*“All of a sudden, I felt this huge shove and the next thing I knew it was completely black,” “I was completely inside; it was completely black,” “I thought to myself, ‘there’s no way I’m getting out of here. I’m done, I’m dead.’ All I could think of was my boys — they’re 12 and 15 years old.”*

This is how lobster diver Michael Packard described his experience of getting accidentally swallowed by a Humpback Whale. Thankfully he did survive. After about 30 seconds the whale spit him out. Packard was released after a brief stay in the hospital [show picture], and later he was invited to tell his story on Jimmy Kimmell. It’s been four years, and today he is a bit of a local celebrity in his Massachusetts fishing town.

Michael Packard’s story got a lot of coverage, in part because it reminds us of an older story. The story of Jonah and the “whale” is one of the best know Bible stories. It’s one of the stories we learn in Sunday School as kids. But the story of Jonah is not just for children. It is a deeply subversive story that raises big questions and challenges us all.

The events in the book of Jonah have long been doubted by skeptics. Many people think it is just a fairytale or a parable. God is certainly free to tell parables if he wants to, Jesus does this in the New Testament. The question we should ask is: does the Bible itself lead us to think that this is a made-up story? Well, I don’t think so. Jonah is described in Scripture as a real person, and we know that Ninevah, the city where God tells Jonah to go, is a real place.

You may struggle to believe Bible stories like this, and that’s okay. Here at CF, we want you to bring your challenging questions about the Bible. Many have a instinct to explain away the miraculous stories in the Bible. But if that is you, I want to give you a challenge as we begin this study.

2 Timothy 3:16 says that; *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness…”* This passage tells us that God gave us the Bible to teach us, to correct us, and to train us. To put it simply, God gave us the Bible, not just because he wants us to be informed, but because he wants us to be transformed. When we read the Bible right, it will challenge us.

It is much easier to critique the Bible than to let the Bible critique us. But we won’t be changed until we stop correcting the Bible, and let the Bible correct us. So, my challenge, over these next two weeks is to let this story convict you. You might just be surprised what you find. As we study this short book over the next two weeks, we will see God’s merciful character, and we will also come face to face with the darkness in our own hearts. So, let’s get started;

**1***Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,****2****“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”****3****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.*

We don’t know who the human author of Jonah was, but this book is artfully constructed. The author says a whole lot with very few words. The book of Jonah is part of a collection of 12 books in the Bible called the minor prophets. Minor doesn’t mean that they are unimportant, it just means they are shorter.

The phrase “*the word of the Lord came to”* is a pretty standard way that prophetic messages are introduced in the Bible. In this case, God has a message for Jonah. So, Who is Jonah? We are introduced to Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25. There we read that Jonah lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and was a prophet during the reign of King Jeroboam II who ruled from 786-746 BC.

So, what does God tell Jonah to do? He tells him to go to Ninevah and preach against that city because God has seen how evil they were. Now this would have caused the original readers to scratch their heads. Normally God sent prophets to the people of Israel, but here he is sending a prophet to preach in a pagan city.

What do we know about Ninevah? Well, Ninevah was an important city in the Assyrian empire. Assyria was a key regional power during that time. It was a much larger and more powerful nation than Israel. For a time Ninevah was probably the largest city in the world.

It was surprising for the Lord to send a prophet to a pagan city, but it would have been even more surprising for a prophet to respond like Jonah responded. Instead of doing what the Lord asked him to do, Jonah flees to Tarshish, which was probably in southwestern Spain. [Show Map] This was about as far in the opposite direction as you could possibly go.

Now, we are not told yet why Jonah disobeys, but we can make an educated guess based on Assyria’s reputation. Listen to how one author describes this empire:

*“Assyria was one of the cruelest and most violent empires of ancient times. After capturing enemies, the Assyrians would typically cut off their legs and one arm, leaving the other arm and hand so they could shake the victim’s hand in mockery as he was dying. They forced friends and family members to parade with the decapitated heads of their loved ones elevated on poles. They pulled out prisoners' tongues and stretched their bodies with ropes so they could be flayed alive and their skins displayed on city walls. They burned adolescents alive. Those who survived the destruction of their cities were fated to endure cruel and violent forms of slavery. The Assyrians have been called a "terrorist state."”* (Keller 10-11)

Does it make sense now, why Jonah would run? Historically we know that Jonah’s nation of Israel had already been subjugated by Assyria and was forced to pay tribute to them. Jonah had good reasons to dislike the people of Ninevah. This was a wicked nation. The Lord had given Jonah a miserable task. He sent Jonah to preach to his oppressors.

But fleeing from the Lord is always a futile decision. Let’s pick up our story in verse 4;

***4****But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up.****5****Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.****6****So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.”*

Throughout this story, the Lord is in control over what happens. Jonah flees, and the Lord hurls a great wind. And did you notice Jonah’s descent? Jonah went down to Joppa, he went down to the ship, and now he is down in the inner part of the ship. As he runs from God, he sinks lower and lower, but still, he can’t escape the Lord.

The pagan sailors on Jonah’s boat are desperate and panicking. They cry out to whatever gods they can think of, but Jonah is sleeping down below. But even in his sleep God pursues him. Jonah is ignoring the Lord, but the captain wakes him up and urges him to cry out to his God. But as far as we can tell, Jonah still doesn’t. So, the sailors try to figure out why they are in trouble. In verse 7;

***7****And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.****8****Then they said to him, “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”****9****And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”****10****Then the men were exceedingly 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.*

The sailors assume that the storm had come upon them because one of them had made a god angry, and when the evidence points to Jonah, they pelt him with a bunch of questions. Jonah begins by sharing his ethnic/national identity. He is a Hebrew. Then he says that he fears the Lord who created the sea and the land. He insists that he fears the Lord, but nothing he has done so far has shown us that he does. There is so much irony in Jonah’s words here, and the pagan sailors immediately see what Jonah can’t see. If Jonah’s God created the sea, how foolish it is for Jonah to run from his God on the sea.

This is the first of several times in this book where Jonah says the right things about God, but he doesn’t seem to really believe what he is saying. Jonah’s theology is top notch, but his theology seems to have no impact on his life. This is exactly what it looks like to have Gospel Doctrine but lack Gospel Culture. He knows who God is, but he doesn’t live like it.

Have you ever known someone who knew a lot about God or the Bible, but was unchanged by what they knew? That’s Jonah. But this is also many of us. This is a danger, especially for those of us who have spent a lot of time in the church. We have learned so much about God, yet we don’t let that knowledge change us.

A great way to reflect on this sermon later this week is to pray and ask God to show you areas of your life where you haven’t applied the things you know about him. (Honestly you may already know what those areas are.)

This chapter begs us ask the question, who really fears the Lord? Well, let’s keep reading and see.

***11****Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.****12****He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.”****13****Nevertheless, the men rowed hard[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=jonah1-4&version=ESV#fen-ESV-22545b)*] to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.****14****Therefore they called out to the Lord, “O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.”****15****So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.****16****Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.*

Now everyone on the boat knows that Jonah is the problem. At this point Jonah could have cried out to the Lord for mercy, but instead he tells the sailors to throw him overboard. They don’t want to, so they try to row back to land. When this fails, they finally agree to toss Jonah, but before they do, they call out to the Lord – Jonah’s God. Earlier they had cried out to their own gods, but now they cry out to the Lord, YHWH!

After they throw Jonah overboard, the sea becomes calm, and the text says they feared the Lord greatly. They showed their respect for God by offering a sacrifice and making vows. Jonah is so proud of his Hebrew heritage, and yet, the gentile sailors do what Jonah hasn’t done. They call out to Jonah’s God and show him honor. Who really fears the Lord? Who really acts like a Hebrew? It’s the sailors, not Jonah.

It is tempting to think that we are good with God because of our heritage. You may have been raised in a Christian family. You may have been baptized as a baby. You may have been born in America. But none of those things can make you good with God. In Matthew 3:9 John the Baptist warns the Jewish religious leaders not to put their faith their heritage; *“And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”*

Jonah’s Hebrew heritage couldn’t save him. He was acting like someone who didn’t really know the Lord. But even though Jonah rebelled, God still accomplished his will. Jonah ran because he didn’t want to preach to pagans. But God still used Jonah to tell the pagan sailors about himself. Jonah is not a great model for sharing gospel hope, but God uses him in spite of himself.

The first chapter ends by sharing how God rescued Jonah: ***17****And the Lord appointeda great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.* The most well-known part of Jonah’s story only takes up only a couple of verses. What do you think Jonah expected to happen when the sailors threw him overboard? I think Jonah expected to die. He chose death instead of crying out to the Lord. What a tragic choice! But God wasn’t going to let him off that easily. God miraculously rescues Jonah by sending a big fish to swallow him.

The Lord is always in control, and that continues to be true here. In the Ancient Near East, the sea, and sea monsters where a source of great fear for people. But here the Lord shows his absolute power over the sea and all its creatures.

After all this, Jonah finally calls out to the Lord. He is stuck in that fish for three days, and while he sits in the swirling slime and seaweed he talks to his God. And chapter two shows us what he said; *“Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish,****2****saying,*

*“I called out to the Lord, out of my distress,  
    and he answered me;  
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,  
    and you heard my voice.****3****For you cast me into the deep,  
    into the heart of the seas,  
    and the flood surrounded me;  
all your waves and your billows  
    passed over me.****4****Then I said, ‘I am driven away  
    from your sight;  
yet I shall again look  
    upon your holy temple.’****5****The waters closed in over me to take my life;  
    the deep surrounded me;  
weeds were wrapped about my head****6****at the roots of the mountains.  
I went down to the land  
    whose bars closed upon me forever;  
yet you brought up my life from the pit,  
    O Lord my God.****7****When my life was fainting away,  
    I remembered the Lord,  
and my prayer came to you,  
    into your holy temple.****8****Those who pay regard to vain idols  
    forsake their hope of steadfast love.****9****But I with the voice of thanksgiving  
    will sacrifice to you;  
what I have vowed I will pay.  
    Salvation belongs to the Lord!””*

***10****And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.*

Did you notice that Jonah’s journey downward continues here? He says, “*you cast me into the deep” and “I went down”* Jonah has hit rock bottom.One commentator puts it this way: *“…when Jonah can sink no lower, the Lord intervenes and raises him upward.”*

A lot of Jonah’s prayer seems to echo the language in the Psalms. As a Hebrew, he was familiar with the language of worship. As an aside, one of the reasons why we need to learn the Bible is so that we have language to speak to God when we are in times of crisis. That way, when we don’t have the words to say, we can use the words God has given us.

Perhaps the most important question we should ask about this prayer is; does it show a real change in Jonah? Up to this point, he has stubbornly refused to turn to the Lord, and he finally does, so that is positive. Though in this case, there wasn’t much else to do when he was stuck in there.

In his prayer Jonah continues to say accurate things about God. Superficially, this is a true, faithful prayer. But if we want to understand Jonah’s position, we need to pay attention, not only to what is said, but also to what *isn’t* said. And looking at the Psalms can help us see what is missing.

When we compare it to the Psalms, what seems most absent in Jonah’s prayer is confession. In Psalm 32 for instance, King David begins by confessing his own sin before he cries out to God for deliverance. In verse 5 he says; “*I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”*

But we don’t see this anywhere in Jonah’s prayer. There is no confession of sin. He never admits that he caused this situation. He seems to appreciate God’s rescue, but he doesn’t acknowledge why he needs to be rescued. If he had simply obeyed God, he wouldn’t have been at sea in the first place.

Also notice what Jonah says about non-Hebrews at the end of his prayer; *“Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.****9****But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!””*

Jonah is proud of his Hebrew identity and his knowledge of the Lord, and he says; “those pagans will never experience God’s love”. And Jonah is right about that. Those who remain pagans will not experience God’s love. But what Jonah misses here is that God wants to make pagans into true worshipers.

Think about what happened with the sailors earlier. They started by crying out to their false gods but in the end the seem to genuinely worship the Lord. Jonah says “I will sacrifice and pay my vows” but the sailors have already done that. Jonah pitties the pagans, but these gentile sailors are ahead of him!

Jonah thinks his spiritual heritage gives him an advantage, but he fails to understand that he needs the Lord as much as the pagans do. This is why it’s so important to get Gospel Doctrine right. If we think we are better than others, we make bad decisions. The apostle Paul addresses this issue in the New Testament. In Romans 3:9 he says;

***9****What then? Are we Jews* [Hebrews] *any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,****10****as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one;* ***11*** *no one understands; no one seeks for God* ***12****All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”*

Here Paul quotes Psalm 14, which the Jews would have eagerly applied to the pagan gentiles, and he says; “this is you too”. Your sin problem is just as bad as theirs! Pagans and prophets both need the Lord. The truth is, no one fears and honors the Lord like they should. And yet God has made a way for us to be forgiven and become true worshipers.

God has mercy on those who repent from their sins and turn to him. Repentance is the pathway to forgiveness and salvation, but repentance itself does win our salvation. God forgives us, not simply because we repent and turn to him. He forgives because our sins have already been paid for by someone else. The sailors and Jonah both recognize the important of sacrifice. But their sacrifices could not pay for their sins. They needed a better sacrifice. The author of Hebrews says, *“For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”* - Hebrews 10:4

And the Bible tells us that Jesus was that better sacrifice. He lived the perfect life that we couldn’t live, and he died the death we deserved to die because of our rebellion against God. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus gave his life to rescue us from the depths of our sin. Like Jonah, we chose to go low, but Jesus wants to lift us up.

It’s easy to criticize Jonah, but we have more in common with him than we would like to admit. We sometimes run from God. We sometimes think we are morally superior to others. We fail to show other people the same kindness we have received from the Lord. We know what is true about God, yet we fail to apply that knowledge. In Jonah’s flaws we see our own.

This story should humble us, and it should motivate us to look more like the gospel we proclaim. But ultimately it should make us long for someone who is better than Jonah. And we have that person in Jesus Christ. He perfectly followed his Father’s will. He preached God’s truth to a violent human race. And ultimately, he gave his own life to save ours.

Jonah was in the fish because of his sin. Jesus went to the grave because of our sin. He is better than Jonah, and he is our ultimate hope.