

The Books of Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah

Lesson 2: Running from God: Jonah and the Storm -- Jonah 1:1-17

Everyone knows the story of Jonah and the whale, and that is part of the problem. We have heard it so often, usually in a children's class with a felt-board fish, that we have lost the shock of it. So let us slow down and feel it again. A man hears the voice of God, the actual voice of the Lord of heaven and earth, telling him exactly what to do. And his response is to get up, walk to the harbor, buy a ticket, and sail in the opposite direction as fast as a boat will carry him.

God says go east to Nineveh; Jonah runs west toward Tarshish, the far edge of the known world. It would be almost funny if it were not so familiar. We may never have boarded a ship to escape God, but most of us know exactly what it is to hear something clearly from God and then suddenly become very busy doing the opposite. Jonah is not a strange exception. Jonah is us, with the volume turned up.

And here is the thing about running from God: it always costs more than we expect, and it never actually works. Jonah goes down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the hold, down into sleep, and finally down into the sea. The whole chapter is a downward staircase. Meanwhile God sends a storm so violent that hardened pagan sailors are terrified and praying, and the one man on board who knows the true God is fast asleep below deck. There is something deeply unsettling about a runaway believer sleeping through a crisis while unbelievers cry out to heaven.

This is not a myth or a fable with a moral tacked on. Jesus Himself spoke of Jonah as a real prophet and a real event, pointing to him as a sign of His own death and resurrection. So we read it as history, and as more than history. It is the story of a God who will not let His servant go, a God whose reach extends to the open sea and to the hearts of foreign sailors, and a God whose mercy is so wide that it scandalizes the very people who claim to serve Him. Before Jonah can preach grace to Nineveh, he has to be caught by it himself.

Group Discussion: Jonah heard God clearly and immediately headed in the opposite direction. Why do you think people so often run from what they know God is asking of them, even when they genuinely believe in Him?

Personal Reflection: Jonah's flight took him steadily downward: down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into sleep. Is there an area right now where you sense yourself drifting away from something God has made clear? What is the next "down" step you want to avoid?

Read Jonah 1:1-17

Study Questions

1. The book opens with “the word of the Lord came to Jonah,” sending him to preach against Nineveh, “that great city” (vv. 1–2). What does it tell us about God that He sends a prophet to a violent, pagan enemy city rather than writing it off, and how does this set up the central theme of the whole book?
2. Instead of obeying, Jonah “rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord” (v. 3). When you sense God calling you toward something hard or uncomfortable, what is your own version of buying a ticket to Tarshish?
3. Twice we are told Jonah was fleeing “from the presence of the Lord” (v. 3), yet the storm and the sea prove God is fully present even there. What does Scripture teach about the impossibility of escaping God’s presence, and why is that truth both sobering and comforting?
4. Jonah went “down” to Joppa, “down” into the ship, and lay “down” to sleep (vv. 3–5). Where have you noticed that running from God tends to pull a person steadily downward rather than setting them free?
5. God “hurled a great wind upon the sea” (v. 4), and later we read He “appointed a great fish” (v. 17). What does Jonah teach about God’s sovereign control over wind, sea, and creature, and how does that shape the way we think about the circumstances in our own lives?

6. While pagan sailors cried out to their gods and worked to save the ship, Jonah was “fast asleep” below deck (v. 5). Have you ever found yourself spiritually asleep, going through the motions, while people around you were more awake to spiritual things than you were? What woke you, or what might?
7. The captain confronts Jonah, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god!” (v. 6), and the sailors’ questions force Jonah to confess, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (v. 9). Why is it significant that Jonah’s true confession of faith comes out of his mouth even in the middle of his disobedience?
8. When the sailors ask what they must do, Jonah tells them to throw him into the sea, taking responsibility so that others would be spared (v. 12). When your wrong choices have spilled over onto people around you, how do you tend to respond, and what would genuine ownership look like?
9. By the end of the chapter the pagan sailors “feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows” (v. 16), while God “appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah” (v. 17), which Jesus later calls a true sign of His own death and resurrection (Matthew 12:40). How does this chapter already display God’s mercy reaching the nations, and how does the great fish point us forward to Christ?
10. Look back over the whole chapter, from God’s call to the swallowing fish. Name one specific way Jesus is using Jonah’s runaway story to call you back, to wake you up, or to make you more willing to go where He sends you.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Psalm 139:7–10, where shall I go from your Spirit, or where shall I flee from your presence; Matthew 12:39–41, no sign except the sign of the prophet Jonah; Romans 1:18–21, the truth about God is plain even to those who suppress it; Acts 17:24–27, the God who made the world is not far from each one of us; Luke 15:11–24, the father who runs to the returning son.

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