

Welcome to Neighborhood! We continue our SUMMER SERIES titled “Campfire Stories”: re-telling the famous accounts of God’s Mighty Hand displayed through the OT. Today, I invite you to open your Bible and join me in the book of Jonah. This is a small book near the end of the Old Testament

If you’ve ever heard about Jonah, what immediately comes to mind? Isn’t he that guy that had a fish in his belly for like 3 days?? NO, Jonah was IN the belly of a huge fish for 3 days!

The book of Jonah is UNIQUE among all the other prophet books in the Bible. The other books are mostly made up of WORDS spoken by the prophet. But the book of Jonah is a story ABOUT the prophet (it only contains an 8-word sermon by Jonah... only 5 words in Hebrew!) You might be saying “I could really go for an 8-word sermon today!”

Many people have wondered, “Are the events about Jonah true? Did they really happen?” I believe, along with many other students of God’s Word, that this is an HISTORICAL account of real events.

- Jonah was a real person: II Kings 14:25 says that during the reign of Jeroboam II, the LORD God of Israel “had spoken through His servant, Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hepher.”
- Jesus refers to the events in Jonah as factual. In Matthew 12:40, Jesus states that “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.” In the following verse, Jesus commends the men of Nineveh because “they repented and the preaching of Jonah.”
- My faith in God means I also believe that He works miracles: He spoke the earth and mankind into existence. He parted the waters for Moses & the Israelites. Jesus fed over 5,000 people with a few loaves & fish. Jesus was killed, buried...and 3 days later rose to life...I can also believe that God used a huge fish to do his work, and to sustain Jonah inside that fish!

The events we are about to read are REAL...and they serve a purpose: *to reveal God to us and teach us something TRUE about Him.*

Let’s Dive In to the book of Jonah, beginning in Chapter ONE:
(how about some good ‘ol fashioned alliteration with the letter P?)

Chapter ONE: Jonah Panics and “Puts Out to Sea”

Jonah 1:1-2 (NKJV) Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

- “the word of the Lord came to Jonah”
 - This is a common phrase used when God speaks directly to a prophet or someone asked to join God’s work in some way. (the same as people like Abraham, Elijah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel)
- “Arise, go to Nineveh”
 - Nineveh: a prominent city in Assyria, Israel’s constant enemy.
 - The Assyrians were known to be arrogant & brutally violent.
 - The prophet Nahum called it a bloody city, full of idolatry.
 - Their wickedness was known to God, and He wanted to address it.

Jonah 1:3 (NKJV) But Jonah arose 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 from the presence of the Lord.

- But instead of going EAST to Nineveh, Jonah goes in the OPPOSITE direction...as far WEST as you can go: to Tarshish!
- Jonah isn’t fleeing from God’s presence (you can’t do that!), ...but he fleeing from God’s work/God’s assignment.
- Why does Jonah flee? We’re not told yet (but we will find out later).
- Jonah does NOT have the same interest with Nineveh as God does.
- Assyria was Israel’s enemy: the command was unwelcome & repulsive to Jonah

Jonah 1:4 (NKJV) But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up.

- God SENT (“hurled”) a storm at Jonah and the sailors on the ship.
- We will see through this story God’s sovereign action over creation...He will use a storm, a fish, a plant, a scorching wind, a worm...all to accomplish His Good Purposes!

Here’s what happens next: The sailors on the ship are fearing for their lives. They cast lots to find out who is responsible for this storm. The lot falls on Jonah...He is responsible for this storm! So the sailors ask Jonah: “Who are you? What do you do?” ...look at Jonah’s response in verse 9:

Jonah 1:9 (NKJV) So 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." What a joke! Jonah says he worships God...but his actions contradict his confession. The sailors know that Jonah has fled from the Lord, so they ask him: What shall we do to calm this storm?

Jonah 1:12 (NKJV) And he said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me." Jonah admits his responsibility...but is he repentant? What better way to get out of going to Nineveh! Throw me overboard! It appears that Jonah would rather PERISH than PREACH. The sailors try to row back to land, but the sea grew rougher. So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea. "and the sea ceased from its raging" (1:15)

Jonah 1:16 (NKJV) Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows. These men are grateful for the Lord's gracious deliverance from the storm. "Vows" were a public expression that one intended to continue in faithful worship. Now we have no indication of whether these sailors gave up their other gods and simply added the Lord to their list of deities...but it is their actions which are shown to be appropriate as opposed to Jonah's. This whole chapter is kind of turned-over, upside down: God's prophet refuses to worship God by obeying Him and the pagan sailors end up worshipping God, offering sacrifices, and taking vows. Jonah is now sinking to his death, but God has not given up on Jonah.

Jonah 1:17 (NKJV) Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. This aquatic beast was NOT a PUNISHMENT by God...It was a PROVISION of God to SAVE Jonah from sinking to certain death.

The common response to this amazing event is: Could Jonah really survive 3 days & nights in the belly of a fish? It's easy for us to think that the FISH is the big miracle of the story. But there is something MORE miraculous, MORE awesome, even MORE unbelievable than a fish swallowing Jonah: *The miracle of this story is that God rescues a rebellious prophet! God saves the rebellious. God saves the wicked, the violent. God saves sinners (like you and me).* The fish points to God's extravagant, unrelenting, pursuing love for all people. He saves the pagan sailors from the storm. He saves a rebellious Israelite prophet from drowning. "Salvation is of the Lord!"

Chapter TWO: Jonah Prays

Jonah 2:1 (NKJV) Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish's belly.

It's not a prayer for God to save Jonah, but a prayer of thanksgiving *because* God has saved him from certain death.

Jonah 2:2-9 (NKJV) And he said: "I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me. "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice. For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, And the floods surrounded me; All Your billows and Your waves passed over me. Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.' The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head. I went down to the moorings of the mountains; The earth with its bars closed behind me forever; Yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God. "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; And my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple. "Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy. But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord."

An interesting prayer: there is TENSION here. Jonah admits that he is an undeserving recipient of God's grace...BUT he never repents for running from God! Jonah appears both grateful *and* defiant. He will go to Nineveh to preach, but he will protest again later. We see that God answers those who call out in distress even if their issues of protest are resolved or not...we see God's PATIENCE with us. In Jonah's prayer we see the complexity of faith: we can praise God even if we have issues of doubt or protest that we are still working out.

Chapter THREE: Jonah Preaches

One of the shortest sermons ever recorded! 8 words in English...only 5 words in Hebrew! What's missing? No mention of what they've done wrong...how to make things right...and no mention of God! Is Jonah purposely sabotaging his own message? "Nineveh shall be overthrown." This word "overthrown" (haphak) in Hebrew can mean: "destroyed" (like Sodom & Gomorrah in Gen. 19:21) OR it can mean "turned over/changed/transformed" (like Saul in 1 Samuel 10:6 when the Holy Spirit came upon him and he was "turned into another man") Jonah may have thought...may have hoped...that Nineveh was to be destroyed...but let's read what happens:

Another miracle happens: The people of Nineveh, Israel's worst enemies, the most unlikely of people...they believe Jonah's message and they repent of their evil ways! The king issues a decree saying: Let neither man nor beast eat or drink (fasting was a means of seeking God's mercy). Let man and beast be covered in sackcloth (a symbol of repentance) (why animals, too?) It shows total repentance. When animals are hungry, they moan.! The sound of hunger from the animals would heard in all the land. Let everyone turn from his evil way & from the violence in his hands.

So Jonah's words COME TRUE...but not in the way he intended. Nineveh does get "overthrown"...they get "turned over" after Jonah's message. How does God respond to wicked Nineveh?

Jonah 3:10 (NKJV) Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

Maybe they were just acting to avoid disaster...but God responds to their humility & repentance...and He spares them from present destruction. God's action to postpone judgment is intended to be: a demonstration of His compassion: that God welcomes the repentant and that He continues to seek out the most distant person and restore them to His grace.

Was it Jonah's eloquent preaching that turned the hearts of Nineveh? No. It is the work of God drawing lost people back to Him.

Now most Children's Bibles, when telling the story of Jonah, end here...but the most important part of the book, where the message is found, takes place in chapter 4.

Chapter FOUR: Jonah Pouts

Jonah 4:1-3 (NKJV) But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. ²So he prayed to the Lord, and said, "Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!" Jonah is burning with anger! To Jonah, Nineveh's repentance was a great disaster! We learn WHY Jonah fled from God in the first place: "I fled because I KNEW You would forgive them!" Jonah was interested in Nineveh's destruction, not their salvation. Jonah gives a familiar, 5-point description of God's character: "I know who You are, God...You are

- Gracious
- A Merciful God
- Slow to anger (anger means the "nostrils burn"...slow to anger means God has lengthened nostrils)
- Abundant in lovingkindness
- One who relents from doing harm.

Where did Jonah learn that this was God's character? God said it. This is God's self-description that he proclaimed to Moses when He passed by him on Mount Sinai: Jonah also knew God's character from his OWN experience, for he was a recipient of God's grace, mercy and long nose! You see, Jonah was grateful when God was merciful to him, but angry when God showed that same mercy toward his enemies.

Jonah 4:4 (NKJV) Then the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah doesn't answer God's question. Jonah builds a shelter on a hill and waits to see what might happen to Nineveh (is he hoping that destruction will come upon them?) God provides a viny plant to give him shade for his head and to deliver Jonah from his misery. Jonah is very happy because of the plant. But the next morning, God provides a worm to eat the plant and Jonah loses his shade. God prepares a scorching wind and the sun beats down on Jonah. Jonah asks God, "Just kill me. It is better for me to die than live." God asks Jonah: "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" Jonah says "Yes! It is right for me to be angry about the plant."

Jonah 4:10-11 (NKJV) But the Lord said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?"

The book ends with God's question just hanging there: "Shouldn't I be concerned about Nineveh?" What is Jonah's answer? The book doesn't say! The question is for US, the readers and listeners to wrestle with and answer ourselves. Are you OK with the fact that God loves your enemy? Jonah felt that God would be best glorified by the destruction of Nineveh...but God is best glorified by showing mercy & grace toward the undeserving.

I have two takeaways for us from the book of Jonah:

1. *God longs to be gracious to "THEM" not just you.*

There is a tendency among those of us who have received God's mercy to become arrogant and hostile toward those outside of the church. The book of Jonah confronts this tendency among God's people. It's easy to feel superior to Jonah because of how outlandishly foolish he is. But the purpose of the book is for us to consider that we are like Jonah!

QUESTION: Who is the "THEM" in your life?

Jonah belonged to Israel...and the Ninevites were outsiders...not a part of his people...and in Jonah's mind, they were unfit for God's mercy. Who are the outsiders in your life? Who are your enemies? Are you OK with God showing mercy to them? Do you seek their destruction or their mercy? God longs to be gracious to THEM, not just you.

As we've witnessed this past week, racial hatred & tension plagues our world, our nation, and our own hearts. We affirm that Jesus came to redeem and reconcile ALL people, of every tribe, every nation, and every tongue. *Lord, may we, Your Church, lead our world with Christ's message of hope and reconciliation.*

My second takeaway from the book of Jonah is for those of us today who feel that God's mercy is not available for you...that God's grace is wide, but not wide enough to cover the things you have done. Hear the Good News today:

2. God longs to be gracious to YOU, not just them.

Whether you are here in a service or joining us online, this grace is for you. The book of Jonah shows us that if God will respond with mercy and grace to the people of Nineveh...the epitome of pagan wickedness and violence. Then SURELY He will respond compassionately to YOU! Each and every day is an opportunity for God to shower His love, His mercy, and His grace upon you. Do you believe that? Do you receive the mercy that God is extending to you today? Or do you think that God's mercy will run out? "One more sin...one more failure...and I'm outta here!" *Though sin runs deep, God's grace runs deeper. Remember, the greatest miracle of the book of Jonah is not the big fish, it is that God rescues rebellious people to turn to Him for help.*