

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **The Reluctant Evangelist**

(The book of Jonah)

#### **Introduction: Shining bright...**

In Old Testament times, God's plan for redeeming the whole world was to redeem and bless one people (the nation of Israel) who would then bring blessing to other people.

Their mission was to make God look as good as He really is (glorify Him) by the way they lived. The Jews would be like a city on a hill, advertising the greatness of God to the world.

God's plan isn't really all that different today.

He intends to reach the world by having people who believe in Jesus take the Good News about Jesus to the world. Christians are to love, proclaim, and meet needs in Jesus' Name, advertising the greatness of God to the world.

Like Jesus said, ***[Matthew 5:16] [We] are the light of the world.***

It's a beautiful thing when God's people embrace God's plan and live like the lights they were redeemed to be. But today it isn't always the case that Christians do this. And we'll see Israel's refusal to "own" God's plan in the story of Jonah.

We're taking a late summer break from 1 Corinthians to turn to the entertaining and thoroughly convicting little book of Jonah.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The prophet Jonah stands as a symbol of Israel. In Hebrew, his name means "dove" a term God used to refer to the nation. (Hosea 7:11)

### **Jonah: "Go to Nineveh?! Forget It, LORD!" (Jonah, chapter 1)**

#### **The Word of the Lord to Jonah (1:1-2)**

*Jonah and his times<sup>2</sup>*

When the prophet Jonah lived and wrote, the wicked King Jeroboam II reigned over the northern kingdom of Israel.

Spiritually speaking, Israel was in terrible shape. But in other ways, life was quite good.

In fact, the only real threat to Israel's welfare and security was the Assyrian Empire. The city of Nineveh was the capitol.

*Nineveh and her times/crimes*

Nineveh was about five hundred miles northeast of Israel. It was a global center for architecture, the arts, education, and music.<sup>3</sup>

However, Nineveh and Assyria were best known for things like idolatry, immorality, and barbaric cruelty.

Assyria's army struck fear into the hearts of everyone in the Ancient Near East, including the Jews. That's important background as we turn to Jonah's book.

The book's first words are not, "Once upon a time..." as if bringing us into a fairy tale. They orient us to history.

#### ***[1] The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai...***

And those first words are followed by words that would have gagged any Jew of Jonah's day.

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<sup>2</sup> The prophets were active during the time of the kings of Israel and Judah, from the 9th-5th centuries BC. Jonah uniquely gives his "prophecy" as a narrative.

<sup>3</sup> At this time, Assyria's king was Shalmaneser IV, a relatively weak king, which was good news for Israel.

*The command of God to Jonah (v. 2)*

God said, **[2] “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry out against it, because their wickedness has come up before Me.”**

Nineveh’s sin had offended God, so God decided to send His prophet, Jonah, with a message of judgment.<sup>4</sup>

Well, God told Jonah to get up and go; Jonah got up and went.

### **Jonah’s Flight from God’s Assignment and Presence (1:3)**

**[3] But Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship that was going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and boarded it to go with them to Tarshish away from the presence of the LORD.**

God said, “Go east, young man!” and Jonah headed west across the Mediterranean in the direction of present-day Spain. (Tarshish)

Of course, Jonah’s flight from God was illogical. You don’t flee from an omnipresent God. But we get it. Jonah hated the Ninevites. So, he stuck out his prophetic tongue at God and said, “NO!”<sup>5</sup>

Jonah was about to learn that when it comes to carrying out God’s assignments, you can run, but you can’t hide.

### **You Can Run. You Can’t Hide (1:4-14)**

*Stormy weather (v. 4)*

The ship Jonah boarded for his Mediterranean cruise was probably a large, multi-decked Phoenician ship.

In those days, Phoenicians were the world’s best sailors. But even these sailors weren’t up to what was coming their way.

**[4] However, 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.**

This storm was sudden and severe, and these sea-hardened sailors did everything they could to survive.

*The storm caused by disobedience (vv. 5-7)*

**[5a] Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried out to his god, and they hurled the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.**

Everybody on board prayed. The only one who didn’t join the sailor’s prayer meeting...was Jonah.

**[5b]...Jonah had gone below into the stern of the ship, had lain down, and fallen sound asleep.**

He ignored God. But God didn’t ignore Jonah. God didn’t throw His hands up and say, “I’m finished with you, Jonah!”

This storm IS the passionate pursuit of God. This storm is the Hound of heaven.

The ship’s captain found Jonah and begged him to call out to his own god. **[6b] “Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.”**

As the sea became more violent, the sailors suspected that the storm was supernatural in origin.

So, they cast lots (like drawing straws) to find out on whose account this storm had hit. Of course, the lot fell to Jonah. When it did, the sailors pummeled Jonah with questions.

*Jonah’s testimony (vv. 8-9)*

<sup>4</sup> This is the only record of a prophet of God being explicitly sent to a heathen nation. As such, Jonah is the most powerful missionary book in the Old Testament, validating God’s love for the whole world.

<sup>5</sup> See Genesis 12 and the covenant God made with Abraham where he was commanded to “*be a blessing.*”

**[8]...“Tell us, now! On whose account has this catastrophe struck us? What is your occupation, and where do you come from? What is your country, and from what people are you?”**

Jonah answered, **[9] “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.”**

We think, *“Good for you, Jonah. Way to witness to those sailors!”*

Well, the sailors now know who Jonah worshipped - and were appalled that he had boarded their ship. Why would a man who worshipped the God who made the sea flee from Him - on a boat!?

*The sailors fight to save Jonah’s life! (vv. 10-14)*

They **[10a]...became extremely afraid, and they said to him, “How could you do this?” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.**

The sailors knew that a storm caused by God could only be calmed by appeasing God. So, they asked Jonah, **[11] “What should we do to you so that the sea will become calm for us?”**

And in what is Jonah’s only commendable act in the book, he said, **[12] “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, because I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you.”**

It was a good plan - except these pagan sailors didn’t want to throw Jonah into the sea.

They were torn between not wanting to offend Jonah’s God by killing His prophet and not wanting to drown.

They **[13]...rowed desperately to return to land, but they could not, because the sea was becoming even stormier against them.**

They finally saw that they had no choice but to toss Jonah overboard, while praying.

**[14] Then they cried out to the LORD and said, “We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life, and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O LORD, have done as You pleased.”**

This storm, caused by disobedience, resulted in worship.

### **Deliverance on the High Seas (1:15-17)**

*The sailors delivered by God (vv. 15-16)*

**[15] So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. [16] Then the men became extremely afraid of the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.<sup>6</sup>**

We might say that Jonah convinced pagan sailors to worship the one true God. But we’d have to admit that his success was completely unintentional.

For their part, the sailors believed that they were ending Jonah’s life.

But...

*Jonah, “saved” by a whale (v. 17)*

**[17]...the LORD designated a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights.**

God miraculously delivered Jonah by appointing this “great fish” (most likely a sperm whale).<sup>7</sup>

In everything that has happened, Jonah has learned about God.

- He had just learned that you can run, but you can’t hide from God.

<sup>6</sup> This being the first of Jonah’s two prophetic “successes” - both unintentional.

<sup>7</sup>The Hebrew word used here is “dag” and can be translated “fish” “whale” or “monster of the deep.” The best guess is that this was a sperm whale.

- He learns in the belly of the whale something of God's goodness for sparing his life.
- He learns that God can be VERY persuasive.

At the end of this first chapter of Jonah's prophecy, Jonah is safe, even if he was pretty yukked up on the inside of a whale. (I'm glad we aren't told what it was like for him in there.)

Now this swallowing was a great deliverance, and while he was in the belly of the whale, Jonah had time to reflect, to think, to pray.

His prayer is recorded for us, and it isn't a somber, sober, sad prayer. No - it is a prayer of thanksgiving and praise.<sup>8</sup>

### **Jonah's Prayer and Promise (Jonah, chapter 2)**

***[1] Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish, [2] and he said,***

***"I called out of my distress to the LORD,  
And He answered me.***

***I cried for help from the depth of Sheol;<sup>9</sup>  
You heard my voice.***

***[3] For You threw me into the deep,  
Into the heart of the seas,***

***And the current flowed around me.***

***All Your breakers and waves passed over me.***

***[4] So I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight.***

***Nevertheless, I will look again toward Your holy temple.'***

***[5] Water encompassed me to the point of death.***

***The deep flowed around me,***

***Seaweed was wrapped around my head.***

***[6] I descended to the base of the mountains.***

***The earth with its bars was around me forever,***

***But You have brought up my life from the pit, LORD my God.***

***[7] While I was fainting away,***

<sup>8</sup> Most, if not all, of the lines of this prayer are lifted from the Psalms, showing that Jonah was a student of the Bible.

<sup>9</sup> He describes himself as being in *Sheol*, the place of the dead, a hyperbole for a near-death experience.

***I remembered the LORD;  
And my prayer came to You,  
Into Your holy temple.***

***[8] Those who are followers of worthless idols  
Abandon their faithfulness,***

***[9] But I will sacrifice to You  
With a voice of thanksgiving.***

***That which I have vowed I will pay.  
Salvation is from the LORD."***

In that prayer, we heard Jonah make a vow to God. He promised that he would carry out the word of the LORD.

He will go to Nineveh.

The Bible says that it was "***THEN***" - after the vow - that ***[10]...the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.***<sup>10</sup>

The miracle of the three days and three nights in the whale's belly is what many people think is the hardest event to swallow in Jonah's book.

Nope. Without question, the greatest miracle in the book is what follows.

### **Revival in Nineveh (chapter 3)**

#### **The God of the Second Chance (3:1-2)**

***[3:1] Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time...***

God gave Jonah a second chance to obey by repeating the first command.

<sup>10</sup> Attempts have been made to explain away the "fish story," but these explanations are not necessary. Jonah is telling what actually happened, and there are other validated reports of men being swallowed by whales and living to tell the tale.

The second iteration was a bit shorter and a bit less personal. But it was crystal clear: **[2] “Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.”**

This time, Jonah did exactly what the LORD told him to do.

### **Jonah, the (reluctantly) Obedient Prophet (2:3-4)**

**[3] So Jonah got up and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk.<sup>11</sup>**

Now, put yourself in Jonah’s sandals. You have left the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea to walk to Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria.

What are you thinking?

Well, given that Assyria posed an existential threat to your nation and that Nineveh was a really wicked city, you might be thinking, “I can’t believe I am doing this!”? and “I can’t believe God is forcing me to do this!”?

You might be resentful toward God about this and bitter about having to go to Nineveh.

But Jonah went, just as the Lord commanded him. And as soon as he arrived in Nineveh, he did some reconnaissance.

He walked through the city (3:4) before he preached. And what do you imagine Jonah saw as he went through the city?

He would have seen evidence of sin. He would have seen idols, evidence of immorality and poverty and violent crime and injustice.

At the end of his tour of the city, Jonah went from street corner to street corner, proclaiming God’s message to Nineveh. It was history’s shortest sermon. It was neither user-friendly nor politically correct.

**[4] “Od arbi’im yom va Nineveh hehphaket!” (“Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.”)**

This is God’s prophetic word to Nineveh. Destruction.

Jonah did what he had been forced to do. Mission, accomplished.

But an interesting thing happened after the people of Nineveh heard Jonah’s words. Unbelievably, they believed.

### **Nineveh - NINEVEH! - Believes (3:5-9)**

**[5] Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. [6] When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, removed his robe from himself, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the dust. [7] And he issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: No person, animal, herd, or flock is to taste a thing. They are not to eat or drink water.”**

**[8] “But every person and animal must be covered with sackcloth; and people are to call on God vehemently, and they are to turn, each from his evil way, and from the violence<sup>12</sup> which is in their hands.”**

They confessed and committed to turn from the sin that had led to the judgment: Violence.

Clearly, the King of Assyria was hoping that God’s wrath would be turned away. In fact, that is just what he said.

<sup>11</sup> This may mean that the metropolitan area of Nineveh was about sixty miles in circumference. If so, that would make Nineveh roughly the size of the area within San Antonio’s Loop 410.

<sup>12</sup> Violence was the national sin of Assyria.

**[9] “Who knows, God may turn and relent, and turn from His burning anger so that we will not perish?”**

And, gloriously, when they turned to God, God’s anger WAS turned away.

### **The Amazing Grace of a Merciful God (3:10)**

**[10] When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their evil way, then God relented of the disaster which He had declared He would bring on them. So He did not do it.<sup>13</sup>**

And THAT is the summit, the peak of the book. It doesn’t get any better than this.

It proves that God doesn’t delight in the *destruction* of the wicked, but in the *turning* of the wicked. He is a gracious and loving God who would much rather extend mercy to a broken sinner than hurl judgment against a hardened sinner.

The city of Nineveh will be spared. A national turning to God prolonged the existence of the capitol city of the Assyrian Empire

And, this would be a wonderful place to end the book. The End.

But as much as we’d like to close our Bibles and end in prayer, we’re not done. Jonah’s book isn’t over.

If this is your first exposure to Jonah, you might have expected to see God’s prophet thrilled at what has happened. The people of Nineveh took God’s message seriously and God spared their lives.

If you were expecting Jonah to celebrate, you couldn’t have been more wrong.

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<sup>13</sup> Messages of judgment become prophecy when people stay hardened. These messages become warnings when people give heed to them. Jonah thought / hoped that he was giving a prophecy of what would happen. But God’s decree of judgment mercifully turned into warning when the Ninevites **“believed in God”** (3:5) and turned from their sin.

### **An Unsettling Epilogue (Jonah, chapter 4)**

#### **Jonah - DISPLEASED at the Mercy of God! (4:1-4)**

**[4:1] But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry.**

Remember. Jonah hated the Ninevites.

For his whole life he had looked toward the east, dreading the day that Assyria would come barreling across the plains to attack Israel.

So, Jonah prayed.

**[2] Then he prayed to the LORD and said, “Please LORD, was this not what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore, in anticipation of this I fled to Tarshish, since I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in mercy, and One who relents of disaster. [3] So now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.” [4] But the LORD said, “Do you have good reason to be angry?”**

God expected Jonah to repent of his anger and Jonah was waiting for God to apologize for not destroying Nineveh.

God breaks the impasse with a curious use of trivialities.

#### **A Pleased and an AGAIN Displeased Jonah (4:5-9)**

*Jonah is finally pleased! (vv. 5-6)*

**[5] Then Jonah left the city and sat down east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade, until he could see what would happen in the city.**

Based on the message God gave him to preach, God has a forty-day window to do something. Jonah has perched himself on a hill overlooking the city, waiting (hoping!) for a fire and brimstone destruction - *a la* Sodom and Gomorrah - to fall on Nineveh.

So, with Jonah sitting under a hastily constructed lean-to, God took Jonah back to school to learn more about His ways and His heart.

***[6] So the LORD God designated a plant<sup>14</sup> and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head, to relieve him from his discomfort. And Jonah was overjoyed about the plant.***

Here, pampered, Jonah is happy for the first and only time in the book.

But God wasn't really interested in Jonah's comfort. He pampered His prophet for a purpose. And the pampering ended as quickly as it began.

*Jonah is, again, displeased! (vv. 7-9)*

With the plant shading him, everything was fine, but ***[7]...God designated a worm when dawn came the next day, and it attacked the plant and it withered.***

Then, God added to Jonah's misery. ***[8] And when the sun came up God designated a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint, and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."<sup>15</sup>***

Jonah is really miserable, now. And with Jonah fully absorbed in his own pain, God speaks.

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<sup>14</sup> The plant was a *gigiyon*, an unusually fast growing gourd-like plant, but supernaturally fast growing here.

<sup>15</sup> One of the most amusing ironies in this book is that our models for faithfulness to God are virtually everyone and everything - except Jonah, God's prophet.

- The **storm** raged when the Lord hurled it on the sea.
- The **heathen sailors** believed when they saw God's power.
- The **ship** went where the Lord blew it.
- The **whale** swallowed Jonah on command.
- The **Ninevites** repented at Jonah's preaching.
- The **plant** grew when appointed, the **worm** burrowed when appointed, and the **wind** blew when appointed.

The only character in the whole story who disobeyed was Jonah.

***[9] But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to the point of death."***

And here is God's final response to Jonah.

**A Final Glimpse at the Great Heart of God (vv. 10-11)**

***[10] Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant, for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight."***

Jonah's thinking, *"Right, Lord. That plant was important to me. It brought me relief. It helped me."*

God responded by exposing His heart for people who are far from Him.

***[11] "Should I not also have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 people who do not know the difference between their right hand and their left,<sup>16</sup> as well as many animals?"***

### **Conclusion:**

Now, before we try to apply what Jonah to ourselves, let's back up to see what the message of Jonah was to the Jews of Jonah's day.

God loved the Ninevites so much (4:11) that when they believed Jonah's message and turned from their violent ways, He didn't destroy the city. He spared it and the lives of the Ninevites.<sup>17, 18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> God was willing to spare Sodom for ten righteous people. How much more Nineveh with 120,000 innocent children?

<sup>17</sup> God valued wicked, violent, and cruel people who had lived badly so highly that He sent them a message via His prophet to warn them of national destruction if they didn't turn from their violence.

<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that all of the Ninevites were justified before God and were bound for heaven. He graciously spared their lives.

This is God's grace at Nineveh's national repentance. In fact, God delayed judgment for about a century and a half...until Babylon destroyed it when the Ninevites returned to their old ways.<sup>19</sup>

The message to the Jews of Jonah's day was the tragedy that Jonah refused to share God's heart, His love, for lost people.

The book was a call to Jonah and to Israel - the redeemed prophet and nation - to repent from their hard-heartedness toward people God loved and to go forth to share His great love with the world.

And the book ends with a tremendous tension.

We are left wondering what Jonah will do. Will he repent? Will He join in God's plan to rescue those who are far from God? Who knows?

Well, let's use our imaginations. As you know, there is no Jonah, chapter 5. But if you were to write your hoped-for Jonah, chapter 5, how would it read?

What if you were given the chance to write a Postlude to this book, a record of what Jonah did AFTER he had time to reflect on what he had learned about God.

Here's my Jonah 5.

*[1] And when Jonah understood the love of God for the Ninevites, he repented of his hatred of them. [2] He left his dead plant, ran down to the city, and began sharing the Good News that they could be justified before God - just like Abraham was - by believing in a coming Savior who will once-and-for-all redeem them from their sins!*

I think THAT would be the hoped-for "end" to the story of Jonah.

Now, with a better understanding of what the book of Jonah meant to the Jews of his day, let's apply Jonah to ourselves.

God has lavished His grace on us in Jesus.

Far beyond delivering a warning of impending judgment, He sent Jesus to pay the price for our sins: once-and-for-all. He now offers us the free gift of eternal life if we will simply believe in Jesus.

God loves us and He loves every person we know.

He now calls us to open our hearts to have the same love He has for people and to share it, freely, expansively, creatively.

- PRAY for people you know who are far from God. Especially pray for that person who is against you, who hurt you, who is hard to get along with.
- Look for ways to MEET NEEDS in Jesus' Name, and to be the hands of feet of Jesus. Serve with ESL or with the Food Pantry, with Hill Country flood relief, in giving to support Jesus' mission world-wide, or a neighbor in need - the sky's the limit!
- OPEN YOUR EYES to opportunities to OPEN YOUR MOUTH to tell someone the good news that eternal life is offered as a gift to everyone who believes in Jesus.

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<sup>19</sup> Jonah prophesied between the years 790-755 BC. Nineveh was destroyed in 612, fulfilling oracles by the prophet Nahum.