



“Running from God”

Introduction / Overview

So much of what we know about God comes from observing His interactions with people recorded in the Bible. God did not dictate a theology book but through stories of His relations with people. Jonah is such a story that can teach us both about God and ourselves. We learn about the love of God, the sovereignty of God, the forgiveness of God, the persistence of God. Jonah records 12 specific actions of God in four short chapters.

God spoke four times

God relented

God hurled a great wind

God appointed a shade plant

God determined the result of the “lot”

God appointed a worm

God appointed a great fish

God appointed a scorching wind

God instructed the fish to spit out Jonah

We learn about people; their disobedience, their repentance, their fears and prejudices, the self-centeredness. I hope to guide us through the historical account and look for clues about God’s relationship with mankind as well as man’s relationship with Him. Jonah lived sometime during the period of the divided kingdom of Israel. He lived probably during the reign of Jeroboam II (792-752 BC). He is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 as a prophet. He was contemporaries with Amos and Hosea.

God restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher. 2 Kings 14:25

Jesus referred to him as a prophet in Matthew 24 and Luke 17 and so validates the historical nature of the events described in the writing. Many view the events of Jonah as a parable intended to teach some lesson. They embrace such a view because of the obvious miraculous events described. God used Jonah to speak His word to Israel. The book of Jonah records his eventual message to the Assyrians in Nineveh.

The book of Jonah is undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of biblical literature. The account of Jonah’s dramatic attempt to escape from God’s presence by boarding a ship bound for Tarshish, only to be thwarted by a raging storm and returned to land incarcerated within a great fish, is possibly one of the best-known stories in the Bible. With its unexpected twists and turns the plot successfully retains our attention throughout. Superfluous details are omitted, and the text abounds in wordplays and other compositional techniques. Everything indicates that it has been composed by an author who has used his literary skills to the full.

Tyndale Commentaries - Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries – Obadiah, Jonah and Micah.

This writing is categorized with a group of Scriptures called the “minor prophets.”

Some call Jonah a missionary. He was not really a missionary. He had no interest in winning people to God. Neither was he an evangelist even though the book records the greatest revival in human history so far. Evangelism of the pagan Assyrians wasn’t Jonah’s intent. He didn’t call them to repent. He announced their pending doom. Jonah is more about the prophet than the prophecy in contrast to most of the prophetic writings who reveal little of themselves and more of their message. Jonah includes more about himself than the actual prophecy in contrast to most prophetic writings which include little of themselves and more of their message.

The book clearly demonstrates God as the Sovereign Creator in full control of people, animals, weather and plants. God appears all thought the book. (33 times) The name Yahweh appears 17 times. The name Elohim (12) and El (1) appears 13 times. A compound Yahweh/Elohim twice. He is the holy God who calls mankind to account. Yet He is the compassionate forgiving God who responds to humble repentance. In Jonah, we see the dual manifestation of God’s severity and mercy; the wrath and compassion of God. The book concludes with a

thought provoking unanswered question regarding His decision to show mercy on the Ninevites, “Should I not be concerned?”

This open-endedness is unequalled in the Bible, as the Book uniquely ends, not with some doxology or carefully prepared summary, but rather with a question provoking its readers to carefully and prayerfully reach their own conclusions about the Book’s contents and message. (Complete Biblical Commentary)

Nineveh was a symbol of man’s sovereignty over a tiny slice of creation in contrast to God’s sovereignty over ALL creation. We observe a sharp contrast between the prophet Elijah and the prophet Jonah.

Elijah’s ministry starts with...

“And the word of the Lord came to Elijah, ‘Hide yourself by the brook Cherith’ ...so he went and did according to the word of the Lord.”

Jonah starts with...

“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, ‘Go to Nineveh’ ...but Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish.”

Elijah’s life was known by obedience and ministry to God and people.

Jonah’s life was known by disobedience and complaining to God about people.

Commentators organize the contents in a variety of ways.

From a God perspective

- God commissions Jonah
- God hears Jonah’s prayer
- God Spares Nineveh
- God reproves Jonah

From a Jonah perspective

- Jonah Flees
- Jonah prays
- Jonah preaches
- Jonah pouts

From a Geographic perspective

- The great Sea 1-2
- The great City 3-4

From a commissioning perspective

- Commission – Disobedience – Repentance of Jonah– Deliverance of Jonah
- Recommission – Obedience – Repentance of Nineveh – Complaint of Jonah

I will organize the content around God’s specific actions resulting in man’s response. I will offer some possible principles to ponder drawn from the descriptive information provided in the book. One needs to exercise caution when suggesting specific directives from general descriptive Scripture. There may be truths implied by this narrative but not intended.

I. God called Jonah

A. God called Jonah

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

God clearly communicated throughout the book of Jonah. The phrase “the word of the LORD” appears seven times in this short book. It appears more than 90 times in the Old Testament. God called or commissions Jonah to “arise and go.” The command implies action and direction. Shift from a stationary state to an active state.

Many followers of God heard the command to “Arise”.

- Jacob—Arise and return to thy kindred.
- Joshua—Arise, and go over this Jordan.

- Gideon—Arise, and get down to the host of Midianites. I have delivered them into your hand.
- Samuel—Arise and anoint Saul.
- Jeremiah – Arise and go to the potter's house
- Elijah—Arise and go to Zarephath. A widow will care for you.
- Philip -- Arise and to Gaza.
- Paul – Arise and Go

Jesus called His followers to “Make disciples” as you are “going.” God did not call Jonah to evangelize the Ninevites but warn them of coming judgement. This wasn't a “turn or burn” message. God called Jonah to “cry against the city.” It was a “You're gonna burn” message. The city was Nineveh was a major Assyrian city that eventually became the capital. God could have been referring to the city proper or the city and its surrounding population.

Later Jonah estimates that the city was home to at least 120,000 people. We will discuss that verse further when we get there. Nineveh was about 600 miles east of Jerusalem; a thirty-day walk across the desert. In today's geography, it stands in Iraq about 75 miles south of Turkey. Elijah began his ministry announcing God's judgment to Israel's evil king Ahab. God called Jonah to announce His judgment to Assyria's evil ruler.

God included the reason for such judgment in His call.

“their wickedness has come up before Me.”

It sinks to the highest heaven.

By referring to historical records, one acquires an idea of the wickedness of Assyria.

"I stormed the mountain peaks and took them. In the midst of the mighty mountain I slaughtered them; with their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool. The heads of their warriors I cut off and I formed them into a pillar over against their city. Their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire." Regarding one captured leader he wrote, "I flayed him. His skin I spread on the wall of the city."

He also wrote of mutilating the bodies of live prisoners and stacking them into piles. Another ruler bragged about his treacheries after one military campaign,

"A pyramid of heads I reared in front of his city. Their youths and maidens I burnt up in the flames."

Yet another Assyrian ruler,

"I cut their throats like lambs. I cut off their precious lives as one cuts a string. Like the many waters of a storm I made the contents of their gullets and entrails run down upon the wide earth. Their hands I cut off."

Another boasted that his officials hung Egyptian corpses on stakes and stripped off their skins, covering the city walls with them. By Jonah's time, Assyrians had already tormented some of the people of the Northern kingdom of Israel arousing hatred and terror in the hearts of the people.

Through history God, permitted wickedness to run a prescribed course before executing judgment. At the time of the flood, God waited until every man's heart was evil continually before acting. At the time of Sodom and Gomorrah, God agreed to spare the city if only ten righteous could be found. God delayed entrance into the promised land until the “cup of the Amorite's wickedness” became full. God has executed temporal individual and national judgment throughout history and will implement absolute national and individual final judgment one day.

B. Jonah refused God's call

You would have thought that Jonah would have been happy to announce judgment to the evil Assyrians but instead of heading to Nineveh, Jonah headed in the opposite direction.

But Jonah rose 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, away from the presence of the LORD. Jonah 1:3

Instead of heading east to Nineveh, Jonah planned to travel 2200 miles west (opposite direction) to Tarshish. The writer stresses the disobedience by repeating “to Tarshish” three times. He did not go to Nineveh but “to Tarshish”. He bought a ticket at the port of Joppa located 30 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Interestingly, Joppa is where God reveals His plan to include Gentiles in His salvation plan to Peter. Jonah’s theology appeared a bit misinformed to think distance would negate God’s call. He should have studied David’s Psalm 139

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. Psalm 139:7-10

The word translated “presence” is literally the word “face”. The concept indicated being out of God’s “line of sight” or direction of attention. Perhaps the phrase simply indicated Jonah’s refusal to answer the call.

“By fleeing from the Lord's presence Jonah announces emphatically his unwillingness to serve God. His action is nothing less than open rebellion against God's sovereignty.” New American Commentary

To depart from the “presence of God” was to be banished from God’s personal attention and intimacy. To be “in His presence” indicated closeness, worship, empowerment, refreshment, sensitivity, humility, meaningful communication, fellowship. Jonah figured physical distance would diminish the pull of God’s mandate. Maybe relational distance would cause God to choose someone else.

It reminds me of Moses who offered several excuses before he demanded that God choose someone else; anyone else. If Jonah were no longer in intimate communication with God, the disobedience may not affect him as much. Adam tried the same thing when he thought he could hide from God after he sinned. Adam forfeited intimate walks in the garden with God for isolation and fear. Jonah found and attached himself to a “ship” headed away from God managed by those who had no relationship with God. The term indicates an unexpected turn of good fortune. Just because things seem positive, doesn’t mean it’s God’s will. Satan can smooth the way to disobedience.

He paid the fare. There is always a “fare”; a price to pay for walking away from God’s directive and fellowship.

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Galatians 6:7-8

We are no different than Adam or Jonah. When we cease living by God’s directives; closeness to God feels uncomfortable. We avoid being in places and doing activities that remind us of our distance from God.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Hebrews 3:12-13

Jesus warned the Ephesian church.

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Revelation 2:4-5

Jonah obeyed the first part “arise” but rose quickly to flee in the opposite direction. Why did Jonah so quickly renounce his prophet’s credentials? Why did Jonah run away without much hesitation? People have suggested a variety of reasons. Some think it was because he was afraid of the extreme cruelty of the Assyrians. Jonah himself reveals why he ran in the opposite direction.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Jonah 3:10-4:1-2

Jonah ran because he hated the Assyrians. He wanted no part in any mercy plan. He wanted God’s judgment to fall. Perhaps Jonah had lost some relatives to an Assyrian incursion. Beyond the fact that they were unclean

Gentiles, they were scary people. Jonah's assignment was to take God's message to Iraqi terrorists. Jonah bristled at the fact that God might just show them mercy. He wanted no part of a revival among the terrorists.

This story challenges us to consider God's perspective and purpose even when dealing with people we want God to severely judge.

Fill in the blank. So and so doesn't deserve God's mercy. Guess what? Neither did we. As we will see next week, Jonah soon found out the danger of ignoring God's call.

Possible pertinent principles to ponder

Each principle calls for some kind of action on our part or response.

- **Omniscient God is fully aware of the wickedness of people and nations.**

Just because He doesn't immediately deal with it does not mean He doesn't see it.

Don't you know that God's kindness forbearance and long-suffering is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. Romans 2:4-5

Don't be too quick to interpret inaction for ignorance.

These things (sins) you have done, and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you. Psalm 50:21

Don't assume God doesn't see.

- **God must and will deal with sin both individually and nationally.**

Keep short accounts.

- **God utilizes individuals to communicate His message.**

What has He asked you to share?

- **Sometimes God calls us to cry out against sin.**

- **God calls us into action from inaction.**

"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. "I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. Revelation 3:1-3

Is there something God is calling you to "Arise" and do? Have you been ignoring a call or a command because it is uncomfortable? Have you become inactive in your response to God?

- **Seek to be sensitive to the "word of the Lord".**

Our responsibility is to hear and obey the word of the LORD.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. James 1:22

Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. Luke 6:47-48

- **You can't escape God's presence**

Stop running from God but draw near to God and He will draw near to you.

- **Bitterness and prejudice blinds us to opportunity for effective ministry.**

Prejudice exists in many forms. Ethnic, geographic, economic, circumstantial, behavioral, religious, denominational. Do we really love people? God's final question to the judgmental Jonah is gripping.

And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" Jonah 4:11

Let's pray for a heart of compassion and mercy for all people.

For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. James 2:13

Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Galatians 6:9-10

There is plenty to ponder. What will you do in response to God's prompting today?

Next week we will explore the consequences of running from God. God disciplines those he loves.