

## Jonah – Half-Hearted Obedience

We're looking today at one of the great books of the Old Testament, the book of Jonah.

This is the story of a man of God with a great calling on his life, but who didn't want to obey God.

But there are some great lessons we can learn.

Jonah 1:1-3 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, (2) "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me." (3) 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.

### 1. The mission

Jonah has received a mission from God; his mission is to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach the message that God has given him.

But there's a problem: Jonah doesn't like the mission.

Here's why: Assyria was a powerful empire and Nineveh was one of the royal cities; they were very aggressive, invading neighbouring countries and subjugating them.

One of the countries that fell victim to their mighty armies was the nation of Israel, who were understandably resentful about being conquered by another country.

In verse 2, it says that the wickedness of the people of Nineveh has come up before God Himself.

The word translated "wickedness" also means calamity or disaster.

So here's what's happened.

Because of the sins of the Assyrians, God has judged them, and some disaster has come upon them.

We don't know what form that disaster took; it doesn't really matter.

What matters is that God sees it, and He has compassion for them.

So He sends Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh that there is yet another judgment to come, and it's coming soon.

But Jonah has no compassion for them at all; he wants to see them get what's coming to them.

### 2. Jonah's response

So what does he do? He runs.

He's running from God, so he goes down to Joppa which was the nearest port to Jerusalem, and books his passage on a ship.

It's amazing the lengths people will go to when they're trying to escape from something.

ILLUS – A German man who was sent to a high security prison for fraud, escaped in an ingenious way. He got into a cardboard box and mailed himself out of the prison. Once the truck was outside the prison walls, he cut himself out, and jumped off the truck.

Weird, huh? But not as weird as this.

ILLUS – Eleven Cubans were so desperate to escape from Cuba that they converted their 1959 Buick into a boat, and drove to Florida. Well, almost. They were intercepted by the US Coast Guard.

People try all sorts of things to escape, but you can't escape from God.

The psalmist understood this:

Ps 139:7-10 Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? (8) If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. (9) If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, (10) even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me.

But Jonah thought he'd give it his best shot anyway, and he went to great lengths to avoid his mission.

His mission was to go hundreds of kilometres north-east to Nineveh, but instead he decided to sail to Tarshish which was on the western outskirts of the Mediterranean.

Jonah must have been a wealthy man, because it's been estimated that this was approximately a 12-month cruise.

But...

### **3. God doesn't give up**

Just as well for us that we serve a gracious and merciful God.

Let me give you two reasons that God didn't just give up on this mission.

First, there were 120,000 people in Nineveh that He cared about deeply.

Jonah 4:11 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?

It didn't matter what these people had done, God still cared about them.

And when it says, "people who cannot discern between their right hand and their left", that doesn't mean that they were a race of morons.

What God is getting at here is that even though the people of Nineveh had brought themselves under the judgment of God, they had no idea what to do to get themselves back out from under that judgment.

They were totally helpless.

So God intervenes and extends His grace to a heathen nation.

The second reason God wasn't prepared to give up was that He had a plan and purpose for Jonah.

Even though Jonah didn't care about the Ninevites, God still cared about this rebellious and small-minded prophet.

Jonah 1:4 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.

The Hebrew word for "sent out" actually means hurled.

It's the same word used in 1 Sam 18:11 where King Saul "hurled" a spear at David and tried to pin him to the wall.

So I just imagine God saying, "Okay, Jonah. You think you're so smart going on your nice little cruise, let's see how you handle this!"

And He hurls a great wind out onto the sea.

What's God doing? He's trying to attract Jonah's attention.

But does it work? No.

#### 4. Jonah's still not listening

Jonah 1:5 Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep.

Jonah is actually asleep!

Even the unbelievers know there's a problem, but Jonah is too busy sleeping.

Jesus said in Luke 16:8, "... For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light."

Christians behave in the most idiotic ways sometimes, and the world looks on shaking their heads, and saying, "I don't get it. These guys are dumber than dumb, and they're supposed to be Christians."

Just remember folks, everything we do, someone is watching.

Amazingly, Jonah doesn't even pray.

I mean, check this guy out!

He's the man of God, they're the pagans; they're the ones praying, but he's not talking to God.

The captain even has to ask him to pray.

Finally, the crew decides that the only way they can resolve this problem is to draw lots and find out who is the cause of it, and Jonah is forced to fess up.

Jonah 1:9 So he said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD (Yahweh), the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

Jonah's being quite hypocritical in this.

On the one hand he says that he fears Yahweh, but then he's right in the middle of a premeditated course of disobedience.

So the crew ask Jonah what they need to do, and he says they need to hurl (same word as before) him overboard.

These pagans show a lot more concern for Jonah than he did for them; they initially decide that they can't throw him overboard to a certain death, and they try to row to shore.

But finally, they're left with no choice, Jonah is chucked into the sea, and here's where he experiences God's grace yet again.

God organises a great fish to come and swallow him.

Is it actually possible to be swallowed by a great fish or a whale and survive?

ILLUS – There's a story about an apprentice seaman named James Bartley who was on a whaling ship in the South Atlantic. The year was 1891. A whale had been harpooned and James Bartley was one of the men sent out in the boats to try and land it. Suddenly, the whale dived and disappeared taking 800 feet of heavy line with it. Then the line went slack which meant that the whale was coming to the surface. The next thing the whale came up right under one of the boats and James Bartley was one of two men who disappeared. When they finally caught the whale and cut it up, they found Bartley in the stomach – still alive!

That's a great story, but unfortunately it's not possible to verify.

Apparently, there's no one by that name on the ship's records, nor is there anyone recorded in the records of the hospital he was supposed to have attended on his return.

It appears it's one of those Christian urban legends, so who knows if, in the natural, it's possible to be swallowed by a whale or whatever and survive for three days.

But God is not limited to the natural; I believe this was a miracle of God's intervening grace.

## 5. God is a God of the second chance

Jonah 3:1-2 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, (2) “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.”

God graciously gives Jonah a second chance to fulfil the mission.

This reminds me of the story of Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-17.

ILLUS – This incident takes place after Christ’s resurrection. Peter has denied the Lord three times, and I guess he’s really not sure what kind of reception he’s going to receive from Jesus. And Jesus asks him three times, “Do you love Me?” Each time, Peter answers, “Yes.” And each time Jesus recommissions Peter.

Three times Peter denied Jesus.

Three times Jesus recommissioned Peter.

God is the God of the second chance.

But we ought not to take that second chance for granted; we can’t just toy with God and treat Him lightly.

Because there are no guarantees that we’ll get that second opportunity.

There’s a very powerful story in 1 Kings 13.

ILLUS – Jeroboam is the king of Israel and he’s not walking with God. So God sends a man of God, who isn’t even named, to prophesy against the altar that Jeroboam is using. Jeroboam is very angry and stretches out his hand towards the man of God, and says, “Arrest him!” And as soon as he does, his hand withers. He then asks the man of God to pray for him so that he can be healed, so the man of God prays for him and his hand is restored. The king is so impressed that he invites the man of God to go back to his place and eat with him. But the man of God refuses because God has told him he isn’t allowed to eat or drink anything in that place. So he leaves.

Now we come to the strange part of the story.

ILLUS – There’s an old prophet in town who hears about the prophecy. He gets his sons to saddle his donkey, and chases off after the man of God. When he catches up with him, he invites him to come back to his place to eat. The man of God tells the old prophet exactly what he told the king. Then the old prophet does something weird: He lies. He tells the man of God that he’s a prophet too, and that an angel appeared to him and told him to bring back the man of God for a meal. The man of God believes him, goes back to his place, and has a meal there. Now the old prophet gets a genuine word from the Lord. He prophesies that since the man of God disobeyed his instructions from God, he would be eaten by a lion.

And that’s exactly what happened.

That man of God got no second chance.

God is a God of grace and He often gives second chances.

But there are no guarantees.

Let’s keep in mind that God is also a God of holiness

But back to our story: Jonah got a second chance from God to fulfil his mission.

Jonah 3:3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. ...

This time, he decides to obey, but grudgingly, as we’ll see.

Jonah preaches the message that in only 40 days, Nineveh will be overthrown.

And something amazing takes place.

Jonah 3:5-9 – The whole city repents!

Now, just think about this: You're standing on the street corner in your city, you preach a very brief message that the city is going to be destroyed in 40 days, and there's a massive outpouring of the Spirit of God.

Everywhere people are turning to the Lord.

How would you feel?

I think that if that happened to me, I'd be amazed and overjoyed.

I'd be getting invitations to preach all over the world.

People would be inviting me to do seminars on the Secret to City-Wide Revival.

I'd be very happy with the results of my preaching.

But not Jonah.

He's not happy at all; he's sulking.

Jonah 4:1-2 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. (2) So 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."

The word "displeased" means offended; Jonah was exceedingly offended, indignant.

Because he didn't like what God had done.

And in this little confession, we can see exactly the kind of pettiness that was in his heart.

He was happy to see the grace of God at work in his own life – the saving of his life by the great fish, the second chance to take up the mission, and later the plant that God caused to grow to give him shade.

But there was no way he wanted to see the grace of God poured out on the Assyrians.

But ...

## **6. God isn't finished with Jonah yet**

God's about to give Jonah an important object lesson.

Jonah 4:6-8 And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant. (7) But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. (8) And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

Now picture this: Jonah entered the city of Nineveh from the western side, preached his message, then exited on the east side.

Then he chose a spot to sit down and wait to see what would happen to the city, no doubt hoping that the judgment of God fall upon it.

Back in those days in Mesopotamian cities, inside the city itself was okay, but outside was really barren.

So Jonah manages to scrape together some clay and some sticks and makes himself a little hut.

But it's not enough, and God causes a plant to grow to give him shade.

And Jonah is very happy, until God causes a worm to kill the plant, and the sun is beating down on Jonah's head – literally, it says that the sun is attacking his head.

And Jonah gets angry and falls into a deep depression.

What's the lesson here?

Jonah 4:10-11 But the LORD said, “You have had pity on the plant for which you have not laboured, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. (11) 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?”

God’s lesson for Jonah is that he had pity on a mere plant, but he didn’t care at all about 120,000 human beings.

Jesus said, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Mark 8:36)

In God’s economy, even one soul is worth more than the whole world.

But Jonah cares more about one plant than 120,000 souls.

There’s something radically wrong with his values.

Let’s close with an important thought.

In Matt 21:28-31, Jesus told a parable. A father had two sons. He went to the first and said, “Go work in my vineyard.” The son said, “No.” But later he felt bad and went and did as his father had told him. The father then went to his second son and said, “Go work in my vineyard.” The son said, “Yes.” But he didn’t actually go. Jesus asked, “Which son did the will of his father?”

The answer was: The first son, the one that actually went and worked into the vineyard.

There could easily have been a third son in this parable: The father says, “Go work in my vineyard.” The son says, “No.” There’s a discussion between father and son and in the end the son says, “Fine! I’ll go and work in your stupid vineyard. Now quit pestering me.”

He’s the son who gives grudging obedience, half-hearted obedience.

That’s Jonah.

But God is calling us to wholehearted obedience.