

# Jonah Is More Like Us Than We Realize

---

TGC [thegospelcoalition.org/article/jonah-is-like-us](http://thegospelcoalition.org/article/jonah-is-like-us)

Elliot Clark

The story of Jonah reminds me of Nasreddin Hodja, a character from Central Asian children's literature. As the story goes, one day Nasreddin, a Muslim holy man, was lying under a walnut tree. Looking up into its magnificent branches, he began to question the wisdom of the Creator. Why should such a large tree have tiny walnuts? It could easily carry the large pumpkins that grow on spindly vines.

Soon, Nasreddin fell asleep. But he was jolted awake when a walnut plopped onto his head. In that moment, he recognized not only the Creator's wisdom but also his kindness. While the Hodja was busy questioning the purposes of God, he'd been oblivious to mercy—the mercy that kept a falling gourd from crushing his head.

In Muslim folklore, Nasreddin Hodja is a silly and absurd character. But his puerile humor often reveals profound truths. Of course, absurd characters can be found throughout literature and throughout the world. Down through the ages, literary satire has been a sharp cultural tool to critique individuals and society at large.

The power of absurdity is that it exposes reality. Such is the case in Jonah.

## Absurd Character

---

The name Jonah means “dove” in Hebrew, a name that seems to represent the silly and senseless nature of Israel (Hos. 7:11). Like the nation, Jonah is pitifully oblivious to the evil of his own heart and the unmerited mercy of God over him. While Jonah questions the wisdom of God in displaying kindness to Nineveh, he's blind to how that same grace has saved him.

Jonah is pitifully oblivious to the evil of his own heart and the unmerited mercy of God over him.

This becomes clear in the final, climactic scene of Jonah's story. In his kindness, God appoints a plant—probably something like a large gourd or pumpkin—to sprout up and shade his pouting prophet. Amusingly, Jonah finds excessive happiness in the plant. But then God appoints a worm to kill the plant. As his beloved shade fades in the sun and withers in the wind, Jonah responds with rage. He's moved to both anger and pity. Pity for the plant—which is really self-pity. And anger toward the worm and the sun and the wind—which is really God-anger.

In that moment, we see the true character of Jonah. He's more concerned for his passing comfort than for the everlasting salvation of the Ninevites. His pity for himself and for a perishing plant overrides any compassion for the lost and dying among the Assyrians. Most concerning of all, he presumes on God's grace. Like many within Israel, he's somehow concluded God's favor belongs to him.

What the last chapter of Jonah reveals, then, is that his initial refusal to go to Nineveh stemmed from his disregard for God's mercy, his desire for personal comfort, and his lack of care for the perishing. His story might be funny if it weren't true.

## **Loving Our Enemies**

---

Henry Gerecke was an evangelical Lutheran minister living in Missouri in the early 1900s. At the outset of World War II, his two eldest sons entered the military. At 49 years old, Gerecke wanted to do his part, so he enlisted as an army chaplain, eventually working among Allied troops in the European theatre. However, his most notable service came after the war ended.

When everyone else was eagerly returning home, including his sons, Gerecke received a letter asking him to stay behind. With his knowledge of the German language, he was a prime candidate to work among the Nazi prisoners awaiting trial in Nuremberg. Gerecke was asked to serve as chaplain to those who were, at that point in history, the most hated men on earth. The wicked of all wicked. It would be like Jonah going to Nineveh. And Gerecke agreed to do it.

Later, when the American press published his story, including Gerecke's willingness to graciously extend his hand to Nazi prisoners, he was excoriated. Back home, his service was seen as treacherous. But Gerecke continued. He quietly worked among the Germans for many weeks, reminding them of the gospel of Christ and offering them the hope of life. As a result, in the last days before their executions, some of those despicable men seem to have come to genuine repentance.

If we're honest, the story of Jonah may seem completely irrelevant to us in the church. After all, what Christian would ever take God's grace for granted? Who among us would ever prioritize personal safety, security, and comfort over the salvation of the nations? What believer would ever entertain angry and vengeful thoughts toward the opponents of our faith? Or of our way of life? Or of our country?

## **Fighting Prejudice**

---

We might assume Jonah's struggles would never be ours. But this is the power of satire. Its absurdity wakes us to reality.

We might assume Jonah's struggles would never be ours. But this is the power of satire. Its absurdity wakes us to reality.

The reality is that many of us in the post-Christian West are tempted to respond to encroaching exile with the spirit of Jonah. Living in a hostile world, it's easy to despise our enemies. Surrounded by opponents, the most natural response is to angrily fight for our rights. When others ridicule and threaten us, we're inclined to respond accordingly, selectively choosing who deserves our kindness—and in so doing, forgetting God's undeserved grace to us in the first place.

Instead of having compassion on the multitudes, it's easy to spend our time grumbling about modern-day tax collectors and sinners. But if the church is to be on mission, taking the good news of Christ to the world, we must beware the pharisaical spirit of Israel. This begins by acknowledging we're tempted to entertain the same prejudices as the prophet Jonah.

**Elliot Clark** (M.Div., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) served in Central Asia as a cross-cultural church planter along with his wife and children. He now travels around the world to equip church leaders and support residential missionaries. He is the author of *Evangelism as Exiles: Life on Mission as Strangers in Our Own Land* (2019) and *Mission Affirmed: Recovering the Missionary Motivation of Paul* (2022), and editor of *Faithful Exiles: Finding Hope in a Hostile World* (2023).