

The Getaway

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Among the prophetic books of the Bible, there is nothing like Jonah's story. It is a larger than life narrative—complete with unexpected turns and dramatic irony and a famous fish, who has nearly stolen the show over the last few thousand years for his or her supporting role. (I mean, whenever we talk about this book of the Bible, we always refer to the fish. It's "Jonah and the whale" or "Jonah and the big fish". It's not "Jonah and the Ninevites" or "Jonah and the mercy of God"...which would, by the way, be a more appropriate title for this little book. It's all about God's mercy. *Praise God for that!*)

And, because the story is so darn entertaining, some scholars have wondered whether or not it's a historical account. Maybe, they suggest, it's a prophetic parable. Perhaps, it's a stylized account to communicate something of the mercy of the Lord for those outside Israel. Yet, I don't think that's likely for two reasons.

- First, there was most certainly a real prophet named Jonah. He's referenced as a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:25).
- But second, and more importantly, Jesus references the prophetic ministry of Jonah to explain his own ministry (Matthew 12:40). So, it would appear that Jesus understood this story to be historical and not parabolic.

We shouldn't doubt the truth of this account simply because it's entertaining or has miracles in it. Sometimes life gets interesting, and God is the God of creation, and as such, he can and (I would assert) does work miracles. To suggest otherwise would merely betray your own prejudiced presuppositions against there being a God who operates outside and over the laws of nature.

Well, having said all this, I hope you will give this little book a fair hearing over the next six weeks. We're going to study it to see what God wants to teach us about his mercy and about his gospel and about his salvation.

Jonah 1:1-6

1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ²“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

³ But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

⁴ Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. ⁶ The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.”

In these verses, we find God working in two ways—(1st) the Lord is working for Jonah’s enemies; and, (2nd) the Lord is working on Jonah. As we unpack these, we’ll begin to see the amazing nature of God’s loving and redeeming work.

1. The Lord’s work for his enemy (vv. 1-2).

Imagine that you’re praying one evening, and the Lord God gives you a vision of a remote village in Afghanistan. As you enter the village, you get the acute sense that it’s a Taliban stronghold—the kind of place they take hostages for executions and plot attacks on American troops stationed in the region. You see distinct faces, hostile faces. You see the faces of those who’d quickly kill you if given the chance. And then, you hear a clear calling from the Lord: “Go to this remote, foreign village. Preach against it. Tell them to repent and turn to me.”

As the weight of such a calling sinks in, put away any judgment you may have in regard to Jonah. We are often tempted to ridicule Jonah’s attempted getaway here. We’re often ready to condemn Jonah’s faithlessness and disobedience and cowardice in this little book. But, we should have far more sympathy for this prophet of God. Nineveh was no Mayberry—*no friendly, hospitable city!*



This is a stone-panel found in the British Museum depicting Assyrian soldiers, a little after the days of Jonah, in the process of conquering a city. The description, under a related panel, explains what's being depicted.

An Assyrian soldier cuts off the head of an enemy soldier. A literal head-count was the standard means of estimating the number of enemy dead. You will never see a dead Assyrian depicted on an Assyrian relief.¹

The reason you won't find any dead Assyrians pictured in such stone-panels is because the Assyrians, like other world power of the day, ruled by fear and force. They were merciless in their conquests and fashioned monuments to reinforce this. This sculpted propaganda said: "Don't mess with us, or we'll count your heads too. We're relentless and invincible."

It's no wonder Jonah heads (*pun intended!*) in precisely the opposite direction from Nineveh. How could God call him to such a mission? Why would God warn such a brutal people? Why wouldn't he simply wipe them off the face of the earth without any warning at all? We shouldn't underestimate the fear and disgust this call from the Lord would have engendered in Jonah. God was calling him to walk right into the middle of that Taliban village. *Right into the lion's den!*

You know, I'll bet there are some Ninevites living right here in Chicagoland. I'll bet there are even some who live right next door to you—people you are called by God to reach but to whom you would rather not go.

¹ You can read the Assyrian stone-panel's full description [here](#).

Are you running in the opposite direction?

My doctoral advisor has shared the story of his dear mother's second marriage following the death of his father. Perhaps in grief and loneliness, she married a man who was harsh and unkind to her. As her adult son, my advisor had discouraged her from marrying him but, nonetheless, she did. You can imagine how difficult it was for him to watch his mother live with a man like this—how hard it was to treat him with kindness and respect and love.

Yet, he knew that this was the Lord's calling on his life. So, he began to look for ways to connect with his stepfather and to appreciate him. But, this wasn't easy. His stepfather was a very hard man.

Eventually, however, he realized that the two of them shared a love of flowers and gardening. So, he began bringing him gifts—hard to find seeds and seedlings—whenever he visited. He worked to appreciate his stepfather's wisdom and giftings as a master gardener. He worked to build a genuine relationship. And, with effort, he did. The iciness began to melt between them.

Well, after a number of years, my advisor's stepfather became terminally ill. But, rather than call for a pastor, he called for his stepson. The years of care and love and grace had made my advisor the person his hardhearted stepfather most wanted at his bedside. And, during their conversations, this man finally received the gospel and trusted Christ for salvation. That wicked stepfather became my advisor's brother in Christ by the grace and mercy of God.

It is good to be aware of the Ninevites in our lives. It is good to pray for them. It is good to move towards them, not away from them. And, when we do these things, God is often pleased to soften hearts and bring redemption. *Amen?!?*

Well, the Lord doesn't merely do work on his enemies but also on believers. God works on his own followers. So, let's consider what this passage says about...

2. The Lord's work on his people (vv. 3-6).

It's pretty obvious—when we read verse three of today's passage—that Jonah thinks he can escape God's calling. Look at that verse.

...Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord (v. 3).

What do you think Jonah's logic was here? Maybe the prophet thought God would just find someone else to do his dirty work if he made it inconvenient enough for him. Maybe Jonah thought the Lord would just move on to Plan B for Nineveh—"Welp, I guess I'll have to call Amos or Hosea now that Jonah's sailing all the way to Tarshish. Too bad I didn't see that one coming!"

Whatever Jonah's logic was, one thing is clear from his decision to runaway: Jonah thinks God simply has plans to confront Nineveh. Jonah thinks that the Lord only has plans to transform the Ninevites. He thinks that God's ministry is merely in one direction. But friends, God's ministry always works in two directions.

You see, Jonah isn't simply *a person* called to take this message to Nineveh; he's *the person* to take it. God wants to work on the Ninevites and, simultaneously, work on Jonah. Everybody's getting transformed here.

It occurs to me that we often fall into the same erroneous mindset as Jonah when thinking about God's calling on our lives. We tend to think our ministry calling is only working in one direction. We go on mission because those people need us; they need our help. We condescend to befriend our geeky neighbor and listen to him talk endlessly about his dioramas because, after all, he needs someone socially adept, like we are, in his life. We think the benefit is all theirs. *But we're wrong!*

Jonah is called for the benefit of the Ninevites but also for the benefit of Jonah. We're called into ministry for the purpose of furthering God's kingdom on this earth, and one of the primary places his kingdom will be furthered on this earth is in us—in our hearts, in our minds, and in our view of things. Friends, this sanctifying work happens in us largely as we faithfully follow God's calling. We work for the Lord, and he works on us. His ministry is never one directional.

Maybe my favorite biblical example of this occurs in the New Testament book of Acts. There the apostle Peter receives a vision from God of all these types of food that a faithful Jew couldn't eat. Yet in the vision, the Lord God tells him to go ahead and feast upon these forbidden foods. "Get up and eat!" he says to Peter. This vision is repeated three times (Acts 10:9-16).

Then, some Gentiles show up looking for Peter. They're from the household of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. You see, God had sent an angel to Cornelius to tell him that he should send for Peter in order that he could travel all the way back (to where Cornelius lived) and share the good news with this Gentile and his family. The distance between the two locations was something like twenty miles...*walking!* And—to top it all off—Jews and Gentiles (*especially a Roman Centurion!*) weren't on friendly terms. For Peter to go to Cornelius's house was as unfaithful an activity for a Jew as eating all the forbidden foods in that vision (Acts 10:17-48).

So then, consider this—Why did the Lord go to all the trouble to send an angel to Cornelius, *so that* Cornelius could send messengers to Peter, *so that* he'd travel (*on foot!*) all the way back, *so that* Cornelius could hear the gospel? Why not simply have the angel share the gospel? That would be more efficient.

Well friends, here's why: God wanted to work on Peter—on his racist views and his compassion for others and his sense of the gospel—while he was working for the redemption of Cornelius and his family. Everybody was getting transformed. *Friends, God's ministry is never merely in one direction!*

So, at the end of today's passage, we find that Jonah's exit strategy doesn't go as planned. His getaway is foiled by God. Look at the text with me.

Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so...we will not perish" (vv. 4-6).

As we close, let me highlight a couple things here. **First**, notice that Jonah is below deck taking a nap in the middle of a life-threatening storm. We might assume that this is something like Jesus' nap on a boat in the midst of a similar kind of storm during his earthly ministry (Mark 4:38-40). But it's not. Jesus is sleeping in peace after faithful ministry. Jonah is sleeping out of exhaustion because running from God is physically, emotionally, and spiritually taxing.

Brothers and sisters, don't be fooled; it is easier to follow the Lord's calling upon us—even when it's difficult—than to try to escape that calling. Didn't Jesus teach us this very truth during his earthly ministry?

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

Second, notice that Jonah gets a wakeup call here. Let's not pass by it too fast. Let's take a moment to consider it. The ship's captain wakes him with these words: "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish" (v. 6). That's his call to Jonah. That's his charge to Jonah. And, it should sound familiar.

If you were reading this in Hebrew, you'd hear a repetition from verse two. The English Standard Version captures the parallel language. Listen to the verses.

- **Verse Two, God wakes-up Jonah**—"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and *call out* against it...."
- **Verse Six, the captain wakes-up Jonah**—"Arise, *call out* to your god...."

Friends, Jonah was having a nightmare, but it really only began when he woke from his sleep. You see, God was speaking, through this pagan sea-captain, directly to this wayward prophet: "Remember my call upon you, Jonah. You can't escape it. You must arise and call out. You must go to Nineveh."

Friends, there is deep irony here. The very kind of people—non-believers—that Jonah is called to wake-up are the very kind of people—a pagan sea-captain—that God uses to wake-up Jonah and send him on his way.

I don't know about you, but I find that incredibly beautiful!

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom...of God! / How unsearchable his judgments, / and his paths beyond tracing out (Romans 11:33).