

Jonah 1A

- Welcome to our study of the prophet Jonah
 - When we open our Bibles to study the stories of great men and women of faith, we expect to find stories of faith and obedience
 - Today on the other hand, we find a story of faith and disobedience
 - A story where the victim is guilty of the crime, the hero is a fish, and the moral of the story is be less like God's man and more like the villains
 - The book of Jonah is familiar to almost every Bible student, if only in a passing way
 - In fact, though it is a historical account, it is structured in many respects like a long parable...only 48 verses long
 - But the story packs so much wisdom in four short chapters, and the action begins immediately as the Lord brings Jonah a new mission

[Jonah 1:1](#) The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying,

[Jonah 1:2](#) "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me."

[Jonah 1:3](#) But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

- Jonah was one of the last prophets to the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the final years prior to their exile in 722 BC
 - Jonah was from a small town in the Galilee
 - And he prophesied under the reign of King Jeroboam II, another in the long line of evil kings that ruled over the Northern kingdom
 - Jonah is described as the son of Amittai, whose name means truthful – a man we know nothing more about
 - But the fact that Jonah's father is named in the story is important because it adds weight to the view that the story of Jonah is literal, historical fact

- We live in relativistic and cynical times
 - So many Christians will dismiss as fiction any part of the Bible that presents supernatural workings of God
 - And this kind of cynicism has established itself in many of today's seminaries and Biblical training institutions
 - Rising out of this movement was the conclusion that Jonah was not historical fact but simply allegory or metaphor
 - One of the casualties of this trend is the historical view of Jonah
 - Today, you can find many seminaries and churches teaching Jonah as little more than a fable told for the purpose of teaching some kind of moral
- Prior to the rise of Biblical criticism, the story of Jonah was always considered to be literal fact
 - Both early Christian fathers as well as Jewish rabbinical leaders had never questioned the literal historical accuracy of the text
 - Even more important, Jesus Himself made reference in Luke 11 to the Book of Jonah as a literal historical work
 - Drawing a comparison that the generation in Jesus' day would receive no more revelation than the generation living in Nineveh
 - Such a comparison would be nonsensical if the story of Jonah was merely metaphor rather than a historical fact
 - So if you are prepared to accept Jesus as Lord and Christ, then you must be equally prepared to accept His view of Jonah as real and factual
- Similarly, we should note that the book itself opens with a reference to Jonah's father, which adds weight to the conclusion that Jonah was a real man
 - And the events of his story therefore are real events
- Nineveh was the last capital city of the Assyrian kingdom

- It occupied about 1800 acres along the eastern banks of the Tigris river in Mesopotamia
 - Today, the ruins of Nineveh stand opposite Mosul in present-day Iraq
- Nineveh's history goes back to the earliest days after the flood
 - It was established by the first great city builder, Nimrod
 - Nimrod also established Babel, which is south of Bagdad
 - The city was surrounded by a great wall for protection
 - The walls were 100 feet high and 50 feet thick
 - One stretch of the wall ran for 7.5 miles and had 15 gates
 - Living inside and around the city were about 600,000 people, making it one of the great ancient cities
- The people of Assyria were enemies of the nation of Israel
 - They were idol worshippers and were a warring people
- At the time Jonah is being sent to Nineveh – around 780 BC – the Assyrian nation was at a weak point in its power
 - The kingdom had given way to invaders from the north such that their border reached barely 100 miles away from their capital city
 - It wasn't until a new king rose to power in 745 BC that the kingdom began to regain its former glory, ultimately leading to their defeat over Israel in 722 BC
- Nineveh's history as an idol worshipping nation and an enemy of God's people was cause for God's command to Jonah
 - Jonah hears from God that he should rise and go cry against Nineveh because of its wickedness
 - This is God's pattern with all His prophets
 - Like Isaiah who told God, "Hear I am, send me" to the rebellious Southern Kingdom
 - Or Ezekiel who heard God say

[Ezek. 2:4](#) "I am sending you to them who are stubborn and obstinate children, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.'

[Ezek. 2:5](#) "As for them, whether they listen or not—for they are a rebellious house—they will know that a prophet has been among them.

- So God would often send His prophet to proclaim – to cry out – to a people
- Sometimes for the purpose of bringing about repentance
- And sometimes for the purpose of being a witness against them before they receive God's judgment
- Jonah's call here is unique in scripture
 - It was the only time that an OT prophet was sent specifically to a Gentile nation with a call to repentance
 - Never before had God taken note of a nation of Gentiles with a merciful cry for repentance
 - Individual Gentiles were known to receive God's mercy and leave behind their idol worship
 - But an entire nation? No.
 - Much less an enemy of Israel
 - Why did God want Jonah to go to Nineveh?
 - The words for cry against are *qara al*
 - They have a wide range of meanings, including call out or proclaim over
 - There is a distinct sense of proclaiming with an expectation of a positive outcome
 - We'll examine the ultimately prophetic picture of Jonah's call as we reach the fourth chapter
 - But for now, the answer is simply because God desired to show mercy on the city of Nineveh
 - And He selected Jonah as His instrument to accomplish this purpose

- In response to this call, we see Jonah's bizarre response in verse 3
 - Jonah jumps up immediately, and promptly disobeys God
 - Immediately upon hearing God's instructions, Jonah leaves for Joppa to find a ship headed to Tarshish
 - To fully appreciate what Jonah did here, you have to consult a map
 - If you were to draw a line from Nineveh to Joppa, it would almost run directly through the heart of Gath-hepher, Jonah's hometown in the Galilee
 - In other words, Jonah chose to travel in haste to Joppa, a point 180 degrees away from Nineveh
 - And he's not content to simply place himself a little farther away from Nineveh
 - When he reaches Joppa, he then looks for a boat headed to Tarshish
 - Tarshish is the name for several ancient cities, but most likely the one in view here is the region in present-day Spain
 - Which represented a place about as far away from Israel as any man could go in that day (2,400 miles away from Joppa)
 - What Jonah did was try to place himself as far from Nineveh as he could
- And why? What is Jonah trying to accomplish?
 - Think about it...if Jonah simply didn't want to obey God's command to preach to the Assyrians, he could have just stayed where he was
 - His hometown was already hundreds of miles away from Nineveh
 - If Jonah simply wanted to be disobedient, then sitting put in Gath-hepher would have been just as effective as running to Tarshish
 - And it can't be that Jonah was upset at the prospect of a long trip to Nineveh

- Because he just set out on a journey even farther than the one God asked him to take
 - So why take off in this way?
- Verse 3 tells us: To leave the presence of the Lord
 - This term is a common one in scripture, and it refers to God's localized physical presence in the Temple or elsewhere
 - The same phrase is used when Adam and woman hid from God in the garden
 - Or when Cain left when he was banished following the murder of Abel
 - And we're told that Mt. Horeb quaked from the presence of the Lord
 - It can also refer to how Jonah personally experienced the Lord's presence in Israel
 - Jonah had heard from God on numerous occasions in the Land of Israel
 - And Jonah associated the land in which he lived as a place God dwelled and interacted with His people
 - So knowing that he wasn't prepared to obey God's voice, Jonah determines to leave God's presence
 - It doesn't mean that Jonah thought he could run so far that God couldn't find him or know his whereabouts
 - Jonah, like any prophet, would have understood that God was omnipresent and always aware of his thoughts and actions and whereabouts
- There were essentially three reasons for why Jonah is running so far away
 - First, he assumed that if he went far away, then God would have to use another man to do His will
 - It was an issue of availability
 - If Jonah wasn't available, then he wouldn't be the one that would go to Tarshish

- This is a disobedience calculated to force God's hand into accomplishing His purpose through a different means
- Secondly, Jonah was trying to run down the clock
 - We learn later in Chapter 3 that the message God gave Jonah to deliver to the Ninevites said that unless the city repented, the city would be destroyed in 40 days
 - So, presumably Jonah was trying to get so far away that the clock would run out before the city heard the proclamation
- The final reason is one we all share with Jonah
 - The natural thing for any of us to do whenever we decide to disobey God's direction is that we instinctively run from His presence
 - There are times for each of us when we know what God would have us do in a particular situation
 - Like Jonah, we've all heard from God in some way
 - Perhaps by an impression God leaves on our heart
 - Or by the counsel of a godly friend
 - Or through the clear teaching of scripture as revealed to us by the Holy Spirit
 - And like Jonah we clearly understood it was a word from God, yet it wasn't the word we wanted to hear
 - It didn't suit us
 - And so we turned and went our own way
 - And like Jonah, this wasn't the kind of disobedience that used to come naturally to us as unbelievers
 - This is the kind of disobedience unique to a child of God
 - This is a sin of rebellion that defines all of us from time to time
 - And when the believer makes a choice to disobey God, we naturally run from God
- Like Jonah, we felt compelled to leave God's presence

- For Jonah, that meant fleeing Israel
- For us it may take the form of forgoing the company of that friend through whom God has been speaking
 - Or perhaps we avoid speaking with the Bible teacher or pastor who taught us God's word
 - Or, perhaps it means forsaking the gathering by stopping attending church altogether
 - One way or another we run from God, because of the conviction and the shame and stubbornness
- Sin separates us from God
 - As an unbeliever it separates us eternally
 - But even after we become a believer, it can separate in the sense of cutting off fellowship
 - Not because God forsakes us over our sins, but because our sinful choices bring conviction and shame that drive us away from His presence
 - And so we compound our own mistake
 - We disobey and grieve the Spirit in us
 - And then unless we repent and turn back to God, we often experience a diminished willingness to seek His presence in worship, in study and in prayer
- It's no coincidence that many people drift away at times of crisis brought about by their own disobedient choices
- But we still haven't addressed the fundamental question here
 - Why is Jonah so determined not to obey, in confidence that God would accomplish His purpose for Nineveh through him?
 - God would bring repentance to the Ninevites and forgive them
 - In fact, if you read ahead to the end of the story, then you know that Jonah's concerns were well founded
 - But even at this point in the story, I want you to consider that this man's disobedience to God's call was not one resulting from a lack of faith

- When we study Chapter 4 in a few weeks, we'll study this in more depth
 - But even now, take note that what Jonah is doing is running because he has faith
 - Because he knows and trusts in God's power and ability to accomplish His purpose, Jonah is determined not to go to Nineveh
 - What Jonah feared most was that the word of God would have its natural effect and that Jonah would be a party to it
 - It would bring repentance and mercy, resulting in a pardon for the city and its people
- Dr. Thomas Constable uses a powerful analogy to explain how difficult it would have been for Jonah to consider this prospect
 - Imagine God spoke to a Jew in 1944 living in a Polish concentration camp, and instructed the Jew to travel to Berlin to proclaim a call for repentance
 - And imagine the Jew knew that God was prepared to pardon the entire German leadership and nation for their crimes against the Jewish people during WWII
 - How difficult would it be for that Jew, as he looked upon the misery and death all around him in the camps, to gather himself up and head to Berlin with that message
 - A message he knew would result in the saving of these people
 - Could he bring himself to do it?
 - Or instead, would he flee from that calling, and refuse to participate in God's plan?
 - You can understand, perhaps, why Jonah has the reaction he has
- So Jonah begins his walk toward Joppa, finds his ship, and boards it for Tarshish

[Jonah 1:4](#) The LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.

[Jonah 1:5](#) Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep.

[Jonah 1:6](#) So the captain approached him and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish."

- As the ship gets underway, the Lord takes steps
 - He brings a great wind against the ship
 - And the force of the storm was so great, it put the ship at the breaking point
 - The greatest danger to a ship in high seas was not the threat of capsizing but the threat that the keel might snap in tow
 - If the waves are too violent, the ship could end up perched on the edge of a wave so that the keel of the boat would be suspended in the air and then snap downward under its own weight
 - This storm was so strong that the crew felt that such an event was possible
 - These are experienced seamen, so their fear suggests just how dangerous the conditions were
- It's fascinating to watch as God pursues Jonah
 - The scripture tells us that God brought the storm upon the ship
 - And we know immediately that God is doing this to force Jonah's hand...but in a particular way
 - Why is God pursuing Jonah in this way?
 - God called Jonah to this mission, but we know that God is not dependent on Jonah
 - Why not leave Jonah alone and find someone else?
 - And on the other hand, if God wants to bring Jonah to Nineveh, why go about it in this way? Why not just pluck Jonah up and transport him to Nineveh?
 - Or better yet, bar him from ever entering the boat or leaving for Joppa?

- It's as though he gives Jonah just enough rope to hang himself, doesn't it?
- The answer is simple and yet not so simple
 - The simple answer is that God has determined to work through Jonah, and God does not change His mind
 - God purposed to work through Jonah to bring a message of repentance to Nineveh
 - For this was the purpose God had in calling Jonah as a prophet in the first place
 - And Jonah wasn't going to change God's decision by changing location
 - Paul puts it this way in Romans 11

[Rom. 11:29](#) for the gifts and the **calling** of God are irrevocable.

- God called Jonah and gifted Jonah, and these were sovereign decisions
 - And they are irrevocable because God, being God, knows the future and therefore He already has all the information He needs to determine the proper course for His plans
 - So when He places a calling on a man's life, it will never end
 - Moreover we can't run far enough to escape that call
 - Jonah is the man who will bring God's word to Nineveh and if so, then Jonah has two choices
 - He can go to Nineveh the easy way or he can go the hard way
- The second answer is a more complex
 - God's purpose here goes far deeper than merely saving the city of Nineveh
 - God is working to teach Jonah a lesson
 - If God's purpose was merely to save Nineveh, He could do it far more effectively and efficiently without Jonah

- Even if Jonah obeyed God from the start, it would still have been easier to send an angel or to appear as a pillar of cloud
- But yet God desires to work through Jonah to make a point – both to Jonah and to us today
- God is going to paint a powerful picture of His mercy and compassion, so He can contrast that with Jonah's selfishness and cold disregard for those who don't know God
 - And the fullness of this picture won't come together until the very end of the book
 - But for now, we need to acknowledge that one of the central themes of this book is the unchallenged sovereignty of God over all things
 - Including in His command of His creation
 - And His supreme authority in dispensing mercy
- Now returning to the details of the scene we just read in verses 4-6
 - The ship is being tossed to the point of breaking up
 - And the men begin to throw out cargo, because the lighter the ship, the higher it sat in the water and the less chance that it would snap as it crested over the top of a wave
 - Then the crewmen began to cry out to his respective god
 - Now these were pagan men, each praying to some pagan god that existed only in their minds
 - But their desperation and fear of death left them with no hope
 - And as they pray they continue to make trips into the ship's hold to bring up more cargo to toss overboard
 - Evidently the ship's captain takes note of Jonah sleeping in the depths of the ship
 - And this is no light sleep
 - The Hebrew word translated as deep sleep is *radam*

- It's the same word used to describe the deep sleep that came upon Adam when he had a rib removed
- The same sleep that Abram experienced when God made His covenant with Abram
- How does a man sleep through a storm like this?
 - It should remind you of a similar story in the Gospels when Jesus fell asleep
 - In Luke 8 when the storm came upon the Sea of Galilee and Jesus slept soundly in the hold of the boat
 - When we studied the scene in Luke, we understood that Jesus' ability to sleep resulted from His confidence that they would reach the other side as He intended
 - The storm wasn't going to harm them because God's purpose was that they make it to the other side
 - The disciples just didn't appreciate that fact, so they feared the storm
 - Likewise, the pagan sailors panicked because to their understanding, the storm represented an angry god intent on destroying them all
 - But Jonah knew better
 - He knew that God was angry with him
 - More importantly, Jonah knew that God wanted to bring Jonah to Nineveh to preach
 - And this Jonah didn't want to do
 - So, what does Jonah have to fear? Nothing really
 - Jonah probably reasoned that one of two things was true under the circumstances
 - Either God was using the storm to force Jonah to go to Nineveh, in which case it's clear that God wasn't going to kill Jonah in the storm

- Or God was intent in using the storm to kill Jonah as punishment for disobedience
 - But either way it makes no difference to Jonah
- And as we read through this story, it becomes increasingly evident that Jonah was perfectly content with facing death
 - Death doesn't bother Jonah, as a man of faith in the living God
 - Just as every Christian should have no fear of death, and even look forward to it because of the promises that come with it
- In other words, Jonah would rather die than participate in God's plan for Nineveh
- Consequently, while all the other sailors are panicking over the storm, Jonah is so much at peace, he can enjoy the deepest sleep
 - He has no reason to pray to God, for he has no interest in deliverance
 - He will not be persuaded by the storm, and should God destroy him, he will have won the battle in a sense, having avoided preaching in Nineveh
- So when the sailor lays eyes on the inexplicable sight of Jonah sleeping through the storm, he admonishes Jonah for not participating in the crew's efforts to pray for help
 - What a remarkable picture...I mean really
 - Jonah understands what's going on here
 - But he won't seek God, if not for himself, at least for these poor men he has subjected to his circumstances
 - In fact, he won't even take the time to explain to them what's happening, not yet anyway
 - And the pagan captain...
 - A man who doesn't know the true God
 - Who isn't to blame for the circumstances

- This man has to order Jonah, the prophet of the living God, to participate with the crew in prayer
- Consider what this tells us about Jonah
 - Already, we can see his stubbornness
 - But now we're beginning to appreciate Jonah's selfish and uncaring heart, particularly toward Gentiles – a group that largely didn't know the Lord God in Jonah's day
 - Remember, the entire story of Jonah exists because the prophet was unwilling to be used by God to bring repentance to a Gentile people that he hated
 - And now he has so little regard for the men on this ship that he shows complete apathy for their circumstances
 - He thinks only of himself
 - And the last statement in the verses I read is really the most memorable statement from our first week in our study
 - "Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish"
 - By its tone it implies a degree of sarcasm
 - Perhaps your god will be concerned about our predicament, because obviously you aren't, Jonah
 - You don't seem to care about anyone but yourself
 - There are few character flaws that handicap us more in our service to and usefulness to God than selfishness – perhaps second only to pride
 - When we are selfish in our time, our service, our finances, our relationships, in our love...
 - We become virtually useless to God, except to made an example of
 - As you may remember from our teaching in Luke Chapter 8 on the sower and the seed
 - The parable's point was to emphasize how pointless, how sad it is, to see a man or woman

raised up by God for the purpose of bearing fruit...

- Only to have that man or woman live merely for themselves, caught up in the cares and concerns of this world, like the plant choked off by weeds
- Because just like a farmer who raises up crops in order that they might bear seed
 - God raises up men and women so that they might bear fruit unto Him in this world
- Because while the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable, the blessings that accompany our obedience are not
- I hope this introduction to Jonah has piqued your interest in the meaning of the story of Jonah and for what we will learn in the coming weeks
 - Though the story of Jonah is short, it's loaded with meaning
 - And it's aimed squarely at an audience of believers, almost like a mirror held up before us
 - And as we study, we'll be taking note of how it reflects on our own behavior and attitudes as men and women called by the living God to be His messengers
 - To a world that does not know our Lord and is the object of His compassion