

Jonah 1

Limits of the Text

This chapter describes God's command, Jonah's disobedient response, and God's judgment upon Jonah.

Interpretation

There are two primary movements in the text; the **first movement** is the disobedience of Jonah.

1:1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying,¹

This is a standard formula to indicate a prophetic revelation from God (1 Sa 15:10; Is 38:4; Zech 7:8), which makes Jonah a prophet. Very little is known about Jonah, though 2 Ki 14:25 tells us he was from the tribe of Zebulun of the northern kingdom of Israel and he prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, who reigned from 786-746 B.C. This was before the fall of Israel to Assyria in 721 BC.

1:2 "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me."

The Assyrians were the dominant world power at this time, and their capital was the city of Nineveh, located on the Tigris River, near the modern day city of Mosul, Iraq. The Assyrians were known as a violent and cruel people. They tortured people they conquered and deported others to be slave laborers. "All who hear about you will clap their hands over you, for on whom has not your evil passed continually?" (Na 3:19). To the Jewish people "Nineveh stood for the essence of human self-exaltation and anti-God power."² As one example of their pride, Isaiah recorded these words from the king of Assyria, "By the power of my hand and by my wisdom I did this, for I have understanding; and I removed the boundaries of the peoples and plundered their treasures, and like a mighty man I brought down their inhabitants" (Is 10:13).

The wickedness of the Assyrians was great, so great that God chose not to tolerate it any longer. "While all sin is abhorrent to God, in some instances a

¹ All Scripture quoted from NASB95 unless otherwise noted.

² Allen, 203.

specific group of people had become so wicked that God issued a special call of localized judgment.”³ But even so, God would offer mercy before his judgment. God’s command to cry against Nineveh must be interpreted in light of 4:2, where Jonah (unhappily) acknowledged that God is “a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.” This is exactly what God told Jeremiah when he visited the potter’s house, “At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it” (Je 18:7-8). God called him to the “most feared and hated place in order to show God’s concern for his enemy;”⁴ unsurprisingly, Jesus taught the same thing at the personal level, “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). There is no one that God is unwilling to show his love and mercy to, not even the Assyrians. “The fact that a prophet of Israel was sent to a heathen city, and that not to denounce destruction except as a means of winning to repentance, declared emphatically God’s care for the world, and rebuke the exclusiveness which claimed him for Israel alone.”⁵

1:3 But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

Here is the tension, the crisis of the narrative. God’s prophet refused to obey! This was unheard of. Listen to what Amos about God and his prophets, “Surely the Lord God does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets. A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?” (Am 3:7-8). The remainder of the narrative will resolve this crisis; it will answer the question, “How did God respond to this unexpected (this is, unexpected to the reader) turn of events?”

Why did Jonah flee? Jonah understood very clearly God’s intentions: he wanted to show mercy to the Assyrians (4:2). “Jonah knew full well that his commission showed God’s desire to spare Assyria.”⁶ The problem was that Jonah didn’t

³ Smith, 225.

⁴ Nixon, 66.

⁵ MacLaren, 178.

⁶ Ellison, 369.

want the Assyrians to experience his mercy! “He refused because he feared success.”⁷

Why didn't Jonah want God to show mercy to the Assyrians? Israel was called to be a light to the nations, teaching them repent and trust God. “Jonah's mission was but a concrete instance of Israel's charge.”⁸ But as a general rule, Israel was not very good at this. Far too often they viewed God as *their* God, whose blessings were to be hoarded for their own nation, instead of sharing them with the rest of the nations. Jonah wanted the Assyrians to get what they deserved. There are a couple other possibilities that might explain Jonah's rebellion. One, if Nineveh repented, it would make Israel look bad. Jonah knew that the prophets had been calling Israel to repentance, but they had refused. Two, Jonah knew that it had been prophesied that Assyria would be the country that would pass God's judgment on to Israel. If God judged Assyria, then they would not be able to attack his own country. In all of these, Jonah was thinking nationally instead of Godwardly; his own country had become an idol in his heart.

So Jonah made the choice to disobey God and run away. Even God's prophets have a choice of whether to obey God or not. He fled west to the farthest known city away from Nineveh, but where he fled was less important than the fact that Jonah was no longer willing to be God's servant.⁹ “The plethora of verbs indicate the hustle and bustle in which he engages in order to achieve this self-centered end.”¹⁰

The **second movement** of the text is God's judgment upon Jonah.

[1:4 The Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.](#)

Jonah's disobedience did not go undetected; God responded quickly with a great storm. In this storm the writer displayed God's character. First, God is sovereign, able to control nature itself to change the course of the narrative. Second, God is merciful. He would have been quite justified in simply destroying Jonah for his disobedience, but instead he showed Jonah mercy and began to draw back to himself. This is exactly what James wrote about, “Or do you think it's without reason the Scripture says that the Spirit He has caused to

⁷ MacLaren, 179.

⁸ MacLaren, 179.

⁹ Nixon, 68.

¹⁰ Allen, 205.

live in us yearns jealously? But He gives greater grace. Therefore He says: ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’” (Jas 4:5-6, HCSB).

1:5 Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep.

1:6 So the captain approached him and said, “How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.”

There was something about the nature of this great storm that was out of the ordinary. It was unnatural; it was God-sized. The sailors became afraid, so they cried out to their gods and tossed the cargo. One commentator noted they tried the religion of man (crying to gods) and the works of man (throwing cargo),¹¹ but neither worked.

The reaction of the crew is in total contrast to the reaction of Jonah, who went to sleep. How was he able to sleep? Some have suggested it was physical; he was tired from his journey. Some have suggested it was psychological; the terror of the storm reduced him to unconsciousness.¹² Some have suggested it was emotional; the stress of running from God and the resulting depression wiped him out.¹³ Whatever the reason, he was out cold.

Somehow the captain of the ship discovered Jonah, perhaps on his way down to get more cargo to toss overboard,¹⁴ and he commanded Jonah to pray to his god. The sailors were polytheistic in their religion. Believing the storm to be supernatural in nature, they employed very simple logic: The more people praying, the better statistical chance that prayers will reach the ears of the god responsible for this storm. “Under a polytheistic system one could seldom be sure which god had been displeased and had, therefore, to be appeased.”¹⁵

There is irony in this verse. The pagan sailors recognized the handiwork of a deity, but Jonah did not. The polytheists are praying and command Jonah to pray, but the prophet of God was not praying.

¹¹ Allen, 207.

¹² Ellison, 370.

¹³ Smith, 230.

¹⁴ Allen, 207.

¹⁵ Ellison, 370.

God can use anyone to call his people to obey, even God-unknowing pagans.

1:7 Each man said to his mate, "Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us." So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

Again the writer displays the sovereignty of God, this time through the use of the lot. "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Pr 16:33).

How did the lot work? "The casting of lots was a widely used method in the ancient Near East. The most common word used for 'lot' indicates that they were either stones or pebbles that were painted or colored. When the stones were thrown, if two dark sides landed up the usual interpretation was no. If two light sides landed up, that meant yes. A light and a dark side meant throw again. Using this system, the sailors dealt with each individual until the color revealed the guilty person."¹⁶

1:8 Then they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"

Here's the big question in the text: "On whose account has this calamity struck us?" The lot revealed you as the guilty party; are you in fact the guilty one? A host of related questions followed.

1:9 He said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land."

Jonah identified himself as a Hebrew which was the term by which Israelites were known to the nations around them. Then Jonah gave his great admission: He revealed the character of the God he served. He is the covenant-keeping, faithful God who controlled the heavens. And more the to point: He is the Creator-God, the one who made the seas. "The sea is His, for it was He who made it, and His hands formed the dry land" (Ps 95:5). This clearly answered the sailors questions, because the God who made the seas was more than capable of causing a storm like this.

¹⁶ Smith, 232.

Here is more irony: Jonah claimed that he feared God, that he was frightened by God, and that he revered and respected and worshipped God.¹⁷ While fearing God, he fled from God. Jonah wasn't living what he claimed he believed.

1:10 Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

The sailors respond rightly. They literally feared with a great fear. "If, Jonah, you serve the Creator-God, how could you possibly do this?" they asked. Apparently he had previously told them he was fleeing from his God; only now did they realize how powerful his God was. They've put 2 and 2 together and realized Jonah was nuts and likely to get them all killed. "To know that Jonah was a Hebrew was one thing; to know that he worshiped the supreme God was another. To run away from a god was foolish; but to run from 'the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land' was suicidal."¹⁸ Somehow, they had to appease Jonah's God.

Here is more irony: The pagans were afraid of disobeying the God who made the sea and the land, but God's prophet was not. The pagans saw the omnipotence of God, but God's prophet did not.

1:11 So they said to him, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?" —for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.

The sailor did not worship God, and they didn't know how to appease him, so they turned to the only one who would know, Jonah himself.

1:12 He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you."

Jonah's response? "If you must do something, throwing me in the sea ought to do the trick." Jonah was resigned to the fact that he couldn't run from God after all; judgment day had arrived. What was Jonah's disposition at the time. One commentator writes, "His willingness to die is an indication that he realizes his guilt before God."¹⁹ That may be, but there is no indication of repentance from

¹⁷ Swanson, DBLH 3707.

¹⁸ Smith, 234.

¹⁹ Allen, 211.

Jonah at this point. He was willing to accept his punishment, but he had not had a change of heart.

1:13 However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.

1:14 Then they called on the Lord and said, "We earnestly pray, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O Lord, have done as You have pleased."

Apparently the sailors were concerned that the punishment of death was too drastic to fit the crime,²⁰ and they did not want to incur the wrath of Jonah's God any further. So they tried to save Jonah, but that didn't work out. "It became quite obvious to the sailors that Jonah's God was not in favor of their chosen method of dealing with Jonah's predicament."²¹

Their prayer was serious, but it was somewhat amusing. In essence, they wanted to remind God that Jonah's impending death was his fault, not their fault.

1:15 So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.

Here is the resolution of the narrative. God caught up with his prophet, and justice has been served.

If they had any doubts previously, it was now obvious to the sailors that it was God who had caused the storm, and God who stopped it. Yahweh was the Creator-God.

1:16 Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

Their fear of the storm turned into fear of the Lord, a reverential awe. Their thoughts were later echoed by the disciples: "They became very much afraid and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?'" (Mk 4:41)

²⁰ Walton, 27.

²¹ Smith, 236.

Again, there is irony: In trying to not tell people about the Lord, Jonah wound up telling people about the Lord, and they feared him and worshipped him. This sounds a lot like God's words to Isaiah: "'I permitted Myself to be sought by those who did not ask for Me; I permitted Myself to be found by those who did not seek Me. I said, 'Here am I, here am I,' to a nation which did not call on My name" (Is 65:1, NASB95).

This verse must have shocked it's Jewish readers. God will be worshipped by everyone, including the heathen, even if he has to toss his own prophets to their deaths. If God did this to his prophet, what might he do to the rest of them? "The lesson it teaches are lessons for all churches, and for all God's children for all time. If we shirk our duty of witnessing for Him...unfaithfulness will be our ruin."²²

Although the sailors worshipped God, there is no indication that they became part of his covenant people; there is no mention in the text of repentance or turning to Judaism. Perhaps they did, but the text is simply not that clear.

[1:17 And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.](#)

Here is the final irony in the text: The creature (the fish) obeyed its Creator, but the servant (Jonah) did not obey his King.²³ Again there are echoes in Isaiah: "An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Is 1:3).

Was the swallowing-fish an act of God's judgment or his mercy? It was mercy. Jonah deserved to die, and without the fish, he would have died (2:2). The fish not only saved Jonah, it taught him that God was compassionately calling him back to himself. God was looking for Jonah to repent and return to useful service.²⁴

²² MacLaren, 182.

²³ Nixon, 125.

²⁴ Nixon, 70.

Three Levels of Narrative

1. Personal History – This is a story about Jonah’s attempt to flee from God’s calling. God sent a storm to stop him and a fish to save him.
2. National History – This is a story that reflects Israel’s desire to keep God’s mercy for themselves while desiring his justice for everyone else.
3. Redemptive History – This is a story about the God who desires to show mercy to every tribe and tongue and people and nation and by the blood of Jesus will make them to be a kingdom and priests to himself (Re 5:9-10).

The Gospel

1. What does this text teach me about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose?
 - a. We tend to put our own interests and preferences, national or otherwise, ahead of God’s interests.
 - b. When we rebel against God, we will do things that we know are illogical and rational. We might try to flee from an omnipresent God.
 - c. When we rebel, we need loving Father who will bring us back to himself.
2. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God’s grace to meet our need?
 - a. God will not be side-tracked by our interests. He will not stoop to the pettiness of us vs. them. God’s plan is to save people from the whole world (Mt 24:14).
 - b. God never lets his children leave him for long. If we are truly his children, then God will draw us back to himself, sometimes subtly, sometimes not (Ja 4:4-6). He will then reorient us onto his plan.
3. How does this text stand in relation to the gospel? This text reflects a key aspect of our need for redemption through the gospel. We are wicked, ignorant, and rebellious. We need a God who shows mercy to people like us, forgives us when we repent, and saves us from our sins when we trust in Christ.

Textual Outline

1. Jonah disobeyed God (1:1-3).
 - a. God commanded Jonah to go to Ninevah (1-2).
 - b. Jonah rebelled by fleeing to Tarshish (3).
2. God judged Jonah (1:4-17).
 - a. God sent a great storm (4-6).
 - b. The sailors asked a great question (7-9).
 - c. Jonah made a great admission (10-14).
 - d. God sent a great fish (15-17).

Central Truth of the Text

Jonah wrote Jonah 1 in order to demonstrate to the Israelites that God gives his mercy even to those who don't deserve it.

Teaching Outline

God's people join with God in sharing his mercy with people who don't deserve it. Today, I want us, as God's people, to join him in sharing his mercy. From the first chapter of Jonah, we see three types of people to whom we can share God's mercy.

1. We share God's mercy with the wicked (1-3).
2. We share God's mercy with the ignorant (4-16).
3. We share God's mercy with the rebellious (17).

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