel

The Assyrians were a pagan, poly-theistic, and wickedly brutal, warrior nation that was known to inflict heinous tortures on their captured enemies – really, what they did is too gruesome to talk about on a Sunday morning

Their method of taking over an area was to displace entire nations to destroy their power through severing their connection to their home turf and then to move others into the land in order to control it

For generations they had been conducting raids on surrounding nations continually exercising and expanding their power as they swallowed up more land by killing and subjugating the original inhabitants

The Assyrians were enemies of Israel and were soon to be God's tool of discipline against Israel by removing Israel from the land as Hosea prophesied in **Hosea 9:3** when speaking of Israel –

They shall not remain in the land of the Lord, but Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and they shall eat unclean food in Assyria

The people of Nineveh were a reprehensible people and Jonah was reluctant to take God's message to them

But the book of Jonah isn't really about Jonah or the Ninevites, it's really about God

C. God

When we study a book of the Bible one of the clues we look at in determining what the book is about is the frequency of different words used in the text – obviously, the more often a word is mentioned the more likely it is to be the subject

Without taking into consideration all of the pronouns used

God is directly mentioned by name **36 times** in the book of Jonah

While **Jonah** is only mentioned by name **15 times**

And **Nineveh** is only mentioned **8 times**

I said earlier that Jonah isn't a fish story and we see that the **great fish** is only mentioned **4 times**

Clearly then, God is the central character of the book of Jonah

And in Jonah we see a great deal of God's character revealed

We see that God cares for all people and all creation

We see that God is the God of second chances

We see that he is the God who provides and the God who rescues

We see that God is sovereign over nature, people, nations, and situations

We see God demonstrate his omnipresence, his omniscience, and his omnipotence

We see that God is the God of righteous justice and the God who saves

All of the other characters are secondary as they are players in a drama that serves to showcase who God is

And as we read the account we see them act according to their personalities and their priorities to the situations they are in and how God orchestrates and directs all things to accomplish his ends

With that in mind we want to look next at what motivates the characters to act as they do

II. Their Motivations

A. Why God Requisitioned

First we want to consider why God requisitioned Jonah for this task in the first place

For that matter, we might well wonder why God decided to warn Nineveh at all – it's not like they didn't deserve to be judged

Frankly, we aren't told specifically why he chose Jonah and we can only ascertain from what God says to Jonah in the last verse of the book that God warned the people of Nineveh because he had pity on them

God often surprises us with his actions because we don't see things as God sees them

We often quote Isaiah 55:8-9 to illustrate this fact as we remind ourselves that God sees things with perfect clarity

But let's turn to Isaiah 55 and look at the context of those verses – follow along as I read **Isaiah 55:6-9**

*“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, **that he may have compassion on him**, and to our God, **for he will abundantly pardon**. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

God is a God of compassion and his desire is that the wicked will turn so that he might show compassion on him and abundantly pardon him

Wow! When people say that the God of the Old Testament was a harsh and cruel God we need to show them this passage – God wants nothing more than to be able to show compassion on everyone if only they will turn to him

We can only speculate as to why God chose Jonah for this mission

One reason could be that Jonah had proven to be a reliable prophet in the past – he had willingly carried God's message of the retaking of the land to Israel

Once again, the book of Jonah is more than a fish story and through its events God attempted to teach the Jews a very important message about his care for all people – even wicked Gentiles

And Jonah as a popular prophet would certainly be a good choice to carry that message back to Israel after he saw the events unfold in Nineveh

But perhaps just as importantly, God may well have chosen Jonah because he needed to teach Jonah some things as we will see as we proceed through the book

B. Why Nineveh Repented

When we consider the people of Nineveh we are somewhat surprised by their sudden and complete repentance and we are left to wonder why Nineveh repented as they did

After all, they worshipped a plurality of primary and lesser gods connected with nature and not the God of Israel so we wonder why they would even care what God had to say to them through Jonah

Again, we aren't told directly in the pages of Scripture but historians have discovered that there were some natural phenomena that took place right around this time that may have “softened them up” so to speak for Jonah's message

We know, for instance, that Nineveh had recently suffered two plagues – one in 765BC and one in 759BC and there was a total eclipse of the sun that occurred on June 15, 763BC

And we know that the Ninevites interpreted those events as signs of divine anger against them which may help explain why Jonah's message which he delivered around 759BC resonated as it did

But perhaps the largest question of motivation is **why Jonah ran** from God

C. Why Jonah Ran

In **1:9** Jonah confesses he is a follower of the “*Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land*”

Knowing that God made the earth Jonah had to know that he couldn't really escape from God – if he had thought about it that is

But **verse 3** tells us that Jonah booked passage on a ship going to Tarshish “*away from the presence of the Lord*”

Jonah ran to try to quiet God's call and he soon experienced the truth of **Psalm 139:7-12** where the psalmist writes:

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

And I don't believe Jonah ran because he was a coward – sure God was sending him into the lion's den so to speak

What God was asking of Jonah was akin to one of us being asked to head over to Iraq or Afghanistan to preach a message of repentance to the fanatics over there

But Jonah had previously been willing to prophesy the restoration of the Israel's boundaries which led to them taking up arms to take back their territory from these same Assyrians

And consider that going to Tarshish required him to undertake a perilous 2,500 mile voyage while the trip to Nineveh was only 550 miles along a well-travelled trade route that saw regular caravans of merchants heading back and forth

Jonah didn't run because he was a coward – Jonah ran because he was a patriot

Jonah thought the way most of his countrymen thought; that only Israel was worthy of God's grace and mercy

And his whole being was tied up in the salvation of his own people

So he was willing to prophesy to Israel but not to become a foreign missionary – especially to his heathen enemies

God's command to Jonah probably would have felt something like a Jewish man living in New York during World War 2 might feel if God told him to head over to Germany and preach a message of repentance in Berlin

Frankly, Jonah hated the people of Nineveh

Due to their wickedness he probably thought they deserved to be destroyed just as there are Christians today who believe that Muslims are undeserving of anything but God's wrath

Ironically, he no doubt thought God's blessing as shown through the restoration of Israel's boundaries in spite of Israel's continued sin was only proper – simply because they were God's people

He no doubt thought God was making a mistake in even thinking about giving the Ninevites opportunity to repent so that he might spare them

It's possible that he may have thought that the example of Nineveh's destruction would cause repentance in Israel

But in the end, Jonah knew that God is merciful and just

Look ahead with me at **Jonah 4:2** where Jonah himself reveals his motivation for fleeing God's command

And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is this not what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”

Jonah knew that, if by some miracle the Ninevites actually repented; God would relent and spare them

And with Hosea prophesying that Assyria would destroy Israel he didn't want to be a party to helping them escape God's judgment

Jonah was a true blue patriot and he prioritized his love for country and his hate for her enemies over his love for God

III. A Mirror

The events recorded in the book of Jonah happened roughly 28 centuries ago but it could have been written yesterday as the subjects of nationalism, patriotism, obedience, forgiveness, justice, mercy, and so forth are all just as meaningful for us today as they were for Jonah

And when we really stop to look at the book of Jonah and seek to understand it we should get a little uncomfortable because Jonah serves as a kind of **mirror**

And if we're honest we have to admit that there's a little Jonah in each of us

We all have mixed up priorities and are driven by wrong motives at times as we put other things, whether political or personal, ahead of what God wants

And when we're in the midst of doing that don't we try to flee from God's presence and try to quiet his voice?

God told Jonah to go and preach and he has told every believer to do that very thing in **Matthew 28:19-20** and we act like Jonah as we look for ways to distance ourselves from our duty

Sometimes we must surely amaze even ourselves when we consider the lengths we will go to and the contortions we will go through as we try to justify doing anything other than what we know God has told us he desires

We all think our judgments are correct and righteous and, if we're honest we all have those who we believe are unworthy of God's mercy and grace – people to whom we could say, "Go to hell" and mean it

Perhaps like Jonah they are people who have hurt us or our brethren or those who we believe are so evil that they must surely be beyond God's reach and we don't want to be a part of seeing them repent because they don't deserve mercy

Admittedly, it's hard not to think like Jonah when we read about the abortion law just passed in New York and the comments made by the governor of Virginia as we hear people cheer the prospect of murdering babies even after they're born

It's hard to keep from thinking that there just might be people who don't deserve salvation

At times all of us forget or refuse to admit just how much we have been forgiven and we behave like the unrighteous servant who after having his huge debt forgiven had his fellow slave imprisoned over a small debt owed to him

I think it's likely that all of us have at one time or another questioned God's wisdom and gotten angry and pouted when he didn't behave as we thought he should

I said earlier that God used Jonah to teach Israel a very valuable lesson concerning the scope of his mercy

And I believe he preserved the book of Jonah to serve as an example and a warning to us concerning our attitudes and behaviors

God is the God of mercy and we all need mercy because we all have a little Jonah in us

And if God wasn't the God of second chances none of us could be used by him for his purposes

Conclusion

The book of Jonah should make us a bit uncomfortable as we recognize ourselves in Jonah's attitudes and actions

It's a short book – the whole thing is only 48 verses and it only takes about 5 minutes to read it through completely

So I recommend that you take the 5 minutes to read Jonah a few times over the course of this next week and ask God to reveal through Jonah's example any ungodly attitudes you may have and any areas where you need to improve

Listen to what God has to say to you about any area of your life where you've been running from him

There is no doubt that there are those in this world who are hard to love and hard to forgive – each of us has our own personal Nineveh

But we need to always remember how much we have been forgiven because everyone needs to be the recipient of God's mercy and grace

Then rejoice as you see God's mercy toward Jonah and Nineveh as he reveals that he is the God of second chances who doesn't simply smite us when we disobey but is patient and loving and concerned for all people

Because, while Jonah can be a sobering book it's also a book of great hope and confidence as we see clearly that we serve a gracious God who can use even the most stubborn among us

There is a little Jonah in each of us but God is merciful and can still use us in spite of ourselves

Let's pray