

# **“From Stubbornness To Second Chances”**

## **Jonah’s Journey**

### **A Lesson in Obedience, Fear, and Divine Mercy**

#### **Introduction**

The story of Jonah, is one of the Minor Prophets in the Old Testament, which focuses less on the prophet's message and more on the personal character development of the prophet himself. Over the course of his journey, readers witness his reluctance, rebellion and eventual repentance. The first chapter sets the stage for the themes of disobedience, divine intervention, and God's mercy throughout the story arc. It explores Jonah's initial disobedience to follow God's command and the consequences that follow.

#### **The Command and Jonah's Disobedience**

The story begins with a clear and direct command from God:

***"The Lord spoke his word to Jonah son of Amittai: "Get up, go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it. I see the evil things they do" (Jonah 1:1-2 ICB).***

Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was known for its brutality and idolatry. Jonah heard his prophetic call, yet responds in a surprising manner. Instead of obeying God's command, he attempts to flee "from the presence of the Lord" by heading to Tarshish, a city in the opposite direction (Jonah 1:3, NIV). This act of disobedience is significant as it reflects Jonah's inner conflict. He is a prophet, chosen by God, yet he chooses to run away, indicating a deep reluctance to confront the people of Nineveh.

It's significant to note that Nineveh, now modern day Mosul, in Iraq, has been marred with violence and destruction in recent years. Therefore, we can somewhat understand his reasoning for his reluctance to travel to that area and hard-heart towards the people causing him to disobey God. We can also begin to see God's purpose for sending a prophet with a message of repentance.

Jonah's flight can be seen as an attempt to avoid responsibility and potential danger of preaching to a hostile nation. However, it also highlights a lack of faith in God's plan and a misunderstanding of God's omnipresence. Jonah's decision to flee suggests that he believed he could escape God's reach by leaving the land of Israel, a common belief in the ancient world that deities were tied to specific territories. Jonah's actions raise important questions about the nature of obedience and the consequences of attempting to evade divine commands.

How many of us see ourselves in Jonah? We may not be called to preach to a hostile nation, however, we may be called to preach to a hostile situation. We, as believers carry the presence of God where we go. Sometimes we are called to carry God's presence into an ungodly environment. It may be our workplaces, our sports clubs, friends or a family gathering. We can refer to these spaces as "little Ninevehs." More on that later.

### **The Storm and the Sailors' Fear**

As Jonah boards a ship bound for Tarshish, God sends "a great wind on the sea, and a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up" (Jonah 1:4, NIV). The storm is a direct response to Jonah's disobedience, demonstrating that God's will cannot be easily avoided. The sailors on the ship begin to cry out to their own gods and throw cargo overboard to lighten the ship (Jonah 1:5, NIV). Their fear contrasts sharply with Jonah's apparent indifference, as he is found "below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep" (Jonah 1:5, NIV).

The sailors' are pagans and have a natural reverence for the divine, even though they are uncertain of which god is responsible for the storm. Their actions of praying and seeking to appease the gods indicate their recognition that the storm is a supernatural occurrence. This contrasts with Jonah, who, despite being a prophet of the one true God, shows a lack of concern and responsibility. The sailors' fear

and reverence serve as a contrast to Jonah's disobedience, emphasizing the seriousness of his actions.

Sometimes we become apathetic by failing to respond to the severity of certain situations. Sometimes, we can be downright prideful and refuse to take responsibility until we are called out. With pride, comes stubbornness and in time, our downfall.

### **The Casting of Lots and Jonah's Confession**

In their desperation, the sailors decide to cast lots to determine who is responsible for the calamity, a practice common in the ancient world to discern divine will. The lot falls on Jonah, and the sailors confront him, asking, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us?" (Jonah 1:8, NIV). Jonah then confesses that he is a Hebrew and worships "the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9, NIV).

Jonah's confession is a turning point in the chapter. It reveals his awareness of his guilt and acknowledges the power and authority of God over all creation. The sailors, upon hearing this, are "terrified" and ask Jonah what they should do to calm the sea (Jonah 1:10-11, NIV). Jonah's suggestion to throw him overboard is an act of resignation, perhaps even an acknowledgment that he deserves punishment for his disobedience. Yet, it also indicates a willingness to sacrifice himself to save the others, showing a glimmer of repentance.

However, we can also see that Jonah did not come to full repentance and God understood the condition of His heart. Jonah continued to possess a hard heart toward God's command and one could say he would rather die than complete his assignment of traveling to Nineveh. God foresaw this and sent the whale to "save him from himself." Despite his actions, God used the situation to bring the sailors to faith.

### **The Sailors' Response and God's Mercy**

The sailors initially resist throwing Jonah into the sea, instead trying to row back to land, but the storm only grows more intense. Realizing they have no other option,

they finally pray to the Lord, asking for forgiveness for what they are about to do, and then they throw Jonah overboard. The sea immediately calms, and the sailors are filled with "great fear of the Lord," offering sacrifices and making vows to Him (Jonah 1:16, NIV). This reaction demonstrates a significant transformation. The sailors, who began the chapter as pagans, now recognize the power and authority of the God of Israel, and they respond with worship and reverence.

God's mercy is evident throughout this chapter. Despite Jonah's disobedience, God spares the sailors and brings them to a place of faith. Additionally, the chapter ends with God providing a "great fish" to swallow Jonah, keeping him alive inside the fish for three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17, NIV). This act of divine mercy not only spares Jonah's life but also sets the stage for his eventual repentance and mission to Nineveh.

## **Conclusion**

Jonah Chapter 1 is a powerful exploration of human disobedience, divine justice, and mercy. It presents Jonah as a flawed prophet, one who attempts to flee from God's command but ultimately cannot escape divine will. The chapter highlights the futility of trying to evade God's presence and the consequences that come from disobedience. Yet, it also underscores God's compassion, as seen in His willingness to spare the sailors and preserve Jonah's life. The themes introduced in this chapter—obedience, fear, and divine mercy—resonate throughout the rest of the Book of Jonah, making it a foundational passage for understanding the overall message of the text.

## **Discussion Questions for Small Groups**

1. If there is one question you could ask Jonah, what would it be?
2. Is there an assignment God wants you to do, that you haven't done yet and deep down inside you know you should do? How do feel about that?
3. Was there ever an assignment God wanted you to do, that you did do? How do feel about that?

4. According to the story, Nineveh is a place where Jonah did not want to go or an assignment he did not want to get involved with. Identify some personal things that may represent Nineveh in your life, people or places you want to avoid. Why?
5. Nineveh is described as a city full of brutality, wickedness, pagans and idolatry. How might Nineveh look in the world today? Could it be a city? A lifestyle? An association? An activity? A personal vice?
6. If Nineveh is Jonah's assignment and his desire was to flee to Tarshish in the opposite direction, might there be a Tarshish in your life? Are there places you flee to? Things you do to try to escape and avoid a calling?
7. The whale is symbolic of Jonah's moment of true repentance. Is there a time you would consider a personal "belly in the whale" experience? Do you believe everyone needs to have an experience like that to return to their senses?