

Refusing God's Commission

Jonah 1:1-16 on June 2, 2024

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Before going further in this transcript, please read Jonah 1:1-16.

This summer we're going to grow in our faith together by learning from some of the OT Minor Prophets. Now, if you're wondering, "Why the Minor Prophets?" Well, in part, it's because of something that we encountered back in Romans. Romans 15:4 declares, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures [*referring to the Old Testament*] and the encouragement they provide we might have hope."¹ There's incredible value for us as Christ-followers, when we consider the whole counsel of God's Word. This is a key strategy for "becoming deeply devoted followers of Jesus together." The Minor Prophets were written to teach us endurance, and to provide us with encouragement, so that we might have hope. By the way, they're not called "minor," because they're less important than major prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, but rather because they're considerably SHORTER. In fact, they're sometimes referred to as "the book of the twelve," and they were often copied together onto one large scroll because they were short enough to all fit.² So this summer we're going to look at 4 of the 12 Minor Prophets; we'll begin with Jonah, then look at Habakkuk, followed by Micah and Nahum.

Now most of us have at least heard of Jonah, and many of us have read his story multiple times. And yet, it's still worth looking at again. And it's worth noting that some of our common assumptions and stereotypes about Jonah may need some correcting. For example, one day way back when our youngest daughter, Serena, was in the church nursery, there was a woman named Robin Hewitt serving. Robin asked her to tell her the story of Jonah. Without missing a beat, Serena replied, "well, first of all, he was a vechable." (*Ok, OK! Our kids may have watched Veggie Tales a few too many times! If you're not familiar with Phil Vischer's Veggie Tales, it's a cartoon that uses vegetables to teach kids Bible stories.*) Well not only is this a cute story, but it's also a good reminder for us, that we could all probably benefit from a little factchecking in our understanding of what the Bible actually says about the life and ministry of Jonah.



¹ 1 Corinthians 10:11 agrees, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come."

² See discussion on p. 1439 of *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

The book of Jonah is only 4 chapters long, just 48 verses; but this “minor” prophetic book, packs a PUNCH! In terms of content, don’t let it fool you: it is in NO WAY “minor”! That’s why we’re going to take a look at Jonah’s true-life story in 4 parts, which are basically 4 chapters of different scenes from his life:

1 Jonah runs from God (by taking a boat ride with some pagan sailors).

2 Jonah prays to God (from the inside of a huge fish).

3 Jonah delivers God’s warning (to the wicked city of Nineveh).

4 Jonah gets angry with God’s compassion (and sits outside the city).

So, is the book of Jonah more about Jonah, or more about God? Well, let’s think about that question for a minute: one of the things that makes Jonah unique from all of the other Old Testament prophetic books, is that it focuses more on the prophet than on his prophecies. In fact, only 1 of the 48 verses is a verse of prophecy, all of the rest, tell the story about Jonah and the Ninevites.³ My Bible app gives this helpful summary: “Jonah’s role in the book is to represent the attitude of many in Israel toward other nations. Instead of accepting their own calling to help these nations come to know the true God, they considered them enemies and expected God to destroy them. The book teaches that God’s love extends beyond Israel to other nations, indeed, to the whole creation. God’s final question [at the end of chapter 4] is intended for all the book’s readers.”⁴

What is that question God asks in 4:11? “Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?”⁵ Therefore, one of the primary reasons for so much focus on the prophet Jonah, is to make us reflect on our own hearts. This inward reflection then results in putting a spotlight on God’s compassion. The book of Jonah, makes us carefully consider God’s heart of compassion for the spiritually lost, and His desire, that His people, would share that same heart of compassion. God’s gracious compassion is the theme that runs throughout the entire book, whether it’s His compassion for the pagan sailors, or His rebellious, runaway prophet, or the wicked people in Nineveh, or even the animals in Nineveh.⁶

The book of Jonah highlights one of God’s key attributes: God’s compassionate concern for people. The prophet Jonah declares this theological crescendo in Jonah 4:2, “...I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” Jonah knew this about God. You and I probably know this about God. But there are lots of people in this world

³ See YouVersion Bible App introductory notes and Jonah 3:4, “...Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

⁴ YouVersion Bible App introductory notes to Jonah.

⁵ We’ll talk about this a lot more when we get to chapter 4.

⁶ Animals which, by the way, receive an intriguing honorable mention in the final 4 words of the book.

who don't yet know this.⁷ The Ninevites... they had no clue, because they were trapped in their evil ways and their violent behavior. They had no way of knowing about God's compassionate concern. No way, that is, without someone preaching to them. The words of Romans 10:14-15 come to mind, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without *someone* preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "*How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!*" But Jonah wasn't interested in having beautiful feet; instead, he used his feet to hightail it in the opposite direction! The book of Jonah begins by highlighting the absolute tragedy of "Refusing God's Commission." The book of Jonah makes it clear, to any sinner who is curious enough to pick up a Bible and read it, that God absolutely, resolutely cares about them. Even if, the messenger that He's commissioned, refuses to deliver His message of compassionate warning.

God's gracious compassion is demonstrated when...

1) God responds to wickedness by sending warning.

Jonah 1:1-2 begins, "The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." Jonah's mission wasn't an easy ministry assignment for at least 3 reasons:

First of all, Nineveh was a big, wicked city. It was an important city in the neighboring Assyrian empire, and it would later become its capital.^{8 9} The population was well over 100,000 people, and may have covered an area as much as 60 miles in circumference.¹⁰ Although Jonah doesn't give us much detail about exactly what this wickedness entailed, Jonah 3:8 later notes, "[Nineveh's] evil ways and their violence." And if we jump ahead in history to the Old Testament prophet, Nahum, Nineveh's sins included: "plotting evil against the Lord, cruelty and plundering in war, prostitution,

⁷ The more I read the book of Jonah and consider why it may have been written down for us, the more I'm convinced that it was indeed written down FOR US. Yes, the OT Hebrew people needed to consider its message for them, but we Gentiles also need to consider its message for us. In fact, this week I've even come so far as to wonder if Jonah was also possibly even written down for the Ninevites themselves; for those who may have learned to read the Hebrew language and then passed along its message to their fellow Ninevites who longed for a connection with their Creator. Consider 2 Chronicles which refers to the eyes of the LORD ranging throughout the earth keeping watch over human hearts. Also consider the story of Cornelius in Acts 10, when Cornelius' prayers and gifts to the poor came up before God as a memorial offering. God saw this and then sent Peter to Cornelius and his household with the gospel good news for all peoples, even wicked Gentiles. Can you imagine what reading a book like Jonah might have meant for these people living in such a wicked time and place? To learn about God's compassionate heart, EVEN for them!?! You see, as a Hebrew, Jonah knew full well that Yahweh is a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity on repentant peoples.

⁸ Jonah 3:2 and 4:11 both later clarify that Nineveh was a "great city," meaning it was a very large and important city in the Assyrian empire.

⁹ If Jonah was written between 750 and 725 BC, it hadn't become the capital city of Assyria yet, which happened around 700 BC. See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1490 introduction and footnote on Jonah 1:2 p. 1494.

¹⁰ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, footnote on Jonah 3:3 p. 1496.

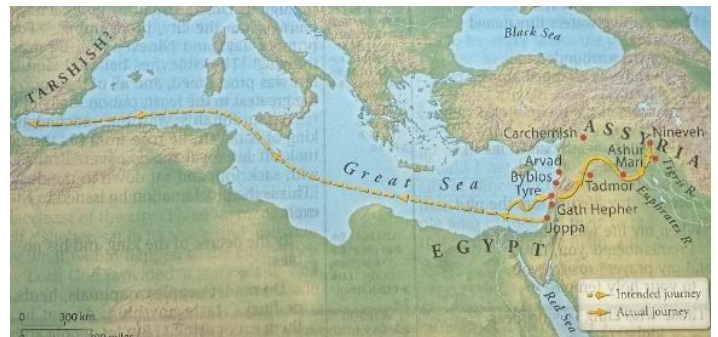
witchcraft and commercial exploitation.”¹¹ This wickedness prompted God’s heart to send in a messenger, with a stern, yet compassionate, word of warning.

Secondly, Nineveh was far away. It was some 500 miles east of where Jonah and the other Israelites were living. It may have taken as much as a full month to travel there, because it wasn’t like he could just hop on a plane and fly over there. It was miles and miles of desert wilderness, and bandits, and the like.¹²

Thirdly, it was a rare, unusual ministry assignment. We can find plenty of examples throughout the OT, of prophets who preached against the sins of foreign nations, but not too many of them were told to go right into downtown and preach directly to them.¹³ This being said, if God calls us to a ministry, then we can trust Him to equip us for that ministry, no matter how challenging it may be.¹⁴

When God saw the wickedness of this great city, He’d didn’t ignore it, nor did He send them the immediate destruction they deserved.¹⁵ Instead, he sent in one of His people to warn them. Sadly, the messenger that God commissioned, refused to go.

Jonah 1:3 says, “But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.”



(On the map, Nineveh is way over to the east side, and Tarshish is way over to the west side somewhere. Gath Hopher and Joppa are both in Israel, on the east coast of the Great Mediterranean Sea.)

In verse 3, some translations clarify that Jonah’s running away from the Lord was an attempt to run away “from the presence of the Lord....” Now

¹¹ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, footnote on Jonah 1:2 p. 1494.

¹² *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, footnote on Jonah 1:2 on p. 1795.

¹³ *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, footnote on Jonah 1:2 on p. 1795.

¹⁴ If we consider ourselves a deeply devoted follower of Jesus, then we need to be ready to do hard things for God. Rather than having low expectations of ourselves, and of what God wants from us, we need to raise the bar, leave our comfort zones, and take risks for God. We need to prayerfully pursue what God is calling us to, and then, once God prompts us by His Holy Spirit, we need to move forward in faith and obedience. I appreciate the sentiment and challenge behind books like “Do Hard Things” written by twin brothers, Alex and Brett Harris. Learn more here: <https://www.therebelution.com/books/do-hard-things/> Pastor John Piper makes this comment about the book: “Adult expectations for youth are too low. And these twins are out to raise them. Don’t adapt to the low cultural expectations for youth. Set high ones. Youth can become examples for adults. Think that way. Dream that way. Or as the Harris brothers would say, ‘Rebel against low expectations.’” 1 Timothy 4:12 comes to mind.

¹⁵ Consider Psalm 103:10-12.

this is exceedingly difficult to do, given that God is present everywhere. That said, how many of us have tried to do this very kind of thing in our own lives, at some point in time? My Study Bible puts it well: “Jonah doesn’t merely ignore the command; he sets out to get as far away from God, and Nineveh, as [physically] possible.”¹⁶ “By heading in the opposite direction from Nineveh, to what seemed like the end of the world, Jonah intended to escape his divinely appointed task.”¹⁷ ¹⁸ The truth of God’s omnipresence is at the same time comforting, and challenging. We cannot escape God; we can’t hide from Him.¹⁹ ²⁰

Although many of us are familiar with his story, Jonah’s response should still shock us. After all, he’s one of God’s officially sanctioned prophets. So, what gives? Why this willful disobedience?

- > *Was it fear?* Was he intimidated by such a large, wicked city?
- > *Was it discomfort?* Was he avoiding the hassles of traveling to such a faraway place that was totally foreign to him?
- > *Was it a lack of confidence?* Was he afraid that he’d fail in such a rare and unusual ministry assignment?

Well, truth be told, Jonah’s disobedience didn’t have anything to do with these. If anything, these could have been used as empty excuses, or smokescreens, used to cover up the ACTUAL reason for his refusal. Jonah tells us exactly why he ran away in Jonah 4:2, “...Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I *knew* that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” You see, Jonah refused his commission because he didn’t care about the lost; he wasn’t concerned about their spiritual condition. He didn’t abound in love the way God did. Instead of relenting, Jonah was hoping that God would send calamity on them, hoping God would judge them for their sin. Jonah refused to have any role in helping his neighbors discover God’s mercy, and possibly even accept it. He wanted his evil neighbors destroyed, not forgiven; so he refused to point them in the right direction. He’d convinced himself that he could forestall God’s plan; “if I’m a thousand miles in the other direction, then there’s no way that God can make me deliver this message to them!”

¹⁶ *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, footnote on Jonah 1:1-16 on p. 1795.

¹⁷ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, footnote on Jonah 1:3 p. 1494.

¹⁸ **In the words of Psalm 139** (vv. 7-10), “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.”

¹⁹ See also Jeremiah 23:23-24.

²⁰ How about you, are you running from a divinely appointed task? If you are, in light of Jonah’s experience, I’d recommend avoiding any large bodies of water anytime soon!

Jonah was a wayward prophet, and at this point in his life, God had every right to take him out. But instead of taking Jonah's life, or sending someone in his place, God gets Jonah's attention by sending a mighty storm.

God's gracious compassion is further demonstrated when...

2) God sends a loving rebuke to His refusing messenger.

Jonah 1:4-5 goes on, "Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.²¹ All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship..." Jonah's refusal of his commission not only put the lives of those in Nineveh at risk, but it also put the lives of these lost sailors at risk. All of these spiritually lost people in the book of Jonah, are living without hope. Their own gods can do nothing to save them as they call out to them. Their only hope was in the message that Jonah refused to share, the message about the one true God: Yahweh.

Jonah 1:5-6 continues, "...But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish."²² ²³ The knowledge and skill of these sailors was no match for the finger of God which was stirring up the seas that day.²⁴ Their only hope was to call out to Jonah's God. This is the same for the people around us today; whatever storm of life they may be in, their only hope is found in our God and in His Son, Jesus Christ.

It's ironic how this pagan captain shows concern for everyone's safety, while Jonah shows a blatant disregard; he's down taking a nap! We've got to wonder how anyone could sleep at a time like this? ...Well, Jonah's stubborn refusal to obey God, likely caused him to fall into a deep bout of depression. The fact that he could sleep, during a storm of such intense magnitude, indicates that his sleep was likely borne out of spiritual exhaustion from resisting God.²⁵

Well even though Jonah had given up, these sailors hadn't. Jonah 1:7-9 goes on, "Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find

²¹ "the LORD sent a great wind." This was the sovereign hand of God at work, not just the mechanism of the universe on autopilot.

²² Clearly God had already taken notice of them.

²³ Some scholars believe that Jonah's account of this storm may be "intended to be a graphic depiction, in exquisite miniature, of the pagan world of many nations (represented by the sailors) threatened by the judgments of God (represented by the storm), with Israel in their midst (represented by Jonah). If Jonah (Israel) does not fulfill his mission, the sailors (nations) will die calling on their gods." See also Acts 27:13-44. *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, footnote on Jonah 1:4-16 p. 1494.

²⁴ See also Jonah 1:13.

²⁵ **Jonah's sleep may also be a word picture of more than just physical rest; it may be a word picture of his spiritual sleepiness.** Jonah is taking a nap in the boat while the people in the world around him are going through a life-threatening crisis. *(Don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with a good nap. We all need times of rest and refreshment. But this particular nap is at the wrong time and place.)*

out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?” He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

This is GREAT theology! Jonah 1:9 is one of the three great theological declarations that Jonah makes in his book.²⁶ In the NIV, whenever you see the word “LORD” in all caps, it signifies the translation of the Hebrew word “Yahweh,” the one and only, true and living God. This highlights the contrast between Jonah’s God (the Creator and compassionate God of the universe) and the many false, powerless gods of the sailors. But even though Jonah had his theology correct, he didn’t have his theopraxy correct.²⁷ The God whom Jonah rightly understood with his *head*, He failed to rightly trust and obey with his *feet*. Notice how, in verse 9, Jonah declares, “I worship the LORD.” He makes this claim right in the midst of his own active and willful rebellion against God’s instruction. Oh the compassionate patience of our God, when He doesn’t just strike us down right where we stand, when we say such hypocritical things.

Jonah 1:10 then says, “This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)” This rhetorical question is really more of an accusation, “Look what you’ve done!” What they’re saying here is “Look at the danger you’ve put us in by running away from God!” More broadly, this question goes out to those of us who are reading Jonah’s book today: What have you done!? Look at the danger that we put people in, if we refuse our Great Commission mandate!

Jonah 1:11-16 concludes, “The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?” “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.” Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.²⁸ Then they cried out to the LORD, “Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us

²⁶ Also note 2:9 and 4:2. *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1493 note on Literary Characteristics.

²⁷ “Theopraxy (literally, “God-practice”) is a lifestyle that seeks to know Christ, to imitate Him, to seek God’s Kingdom, and to view everything in life from God’s perspective. It requires a desire to live in total concord with and submission to His will, ways, purposes, character, nature, desires, and thoughts. It is doing God’s work, in God’s way, in God’s timing, by God’s enablement.” (<https://renew.org/introducing-the-lifestyle-of-theopraxy/>)

²⁸ The sailors had the right idea. Let’s turn around! Let’s go the direction that God wants us to go. Let’s get this guy back to shore and send him on his way to Nineveh. But God knew Jonah’s heart; it hadn’t changed. He still had no intention to go to Nineveh. He’d rather give himself up to the fate of dying at sea, than to repent and go to Nineveh like he was told.

accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased.”^{29 30 31} Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.”³²

Now at first reading, Jonah’s self-sacrifice may seem noble to us. “Oh, look how great Jonah is! He’s willing to lay down his own life for the sake of these frightened and needy sailors. What a guy!” But Jonah’s willingness to be tossed into the sea wasn’t necessarily an honorable or heroic act of self-sacrifice.

Let’s think about this for a minute; what would a godly response really have looked like in Jonah’s situation?

...*How about repentance?* How about, “I’m so sorry Lord. Please forgive me for my willful disobedience. Please forgive me for refusing to go to Nineveh. (*But Jonah was surrendering himself to fate rather than repenting.*) What would a godly response have looked like?

...*How about reparation?* Yes Lord, I’ll go. Here I am, send me. If you’ll just calm this storm, then we’ll turn this ship right around, and we’ll head straight for shore. I will obey you fully. I will go and declare your compassionate warning to the spiritually lost. (*But instead of saying something like this, Jonah just says, “pick me up and throw me into the sea.” So he is still “Refusing God’s Commission.”*)

At this point, the personal application of today’s text should be pretty obvious.³³ Those of us who are Christfollowers, have something in common with Jonah; God has chosen us to be His messengers to the people living in the Bemidji area. So we might say that Bemidji is our Nineveh, but we certainly don’t want to respond to our city the way Jonah did. Instead, we want to respond with obedience. We want to share God’s compassionate warning with the people in our community.

²⁹ There’s a sharp contrast here between the reluctance of the sailors to take Jonah’s life, and Jonah’s refusal to help save the lives of the Ninevites. It’s ironic that the compassion of these pagan sailors for Jonah is a much closer match to God’s compassion.

³⁰ The sailors recognition of God’s right to do as He pleases stands in direct contrast sharply with Jonah’s disagreement over God’s right to send him to Nineveh with a word of warning. See *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, footnote on Jonah 1:14 on p. 1796.

³¹ The sailors described Jonah as an innocent man, but the readers of the book of Jonah know better. He is guilty of refusing God’s mission. He is guilty of preferring the destruction of the wicked rather than their rescue.

³² The sailors do what Jonah refused to do: Call out to Yahweh! Call on His mercy for the taking of an innocent life. God’s answer is immediate, the raging sea grew calm. Imagine the expression on each of the sailor’s faces? Imagine the story they told their loved ones the next time they went home? Imagine how their prayer lives, and religious practices may have changed after experiencing the awesome power of the one true God firsthand!? “the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.” It’s just too bad that Jonah couldn’t have still been there to teach them more about the things of God, and to help them understand the further teachings about Yahweh. However, we can’t be sure just how sincere this “foxhole faith” was for the sailors. These verses don’t necessarily mean that the sailors renounced all of their other gods, or came to a real and saving faith in Yahweh. But we sure can’t deny that they must have been thinking carefully and deeply about the one true God.

³³ See Isaiah 6:8 and 2 Corinthians 5:20 and 1 Peter 2:9.