



IMMANUEL BAPTIST CHURCH
SERIES: JONAH AND OUR MISSIONARY GOD
LESSON: "HOUND OF HEAVEN"
DATE: JULY 13, 2025
SCRIPTURE: JONAH 1:1-17

INTRODUCTION

What if there was a Hall of Fame for Bible stories? If you tried to come up with a short list of the most important, memorable, or maybe just most popular—what would they be? If you grew up attending Sunday School during the heyday of the Flannel Graph Era, would these be the stories that were featured in those tiny felt reproductions?

For those who are raising children or who remember what it was like, were these the stories you focused on at bedtime? Did your children have favorites? Did you?

It may be a fun exercise to ask your class to create their own collective ranking. Or maybe to have them share which stories they remember most from their own childhoods.

Where would Jonah rank for you? Even if not a favorite of yours, would you agree it is one of the most well-known? Have you ever thought about why? Now, perhaps it would be useful to stop and consider how much you remember from the story of Jonah. How many details come to mind? Do they get to the central theme?

In the lesson this week and in the weeks to follow, we will walk through this short narrative of a unique missionary. As you read, you may find some things that surprise you; some things that you don't recall learning with those flannel graphs; and maybe you will find a story that is much more complex and challenging than a debate over whether it was a fish or a whale.

This study will work through the narrative of this period of the life of Jonah, which admittedly was quite remarkable. But the challenge presented by these lessons is to look beyond this memorable story to the more subtle presence of God's hand throughout each step along the way. After all, the hero of this narrative is the Lord. If you read to the end, it is certainly not Jonah...

Text and Explanation

Read Jonah 1: 1-17. This first chapter of Jonah sets the stage for and includes the primary events that one may typically recall when thinking of the story of Jonah.

As background, Jonah is a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. In addition to the Book of Jonah, he is mentioned by name in 2 Kings 14:23-29 playing an integral role in the revelation of God's plan for Israel, despite Jeroboam's sinful ways. This passage is important not only for providing a historical evidence of a real prophet named Jonah but may also provide some important context about Jonah's ministry. For example, the Lord had allowed Israel to expand their boundaries militarily in a manner that had not happened for years following retreat from the heights of Solomon's reign (see v.25-27). This happened through the ministry of Jonah, despite Jeroboam being a wicked king. The Bible does not provide clear context around the timing of his Israel-based ministry, but it is a reminder of the world Jonah lived in, specifically the fights for Israel's place and the sense of rivalry and fear that may have been associated with an emerging nation like Assyria.

In the Book of Jonah itself, there is very little prelude to God's call which initiates the action. There is little introduction other than Jonah's name, his father's name, and a call – go to Ninevah. Throughout the chapter, more is revealed about Jonah's career as a prophet and his reasoning for his flight (v. 9-10). In the book, his relationship with the Lord, his faith, and other key aspects of his work are revealed through his words and actions, and not always in a favorable way.

What the narrative reveals is that God spoke, Jonah listened, and Jonah reacted. Unfortunately, his reaction was one of disobedience as he booked passage on a ship sailing for Tarshish, a trading city in modern-day Spain near the Straits of Gibraltar that is literally at the far western end of the Mediterranean Sea. Jonah was going to the opposite extreme from where he

had been called to go preach. Specifically, the narrative says that Jonah fled away “from the presence of God.” Jonah ran from God’s call, and he ran from the people God had called him to preach to. But God made sure that was not the end of the story.

This disobedience led to a crisis for the crew onboard Jonah’s ship. God sent a storm to harass and disrupt the ship (v.4). A storm so formidable, the sailors (a) were afraid and cried out to their gods (v. 5), (b) threw items overboard in an effort to regain better control over the ship (v. 5), and (c) cast lots to determine responsibility of this storm (v. 7). Ultimately, the lot fell on Jonah who proceeded to openly share his intentions, actions, and motives (v. 8-11). Jonah even proposed a solution—throw him overboard (v. 12-15). Too little is said in the text to explain his frankness for readers to truly draw significant conclusions, but he seemingly did very little to defend himself, argue his position, or even to resist the seeming consequences. As the narrative shifts in chapter 2, the reader begins to see more about what is going on in Jonah’s heart, but at this stage in chapter 1, it is worth considering what clues are there. It certainly feels like he may have been so set on his disobedience, he was willing for that to be the end of his life.

Jonah’s interaction with the sailors is fascinating. These men who invoke their own gods, clearly pagans and likely polytheists, demonstrate a spiritual openness that may surprise the reader (v. 5). After all, they resisted the opportunity to throw Jonah overboard, choosing at first to attempt to row to shore (v. 13) and ultimately praying for forgiveness when they do so (v. 14-15). As a result of his disobedient actions, a group of sailors who nearly died end up in v. 16 with a new reverence for God, offering sacrifices, and making vows. In Jonah’s disobedience, God took His good news to a group of pagan, polytheists and received a response. The book does not go on to share their ultimate fate and whether the belief was lasting, but their departure from the scene is noteworthy as an indication of what God can do, even in a mess.

Discussion Questions:

- Reading this story again with fresh eyes, what stands out to you or surprises you about this story? Does it align with your recollection and expectations?
- Does this feel like a children’s story?
- How would you describe Jonah’s relationship with the Lord? Look closely at his comments and behavior, did he ever doubt it was God who spoke or the clarity of the call to go?

- The Book of Jonah said that he specifically fled away from the presence of the Lord. How would you describe this and how would you describe the dangers in this?
- What can we make of Jonah sleeping during the storm? What might this tell us about Jonah? Does it inform our understanding of his view of God?
- Compare this episode in Jonah's life with a very similar incident involving Jesus in Mark 4:35-41. What is similar? What is different? Look specifically at the accusation from the disciples? Does that sound more like Jesus or Jonah?
- How did this situation impact the sailors on the ship with Jonah? Read v. 12-16. Does their behavior surprise you? How would you characterize their relationship with and experience of God after this episode?
- Look back through chapter 1 and consider it from the perspective of God being the main focus of this action, the main character. How does he drive the action in this story?
- Why did God send the storm? Why did God send the fish?
- What do we learn about God in this story?
- Does this notion of resisting God's call on your life challenge you? Have you seen times in your life when it was easier to let other factors drive you away from God's presence? How do you combat that?

Conclusions or Application

GOD IS ON THE MOVE.

Jonah made a choice. An unfortunate choice that should have cost him his life in addition to costing him the opportunity to be part of a miraculous work of God. In his resistance to God's call, Jonah acted in disobedience, imperiled others, and seemingly tried to thwart God's plan for Ninevah.

But God. Throughout this story, God has His fingerprints all over the action, and one telling sign is that they never let up or leave. God did not leave Jonah to his sin and disobedience. He pursued. He loved him anyway. He ultimately drew him back.

God did not give up on Jonah, and God did not give up on the people of Ninevah.

GOD CAN TURN EVEN THE WORST SITUATIONS INTO AN OPPORTUNITY TO BRING HIMSELF GLORY

While Jonah's rebellious heart and disobedience were wrong and nearly had tragic consequences for him and for a boat full of sailors, God was able to take this opportunity to draw a crew of pagan, polytheistic sailors to Himself. Their reaction to God, recognition there is one true God, and their vows made in dealing with Jonah reflect the reality that the Gospel went out despite Jonah's best efforts. God took this episode and used it to further His kingdom.

This should have been a lesson to Jonah that God has tremendous grace, even for those who do not seem to deserve it (which seemed to be Jonah's major hang up with the Assyrians). God had grace for this crew, not allowing the boat to sink and preserving their lives long enough they could have this full experience with Jonah.

What Jonah may not have realized is that God had done the exact same thing through him in bringing God's plan for Israel under Jeroboam to fruition. Jeroboam was an evil king who seemingly did little if anything to deserve God's favor. More likely, he deserved wrath. While we can't be certain of the sequence, one wonders if Jonah missed this truth and overestimated the worthiness of Israel. Or maybe his mistake was overestimating his own righteousness.

WE MUST NOT FORGET THE MIGHTY ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Jonah seemingly does one thing unequivocally right throughout this. He has faith in God as a great God both in power and in grace. He knows God and hears from God. He knows God can do abundantly more than we can imagine. After all, he later revealed the reasoning in his heart as he bitterly watched this city receive forgiveness that came from His own gospel message (see chapter 4).

One interesting piece in this was in v. 9. When questioned by the sailors, Jonah is clear. God controls the sea and land. He gets that God is a big God. He is not shocked about the storm. He seemed to never be in doubt about what God could do.