

Session Three

Jonah: God's Reluctant Messenger



The Prophet Jonah by Carl Mayer

A. Establish the Context

As we saw in the previous session, the Book of the Twelve begins with Hosea's dramatic demonstration of God's love for his wayward people. The next three minor prophets—Joel, Amos, and Obadiah (whom we will not study in this program)—deplore the sins of Israel and the nations and pronounce judgment while announcing the future restoration of God's kingdom. They say nothing of including the nations in that restoration, however, and the book of Jonah follows them with a qualifying message. As Hosea was all about love, Jonah is all about mercy: God's compassion and willingness to forgive all who turn to him, both Jew and Gentile. As Jonah learns, God is LORD of all creation and all nations. Even Assyria—the epitome of wickedness and the recipient of his message—can be delivered if it repents.

WHO IS JONAH?

The prophet is identified in Jonah 1:1 as “Jonah the son of Amittai”—a prophet of the Northern Kingdom named in 2 Kings 14:25-27, who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, predicting that the king would restore the northern borders of Israel. It is worth getting the larger context from 2 Kings. Jeroboam did what was “evil in the sight of the LORD” (2 Kings 14:24), but the LORD nonetheless gave him military success. Jonah would have witnessed an outpouring of blessing on Israel at a time when the people persisted in their sins and were very far from God (see 2 Kings 17). This is the prophet God calls, then, to take a message of mercy to Nineveh in Assyria, which had launched a ruthless empire-building campaign by the end of Jeroboam's reign. It is to Assyria that Israel will fall in 722 BC, never to recover. This forms the background to the book of Jonah.

WHEN WAS THE BOOK WRITTEN?

The author of the book of Jonah and the date of its composition are unknown. Based on the language used and its message, many scholars believe it was written post-exile, in the mid-fifth century BC. Its message would speak loudly to the Jews of that era, centuries after the fall of Israel and during the return of Judah from Babylonian exile. Many Jews at that time thought God loved only Israel and hated its pagan neighbors. For them, reading about Jonah's mission to Nineveh with the benefit of hindsight, Assyria meant wickedness as certainly as the

Third Reich does to modern Jews. The message of God's mercy on such a place and people would be profound. At that time, Israel (the Northern Kingdom) remained in exile. But Judah, which, like Jonah, fled from God's presence, was given a second chance and restored to the land. What, then, was their relationship to the nations? The question at the end of the book of Jonah is for them as well.

IS THE STORY OF JONAH TRUE?

The study of Jonah often starts with the question, "Did it really happen?" The majority of modern scholars consider Jonah to be a parable or allegory, but the Church does not require us to believe one way or the other.

Could the story of Jonah have happened as described? Of course. The omnipotent God who raised Jesus from the grave and calmed the seas is perfectly able to command a "great fish" to swallow a man and spit him out, alive and kicking, three days later (see Jonah 1:17; NAB 2:1). *Did* it happen? This is harder to say. The book is presented as an historical narrative, but some of its literary features suggest something more like a fable (e.g., it has humorous elements, lacks historically identifiable facts, makes use of larger-than-life caricatures of people and things, and is full of literary motifs). For example, Nineveh is a symbol for wickedness akin to Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis and the "ends of the earth" (i.e., Tarshish). Even Jonah's name, which means "dove," is rich in symbolism; it represents Israel itself, atoning sacrifice, and a sign from God. Regardless of whether the story actually happened as told, the book of Jonah is certainly "true" in what it teaches. In our look at this prophet, we will set the question of historicity aside and focus on the message that God and the inspired author of this book of the Bible intended to convey to God's people then and today.¹

B. Read the Story

Read the entire book of Jonah in one sitting to get a feel for the prophet's message (it is only four short chapters).

As always, pray before you read.

C. Take a Deeper Look

Answering these questions will draw you into the heart of the story. If you do not understand something, make a note of it to bring up in the small-group discussion.

¹ For more on the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture, see CCC 115–119.

THE RELUCTANT PROPHET (JONAH 1; NAB 1:1-16)

1. When the Word of the LORD comes to the prophet Jonah, telling him to cry out against the “great city” of Nineveh because of its wickedness, Jonah’s response is to flee on a ship to Tarshish.
 - a. Find Joppa, Jonah’s starting point, on the map on this page. Locate Nineveh, where he is asked to go, and Tarshish, where he decides to go instead. What do you notice?



- b. Jonah’s reluctance to go to Nineveh is understandable in light of Assyria’s fearsome, tyrannical rule. Yet, it is not Nineveh he seems to be afraid of. From what does Jonah flee, according to Jonah 1:2, 1:3, and 1:10?
 - c. Read Genesis 3:8, 4:16. Who else have we seen flee in this way? How were their circumstances similar to or different from Jonah’s?
2. Compare and contrast Jonah’s response to God’s Word to the response of the captain, the mariners, the fish, the wind, and the sea. Note the verses where you find your answers.

3. Describe the progressive downward spiral that parallels Jonah's trip "away from the presence of the LORD" in Jonah 1:3, 1:5, 1:15, 1:17, 2:5, 2:6a (NAB 1:3, 1:5, 1:15, 2:1, 2:6, 2:7a).

4. Read Psalm 139:1-12.

a. How is the truth of this psalm reflected in Jonah 1 (NAB 1:1-16)?

b. How have you experienced the far-reaching persistence of God's love?

HOW LONG WAS JONAH IN THE WHALE'S BELLY?

"Three days and three nights" (1:17; NAB 2:1) was a conventional phrase in Hebrew for "parts of three days" that could mean anywhere from twenty-six to seventy-two hours. Centuries later, Jesus would compare his own "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40) with Jonah's time in the belly of the whale. That time, as we know, was not a full seventy-two hours but lasted from late Friday afternoon to early Sunday morning.²

GOD GETS JONAH'S ATTENTION (JONAH 2; NAB 2:2-11)

In Jonah 1 (NAB 1:1-16), the Word of the LORD came to Jonah, and Jonah ran away. In Jonah 3, the Word of the LORD will come to Jonah a second time, and this time, he will obey. What happens between the two episodes is "a whale of a story"—Jonah spends three days and nights in the belly of a "great fish," according to the narrative. Whether one reads this as historical fact or as parable, Jonah 2 (NAB 2:2-11) holds the key to understanding the change in Jonah.

5. Read Jonah 2 (NAB 2:2-11). In Jonah 2:1 (NAB 2:2), we read that Jonah prays from the belly of the fish. How does Jonah describe the place from which he cries to God in Jonah 2:1-6 (NAB 2:2-7)?

² While we measure days beginning at dawn (technically, at midnight), the Hebrews counted days from sunset, following Genesis 1:5, NAB: "Evening came, and morning followed—the first day."

6. Describe Jonah’s prayer in Jonah 2:1-9 (NAB 2:2-10) as it reflects his change of heart.
7. Recall the many times Jonah “went down” lower and lower, away from the Lord (see your response to question 3). What is God’s response to Jonah’s distress? See Jonah 2:6 (NAB 2:7).

GOD CALLS JONAH AGAIN (JONAH 3)

The Word of God comes to Jonah again, and this time, he obeys and goes to Nineveh. The description of the city as “three days’ journey in breadth” (Jonah 3:3) has caused some to doubt the historicity of this account, because there is no record of Nineveh approaching such a great size. Some possible interpretations: Three days may have been the expected length of Jonah’s task, the size of the entire region around Nineveh, or a deliberate mirroring of Jonah’s three days in the fish’s belly.

8. Read Jonah 3. Given the reputation of the people of Nineveh, one might expect their reaction to Jonah’s message to be similar to the reaction Lot’s sons-in-law had to God’s message that the city of Sodom would be destroyed (see Genesis 19): Lot’s family thought he was joking and had to be forcibly removed to be saved.
 - a. Describe the response of the people of Nineveh to Jonah.
 - b. Describe the response of the king and his motivation in Jonah 3:6-10. How would you compare him with the captain in Jonah 1:6? What does each know about God?
9. How is the prophecy from Jeremiah 18:7-8 borne out in God’s response to Nineveh’s repentance?

- 10. New Testament Connection:** Read Matthew 12:38-42. What meaning does Jesus give Jonah's story in applying it to his generation?

GOD GETS JONAH'S ATTENTION AGAIN (JONAH 4)

- 11. Think About It:** When Jonah says, "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy" (Jonah 4:2), he is quoting God's own words in Exodus 34:6-7. In that passage, God declared his mercy in the context of Israel turning from him to the Golden Calf even as he was establishing his covenant with them. In spite of their wickedness, God forgave them and took them as his own. Knowing this about God, why is Jonah angry? How can he use these words to justify his flight to Tarshish?
- 12. a.** Jonah would rather die than carry God's message of mercy to Nineveh. Now, in Jonah 4, he asks to die rather than witness this mercy. Explain how God gets Jonah's attention in Jonah 4:6-9.
- b.** What message does God intend Jonah to learn from this? (See Jonah 4:10-11.)

D. Application

This question will help you apply one of the key themes of the session to your life. After meditating on it, respond to God with a brief written prayer if you choose.

Have you ever run (or are you running now) from God? Or is there someone you think does not deserve mercy? Who is it? What prevents you from bearing God's message to them or showing them mercy? With this in mind, what lesson or lessons can you take from Jonah and apply in that situation?

Dear Lord ...

SESSION THREE TALK NOTES

Jonah: God’s Reluctant Messenger**I. Setting the Stage**

- A. Background
- B. A reflection on the merciful character of God
- C. Audience and their response
- D. Jonah’s reluctance: a liturgical contrast
 - 1. Response of faith or fear (feasts of Jonah and St. Matthew, September 21)
 - 2. Two runaways (Jonah paired with Prodigal Son, Twenty-Seventh Week in Ordinary Time)
- E. Masterful storytelling
- F. Jewish oral tradition: Jonah as a disciple of Elisha³

II. Jonah and the Great Fish (Jonah 1; NAB 1:1-16)

- A. God calls Jonah and Jonah flees
 - 1. Why? Jonah knows the heart of God
 - 2. The distance of Tarshish – “from far” (Isaiah 60:9)
 - 3. The irony of trying to escape the LORD’s presence
 - a. God will never leave or forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5; Matthew 28:20)
 - b. God’s persistent, pursuing love
 - i. Francis Thompson, “The Hound of Heaven”
 - ii. St. Augustine: “Our hearts are restless till they find rest in thee”
- B. The storm
 - 1. Pagan sailors ask Jonah to call on God for mercy
 - 2. Irony: fleeing from God on the sea God made
 - 3. Sin, however private, affects others
 - 4. Sailors’ response
 - a. Risk lives to save Jonah
 - b. Ask God’s forgiveness before throwing Jonah overboard
 - c. Offer sacrifices, make vows

³ See Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, XIII, p. 246 and following.

C. Jonah in the belly of the fish

1. Truth or parable?
2. Judgment or mercy?
 - α. "Appointed," *suwm* = "extended compassion"

III. Jonah's Deliverance (Jonah 2; NAB 2:2-11)

A. Thanksgiving (*todah*) psalm

1. Move from plight, to acknowledging God and declaring deliverance, to thanks
2. Jonah's flight takes him down, yet straight to God
3. Psalm ends with thanksgiving, promises to sacrifice, vows

B. The obedience of the fish (Jonah 2:10; NAB 2:11)

IV. Jonah Called Again (Jonah 3)

- A.** The God of second chances
- B.** Jonah obeys, but not from the heart
- C.** The message (Jonah 3:4): "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"
 1. Nineveh calls for a fast
 2. Ashes at start of a forty-day call for repentance: Lent

V. Jonah's Continued Reluctance (Jonah 4)

- A.** God works with Jonah
- B.** An open question at the end
- C.** New Testament Connection:
 1. Acts 1:8 – structure of Acts
 2. God intends gospel to go to all nations
 3. Acts 10: Peter ("Simon Bar-Jona")⁴ says yes in Joppa
 4. Will you be a Jonah or a Peter?

VI. Conclusion: Prayer of Renewal⁵

⁴ Peter is called Simon Bar-Jona ("Simon, Son of Jonah") in Matthew 16:17.

⁵ For the text of this prayer, which is prayed at the close of each session, see page 12.