

## God's Reluctant Missionary

Jonah 1-4

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A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales when her teacher stated, *"It's scientifically impossible for a whale to swallow a person."* The girl replied, *"But Jonah was swallowed by a whale."* Annoyed, the teacher insisted, *"A whale cannot swallow a human!"* The girl said calmly, *"When I get to Heaven, I'll ask Jonah."* The teacher smirked, *"And what if Jonah didn't make it to Heaven?"* Without missing a beat, the girl replied, *"Then you can ask him."*

Many people cast doubts on the Book of Jonah because they don't believe a whale can swallow a human being, but we now have evidence that this has happened. Actually, the word used in Jonah is for a large fish. It might have been a whale, but we don't know for sure. The Book of Jonah is not about a fish story; it's about a gracious and compassionate God and a reluctant missionary. After all, the fish only gets three verses in the narrative. The main character in the book is God, not the big fish.

One pastor asks, *"Is this a tale of a whale or a whale of tale?"* It's neither because the Book of Jonah is not a fable or a parable. According to 2 Kings 14:25, Jonah was an actual prophet and Jesus Himself referred to Jonah when explaining his burial and resurrection in Matthew 12:39-41.

I want to encourage you to read this brief book of only 48 verses because we won't have time to take a deep dive into it. I also urge you to utilize the Here Am I questions found in our Go Con booklet, either individually or in a Growth Group, because they will help you apply the sermon. These questions are also available in our resource areas in both lobbies and on our app.

Here's what I'm hoping we learn: *Because God sends us to those we'd rather avoid, we must choose compassion over comfort.*

We'll follow this outline which captures the flow of the book.

- 1. Jonah runs from God.**
- 2. Jonah returns to God.**
- 3. Jonah responds to God.**
- 4. Jonah resents God.**

Let's hit the highlights.

**1. Jonah runs from God.** Listen to the first three verses: *“Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.’ 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.”*

As a prophet of God, Jonah would have been accustomed to having the word of God come to him. He also would have experienced times he was told to *“Arise, go...”* He wasn't expecting to be commissioned to go to Ninevah. He probably bristled when God called it a *“great city,”* because the Ninevites were known for acts of terror, idolatry, and barbarism. On top of that, the Assyrians were Israel's arch enemies. It would be like sending a Jewish person during WWII to go witness to Nazi Germany.

One person writes: *“Jonah's call to preach to Nineveh (the Assyrian capital) wasn't just inconvenient; it was personal. He was being sent to show compassion to the very nation that would later wipe out his own people and very possibly had already harassed his hometown of Gath Hepher, located just north of Nazareth. So, when Jonah resisted God's call, it wasn't mere disobedience. From his perspective, it was unthinkable: ‘Why would I go warn the very enemies who will destroy us?’”* This background makes God's compassion stand out even more because His mercy extended even to Israel's fiercest enemies.

Instead of heading east to what is now Mosul in northern Iraq, Jonah booked a boat headed west to Tarshish, a city in what we know to be Spain. This was the farthest west he could go by ship at that time, about 2,500 miles away. Jonah paid the fare out of his own pocket and *“went down into it,”* which is also a picture of how he went down spiritually. Notice, he is vainly trying to get *“away from the presence of the Lord.”* One pastor has great insight, *“If you decide to run, you'll probably find a ship going your way.”*

During our Growth Group this week, we discussed Pastor Kyle's excellent sermon and how Abraham was told to go, and he went willingly. In contrast, Jonah was told to go, but he went the other way to get as far away as possible. One of the questions we'll discuss this week is this: *“Who are the ‘Ninevites’ in our world today? Who or what might be your ‘Ninevah’ right now?”* Is it secular humanists?

People from a different race or nationality? Those who are pro-choice? A person from the LGBTQ community? A person with a different political affiliation than yours? A Muslim? An immigrant? Your neighbor?

Verses 4-6 explain what happened next: ***“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. 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. 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.’”***

To get Jonah’s attention, God hurled a great wind upon the sea, which caused a whirlwind that threatened to capsize the ship. This is the same word used when King Saul “cast” his javelin at David. Psalm 48:7 says, ***“By the east wind you shattered the ships of Tarshish.”*** Because these seasoned sailors were petrified, they started praying to their false gods, while Jonah continued his descent ***“down”*** and fell fast asleep in the basement of the boat. Ironically, he was awakened from his apathy by the pagan captain who implored the prophet to start praying.

*Sometimes God must shake us up to wake us up.* This makes me think of the lyrics to an old Keith Green song.

*Oh, can't you see it's such sin?  
The world is sleeping in the dark  
That the church just can't fight  
'Cause it's asleep in the light.*

*How can you be so dead  
When you've been so well fed?  
Jesus rose from the grave  
And you, you can't even get out of bed.*

In verses 7-10, after finding out Jonah was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, they became ***“exceedingly afraid.”*** Jonah told them to hurl him into the sea to stop the storm. To their credit, they tried another route because they had compassion toward Jonah, something he didn’t have for them or for the Ninevites. After they prayed, verse 15 says, ***“So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.”*** Verse 16 tells us what happened

next: ***“Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.”***

It’s interesting that Jonah declared in verse 9: ***“I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord...”*** but it was the sailors who stood in awe of the Almighty. In addition, the sailors prayed to the Lord in verse 14 but there’s no indication the prophet prayed at all. As Jonah was sinking in the sea, we see the sweet sovereignty of God in verse 17: ***“And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”*** The word ***“appointed”*** means, ***“allotted or assigned.”***

*Because God sends us to those we’d rather avoid, we must choose compassion over comfort.*

**2. Jonah returns to God.** In 2:1-2, we see that Jonah finally calls on the Lord: ***“Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, 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.’”*** We won’t take the time to read the rest of his prayer, but I do want to point out that every line of his plea reflects sentences from the Psalms.

Verse 9 is the turning point for Jonah when he prays, ***“Salvation belongs to the Lord!”*** Structurally speaking, this verse is the exact center point of the narrative. At the last minute, Jonah calls out for help, and in that instant, he receives the mercy from the Lord that he had been unwilling to give to the residents of Ninevah. After Jonah affirmed the Lord as Savior, verse 10 tells us what happened next, ***“And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.”***

Mike Burns reminded me of the lyrics to the hymn, “Love Lifted Me.” The composer probably had Jonah in mind.

*I was sinking deep in sin,  
Far from the peaceful shore,  
Very deeply stained within,  
Sinking to rise no more.*

*But the Master of the sea  
Heard my despairing cry,  
From the waters lifted me—*

*Now safe am I.*

**3. Jonah responds to God.** In chapter three, Jonah is now ready to receive God's instructions. Notice how similar 3:1-2 is to the beginning of the book: ***“Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘rise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.’”*** Aren't you thankful for second chances? God's call didn't change, but Jonah changed. Sometimes God rewinds us back to the very place we resisted Him, giving us another opportunity to obey. He extends His mercy to get us back to missional living.

In 1:3 we read Jonah ***“rose to flee to Tarshish”*** and in 3:3 we read, ***“So Jonah arose and went to Ninevah.”*** We see again that Ninevah was called ***“an exceedingly great city,”*** which refers to its size and its significance.

Jonah's sermon in verse 4 is only five words long in Hebrew: ***“Yet forty days, and Ninevah shall be overthrown!”*** As I reflected on this, I wondered why Jonah refused to give this message because it's clear he wanted Ninevah destroyed. But, as we will see, he was afraid this word of warning would lead to their repentance and salvation. It strikes me how important it is to preach both truth and grace. People must know they are condemned before a holy God because of their sins before they will repent and receive Christ.

Verse 5 gives us their response: ***“And the people of Ninevah believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.”*** This short sermon launched one of the greatest revivals in history. We see in verses 6-9 that even the king repented and ordered everyone to ***“call out mightily to God,”*** which means to do so ***“earnestly and forcefully.”*** He also commanded them to turn from their evil and violent ways ***“so that we may not perish.”***

Verse 10 reveals the compassionate and forgiving heart of God: ***“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said He would do to them, and He did not do it.”*** I'm praying that our country will turn from our evil ways and turn to Christ, who is the only way.

Churches across the country saw a surge in attendance last weekend. I hope this heightened interest in spiritual matters leads to conversions and commitment because the heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart. In short, we need a

revival in the church and a spiritual awakening in our nation that will only come when we repent of our sins and receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

A week ago, on Thursday, I had the opportunity to speak at Second Winders. Since this was 9/11 and the day after the evil assassination of Charlie Kirk, I changed up the message I had prepared. I want to share a portion of that now, while making some additional comments.

In reflecting on what happened in his state, Utah Governor Spencer Cox declared, *“Our Nation is Broken.”*

We remember the atrocity unleashed 24 years ago on 9/11 when *external* forces attacked us. And now, *internal* acts of evil threaten to undo us as violence has been unleashed against politicians in their homes and on ball diamonds, against young image bearers in schools and churches, against an immigrant on a subway and against an evangelical apologist on a college campus. On top of all this, just this past Wednesday, five police officers were shot in Pennsylvania, leaving three of them dead.

Political polarization is tearing us apart, causing vitriolic division and hatred. Moral and cultural shifts threaten the fabric and conscience of our country. Rising anxiety, depression, loneliness, and hopelessness affect the younger generation, though levels are up for all age groups. Confusion about identity, purpose, and truth have left us without an anchor for the soul.

Indeed, our nation is broken. It’s time for us to admit it and it’s good for us to own it because step one is to admit we have a problem that we are powerless to overcome on our own. One of my friends said it well: *“Now we make anyone we disagree with ON ANYTHING our enemy - when in reality the enemy we are all fighting is unseen.”*

In the sermon I preached in the days right after 9/11, I referenced a question from former NATO Supreme Commander General Wesley Clark after the towers tumbled, and parts of the Pentagon were pulverized. Here’s what he asked: *“Will we ever be the same?”*

My answer then and my answer now is unchanged: *“I hope not. The worst thing that could happen would be for us to go back to the way we were before. We must not stay the same. We must never be the same again.”*

Unfortunately, in the last 24 years we have not remained the same, we have gotten worse. As a country we are divided and disheartened, helpless and hopeless. We've turned our backs on God which has led to a moral free fall.

Will we stay the same or continue to slide south?

Let's hold on to Psalm 121:2-3: "...*Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.*"

We won't be the same and we can't be the same!

Will you join me in praying this prayer from Psalm 85:6? "*Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?*"

This week I met with a group of gospel-preaching pastors, and we all agreed that this is a missional moment for Christians because people are frightened and angry. Let's be ready to give an answer for the hope we have in Jesus Christ because the gospel is the only answer.

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**4. Jonah resents God.** Jonah's reaction to the repentance of the Ninevites was to become incensed. We see this in 4:1: "*But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.*" While God turned from His anger, Jonah turned to anger, which means, "*to become hot.*" In verse 2, "*He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.'*" Jonah knew his Bible as this is a paraphrase of Exodus 34:6.

Jonah's idol was Jonah and because God didn't do what Jonah wanted Him to do, Jonah was done with God. That's a good word for us because it's common for some people to be finished with God if He does something they don't like, or if He doesn't do something they want Him to do. Do you ever get angry or jealous if God blesses someone else? Do you get mad when someone you don't care for is forgiven? In short, Jonah had an issue with the attributes and actions of God.

In verse 3, he'd rather die than see the Ninevites spared and in verse 4 God questioned whether Jonah had a right to be angry about this. Interestingly, Jonah

never answered that question. Instead, verse 5 tells us he pulled up his lawn chair to watch the fireworks, hoping that God might change His mind and incinerate his enemies: ***“Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.”***

To teach Jonah a lesson about God’s steadfast love for the nations, verse 6 tells us what happened next: ***“Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.”*** Sadly, this is the first time in the book that Jonah is happy.

Check out 4:7-8: ***“But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’”*** God utilizes all the forces of nature to get Jonah’s attention.

God appointed a plant for shade, a worm to attack the plant, and then a scorching wind to make him uncomfortable. Jonah was exceedingly glad about the comfort the plant provided and then he became enflamed with anger when it was taken away. Verse 9 says, ***“But God said to Jonah, ‘Do you do well to be angry for the plant?’ And he said, ‘Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.’”***

In verse 10, God applies the lesson: ***“And the Lord said, ‘You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night.’”*** Sadly, Jonah had more passion and pity for a plant than for people made in the image of God. He had demonized and dehumanized his adversaries so much that he rendered them unworthy of God’s grace and mercy. He loathed his enemies while God loved them.

Like Jonah, we often value our own comfort over the souls of millions of lost people who need to hear about God’s judgment and His mercy through Jesus Christ. You would think that we who have received God’s mercy would be quick to extend it to others. Instead, we’re often quick to want God to judge people we dislike. One pastor says, ***“It’s just a short step from dislike to disobedience...If God had rained fire and brimstone on Ninevah, Jonah would have returned to Israel as a national hero...maybe he would have made it out of the minor prophets and into the major prophets!”***

The book ends with a question that leaves us with a sense of uneasiness: ***“And should I not pity Ninevah, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”***

This may refer to young children, in which case there could have been a population of over 400,000 in Ninevah (which is the population of the greater QCA). Other commentators suggest the 120,000 were adults who were living in spiritual darkness and depravity with an inability to make moral judgments. In short, they’re acting like lost people because they are lost, which is a good reminder for us when we get angry with those who sin differently than we do.

Jonah cared more for his personal comfort than for the spiritual destiny of thousands of people. You’d think Jonah would be thrilled about the response to his sermon! I get excited over just one person getting saved. Jonah knew the Bible in his head, but he lacked God’s heart for lost people. Interestingly, every time God mentions Ninevah to Jonah, He calls it a great city. I’m sure Jonah would have used other adjectives to describe it.

The book ends quite abruptly with a question, leaving us uncertain if Jonah fully repented and returned to the Lord. That leads us to the same question. Do I have compassion for lost people from every nation, tribe, and tongue? Am I willing to forgo comfort and prejudice and become compassionate towards those who need Christ?

This week I came across the lyrics to a song I had never heard before. It’s called the “Hornet Hymn.”

*Now, the Lord sent a great fish to swallow him up,  
The story I am sure you all know.  
God did not compel him to go against his will,  
But He just made him willing to go.*

## **Action Steps**

**1. Repent, believe, and receive the gospel.** If you’re not yet a follower of Christ, it’s time to trust what Christ did on the cross for your sins before it’s too late. Listen to the words of Jesus found in Matthew 12:40-41: ***“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.”***

**2. If you're saved, but not surrendered, it's time to return to God.** You may feel like there's 1,000 steps between you and God. God has taken 999 of them but is waiting for you take the last step. If you will take one step back, you will be back!

**3. Confess any smug prejudice you may have toward anyone.** We're called to love our enemies, not lambast them. Ask God to give you the compassion of Jesus toward those people you don't care for.

**4. Obey God's word promptly.** Determine to faithfully follow what God says in His word and be thankful He gives you another chance when you don't. What decision is God asking you to make in this Here Am I series?

**5. Light up your neighborhood on October 31.** Since Halloween is one of the only nights of the year when our neighbors literally come to our doors, instead of hosting a large event at church, this year the staff is encouraging everyone to turn their lights on and look for ways to bless children, their families, and our surrounding neighbors.

As Matthew 5:14 says, ***"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."*** As we've been focusing on living on mission among the nations, we're excited about this positive and practical way for each of us to serve our neighbors this year. We're calling it, "Light it Up!"

Here are some ideas to consider. Keep it simple but be as creative as you'd like!

- Pray for your neighbors by name and ask God to help you connect with them.
- Turn on all your outdoor lights.
- Set up lawn chairs in your front yard and greet people as they come to your home.
- Be generous in the amount of candy you give out.
- Play some uplifting music.
- Consider grilling hot dogs or serving hot chocolate.
- Prepare gift bags and distribute them to the neighbors who don't come.
- Take some pictures and post them to #ebclightitup.

This year, we will not be doing the Fall Festival of Fun or Trunk or Treat because it's on a Friday night, which is the night we reserve our facility for Celebrate Recovery.

Thomas Carlisle wrote a poem called "You! Jonah!" Here are the last two stanzas:

*And Jonah sulked  
To his shaded seat  
And waited for God  
To come around  
To his way of thinking.*

*And God is still waiting  
For a host of Jonahs  
In their comfortable houses  
To come around  
To his way of loving.*

### **Interview with Emma J**

1. Can you give us an overview of some missions experiences you've had the last several years?
2. This summer you spent a couple weeks reaching out to Muslims in Detroit. What was that like? Can you share a story?
3. Tell us about your upcoming plans to go to central Asia in January as part of your doctorate in Occupational Therapy?
4. How do you sense God leading you in the future?