Jonah

Bible Stories Anthology — Jonah 1–4

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

The Prophet Who Ran the Wrong Way

Everyone remembers the fish. Most people have forgotten why Jonah was in it.

God told Jonah to go east, to the capital of the most brutal empire in the world, and warn it that judgment was coming. Jonah went west instead, as far west as a ship could take him. It was not cowardice. As he later admitted, he ran because he knew exactly what God was like: that if Nineveh repented, God would forgive them. And Jonah did not want them forgiven.

This is a book about a storm, a fish, a city, a plant and a worm. But more than any of them, it is about the heart of God — a heart big enough for pagan sailors, for a city of Israel's enemies, and for a sulking prophet who would rather die than see his enemies saved. It is the only book of the prophets that ends with a question, and the question is left for the reader to answer.

Jesus Himself pointed to this book. When His critics demanded a sign, He said the only sign they would get was "the sign of the prophet Jonas" (Matthew 12:39). Three days and three nights in the fish; three days and three nights in the heart of the earth; and then, out alive.

The Setting

When. Jonah the son of Amittai was a real prophet of Israel, known from the book of Kings. He prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, king of the northern kingdom of Israel, in the first half of the 700s before Christ. His one other recorded prophecy was a welcome one: that Israel would win back its old borders (2 Kings 14:25). Jonah was the prophet of Israel's success.

Where. Jonah came from Gath-hepher, a village in Galilee, a few miles from where Nazareth would later stand (2 Kings 14:25). (The Pharisees would one day sneer, "out of Galilee ariseth no prophet" [John 7:52]. They had forgotten Jonah.) God sent him to Nineveh, on the Tigris River in what is now northern Iraq, some five hundred miles to the northeast. Jonah went instead to Joppa, the seaport on Israel's coast (today's Jaffa, part of Tel Aviv), and boarded a ship for Tarshish — very likely Tartessus in southern Spain, near the far western end of the known world. Nineveh was east, over land. Tarshish was west, over sea. Jonah went in exactly the opposite direction, as far as he could go.

Who. Jonah; a crew of foreign sailors and their captain; a great fish; the king and people of Nineveh; a plant, a worm and a wind; and the LORD God.

The situation. Assyria, whose great city was Nineveh, was the rising superpower of the age, and it was notorious for its cruelty. Its kings boasted in their own inscriptions of flaying, impaling and mutilating the people they conquered. Within a few decades of Jonah's day, Assyria would destroy the northern kingdom of Israel altogether and carry its people into exile (2 Kings 17). The prophet Nahum later called Nineveh "the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not" (Nahum 3:1). To an Israelite, Nineveh was the enemy — the nation most likely to destroy his own people.

This is the **Mosaic Law administration**, the period in which God dealt with Israel under the covenant of the Law. But this story is not about Israel's Law. It is about God's dealings with Gentiles — with sailors and a foreign city — and it shows that God's heart had always reached beyond Israel. He had promised Abraham from the beginning: "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

The Story, Told Faithfully

Arise, Go to Nineveh

> **Jonah 1:1** *Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,*
> **Jonah 1:2** *Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.*

"Jonah" means *dove*. "Amittai" means *my truth*. The dove, son of truth, was given the hardest assignment of his life.

"That great city." The word *great* (Hebrew *gadol*) runs all through this little book: a great city, a great wind, a great tempest, a great fear, a great fish, great displeasure, great gladness. Everything in Jonah's story is great — except Jonah's heart.

"Their wickedness is come up before me." This is the figure of speech called **anthropopatheia** — describing God in human terms so that we can understand Him. (A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used to add emphasis or feeling.) Nineveh's evil is pictured as rising up, like smoke, into God's presence. God sees what is done in the world, even in a pagan city that does not know Him.

Going Down

> **Jonah 1:3** *But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.*

God said, "Arise, go." Jonah "rose up to flee."

"From the presence of the LORD." Twice in one verse. Jonah knew perfectly well that God was everywhere; he says so himself a few verses later (1:9). The psalmist had already written, "Whither shall I flee from thy presence?... If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me" (Psalm 139:7, 9-10). What Jonah was fleeing was his *service* — the place of standing before God as His prophet. He was resigning.

Now watch one word through the chapter. Jonah "went *down* to Joppa." He "went *down* into" the ship. Then he "was gone *down* into the sides of the ship" (1:5). Later, in his prayer, he says, "I went *down* to the bottoms of the mountains" (2:6). Down, down, down, down. The Hebrew verb is the same each time. The man running from God was on a downward path, step by step, and each step took him lower.

"He paid the fare thereof." Running from God always costs something.

The Storm

> **Jonah 1:4** *But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.*

"But the LORD." Jonah had made his plan, bought his ticket and set sail. God had not finished with him. "The LORD sent out a great wind" — the word is used of hurling a spear. God hurled a wind at the sea.

This storm was not God giving up on Jonah. It was God refusing to give up on him. It was the loving discipline of a Father who would not let His servant sail away from his calling into the uttermost parts of the sea.

"So that the ship was like to be broken." In Hebrew, literally, *the ship thought to be broken* — as though the ship itself expected to break apart. This is a figure of speech called **personification** — speaking of a thing as though it were a person. Even the ship knew it was in trouble.

> **Jonah 1:5** *Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep.*

The sailors were probably Phoenicians, the great seafarers of the day, from many ports and worshipping many gods. They "cried every man unto his god." They threw the cargo overboard — their profit, their livelihood — to keep the ship afloat.

And Jonah? Asleep in the lowest part of the ship. The phrase "fast asleep" is a word for deep, heavy sleep, the kind that falls on Adam when God took his rib (Genesis 2:21), or on Sisera when he was exhausted (Judges 4:21). The pagans were praying. The prophet of the LORD was asleep.

> **Jonah 1:6** *So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not.*

"What meanest thou, O sleeper?" — a question asked not for information but to rebuke, the figure of speech called **erotesis**. And then: "arise, call upon thy God." They are nearly the same words God had spoken to Jonah at the beginning: "*Arise*, go to Nineveh, and *cry* against it." Jonah had run from God's call, and now a pagan sea captain was repeating it to him.

The Lot Falls on Jonah

> **Jonah 1:7** *And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.*

In the ancient world, a storm this sudden and fierce was taken as a sign that some god was angry with someone on board. Casting **lots** — drawing marked stones or sticks — was a common way of seeking a decision from above. "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD" (Proverbs 16:33). The lot fell on Jonah.

> **Jonah 1:8** *Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou?*
>
> **Jonah 1:9** *And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land.*

Four questions, fired one after another in panic. Jonah answered with a confession of faith — and in the same breath, condemned himself. "I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land." He was running across the sea from the God who made the sea.

> **Jonah 1:10** *Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.*

"Why hast thou done this?" The pagan sailors understood what the prophet had forgotten: you do not run from a God like that.

Watch the sailors' fear grow through the chapter. First they "were afraid" (1:5) — afraid of the storm. Then they "were exceedingly afraid" (1:10) — afraid of Jonah's God. At the end, they "feared the LORD exceedingly" (1:16) — the fear of worship. In Hebrew, literally, *they feared a great fear*.

Cast Me Into the Sea

> **Jonah 1:11** *Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous.*
>
> **Jonah 1:12** *And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.*

"The sea wrought, and was tempestuous" — literally, *the sea was going and storming*, growing wilder by the minute.

Jonah's answer is remarkable. "Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea." He did not ask them to turn the ship around and take him back to Israel so he could obey. He would rather drown than go to Nineveh. But there is something else in his words too: he would not let innocent men die for his sin. "For my sake this great tempest is upon you."

> **Jonah 1:13** *Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them.*

"Rowed hard" — literally, *dug*, as though digging into the water with their oars. The pagan sailors had more compassion for Jonah than Jonah had for Nineveh. They tried everything to save the man who had endangered them. "But they could not."

> **Jonah 1:14** *Wherefore they cried unto the LORD, and said, We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee.*
>
> **Jonah 1:15** *So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging.*
>
> **Jonah 1:16** *Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows.*

Earlier, "every man" cried "unto his god." Now they cried "unto the LORD" — by His own name, the name Jonah had told them. They threw Jonah overboard, and the sea went instantly calm. And the sailors "feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows."

Here is the first surprise of the book. The prophet ran from God to keep Gentiles from being saved — and on the way, a shipload of Gentiles came to worship the LORD. God used even Jonah's disobedience to reach them.

A Great Fish

> **Jonah 1:17** *Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

"The LORD had prepared." The Hebrew word means *appointed* or *assigned*. It appears four times in this short book, and every time God is the subject: God prepared a great fish (1:17), a gourd (4:6), a worm (4:7), and an east wind (4:8). Nature does God's bidding in this book. Only the prophet does not.

"A great fish." The Hebrew does not say *whale*, and it does not tell us what kind of sea creature it was. When Jesus referred to this event, the Greek word used (*ketos*) means *a great sea creature*, and the King James Version translated it "whale" (Matthew 12:40). Scripture does not say whether it was a whale, a great shark, or a creature God made for the purpose. It says God *prepared* it. The fish was not Jonah's punishment. It was his rescue. Without it, he would have drowned.

"Three days and three nights." Jesus would take up these exact words.

A Prayer From the Deep

> **Jonah 2:1** *Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly,*
>
> **Jonah 2:2** *And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.*

In the fish, Jonah did what he had not done on the ship: he prayed.

"Out of the belly of hell." The word is *sheol*, the grave, the realm of the dead. Jonah was not dead; he was praying. He used the word as a picture of how close to death he had come — as good as in the grave. Scripture uses *sheol* this way in poetry to describe the depth of distress.

> **Jonah 2:3** *For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me.*
>
> **Jonah 2:4** *Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.*
>
> **Jonah 2:5** *The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.*
>
> **Jonah 2:6** *I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God.*

Jonah's prayer is woven out of the psalms. "All thy billows and thy waves passed over me" is nearly word for word from Psalm 42:7. A man who had spent his life with the scriptures reached for them when he was drowning.

"Thou hadst cast me into the deep." The sailors threw him, but Jonah knew whose hand was really behind it. "The weeds were wrapped about my head" — seaweed tangled around him as he sank. "I went down to the bottoms of the mountains" — the last *went down*, the lowest point of all. "The earth with her bars was about me for ever" — pictured as a prison with bars that would never open. This is **metaphor**, a figure of speech that speaks of one thing as though it were another.

"*Yet* hast thou brought up my life from corruption." The man who had gone down and down and down was brought *up*. Every step down had been Jonah's. The step up was God's.

> **Jonah 2:7** *When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.*
>
> **Jonah 2:8** *They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.*
>
> **Jonah 2:9** *But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD.*

"They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy." "Lying vanities" means idols — empty, worthless gods. Those who cling to idols walk away from the only mercy there is. It is a true statement, but notice the irony: Jonah said it about idol-worshippers, and the idol-worshipping sailors had just turned to the LORD — more readily than Jonah had.

"Salvation is of the LORD." This is the centre of the whole book. Salvation belongs to God. He gives it to whom He will — to a drowning prophet, to pagan sailors, and, as Jonah is about to find out, to Nineveh.

> **Jonah 2:10** *And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.*

"The LORD spake unto the fish." The fish obeyed the first time. Jonah, a prophet, had not. And the fish put Jonah back on "the dry land" — the land made by the God "which hath made the sea and the dry land" (1:9).

The Second Time

> **Jonah 3:1** *And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying,*
>
> **Jonah 3:2** *Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.*

"The second time." God did not choose someone else. He gave the same assignment to the same man. God does not abandon those He has called: "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Romans 11:29).

> **Jonah 3:3** *So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.*

This time, "Jonah arose, and went."

"An exceeding great city of three days' journey." Literally, *a great city to God* — a Hebrew way of saying *very great*, but also a reminder that the city mattered to God. What "three days' journey" means exactly is debated. It may describe the size of the whole district of greater Nineveh, with its surrounding towns; or the time needed to go through the city and proclaim a message in all its streets and squares. Either way, it was huge.

Yet Forty Days

> **Jonah 3:4** *And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*

Five words in Hebrew: *Yet forty days, and Nineveh overthrown.* No call to repent, no promise of mercy, no mention of God's name. Perhaps that was all God gave him to say. Perhaps it was all Jonah was willing to say. Either way, he said it only one day's journey into a three-day city.

"Overthrown" is the word used of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:25). The Ninevites would not have known that. But the warning was clear. Forty days — scripture's number of testing and probation — and then destruction.

Nineveh Believed God

> **Jonah 3:5** *So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.*

Here is the second surprise of the book, and the greatest. "The people of Nineveh believed God." No miracle. No long sermon. Five words from a reluctant foreigner, and the most violent city on earth believed.

They "proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth" — the Eastern signs of mourning and repentance: going without food, and wearing coarse goat-hair cloth against the skin. "From the greatest of them even to the least of them" — this is **merism**, a figure of speech that names the two extremes to include everyone in between. Every single person.

> **Jonah 3:6** *For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.*

The king of the most powerful empire in the world rose from his throne, took off his royal robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in the ashes. Four actions, from the throne to the dust.

> **Jonah 3:7** *And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water:*
>
> **Jonah 3:8** *But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.*
>
> **Jonah 3:9** *Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?*

Even the animals were to fast and be covered in sackcloth. To a modern reader this sounds strange, but ancient peoples sometimes did include their livestock in public mourning. The king left nothing out.

And he named the sin: "the violence that is in their hands." The very thing Nineveh was infamous for. Repentance was not only fasting and sackcloth. It was turning from what they had been doing.

"Who can tell if God will turn?" The king did not know God's name or His promises. He did not know whether God would forgive. He only hoped. Erotesis again — a question that expresses hope.

God Repented of the Evil

> **Jonah 3:10** *And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.*

"God repented of the evil." Two things in this verse need explaining.

"The evil" here does not mean a wicked thing God had planned. The Hebrew word, *ra'*, means *harm*, *calamity*, *disaster* as well as moral evil, and the verse itself shows which is meant: the evil "that he had said that he would do unto them" was the destruction Jonah had announced — "Nineveh shall be overthrown." Nineveh turned from its *evil way* (its wickedness); God turned from the *evil* (the calamity) He had warned of.

"God repented" does not mean God had done wrong. This is anthropopatheia again — God described in human terms. God had told Jeremiah exactly how His warnings work: "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation… to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them" (Jeremiah 18:7-8). A warning of judgment always carried an unspoken "unless." God did not change. Nineveh changed, and God's unchanging mercy met them.

Jonah's Anger

> **Jonah 4:1** *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.*

In Hebrew, literally, *it was evil to Jonah, a great evil*. The same word again. Nineveh turned from its evil; God turned from the evil He had threatened; and Jonah thought the whole thing was evil.

> **Jonah 4:2** *And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.*

Now, at last, Jonah tells us why he ran. Not because he was afraid of the Assyrians. Not because the job was too hard. "For I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness."

Those words are not Jonah's invention. They are the description God gave of Himself to Moses on Sinai: "The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth" (Exodus 34:6). It was Israel's most treasured creed about God, repeated by psalmists and prophets (Psalm 103:8; Joel 2:13). Jonah quoted it as a complaint. *I knew You would be merciful. That is exactly why I didn't want to come.*

Jonah wanted God's mercy for himself and for Israel. He had just received it, in the belly of a fish. He did not want it for the enemy.

> **Jonah 4:3** *Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.*
>
> **Jonah 4:4** *Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry?*

The prophet who had just been rescued from death asked to die, because his enemies had been rescued too.

"Doest thou well to be angry?" God did not strike him. He asked him a question — erotesis again, a question meant to make Jonah look at his own heart. It could also be translated, *Is it right for you to be angry?* Jonah did not answer.

The Gourd, the Worm and the Wind

> **Jonah 4:5** *So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.*

Jonah went out east of the city, built himself a rough shelter of branches — a "booth" — and sat down to watch. Perhaps he still hoped the forty days would end in fire.

> **Jonah 4:6** *And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd.*
>
> **Jonah 4:7** *But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.*
>
> **Jonah 4:8** *And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.*

"God prepared" — three more times. A gourd, a worm, a wind.

The "gourd" was a fast-growing leafy plant; many think it was the castor-oil plant, which grows quickly and has large, broad leaves. God made it spring up overnight to shade Jonah's head, "to deliver him from his grief." And for the first time in the whole book, Jonah was happy — "exceeding glad," literally *glad with a great gladness*. A great city was spared, and Jonah was furious. A plant grew, and Jonah was overjoyed.

Then God prepared a worm, and the plant withered. Then God prepared "a vehement east wind" — the hot, dry desert wind of the Middle East, called the *sirocco*, which can push the temperature up sharply and parch everything it touches. The sun beat on Jonah's head, and he fainted, and asked again to die.

> **Jonah 4:9** *And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.*

God asked the same question again, this time about the plant. Jonah answered: *Yes. I am right to be angry. Angry enough to die.*

Should Not I Spare Nineveh?

> **Jonah 4:10** *Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:*
>
> **Jonah 4:11** *And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?*

Here is God's answer, and it is an argument from the lesser to the greater. *You grieved over a plant. You did not plant it, you did not water it, you did not make it grow. It lived one night and died the next. And you pity it. Should I not pity a whole city of people I made?*

"More than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand." Sixscore thousand is 120,000. Many readers take "cannot discern between their right hand and their left" to mean small children, too young to know right from left — which would mean the whole city was far larger. Others take it to mean people who were morally ignorant, who had never been taught right from wrong. Either way, God was pointing Jonah to the people, and saying: *they matter to Me.*

"And also much cattle." Even the animals mattered to God.

And there the book ends. With a question. Jonah never answers it. Scripture does not tell us whether he ever changed his mind, whether he went home to Galilee still angry, or whether he finally saw what God saw. The question is left hanging, for the reader to answer: *should not God have mercy on people you would rather see destroyed?*

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The sign of Jonah. When the scribes and Pharisees demanded that Jesus prove Himself with a sign, He answered:

> **Matthew 12:39** *But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas:*
>
> **Matthew 12:40** *For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*
>
> **Matthew 12:41** *The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.*

Jesus treated Jonah as a real man, the fish as a real event, and Nineveh's repentance as real history — real enough that the men of Nineveh would stand in the judgment. And He made Jonah's three days in the fish a picture of His own three days and three nights in the grave. Jonah went down into the deep and came up alive; Christ went down into death and came up raised. After He rose, He ascended into heaven, and the message of His resurrection went out to the nations.

A greater than Jonah. The two men are set side by side, and the contrasts matter as much as the likenesses:

- Jonah ran from his mission; Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem.
- Jonah was thrown into the sea for his own disobedience; Jesus gave His life for the sins of others.
- Jonah's going down calmed one storm for one ship; Christ's death and resurrection brought peace between God and the whole world.
- Jonah preached five words of doom, reluctantly; Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom with compassion.
- Jonah wanted Nineveh destroyed; Jesus wept over Jerusalem and prayed for the men who crucified Him.
- Jonah slept in the storm because he did not care; Jesus slept in a storm because He trusted His Father, and then rose and calmed it with a word (Mark 4:38-39).

"Salvation is of the LORD." Jonah's prayer from the deep sums up the whole gospel. Salvation does not come from us. It comes from God, through the One He raised from the dead.

To the Grace Administration

God's heart for every nation. Jonah wanted God's mercy kept for Israel. God's heart was always bigger than that. Under grace, the door is wide open: God "will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4); He is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

Joppa again. Jonah went down to Joppa to run from God's call to the Gentiles. Some eight hundred years later, another Jewish preacher stayed in Joppa "with one Simon a tanner" (Acts 9:43). His name was Simon Peter, whom Jesus had called "Simon Bar-jona" — *son of Jonah* (Matthew 16:17). At Joppa God gave Peter a vision and sent him to the house of a Roman officer named Cornelius, and Peter went. There, the first Gentile household heard the gospel and received the gift of holy spirit, and Peter said, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him" (Acts 10:34-35). The church at Jerusalem heard it and said, "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). Where one son of Jonah ran, another son of Jonah went.

Ambassadors, not Jonahs. Believers today have been given a message for the world: "God… hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation… Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:18, 20). No one is too far gone for that message — not even the Ninevites of our own day. "How shall they hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14).

A second chance. "The word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time." God does not throw away His people when they fail. The believer who has run from God can turn back, and find the same God, with the same calling, waiting.

Mercy we have received, mercy we should want for others. Jonah loved mercy for himself and resented it for his enemies. It is the same attitude Jesus described in the elder brother of the parable, who "was angry, and would not go in" when his father welcomed home the prodigal (Luke 15:28). Grace received should make us glad when others receive it too: "God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us" (Ephesians 2:4).

To the Topic of Running From God

Jonah's story is scripture's great picture of what happens when a believer runs from what God has called him to do:

- **It always goes down.** Down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into its hold, down to the bottom of the sea.
- **It costs something.** "He paid the fare thereof."
- **It endangers others.** The sailors nearly died for Jonah's disobedience.
- **It cannot outrun God.** "Whither shall I flee from thy presence?"
- **God's discipline is mercy.** The storm and the fish were not God's rejection; they were God's pursuit.
- **The way back is prayer.** "When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD."
- **God gives a second time.**

The Main Takeaway

God's mercy is bigger than our prejudices — and He will pursue a reluctant servant across the sea to reach people that servant would rather see destroyed.

- **You cannot outrun God.** Running from His will always goes down, and always costs.
- **God's discipline is His pursuit.** The storm and the fish were rescue, not rejection.
- **Salvation is of the LORD.** It is His to give, to whomever He will.
- **God gives second chances.** "The word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time."
- **No one is beyond repentance.** If Nineveh could turn, anyone can.
- **Want mercy for others, not just for yourself.** Jonah's anger is a warning.
- **Answer God's question.** "Should not I spare Nineveh?" Who is your Nineveh?

For Our Learning — The People

- **Jonah.** "Dove," son of Amittai, "my truth," a prophet from Gath-hepher in Galilee under Jeroboam II. He ran from God's call, slept through the storm, told the sailors to throw him overboard, prayed from the belly of the fish, preached five words in Nineveh, and then sat outside the city angry that God had spared it. The book leaves his heart an open question.
- **The sailors and the shipmaster.** Pagan seafarers who prayed to their own gods, woke Jonah to pray, tried their hardest to save him, and ended by fearing the LORD, sacrificing to Him and making vows.
- **The great fish.** Prepared by God to swallow Jonah and save him from drowning, and obedient to God's word to put him ashore.
- **The people of Nineveh.** The inhabitants of the capital of cruel Assyria, who believed God at Jonah's five-word warning, fasted, put on sackcloth, and turned from their violence.
- **The king of Nineveh.** He rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, sat in ashes, commanded the whole city to repent, and hoped: "Who can tell if God will turn?"

- **The LORD God.** He saw Nineveh's wickedness, called His prophet twice, hurled the wind, prepared a fish, a gourd, a worm and an east wind, spared the repentant city, and patiently reasoned with His angry prophet. "Gracious… merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness."

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Tarshish.** A far-western port, very likely Tartessus in Spain — the opposite direction from Nineveh.
- **Joppa.** Israel's Mediterranean port, today's Jaffa.
- **Nineveh and Assyria.** The great city of the Assyrian empire, notorious for cruelty, and the power that later destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel.
- **Sailors' gods.** Ancient crews came from many nations and prayed to many gods; a sudden storm was taken as a sign of divine anger against someone aboard.
- **Casting lots.** Drawing marked stones or sticks to seek a decision; "the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD" (Proverbs 16:33).
- **Lightening the ship.** Throwing cargo overboard in a storm.
- **Sacrifices and vows.** Offerings and solemn promises made to a god in thanksgiving for deliverance.
- **Sackcloth and ashes.** Coarse goat-hair cloth worn against the skin, and sitting in ashes: signs of mourning and repentance.
- **Fasting animals.** In some ancient cultures, livestock were included in public mourning.
- **A king's decree.** Proclaimed publicly throughout the city "by the decree of the king and his nobles."
- **The booth.** A rough shelter of branches for shade.
- **The east wind.** The hot, dry desert wind (the sirocco) that parches everything it touches.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Anthropopatheia** — describing God in human terms so that we can understand Him. "Their wickedness is come up before me" (1:2); "God repented of the evil" (3:10).
- **Personification** — speaking of a thing as though it were a person. "The ship was like to be broken" — literally, *the ship thought to be broken* (1:4).
- **Erotesis** — asking a question to make a point rather than to get information. "What meanest thou, O sleeper?" (1:6); "Who can tell if God will turn and repent?" (3:9); "Doest thou well to be angry?" (4:4); "Should not I spare Nineveh?" (4:11).
- **Metaphor** — speaking of one thing as another. "The belly of hell" (2:2) — the grave, for the brink of death; "the earth with her bars" (2:6) — the depths as a prison.
- **Merism** — naming two extremes to include everything between. "From the greatest of them even to the least of them" (3:5).
- **Repetition of a key word** — "went down" (1:3, 5; 2:6); "prepared" (1:17; 4:6, 7, 8); "great" throughout the book.

What the Bible Actually Says

- **The Hebrew says "a great fish," not a whale.** Jesus' word (*ketos*) means a great sea creature. Scripture says God *prepared* it (1:17).
- **The fish was Jonah's rescue, not his punishment.** Without it, he would have drowned.
- **Jonah did not run because he was afraid of Nineveh.** He ran because he knew God was "gracious… and merciful" and would forgive them (4:2).
- **Jonah's message was only five Hebrew words:** "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4).
- **The pagan sailors came to fear the LORD before Nineveh did** (1:16).
- **"God repented of the evil" does not mean God had done wrong.** The "evil" was the destruction He had warned of, and He spared the city when it turned (Jeremiah 18:7-8).
- **Jonah was not dead in the fish.** He prayed there; "the belly of hell" is a picture of how near to death he came.
- **The story does not end happily for Jonah.** It ends with God's question, unanswered.
- **Jonah came from Galilee** (2 Kings 14:25), though the Pharisees later claimed no prophet ever had (John 7:52).
- **Nineveh's repentance did not last forever.** A century and more later, Nahum prophesied its destruction (Nahum 1:1; 3:1).

God's Will and Intent

- **God cares about every nation, even Israel's enemies.** "Should not I spare Nineveh, that great city?"
- **God warns before He judges, and relents when people turn.** "If that nation… turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil."
- **God pursues His servants.** He hurled the wind, prepared the fish, and gave the word "the second time."
- **God uses even disobedience to reach others.** The sailors came to worship the LORD because Jonah ran.
- **Salvation belongs to God.** "Salvation is of the LORD."
- **God reasons patiently with His people.** He answered Jonah's anger with questions, a plant, a worm and a wind.
- **God is exactly who He says He is:** "a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness."