



The Flight of a Prophet

Jonah 1:1-6
January 7, 2024

The book of Jonah kicks off like other prophetic books. God has a message, and at first, it sounds simple: "Head to Nineveh and tell them what I tell you to say, just like you do back in Israel." But there's a big difference—Jonah isn't dealing with a crowd who already knows the Lord and His laws. This time, he's off to chat with non-Jews, and some of the most powerful ones of the day. This time, he is called to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, a global superpower, with a well-earned reputation for brutality. It's a whole new ball game for Jonah.

Jonah 1:1-6¹

¹ Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh², that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." ³ 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. ⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶ So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish."

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² At this time the ancient Assyrians are associated with terror and cruelty. In order to maintain control the rulers adopted grisly methods to keep conquered nations in fear and capitulation to their rule. Along with forced deportations, impalings, the removal of tongues, blindings, and beheadings were all commonly employed to control and stop possible aggressors. This reputation for bloodshed and violence would be well known by the Israelites, including the prophet Jonah.

Opening Questions

- Pray for insight and understanding into the text (Psalm 119:18)
- Take the time to highlight key phrases from the text. Look for repeated wording, contrasts, similarities and things that are emphasized.
- Highlight key words or actions in which you see the characters engaged.
- In one clear sentence summarize the passage and write your sentence below.

Bible Study

1. Many other prophetic books begin as Jonah does. Compare Jonah 1:1 with Joel 1:1, Micah 1:1, and Jeremiah 1:4.
 - a. What do you notice that's unique about Jonah's calling?
 - b. How does "the word of the LORD" come to us today?
2. God's instructions to Jonah consist of only one verse describing the wickedness of a distant city in a foreign land. What does this tell us about the nature of God's concern (compare Psalm 24:1; Proverbs 15:3)?
3. In verse 2, God gives three commands to Jonah. What are they? Circle all three in the text above. Compare the commands to Jonah with Matthew 28:18-20, describe the similarities and differences between the two.
4. Instead of heading toward Nineveh (to the east of Israel), Jonah willfully boards a ship heading to Tarshish—the westernmost location in the ancient Near East.
 - a. What phrase is repeated twice in verse 3?
 - b. What do you think Jonah was trying to accomplish?
5. Jonah's action contrasts with the prophets' typical responses to God's call. Read Isaiah 6:8 and Hosea 1:2–3. How did these prophets answer God's call? Think of a time you felt God's call to act. How did you respond?
6. Read ahead in Jonah 4:1-2. According to Jonah, why did he flee? What did he think would happen if he went to Nineveh, and why is this so upsetting to him?

7. What does Jonah's response to God's calling tell us about Jonah's understanding of God? What does it tell us about Jonah's view of himself?
8. Why is it significant that the story of Jonah does not end at verse 3? What does this tell you about the character of God?
9. In verse 4, the Lord sends powerful storm Jonah's way. Do you feel that this is God's punishment of Jonah, or something else? How do you think Jonah viewed it?
10. Compare Jonah in verse 5 with Jesus in Matthew 26:36-45.
 - a. Which of the two is more peaceful?
 - b. Which of the two are following the will of God?
 - c. How would you answer someone who said to you that they knew they were making a right decision about something because they had "a lot of peace" about it?
11. Why do you think that Jonah fell asleep in the boat? Do you think this was a spiritual battle? Have you ever wanted to 'sleep' instead of working for Christ? Explain.

Diving Deeper

1. Read 2 Kings 14:25. Where was Jonah from? What else does this verse tell us about Jonah?
2. Using the following references, describe what the ancient city of Nineveh was like at points in its history:
 - a. Zephaniah 2:13
 - b. Nahum 3:1
 - c. 2 Kings 19:36-37
3. Using 1:2, 3:2, 3:4, and 3:8, piece together the basic content of God's message to the Ninevites.
4. Read Luke 11:30. What is so significant about the fact that in the New Testament Jesus referenced Jonah's story?