

Jonah 1:1-17¹

1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 2 “Go (Arise) at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.”² 3 But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.³ He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.⁴

4 But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up.⁵ 5 Then the

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jon 1:1–16)]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

² The Book of Jonah opens like any other prophetic book in the Old Testament with the Word of the Lord. Jonah is called to the great city of Nineveh and he is told to cry out against it because of their wickedness. In the minds of those listening to these words, Nineveh stood as a symbol of all that was against God. Standing outside of Israel, Nineveh was the capital of Assyria during the reign of Sennacherib. While we might wonder why God is calling an Israelite to a Gentile city, “in accord with the best prophetic traditions, Yahweh is represented as the Lord of the nations, to whom the whole world is held morally accountable. If Nineveh is great, God is greater, for he speaks from heaven above (Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1976), 203).” What might bring a moment of pause to Jonah is the reputation of Nineveh. They were known for their lust for warfare and conquering. Why would God be involved with such a forsaken place as Nineveh?

³ Following the Lord’s call, Jonah does “arise” but he goes in the opposite direction. The city of Nineveh was east of Jonah, in a willful act of disobedience, Jonah heads west to Tarshish. This is not the typical opening to a prophetic book. Typically there is protest on the part of the prophet but never willful disobedience. Jonah’s “escape” is an attempt to flee from the presence of the Lord, breaking the traditional call model. But Jonah was surely familiar with Psalm 139, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” As one commentator notes, “The Lord of Israel is an inescapable God, and Jonah probably knew that. But Jonah can flee to a distant city where Yahweh of Israel is unknown, where the society knows nothing of God’s word spoken through his prophets and psalmists, where the covenant with Israel is not acknowledged, and where other gods and other commitments guide daily life. Jonah can place himself outside of the elect people and live with people for whom Yahweh is not the Lord, much like people in our day can choose to immerse themselves in a totally secular culture. A place where God and God’s word are unknown, or ignored and forgotten—that is the society Jonah seeks (Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 261-62).”

⁴ It is a comedic moment in this vision of a prophet, for Jonah does the exact opposite that God commands. “His rejection of the divine commission is shown in concrete terms as a desire to put as much distance as possible between himself and the place where Yahweh revealed his word to him (Allen, 205).” Our narrator informs us that Jonah goes down to the city of Joppa and hires a ship to take him to Tarshish. This adds layers of comedy and irony. “The Hebrews were landsmen with little experience of the sea. That Jonah was prepared to entrust himself to an ocean-going boat rather than face up to God’s call must have struck the hearers as proof positive of his made determination (Allen, 205).” Not only does Jonah flee from God, he flees from what is comfortable and known to him culturally.

⁵ God’s call upon Jonah’s life will not be stifled or thwarted. Jonah may try to flee from the presence of the Lord, but the Lord will find him wherever he goes.

mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. 6 Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. 6 The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up (Arise), call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”⁶

7 The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots⁷, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. 8 Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” 9 “I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship (fear) the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” 10 Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.⁸

⁶ In the midst of the storm, Jonah is asleep in the boat’s hold. Clearly, nothing is going to disturb him for he is content with the decision he has made. But then the captain comes down, finds Jonah sleeping, and awakens him with the same words used by God in his call, “Arise.” In the captain’s mind, someone is responsible for this storm, so the he calls Jonah to pray to his god. Perhaps that will bring an end to the storm. But, in a touch of irony, “the captain does not know that Jonah, in his disobedience, has turned his back on God. Jonah cannot abruptly shift and pray to Yahweh when he finds himself in a jam—a caution to every reader of this story. And so there is no mention of Jonah uttering any prayer (Achte-meier, 264).”

⁷ “In antiquity, lot casting (cleromancy, a term derived from Greek) was one of many divinity practices by which to solicit an immediate and unambiguous response from a deity. While Hebrew laws and customs severely condemned any activity that smacked of fortune-telling or witchcraft, Israel resorted to lot casting quite commonly, reasoning that the results could only be directed by God (Jack M. Sasson, *Jonah*, AB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 108).”

Some of the significant biblical texts that involved the casting of lots are: 1 Samuel 10:19 (the call of Israel’s first king), Leviticus 16:8-10 (choosing who would offer the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement), and Acts 1:23-26 (the disciples discern who should replace Judas). While there are other, we can see from these examples the practice was used in the pagan world and in Israel.

⁸ The sailors arrive at a point of desperation. Detecting that this is no ordinary storm, they resort to the casting of lots to see whose fault this calamity is. The casting of lots was a customary practice in the ancient world; one that could reveal who was responsible for this mess. As we can expect, the lot falls on Jonah. In an instant, the sailors pepper Jonah with question concerning his occupation, his hometown, his country, and his people. These questions are not offered because the sailors want to know more about Jonah personally; rather, “to the sailors’ way of thinking, ever god or goddess is attached to a particular location or people, and the sailors desperately need to identify the deity, in order to take measures to appease him or her (Achte-meier, 265).” In reply, Jonah throws the men for a loop by revealing where he is from and who his God is. Within his reply, Jonah emphasizes the reality of his Lord by proclaiming him as the God of heaven who made the land and the sea. In this way, Jonah is bearing witness to the reality that he worships the one true God.

11 Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. 12 He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” 13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them.⁹ 14 Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” 15 So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.¹⁰

17 But the LORD provided (appointed) a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.¹¹

⁹ Because they recognize that Jonah is the cause of this storm, the sailors assume that he will have the best solution for calming it. Taking responsibility for his actions, Jonah understands that the only way to bring this storm to an end is to embrace God’s call and claim upon his life. Jonah doesn’t have a death wish, nor is he trying to help the sailors get out of a bind; rather he knows there is no escape for him. “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Yet the sailors will have none of it.

As Actemeier notes, “Contrary to Jonah’s instructions in verse 12, the sailors do not immediately hurl Jonah overboard. Instead, they try to row the ship to land where they can beach it. Probably, their motives were not entirely altruistic, as indicated by verse 14. They did not want to take the risk of incurring bloodguiltiness, and they reasoned that if they could deposit Jonah on the land, he and God could work out their dispute between them without the sailors being involved. In short, they wanted a no-fault disposal of Jonah (Actemeier, 268).”

¹⁰ Realizing that their attempts to get back to land are pointless, the sailors lift their voices to the Lord God Almighty, forsaking their pagan Gods for this God who pursues his prophet with such fervor. Unsure whether they will be punished for harming God’s prophet the sailors “are driven to pray to his God and plead their warrant for dropping Jonah to certain death. They have a commendable respect for Yahweh and his power...In a sense they pray the prayer that Jonah would not pray at the captain’s bidding; the wish not to perish ends one and begins the other (Allen, 211).”

¹¹ Even though Jonah is accepting responsibility for his attempts to flee God’s presence, he cannot know what will await him as he lands in the water. As readers, we might assume that this circumstance will equal death, we quickly discover that Jonah’s experience in the water is redemptive. As Allen notes, “The gracious gift of God is life. He does not abandon his servant to death, but snatches from its clutches the drowning man...The fish stands for the amazing grace of Yahweh, which came down to where he (Jonah) was and lifted him to new life (Allen, 213).” From out of the impossibility of survival, God creates the way of redemption through God’s own gracious provision.

Now, one of the areas that will often cause consternation for people surrounds our understanding of the great fish. This was the great debate between Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryant. Within their debate regarding evolution, Darrow asks Bryant whether Jonah “really” sat in the belly of a

Study Questions:

- 1) How is the power of God's word exhibited in the action of the fish?
- 2) Why does God stick with Jonah rather than forsake him? What does this tell us about God's love for us?
- 3) From your knowledge of the entire book, can you recall three other times when God provided for Jonah?
- 4) What do God's provisions for this prodigal prophet reveal to you about this God whom we worship? How does it cast light on God's provision for us in and through Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit?

fish for three days and three nights. What we need to understand when dealing with this passage is that it is futile to argue over whether something like this is even possible; for in arguing we miss the point of the narrative completely. "The author is telling us a story in order to say some very important things about God, and all arguments over the fish tend to divert our attention from the main points being made. The important fact is that Jonah, despite his disobedience, inability to pray, and acceptance of his just death, has been saved from a watery grave by the totally undeserved grace of God (Actemeier, 270)." The first chapter of Jonah is about our disobedience, our attempts to flee from God, and God's gracious love and mercy that will not let us go. Whether it is God's chastising grace in the midst of the storm or God's providing grace through salvation in the water, Jonah's story is a story of being blessed by God despite all reasons to the contrary.