

A Futile Effort

Jonah 1: 1-10

Having considered the introduction for Jonah, I want to remind us of the major theme of the book. Most tend to focus solely on Jonah's miraculous deliverance from the belly of the great fish, but that is just one scene from this account in Scripture. In fact, that miraculous event is not the focus of the book of Jonah. The sovereignty of God in pursuing men unto Himself is the theme of the book. Jonah reveals the love of God, shown through His unmerited favor to those who are undeserving. The Ninevites were wicked, and Jonah purposely disobeyed God, but in His grace and mercy, the Lord continued to pursue them.

As we begin in this short, yet powerful book, we find the opening scene – God's call for Jonah to go to Nineveh, and his futile attempt to avoid that call. There is much we need to learn from this opening passage. God is always righteous, and His divine character dictates His dealings with men. God had every right to abandon Jonah because of his disobedience. He could have judged the sin of Nineveh without question. However, God had a plan, and He was determined to see His plan fulfilled. Any effort to resist the Lord and His sovereign plan will prove futile at best.

As we examine the [details](#) of this encounter, I want to consider the thought: [A Futile Effort](#).

I. The Reluctance of Jonah (1-3) – As we are introduced to Jonah, we immediately discover his reluctance to submit to God's will for his life. Notice:

A. The Commission (1-2a) – [Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,](#) ^[2] [Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it.](#) We discovered in our introduction that Jonah was a prophet of the Lord, called unto the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He was from Gath-hepher, located in Nazareth, west of the Sea of Galilee. The word of the Lord came unto Jonah, calling him to go and cry against the city of Nineveh. No doubt this was viewed as an unusual request, with Jonah being aware of the brutality of the Assyrians and their desire to conquer the world. However, God did not ask Jonah for his consideration or approval of the task. God called Jonah to go and cry against the city.

- We tend to be critical of those within the Bible who are skeptical or disobedient to the call of God, but we too try and rationalize particular acts of service. We know that the Lord desires the Gospel to be shared with all people, but at times we act as if the Great Commission is reserved for someone else, and we are immune to the call. We are called of the Lord to proclaim the Gospel unto the nations, calling them to repentance and faith.

B. The Motivation (2b) – [for their wickedness is come up before me](#). We will discover that God sent Jonah to preach a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh. God could have judged their sin, utterly destroying the city and its inhabitants; but through His mercy and grace, He wanted to provide an opportunity for them to repent of their sin and turn unto Him. It is estimated that the population of Nineveh at that time was between 600,000 and 1,000,000. God wanted Jonah to warn the people of the judgment they faced apart from repentance.

- The brutality and wickedness of the Assyrians is almost incomprehensible by civilized people. They were notoriously violent in their dealings with those they conquered in battle. Often their captives were beheaded, or had their throats slit. The young men and women were often burned with fire. Some captives were impaled on poles as a display of Assyrian might and brutality. The Assyrians were also known to flay the skin from some of the more prominent captives, and hang their skins upon the city walls. All of this was done to intimidate and strike fear in the hearts of those they came against in battle. Their wickedness was known of God, and He desired to deal with them in grace rather than the judgment they deserved. (Aren't you glad the Lord didn't deal with us according to our sin, but offered grace instead?)

C. The Rebellion (3) – [But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD](#). Here we discover the rebellion and disobedience of Jonah regarding the call of God. While I would never condone disobedience, one can see why Jonah might have been skeptical, being sent to such a barbaric people. Consider:

1. The Direction (3a) – [But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish](#). Upon hearing the call of God, Jonah decided he would flee unto Tarshish. He left home and made his way to Joppa, on the Mediterranean coast, seeking a ship sailing toward Tarshish. It is interesting when you consider where Jonah intended to travel. Tarshish was located in modern-day Spain, considered the western-most point of the known world at that time. Nineveh was east, near modern-day Iraq. Rather than going east toward Nineveh, Jonah determined to go as far west as he possibly could, totally opposite of where the Lord called him to journey.

2. The Determination (3b) – [so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD](#). Here we find a telling detail that reveals the determination of Jonah, regardless of the cost. He was determined to make his way to Tarshish, in hopes of escaping the presence of the Lord. Jonah literally turned his back on God and sought to get as far

away from His presence as possible. This is a very dangerous place to find one's self. Little did Jonah know, it is impossible to escape the presence of the Sovereign.

- You and I maybe haven't paid our fare, and boarded a ship in order to escape the call of God, but we likely have been disobedient to His will at times. This is a lonely and dangerous path to travel. Jonah couldn't escape the presence and call of God, and we can't either. The Lord may eventually leave us to our own desires, but it is impossible to escape the ever-present Lord.
- Jonah didn't want to preach to the Assyrians. It appears he hated them and wished for God to annihilate them. Often our disobedience is prompted by sinful desires and a lack of spirituality. Honestly, I had rather walk into the midst of Nineveh with the Lord than sail to Tarshish in an effort to escape His presence!

II. The Persistence of Jehovah (4-10) – Jonah may have wished to escape the presence of the Lord, but God would not give up on His plan for Nineveh. He intended for them to hear a message of repentance, and He intended for Jonah to deliver the message. Consider:

A. The Sovereignty (4) – *But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.* Jonah thought he had come up with a plan to avoid going to Nineveh, but the Lord had other plans. As Jonah, and those who sailed with him, made their way toward Tarshish, God sent out a great wind into the sea. This created a mighty tempest and the boat was in danger of being torn to pieces and sinking. God was persistent in His pursuit of Jonah, and he would not relent or change His plans.

- We rejoice in God's sovereignty when it comes to our provision and security, but we tend to dismiss it when it doesn't agree with our plans or desires. The modern movement paints the Lord as little more than a genie in a bottle, who exists solely to grant our wishes. I am thankful for the Lord's gracious provision in our lives, but I am also aware of His sovereign authority. I know total submission to the Lord flies in the face of pride and human accomplishment, but it is expected of us. He paid for our redemption as He offered His life an atonement for sin. We have been bought with a price; we belong to the Lord and Master of our lives. Who are we to question or challenge His sovereign will for our lives? His will and ways are always best, and the sooner we submit to His sovereignty, the sooner we will experience peace and fulfillment. He is loving and very patient, but when necessary, He does have the ability to get our attention!

B. The Identity (5-7) – The storm immediately got the attention of the shipmaster and the mariners aboard the ship. They were doing everything within their power to keep the boat from

sinking. They began to throw the cargo from the ship, desperately trying to lighten the load to keep it afloat. As these frantically worked to save the ship, the shipmaster was made aware that Jonah was asleep inside the ship. Coming to Jonah, the shipmaster admonished him and demanded that he begin to call upon his God, in hopes the Lord would save them from the storm. Following their superstition, the crew cast lots to see who was responsible for this great evil that had come upon them. The lots they cast fell upon Jonah and he was identified as the source of their trouble.

- We know there is no benefit or ability in the chance revealed through casting lots, but again God was working behind the scenes. He had orchestrated the storm, and He had revealed that Jonah was the reason for their trouble. We cannot hide from a sovereign God. He will reveal us to those around us. It is foolish to run from the Lord, seeking to escape His presence. He will find us, where we are, and continue to deal with us according to His will for our lives.

C. The Testimony (8-10) – Once the lot fell on Jonah, the mariners demanded information from him. What do you know about this evil that has befallen us? What is your occupation? Where did you come from? What country do you belong to? What nationality are you? Jonah's response to the questions was informative and ironic. He admitted that he was a Hebrew, who feared the LORD, the God of heaven. Then Jonah admitted that it was God alone who made the sea and the dry land. He acknowledged that God was the sovereign Creator, with authority over land and sea. Seeking to escape the Lord's presence, Jonah was forced to admit there was no place to hide.

- Hearing Jonah's testimony, the men asked why he had done such a thing. Why would you attempt to flee from the Lord's presence? Those who made no claim of knowing God or serving Him knew Jonah had acted very foolishly.

- Jonah should have been a positive witness for the Lord, but his actions resulted in distrust and shame. We have an opportunity to be an effective witness for the Lord, but we must guard our lives. We cannot expect to positively impact others if we are trying to flee from the Lord and His will for our lives. In order to be an effective witness, we must walk with the Lord, according to His desires for us.

Conclusion: We are mid-way through the first portion of Jonah's story, and I hope to conclude this in our next study. No doubt, we are like Jonah at times, wanting to please ourselves instead of responding in obedience to the Lord. There is no place to run or hide from His presence. If the Lord is calling, the best course of action is submissive obedience. Are there needs in your life? Is the Lord calling you today? If so, respond in submission to Him!