

Travelling with JONAH

a double journey

Rick Creighton

BeaconLight Books

Travelling with Jonah: a double journey

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For Alanna

My thanks to Paul Adams for the encouragement
and stimulus to write this book.

A Double Journey?

Jonah is an unusual book. If you are familiar with the Bible, then it's probably one that you feel fairly at home with – one you know quite well (or at least, parts of quite well). The part about 'the whale'¹ is usually familiar territory – it's classic Sunday school material. But there is a lot more to the book than just fish. In fact, the book of Jonah is very unlike any of the other prophets in the Bible. We only have eight words of actual prophecy in the whole book, and we don't get to them until chapter 3.² The book isn't so much a prophecy as a story.³

Even so, the fact that it's included among the prophets does give us a clue about what the story is concerned with. It's about God's word entering human history – why that's important, what impact it has, how we should respond to it. But the content of that word isn't expanded in great detail. When we come to Jonah's actual prophecy, we'll see that *it* isn't complicated or difficult. The message is simple. What's complicated and difficult is the way various people in the story *respond*. And in particular, the way Jonah responds.

It's a story with a lot to show us about Jonah's attitude to those who don't know God. And a lot to show us about God himself, and his purposes for this world. But as the story unfolds, it also holds up a mirror for us. We will see things that are thought-provoking and encouraging – as well as things that are challenging and perhaps uncomfortably close to home.

The story isn't as straightforward as it looks on first glance. There are surprises, reversals and plenty of irony. It does start off straightforwardly (chapter 1), and seems to be going in one direction. But then it has a sting in its tail (chapter 4) – and this 'sting' makes us reconsider the meaning of the whole book. Our hero doesn't look quite so heroic by the end – and some of the 'villains' almost turn out to be heroes.

Because of this, we're going to journey through Jonah twice. Our first journey will be 'forwards' – we'll start at chapter one, and work straight through to chapter four. Our second journey will be 'backwards' – having seen how the tale ends in chapter four, we'll work backwards and retrace our steps through chapters three, two and one. In one sense we'll end up back where we started, but in another sense it'll be quite different ...

1 | Running Scared (?)



‘Storm on the sea’
(Bonaventura Peeters)⁴

Before we jump in at the deep end of Jonah’s story, we ought to spend a few moments getting our bearings. After all, we don’t normally hear much about the ‘current affairs’ of the Middle East in Jonah’s day. Fortunately, there’s not too much we need to know. A short ‘News Bulletin’ version will be plenty.

Jonah’s News of the World

A bit of Bible Background

Originally Israel was one nation, ruled by King David. Later, after Solomon died, it split into two. The smaller, southern half stayed with the kings descended from David – it was called ‘Judah.’ The larger, northern half split off on its own – it kept the name ‘Israel.’ Jonah lives in Israel.

1 Kings 12 tells the story of the division. 2 Kings 14:25 tells us Jonah was based in the north (Israel).

Most of the action in Jonah centres around an Assyrian city called Nineveh. Not many of us who read the book of Jonah will have visited Nineveh. And even if we went to the modern-day site, it’s in ruins. We wouldn’t come away knowing much about what it was like in Jonah’s day. So let’s

begin with a couple of maps, to give us a feel for the geography. The map below (Image 1) is a map of the Middle East, with Israel just left of centre (which is where Jonah lived).

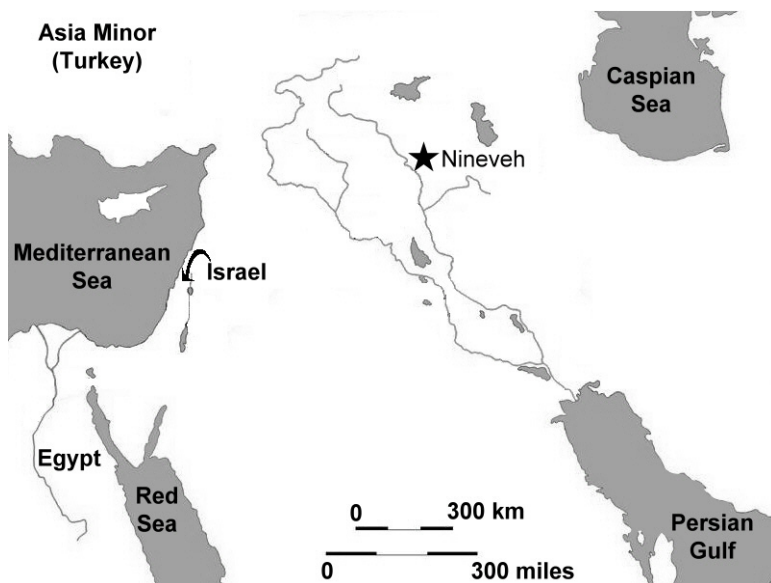


Image 1: Jonah's world

Now Nineveh is off to the north east. That might look like quite a long way away from Israel – and in one sense it was: it would have taken Jonah some weeks to get there by foot. It might be like trying to walk from London to Poland – it was quite a trip. But even so, Nineveh would have felt a lot nearer to Israel than Poland feels for people in Britain – or, at least, it would have felt a lot more threatening.

That's because Nineveh was one of the main cities in a country called Assyria – and Assyria was *the* superpower at that time. The second map (Image 2, on the next page) shows how big the Assyrian empire eventually becomes, at its peak (not long after Jonah's time).

Their sphere of control becomes huge. As you can see, Assyria completely overruns Israel and Judah in the end. They totally destroy the northern kingdom (Israel), and make a real mess of the southern kingdom (Judah). (See 2 Kings 17-19.)

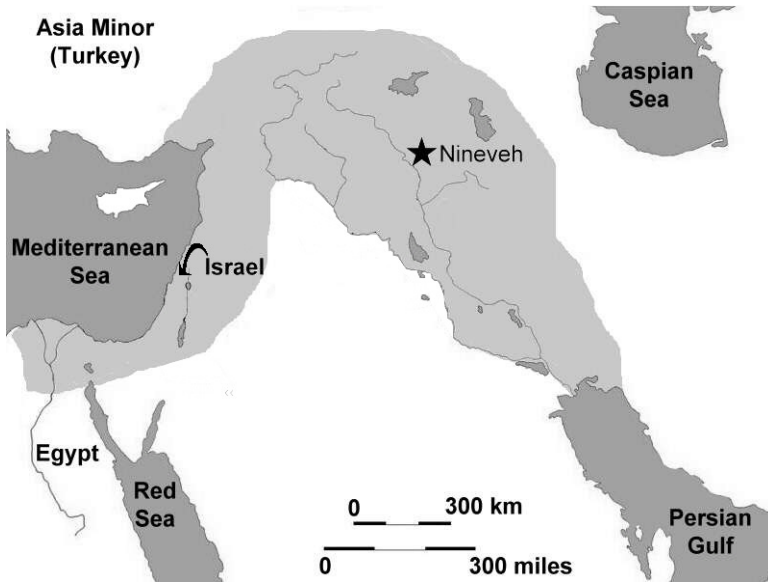


Image 2: The Assyrian Empire (at its biggest)

These Assyrians were wild and brutal. They were brilliant warriors, but vicious too. They enjoyed inflicting war crimes on the people they defeated. The following photograph (Image 3, over the page) shows a detail from an Assyrian-made piece of art. An Assyrian king had this metal-work decorating his palace gate, as a little proclamation about what it's like to be conquered by Assyria. (A reconstruction of the gate in question is shown on the front cover of this book.)

The picture shows some survivors having their hands and feet cut off, and then being impaled on stakes. There are also some decapitated heads which have been nicely arranged as ornaments. They were particularly fond of doing this with the head of the defeated enemy king – they thought it was a great

trophy, and a great way to celebrate.⁵ This image was meant to send a clear, unmistakable message to all their neighbours: ‘Don’t mess with us, if you know what’s good for you.’



Image 3: Assyrian war crimes⁶

The relationship between Israel and Assyria was not warm and friendly. They were near neighbours (and getting steadily nearer as Assyria’s empire grew!) but they hated each other. And this is the nation that Jonah was called to preach to. He probably didn’t relish the prospect. Let’s look at how he reacts.

Scene 1 –Call and Response

¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ²‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’ ³But 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.

That's an abrupt start for a book. God calls Jonah, clear and simple – and Jonah runs away, clear and simple. Have a look at the map again (Image 4, below) to remind yourself of the geography of this, and to see where Israel, Nineveh, Joppa and Tarshish are in relation to each other. Tarshish is actually off the map to the far, far west (probably in modern-day Spain).⁷

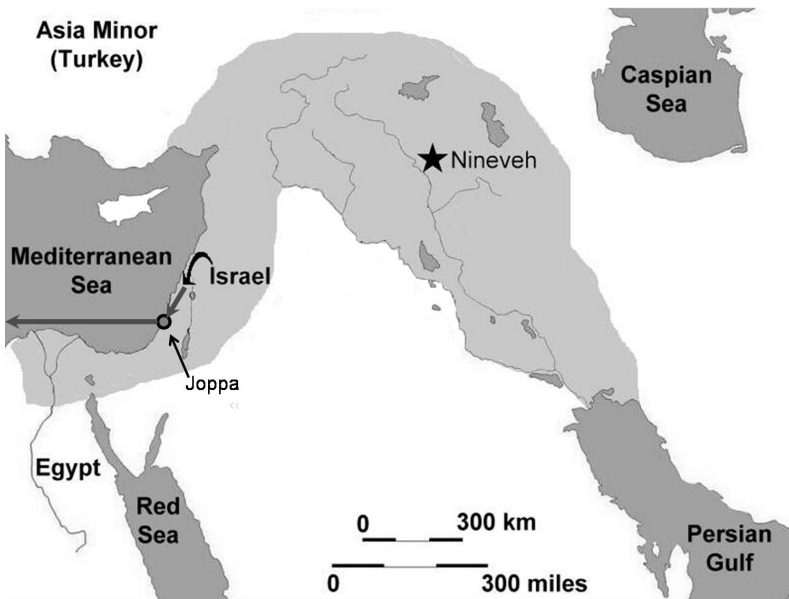


Image 4: Jonah runs

God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh in the north east. Instead Jonah heads south to Joppa, to catch a boat as far west as he can. Completely the opposite direction (see grey arrows).

So what's he doing? Why doesn't he do what God has told him to do? At this point we can only guess. Verse 3 just tells us he ran away, it doesn't tell us why. We have to wait till chapter 4 to find out why, because Jonah doesn't explain himself until then.

But we haven't got to chapter 4 yet. The first time we read through Jonah, we are probably just expected to make a provisional guess (and we can see later whether our guess was right). And it's not too hard to come up with a provisional guess: Jonah may well have been scared. Preaching a message of judgement to a foreign city of 120,000 people – that's got to be pretty daunting at the best of times. It's going to be all the more daunting if these are people with a nasty reputation for how they treat their enemies. Most people would think twice about that.

**Daunting
at best**

So maybe Jonah was scared. That's as good a guess as we can make at this point, because chapter 1 doesn't tell us anything else. And actually, at this stage, we don't need to concentrate on Jonah's reasons for running away. All we need to know is that Jonah ran.

Scene 2 – Storm and Response

Jonah buys a ticket and jumps on a boat for Spain. You can imagine him being frantic and tense, trying desperately to get away before anything happens. But then the boat puts out to sea, and the more the minutes go by, the further away from trouble he gets. He's put Israel behind him, and Nineveh far, far behind him. Maybe at that point Jonah feels like he can begin to relax. His tension starts to ease, maybe he even begins to feel confident about facing his new future. But if he does, that relaxed confidence is about to be shattered. God sends a storm. Look at verse 4:

⁴Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

⁵All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the

ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. ⁶The captain went to him and said, ‘How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.’

The storm is fearsome and the ship is in danger. Imagine what it would be like to be there: this isn’t some great big modern ocean liner made out of the toughest steel. It’s a little wooden ship made of creaky planks and held together with rope and tar.⁸ It’s a fragile thing Jonah is standing on – and waves are slamming into it, pounding it to pieces. The wind is ripping the sails apart; it’s so loud the sailors can hardly hear themselves shouting. They know the boat can’t take much more of this – and they know that if they end up in that raging water, they’ll be dead. When a storm is this bad, you expect people to be afraid.

Pounded to pieces

But Jonah isn’t doing what you’d expect. He’s down below, fast asleep.

The captain isn’t very happy about this – ‘How can you be sleeping?!’ he says. ‘Get up and call on your God – maybe he’ll listen to you and we won’t all die.’ That’s quite ironic, isn’t it – the LORD’s prophet needing a pagan to tell him to pray. It’s good advice the captain gives, but we don’t get any indication that Jonah takes it. So look what happens next, in verse 7:

⁷Then the sailors said to each other, ‘Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.’ They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸So they asked him, ‘Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?’

⁹He answered, ‘I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.’ ¹⁰This 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.)

Nothing’s been working, so the sailors finally decide to cast lots to find out who is responsible for the storm. The lot falls on Jonah. He tells them he is running away from Yahweh, the LORD, the God of heaven who made the sea. At this point we are given a flashback, which the NIV puts in brackets: Jonah has already told them he’s running away from ‘The LORD’ or, literally, from ‘Yahweh.’⁹

We aren’t given the details, but you could imagine how that might naturally have come up in conversation. Somebody says, ‘You don’t look like a sailor, Jonah. What are you doing going on a long sea voyage like this?’ And Jonah replies with something like, ‘Oh, I’m running away from my Master, Yahweh.’ But then Jonah must have left it there. So, as far as these sailors are concerned, Yahweh is just some lord or other, just somebody’s boss, no big deal.

Which tells us, by the way, that Jonah hasn’t been doing a very good job as a prophet. If the conversation had already gone that far, Jonah could have taken it a little further without too much effort.

**Don’t even think
about God!**

It would have been the most natural thing in the world for Jonah to have told these guys something about who Yahweh is. But Jonah clearly hasn’t done that. They don’t get to find out until they’re in the middle of a tempest. We’re not told why Jonah kept quiet all the way up to this point, but perhaps we can hazard a guess. After all, Jonah is openly disobeying the LORD: he’s running away from the LORD, he doesn’t want to be near him – and so he probably doesn’t want to think about him or talk about him any more than he has to.

This is one of those points where Jonah might hold up an uncomfortable mirror to us. If we open disobedience to God, that will show through in how we act. When we disobey God, we aren't so keen to think about him, or pray to him, or talk about him much with others. That's how Jonah reacts. Let's not make his mistake, because it doesn't just damage him: it robs the sailors of a chance to hear about the LORD who saves. Jonah chooses not to give them the chance to make up their own minds. Let's not take that chance away from the people around us.

An uncomfortable mirror

Scene 3 – Crunch Time

But, as it turns out, the sailors do get a fair chance to hear who the LORD is. They do hear it from Jonah in the end, but it's more in spite of him than because of him. When the time comes, however, it's not in the most conducive of environments. Here they are, in the middle of this vicious storm, and it's now that Jonah sees fit to tell them who this Yahweh he's running away from is: He's the God of heaven who made the sea and the land. You can see why the sailors are terrified. If you have to go out on the sea in a flimsy little wooden boat, you don't want to go annoying the God who's made that sea. 'What have you done?!!' they ask Jonah! And there's nothing he can say. But even if Jonah's silent, the storm is still raging, verse 11:

¹¹The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, 'What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?' ¹²'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.'

¹³Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.

¹⁴Then they cried to the LORD, ‘O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased.’ ¹⁵Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.

¹⁶At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

Jonah says that the only way to calm the storm is to throw him overboard. The sailors don't want to do that – they're decent guys – they don't want to be responsible for taking his life. And given what they've just learned, you can understand that all the more. They know it's Jonah's God – the LORD who made the sea – *he* has caused this storm. If Jonah just being there has brought on this storm, imagine what *killing* him could do! They don't want to risk that – and they don't want to kill the guy anyway – so they try to row the boat to shore to save his life (and theirs!). That's another little irony. These rough pagan sailors are working like mad to save Jonah's life, when he – a so-called prophet – he is the very one who put them in danger in the first place.

Man overboard!

The sailors try their best, but it doesn't work. The storm only intensifies, they can't make *any* headway, and they run out of options. So eventually they agree to throw Jonah overboard. Jonah knows the storm is his fault. He knows he deserves to be thrown over. He's probably assuming he'll be dead within seconds – there's no way he could survive in a raging sea like that.

Actually, it's funny – you don't get the impression that Jonah is panicky or worked up over this. It sounds more like he's just resigned to dying. Perhaps he's given up hope and accepted his fate, we're not really told. Maybe he's even able to grab a few crumbs of comfort by thinking to himself, ‘Well

at least I won't have to go to that stinking Nineveh place now.' The sailors seem far more worried about Jonah's death than Jonah does. In fact, there's a string of back-to-front contrasts between the prophet Jonah and the pagan sailors around him:

Back-to-front contrasts

- The pagan captain has to tell Jonah the prophet to pray.
- The sailors work to save Jonah's life when he has put theirs in danger. They work like mad, whereas he spends part of his time asleep (and the rest of the time he stands about silently).
- The sailors understand how serious Jonah's disobedience is, far better than he does. When they hear what he's done they are absolutely terrified, whereas Jonah doesn't seem to care all that much. 'What have you done?!!' they say. How could you be stupid enough to run away from the one who made the land and sea? Jonah has no answer.
- The sailors begin to worship the true God while Jonah is still running away from God.

It's funny – the only good responses we hear about in this chapter are to do with the sailors. They fear the LORD and sacrifice and make vows.

But not Jonah. We don't hear of him praying to the LORD, we don't hear of him worshipping the LORD, we don't hear of him apologising, or offering to turn back and do what he's told. We don't hear him asking God for forgiveness, or asking God to spare his life. There's no trace of repentance from Jonah in this passage. It's almost like he'd rather have God put him out of his misery by drowning him – he'd rather die than turn around and do what God has called him too.

The attitudes in this chapter are all topsy-turvy and upside down. Jonah should be pointing these rough, pagan sailors towards the LORD. Jonah should be an example to them both in what he says and what he does. But it's completely the other way around. Jonah just sits there doing nothing. It's the sailors who tell him to pray, it's the sailors who take disobedience seriously, it's the sailors who offer vows and make sacrifices to the LORD in this chapter.

There's one take-home message for us right there. If we are people who know God and who want to follow him, let's do a better job of it than Jonah did. The sailors knew next to nothing about God, but they made every effort to do the right thing. Jonah knew an awful lot more, but he didn't live it out. Let's not make his mistake – let's not be people who run away from what God wants. Let's make sure we do follow him.

Pause for Thought

Are you running away from
anything that God wants you to do?

Jonah, it seems, is just the opposite of that. He'd rather die than do what God wants. But if he thinks he's going to get out of it by dying, he's got another thing coming. There's still v17:

¹⁷But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah may have given up already. Maybe he's even happy enough to drown, so long as he doesn't have to go to Nineveh. But God hasn't given up. He's not finished with Jonah yet. That shows us just how much God is in control of this whole situation. In fact, all through this chapter we see how God is in control of absolutely everything. He controls the storm, he controls the whale, he even controls the casting of the lot. The technical word for that is to talk about God

being ‘sovereign’ – like a King or Queen. God is sovereign, God is King, God is totally in control.

That’s great news. It means that when things are in a mess, in the long run the mess won’t have the last word. God is able to sort it out. Maybe he’ll do it here and now, maybe it won’t finally get

**Nothing catches
God by surprise**

sorted out until heaven. But it will be sorted out. There’s nothing that catches our God by surprise, whether it’s the big things in life or the tiny, little things. He controls the path of the biggest storm and casting of the smallest lot.

Even when we create the mess ourselves, God can still turn it around to bring good out of it. Take the sailors in this chapter: Jonah doesn’t seem to care much about them; he doesn’t make any real effort to let them find out about the saving God, or point them in his direction. He’s an absolute failure of a prophet. But even so, God still uses Jonah to teach these sailors to fear him. God’s so in control he can bring that about even when Jonah tries to mess things up completely. Now that’s not a reason to aim for complete messes. But it’s good to know that even when we do mess up, God doesn’t.

For Reflection and Discussion

- Are there things about following God that you find daunting? How do you deal with them?
- Have you ever gone against God, and then felt distant from him? What brought you back (or are you still there)?
- Are you running away from anything the God wants you to do?

2 | The God who Saves



Jonah thrown overboard by the sailors
(J.L. Hurlbut)¹⁰

Have you ever made a mistake and ended up in an enormous mess? It's something nearly everyone has done at one time or another, so we can probably all identify with where Jonah finds himself. Or rather, we can identify to some extent. Very few people reading this will ever have been in quite the mess that Jonah is in. He's barely escaped drowning – and only because a great big sea monster eats him first! That's where our story left off at the end of chapter 1, and so that's where we pick it up again. Jonah is stuck inside a whale.

It's no surprise to discover that Jonah is distressed and sorrowful. In fact, the main bulk of chapter 2 is a sorrowful prayer that Jonah prays to the LORD. This sorrow is a key theme of his prayer, so we'll start looking at it by picking out a few points to do with being sorry over sin. So, first of all: Sorrow realises there's a problem.

Sorrow realises there's a problem

To be honest, Jonah didn't have to be too smart to work this out. He's just been thrown overboard into a raging tempest. That's a big enough problem for starters. Look at verse 3:

³You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

And verse 5:

⁵The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. ⁶To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in for ever.

Imagine him there: tangled up with seaweed, plummeting down through the water. His lungs are bursting and his mouth and nose are full of bitter, salty sea water. His life is ebbing out of him and he knows he's only got seconds left before he dies. That's not a good situation – but at least Jonah recognises it. Not that that's particularly to his credit. In his case, things were so bad that he couldn't pretend any more – no matter how much he might have liked to. He's forced to recognise that he's in desperate trouble and needs help.

In a way, it's a ridiculously obvious lesson. When you're out of your depth, you need help. And the worse the trouble is, the greater the help you need. Jonah should have asked God for help long before this. In fact, he should

**When you're out
of your depth,
you need help**

never have run away in the first place. But even when he had, and the storm had begun pounding the boat, he still had plenty of opportunity to ask for mercy and help at that stage. He could have called out to God there and then. God obviously wanted a response from Jonah, and the most natural response would be repentance. God never said anything about throwing him in the water – that was Jonah's own idea. It seems he'd rather be stubborn and drowned, than humble and repentant.

It's easy for us, in the clear light of day, to criticise Jonah in that way. And when it comes down to it, our criticisms are true enough and fair enough. But when we come to that sort of judgement it's also important to stop and ask ourselves whether we're ever guilty of the same stupidity and

stubbornness as Jonah. Can you think of a couple of occasions when you've landed yourself into trouble – occasions when it's been your own fault? How do you tend to react in situations like that? Most of us are tempted to make Jonah's mistake – maybe not always, but at least some of the time.

We begin to get ourselves in a mess, but we try to pretend it's not happening. Or maybe, if we just ignore it, it'll go away. Or won't be noticed. That's what Jonah did by sleeping through the storm. But – like lots of messes we get into – it didn't go away, it just got worse. Jonah may have been in denial, but the storm wasn't.

It's like the proverbial ostrich trick: if an ostrich sees a lion stalking it, there are several things the ostrich might do. One of them is to bury it's head in the sand.

The Ostrich Trick

This solution does have one 'benefit' – it may make the ostrich feel much better. The lion will have disappeared out of sight; and for the ostrich that means out of mind too. The sand may be warm and soft and comfortable. The ostrich might even think it had found a good spot for an afternoon nap. However, you won't find (m)any ostriches in the wild that actually adopt this method of dealing with lions. That's because the ones that do, only get to try it once.

Ignoring the messes we make is not the godly way to respond to them. The godly response is to own up to our failings – to confess our own part in bringing about the mess we're in. Primarily that will involve owning up to God; it may well involve owning up to other people as well. We tend not to like doing that. I don't like doing it because I don't like facing up to how foolish, stubborn and blind I can be. I don't like acknowledging it to myself, I don't like acknowledging it to God, I don't like acknowledging it to other people. Often I'd far rather play the ostrich. It feels like it takes less effort in the short-term. And the whole 'beauty' of the ostrich method is

that you don't look at all the problems it will create for you in the long run.

One lesson we ought to learn from Jonah is that the ostrich method doesn't work. Please do take the time to stop and ask yourself a couple of questions about your own situation at the moment:

- Have you made any significant mistakes recently?
- If so, what have you done about them? (Are you dealing with the problem, or adopting an ostrich approach?)
- What would facing up to them involve?

Each situation is different, and will require a different response. But even so, there are some general principles we can learn from the way Jonah responded to his very specific water-situation.

Pause for Thought

Have I made any 'messes' that I need to face up to?

Calling to God for help

The first is about calling to God for help. There was a wartime proverb which said: 'There are no atheists in foxholes.'¹¹ We could say the same thing about Jonah's situation: There are no atheists in the middle of a tempest. It takes the threat of imminent drowning to shake Jonah out of his ostrich attitude. And by then, his situation is so dire that the only who could possibly help him is God. So Jonah cries out to him, verse 2 and verse 7:

²In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. ... ⁷When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.

Jonah realises he can't save himself. In fact, he realises there's nobody but God who can save him. So – to God he calls.

The ostrich approach doesn't have much going for it. It doesn't do anything to improve your chances, or fend off disaster. The only advantage it has, is that it makes you feel better while you're waiting for the hammer to fall. So if you had someone in a situation that was truly hopeless, it might be as good a response as any. If there was nothing they could do, and nothing anyone else could do, then why should they dwell on the inevitable? If there really was no hope, they might as well forget about reality, and try to come up with some happy fantasy.

But the thing is – and on this one point, Jonah is absolutely correct – if God really is God, then no situation in this world is ever entirely hopeless. If God is God, then there is always hope. Maybe no one else can do anything about it. Maybe it would be pointless to even ask them. But if God is God, it's not pointless to ask him.

Think about Jonah's situation. It would be hard to make it much worse. He's thrown overboard, far out at sea, in the middle of a violent storm. The waves crash over him, and sweep him down, deep underwater. His head is all tangled up with seaweed, and he's sinking deeper and deeper towards the sea floor. His lungs are bursting; even if he escapes from the seaweed, he'll never make it to the surface in time. Even if he made it to the surface in time, even if he managed another gasp of air, he'd be completely exhausted. The next big wave would just sweep him under again and he'd still drown.

Apart from God, Jonah's situation is totally hopeless. If there was no God, Jonah would be dead in seconds. But there is a God, and he is more than able to save.

The God who Saves

Jonah's prayer tells us lots of important things about our saving God. Let's walk through the prayer and pick out some of the key ones.

²In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. ... ⁴I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again towards your holy temple.' ⁵The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. ⁶To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in for ever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God. ⁷When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.

Nowhere is beyond God's reach. Jonah feels like his watery plummet has taken him to the very depths of the grave – but even calling from there the LORD can listen and answer. I find this a tremendous comfort and encouragement. To be honest, I've never been in a situation anywhere near as hopeless as the one Jonah is in. But sometimes things can feel hopeless; sometimes it can feel like there's no way out. But there is a way out, and Jonah's experience points us to it.

The thing that makes the difference is: What are we focusing on? If you've got a decent-sized problem of any sort, and you focus on it, it will seem to get bigger and bigger and bigger. But if you've got a decent-sized problem, and you focus on the LORD our God, the problem will seem small in comparison to him. Jonah has got himself into far more of a mess than any of us will ever come close to. If God is able to deal with that – and deal with it without even breaking sweat – he can deal with our

**Where's your
focus?**

situations too, however daunting they may feel to us. When you're in trouble, remember God and call out to him.

Pause for Thought

Are you facing trouble at the moment?
Have you called out to God for help?

When bad things happen it's not because God has somehow lost the plot. It's not because things are now out of his control. It's not because Satan has been particularly clever that day, and got one over on God. No, God is still in control, even when disaster happens. Jonah himself recognises that God has brought this storm about, verse 3:

³You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

Now let me be clear about what this is NOT saying. It's not saying that every time something bad happens, that's God directly punishing us. Not at all. Sometimes that *is* true – it was true in Jonah's case – but most of the time it doesn't work like that. We don't live in some remote-control world with God continually pressing awkward buttons; we don't live in some puppet-world with God continually pulling awkward strings. Those would be pretend worlds – probably the sort of worlds we'd make if we had the chance to play at being God. But God has made a real world, with real people, who make real decisions – and who have to live with those decisions.

The problem with our world is that it's fundamentally broken. We have turned our backs on God and made a mess of everything. One day God is going to put everything right again – that will happen when Jesus returns. But until then everything is not right. Everything is broken – at least a little bit broken, sometimes very broken.

But God is still in control. It's important we remember that, especially when bad things happens to us. No matter how bad it gets, God is so tremendously in control that he can bring good things out of the broken pieces of our world. The brokenness may not go away (not this side of heaven), but beauty can still emerge from the wreckage. God is in control, so he is able to save. We're going to see something of that in Jonah's story. Jonah himself reminds us of that in verse 8-9:

**Beauty from
the wreckage**

⁸‘Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. ⁹But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD.’

There's perhaps a touch of irony here in verse 8, given how the sailors turn *away from* idols to the LORD in chapter 1. (This is something we'll return to think about later.) But nonetheless, what Jonah says is true. God is a gracious God. He loves to show his kindness to us, but so often our world turns its back on God and forfeits that grace. And it's not just 'the world out there.' Even when we've come to know God, we sometimes still try to shut him out, and end up making our lives far harder than they need to be. Jonah recognises something of that, and he responds to God in thankfulness. That response is so important, it's worth focusing on it.

Jonah's thankfulness

We've talked about God being able to save, we've talked about God being far bigger than any problem we might face. But it's important to realise that God doesn't operate like some fairy-godmother, or a genie-in-the-bottle. He isn't there just for our convenience. It isn't his job to wave a magic wand and make all our troubles vanish in a puff of smoke.

God's top priority for us isn't to help us live a *trouble-free* life. Rather, his top priority for us is that we should live a *godly* life. And if you are anything like as sinful as me (or Jonah!) then you may be a bit upside-down when it comes to troubles and godliness. To my shame, I have to admit that the times when I'm most likely to forget about God are often precisely the times when things are going beautifully well, thank you very much. Those are the times when I forget to say thank you!

**It's not God's job
to give us a
trouble-free life**

For all his faults, at least Jonah's doing OK on this front. When the fish swallows him, he offers up his prayer of thankfulness to God. For once, Jonah does something godly. I don't know about you – but speaking for myself, I've never been swallowed by a fish. I don't know *exactly* what it's like, but I don't imagine I'd enjoy it very much. If I was praying for help, and God decided to 'help' me by sending along a great big brute of a fish to swallow me, I'm not sure whether I'd be as clear sighted as Jonah is. Instead of being thankful, I might slip into being ungrateful. I could see myself thinking: 'Well, OK, I'm alive I suppose. But I'm not convinced I wouldn't rather have drowned. I don't want to live the rest of my life in the belly of some fish. It's dark, smelly, slimy and lonely. And I'm not going to last long here anyway. What do you think you're playing at, LORD? Is this the best you could have done?'

It's not pleasant to face up to our own potential for that sort of ingratitude. And it doesn't just depend on doing a thought experiment about fish-swallowing. I know ingratitude is a danger because it's been true of me in other situations. Again, it's probably true for lots of us. We're in trouble, we pray to God for help, and he delivers us. But we aren't impressed by his choice of deliverance. 'Couldn't you have done a better job?' we ask. We can all slip into thinking that God's role in

life is to make us comfortable. It's not. His purpose is to make us godly. And sometimes that might be very uncomfortable indeed. Especially if we're stubborn.

In this regard, Jonah wasn't stubborn. He recognises God's grace in delivering him. Sure, a fish-belly might not be five-star accommodation – but it's far better than Jonah deserves. Jonah has been wilfully rebellious and disobedient. He *deserves* to drown, but God saves him anyway. God doesn't do it all in one fell swoop. He does it in two stages: first being swallowed by the fish; then being vomited onto dry land. What this does, is give Jonah an opportunity to reflect and repent and learn. The fish may not be luxurious, but Jonah recognises that it is gracious nonetheless, and he gives thanks for it. And God responds to Jonah's thankfulness by taking the deliverance a step further. He's gone from drowning, to fish-belly; now he goes from fish-belly, to dry land.

Again, this should give us a pause-for-thought moment. Can you think of equivalent situations in your life? Can you think of some where you've responded well? Perhaps times when you've been in trouble, and prayed to God for help, and the help has come in stages. The first stage may not have been everything you had hoped for, but you were still thankful for it, and learned to keep trusting God – and specifically, trusting him to sort things out according to the timing he chooses. And can you think of times when you haven't responded so well? Perhaps times that started similarly – you were in trouble, prayed for help, and again the help came in stages. But the first stage wasn't what you had hoped for, so you didn't thank God at all. (Maybe you even grumbled against him?)

Pause for Thought

What was the last thing you thanked God for?

Are there other things you could thank him for?

God is wonderfully forgiving, and his desire is always for us to grow in our relationship with him, and to learn from past mistakes and successes – both our own and others’. Jonah’s example shows us that God sometimes helps us in stages (even though we usually don’t deserve any help at all!). And it should encourage us to be grateful to God when help does come. Often we’re impatient and want everything to be sorted out immediately. But often patience is one of the qualities God wants to teach us – and that’s something we can be thankful for as well.

Knowing the truth and living it

Before we move on from chapter 2 there’s one more quick application we can make. Think about the great high note Jonah’s prayer finishes with, verse 9: ‘Salvation comes from God.’ Jonah *knew* that was true before this whole incident started. But now he knows it even more – he’s experienced it vividly and powerfully in his own life. And he’s learnt a major lesson through all this. He’s tasted God’s grace all over again.

After all, there’s a huge difference between knowing the truth and living the truth. Those things Jonah said when he was inside the fish – they were all things he knew were true, long before he set foot aboard the ship. But even though he knew them, he didn’t live them. Even though he knew all that about God, that didn’t stop him running away from God.

So what will happen? Will Jonah live up to what he knows? God’s grace has saved him, and his experience of it is fresh and vivid. Maybe now he is ready to do what God has called him to do. Maybe now, he’s ready to go to Nineveh – a city where people do cling to worthless idols. Maybe now, Jonah is ready to show them the grace that could be theirs if only they would turn to the God who saves. Which leads us on to

the brink of Chapter 3. Are we going to see a complete change around in Jonah? Is he going to start living it out?

Making Connections

It's not just Jonah who makes this mistake: we can know the truth about what God has done for us in Jesus; but that doesn't mean we always live it out. We can know that we have been saved from our sin; but sometimes our lives don't show it. Jesus himself warns us against this:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

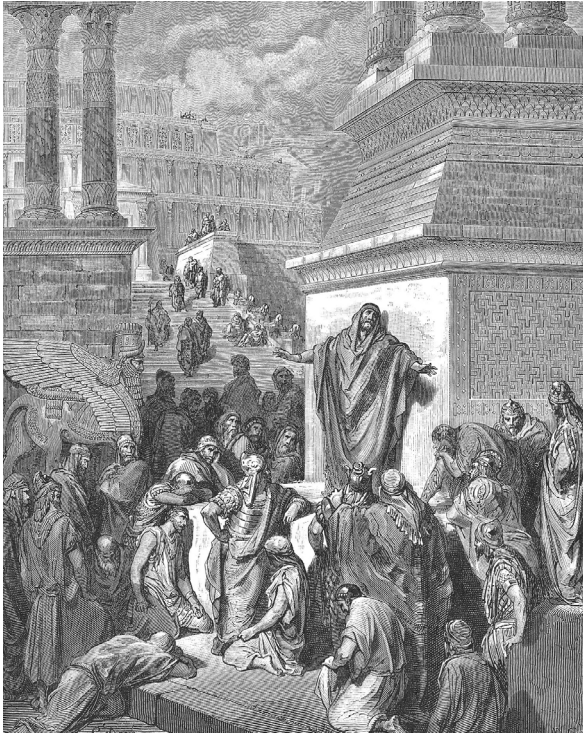
Matthew 7v24-27

So here's a question it's worth us asking ourselves: Am I living up to the knowledge I have? Am I hearing Jesus words *and* building on them? Or am I just hearing? Is there some area of my life where I could live up to it more?

For Reflection and Discussion

- Have you made any messes that you need to face up to?
Are there any situations where you're attempting the 'Ostrich Trick'?
- Does seeing how big God is give you confidence to face the difficulties of life?
When are you tempted to look at the size of the problems you face, instead of looking to God?
- What can you thank God for?
- How much do you know about God?
Are you living out that truth?

3 | A Second Chance?



Jonah preaching to the Ninevites
(Gustave Dore)¹²

Have you ever felt like you wanted a second chance at something? Second chances can be wonderful. They are great if a problem arises by accident. They are even better if the problem is created by your own moral failures. Unfortunately, life doesn't always give you a second chance; but sometimes it does, and when it does, it's worth grabbing hold of it with both hands.

Pause for Thought

What do you wish you could have a second chance at?

Scene 1 – Jonah’s Second Chance

As we look at Jonah chapter 3, we’re going to think quite a bit about second chances – there are plenty of them around. Take verse 1 for example:

¹Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:
²‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.’ ³Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh.

Here it’s Jonah who gets a second chance. This is almost an exact repeat of the way God first called Jonah back at the beginning of chapter 1. God hasn’t washed his hands of Jonah and left him to drown. God hasn’t given up on him and said, ‘You messed up, you’re obviously no use for anything. OK I’ve saved you, but I’m not going to trust you with anything again. You just go home and stay there.’

It would have been understandable enough if God had done that – maybe Jonah would even have preferred it. But that’s not what God does: he gives Jonah a second chance. And that’s good news for us too, because there are going to be times when we mess up as well. If God only gave people one chance, I’m sure we’d all have used that up already. But God isn’t a one-chance God. God isn’t even merely a second chance God. God is hugely generous, and gives us many, many chances. That’s what ‘God is gracious’ means.

**The God of a
thousand chances**

Jonah has got his second chance, and this time he takes it. This time he obeys God and he sets out for Nineveh. Probably all the original fears and doubts he had about going to Nineveh are still there – but this time he’s not going to act on those fears and doubts. This time he is going to obey God. Jonah seems to be a changed man – his time inside the fish has seen

to that. I suppose there is nothing quite like a life-threatening experience on a boat, and three days inside a whale, to modify your behaviour.

So Jonah makes the trip to Nineveh. Now Nineveh is quite a long way inland, and Jonah had been travelling by sea in the opposite direction. So depending on just whereabouts he was vomited up on the beach, it could have taken Jonah 3 or 4 weeks to travel overland to Nineveh. Perhaps that's just as well – if you've ever had to gut a fish, you'll have an idea of what you'd expect to find inside one. Can you imagine what Jonah would have looked like after being in that for three days? It would have taken him a while to shake off the smell.

Scene 2 – A Three-Day-Visit City

But eventually Jonah arrives, verse 3:

Now Nineveh was a very important city – a visit required three days. ⁴On the first day, Jonah started into the city.

This verse reminds us that Nineveh is a big, important, impressive city. People have often wondered what exactly it means when it says 'a visit required three days.' The verse doesn't elaborate, so it's hard to be sure. It may simply mean that a full-blown preaching visit, like the one Jonah is going to do, will take three days.¹³ After all, if Jonah wants everyone to hear his message, he's going to have to physically visit many different suburbs, get up on a soapbox, and deliver what he's going to say. There are no newspapers or TVs or radios, so he's just got to walk around and do it. So, verse 4, on the first day he *starts* into the city. But it will take another couple of days before he's finished. It's a big place; it's a three-day-visit city.

The Big Smoke

And what about Jonah's message? If he has the best part of a month to get ready, you might think he could use the time to produce a brilliant sermon to preach in Nineveh – gripping, well-illustrated, punchy and polished. Well, verse 4 gives us the message he delivered: '40 more days and Nineveh will be destroyed.' It's probably not one of the all-time great sermon masterpieces. It hasn't gone down in history as a model of communication or oratory. It's sort of ... short. And to the point. But that's the message God had given Jonah to preach. It's what the Ninevites needed to hear. So it's the message Jonah gave them.¹⁴

Pause for Thought

How would you feel if you knew you would
have to answer to God in 40 days time?

What would you do?

Scene 3 – Nineveh takes its second chance

The Ninevites waste no time about responding. They realise this is a second chance for them, and they grab hold of it with both hands – and just as well too. By the sound of Jonah's message, it's a second and final chance for them. Verse 5 sums up their reaction for us:

⁵The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

Nineveh might be a three-day-visit city, but you don't get the impression that it takes three days for Jonah's message to have its effect. It's almost as if the Ninevites fall over themselves to

Taking God at his word

respond, from Day 1 onwards. For starters, the verse says that they 'believed God.' There's a lot packed into that one little sentence. The Ninevites believe in the God Jonah proclaims. They believe God is right to pronounce this judgement against

them – they recognise that they deserve to be condemned. And they believe God means what he says. To say someone ‘believes God’ means they take God at his word. That’s exactly what the Ninivites do. They take God seriously, and they take what he says seriously. And so they do something about it.

They believe God and they respond in the only way they know how – by showing sorrow and regret. They realise they’ve ignored and rejected God, they realise how offensive they’ve been to God, and they’re grief-stricken. And they have plenty to be grief-stricken about. Back in chapter 1, we touched on some of the war crimes the Assyrians committed. If you want a quick reminder, look at Image 3 again (reproduced below). It’s the exhibit from the British Museum. It shows the Assyrians impaling prisoners on poles, and chopping off their hands and feet. Remember, this was a decoration on the door of somebody’s palace – they were proud of acting in this way.



Image 3 (repeated): Assyrian war crimes⁶

And I guess that when we think of ‘sin,’ it’s often something like that which springs to mind – some terrible crime or offence. And certainly the Ninevites as a whole had committed some especially clear examples of particular sins. But sin itself is something more. Fundamentally, sin means rebellion. God made this world, he made the Ninevites, and he made you and me. God has things to say about how we ought to live in this world of his. Sin is all about us saying, ‘Well God, it’s nice that you think we should do such-and-such, but actually we think we’ll do this other thing instead.’ Sin is all about living in God’s world, the world he made, without paying him any real attention at all.

**Sin means
rebellion**

The Ninevites have been acting like that towards God, and through Jonah’s preaching they realise it. They realise how offensive it is to God, and how angry he is with them, and they are cut to the heart. And this remorse – it isn’t just among a few people in Nineveh – the whole city responds, even including the king, verse 6:

⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.’

Even the king takes Jonah’s message to heart, and he declares a fast. They wear sack-cloth, they even get the animals to fast. The whole city of Nineveh is in mourning. From top to

bottom, from king to cattle, they're all mourning. They go through a three-stage process (and if you are into memory hooks, you could use three S-words here: sin, sorrow and sackcloth.) First of all, they admit to God that they are sinful; secondly, they express their sorrow at their sinfulness; and thirdly, their sorrow translates into action – the fasting and the sack-cloth. That's how we know their reaction is for real. We know they have really seen and acknowledged their sin, because they're upset by it. And we know they're upset because it changes how they behave. They recognise their second chance, and they grab hold of it.

Anyone reading this book has probably heard plenty of talk about God before. Each of us has probably had second and third and fourth chances to respond, maybe even hundreds of chances. And this passage gives us another one. The process the Ninevites went through back then is exactly the same process we need to go through here and now. It's the same three stages:

Cultural Context

Getting the animals to fast seems a bit strange to us. But we still have some similar practices today. It wasn't so long ago in Western society – in the days when horses were still used to pull funeral carriages – that we got our horses to wear black, as a way of trying to show that the horses were included in the grief about the person's death. Even today, most funeral directors do much the same thing: they have black cars, as a way of showing how total the grief is. Even the cars are included.

1. Admit our own sin to God. If we don't think we're sinful then we won't think that we need to be forgiven. And so we probably wouldn't see any need to turn to God.
2. Be sorry about our sinfulness. We need to realise it's a bad thing. Plenty of people are more than willing to admit that they are sinful – but don't have any *sorrow* about it. They just don't care. Becoming a Christian involves realising that sin is wrong, and caring that it is wrong.

3. Respond to God – ask him to forgive us. Nowadays sackcloth and fasting aren't the actions God's particularly interested in. The one action God wants from us is this: trust in his Son. Of course, lots more actions will flow out of trusting him. But when it comes to whether or not you're a Christian, they aren't the make-or-break issue. Trusting Jesus Christ is.

One action

It's worth each of us stopping to ask ourselves – have I gone through that process? Because if you haven't, this passage gives you another chance to respond to God today. Please do take it. The thing is, if you turn down too many second chances, you can become quite good at it. But that's dangerous, because one day the chances will run out.

Pause for Thought

Have you recognised your own sin?
Do you care that it is wrong?
Have you turned to God for forgiveness?

Scene 4: God has compassion on Nineveh

The chances had almost run out for Nineveh, but they take hold of this chance just in time. The way the whole city responds is amazing. But something even more amazing happens in the last sentence, verse 10:

¹⁰When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

God has compassion on them. This is a really big deal. God isn't under any obligation to have compassion on them. They deserve his condemnation. If God had destroyed the whole city, he would have been perfectly justified. Even the king

knows they deserve condemnation; even he acknowledges that their ways are evil. See what he says at the end of verse 8:

^{8b}‘But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.’

God is compassionate, and he does relent and they don’t perish. God’s compassion is visible throughout the whole book of Jonah. After all, if God had simply wanted to punish the Ninevites there would have been no need for him to send Jonah in the first place. He could have just sent destruction on the city. The very fact that he gave them 40 days grace also shows his willingness to forgive, if they would respond.

It’s a bit like when an electricity company sends you a ‘Reminder Notice’ and a ‘Final Warning’ before they cut off your power. Not that they’re being particularly gracious – that’s not the analogy, because all they want is to keep making money. But when they send you the ‘Danger, you are going to be cut off’ letter, they don’t actually want to cut you off. They are hoping you will change your ways so that they can relent. It’s a little bit like that here with Jonah. Jonah is God’s ‘Final Warning’ – in big red letters – to the Ninevites. The king understands that, and expresses it clearly, ‘Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.’

Jonah only tells the Ninevites one sentence. He doesn’t explicitly spell out God’s willingness to relent. But the king realises it was implicit in the very fact that God sent Jonah with this message. And, although the king wouldn’t know this, other parts of the Bible do make it explicit. Here is one example from Jeremiah:

⁷If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, ⁸and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. ⁹And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

Jeremiah 18:7-10

God is not some computer that responds blindly and automatically. God cares about how we respond to him, and he takes it very seriously. God wants to show compassion to those who turn to him. No matter how bad someone is, God doesn't want to see them destroyed. He would far rather see them turn to him and live. If someone does repent, and turn to God and ask his forgiveness, then they can be confident that God will forgive them, and that he will show compassion. That's what God is like; he loves to show compassion to people, he loves to forgive those who turn to him from wickedness.

**God is no
computer**

For Reflection and Discussion

- If you knew you only had 40 days before you were going to have to face God's judgement, what would you do differently?
- Are there any situations in your life at the moment where you feel that you need a 'second chance'?
- Have you asked God for forgiveness?
If so, what difference has it made to your life?

Making Connections

‘Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent –
the Lord detests them both.’

Proverbs 17v15

It’s a big deal to acquit (or ‘justify’) the guilty, and it’s a big deal to condemn the innocent. We normally call such things ‘a miscarriage of justice’ – or, more bluntly, ‘a crime.’ Yet God has done both in Jesus – condemned the one who is perfectly innocent, and acquitted those who are guilty – and he has done it precisely in order to demonstrate his justice:

‘God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement ... He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his justice ... so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.’

Romans 3v25-26

Sometimes we get too used to hearing that God is a God who ‘justifies the wicked’ (Romans 4v5). We can slip into taking it for granted – but actually, it’s amazingly good news. Many amazing things have happened in Jonah’s story: there’s the storm, there’s Jonah surviving in the whale, there’s 120, 000 people responding to Jonah’s message. But the most amazing thing of all is that God forgives these vicious Ninevites. He has compassion on them.

We often think forgiveness is easy for God. There was a famous atheist¹ who was asked, on his death-bed: ‘What would you say if, when you die, you discover there really is a God after all, and you have to stand before him?’ And he said ‘Oh, God’ll forgive me. That’s what he does.’¹

If forgiveness was as casual and sloppy as that, it wouldn’t be forgiveness at all. It would just be ‘couldn’t-care-less-ness’. It would be apathy. Imagine one of these Ninevite warlords living his whole life going around killing people and murdering whole villages. And then eventually he dies, and he turns up and knocks at the gates of heaven and asks to be let in. And God says, ‘Yeah sure, come on in. OK, so you’ve slaughtered a few thousand villagers. Men, women, children, infants. Impaled them all on poles and left them to die. Well, what’s that between friends – it’s no big deal is it? Come on in, we’ll just pretend it never happened.’

There's something offensive about that idea, because it ends up saying slaughter doesn't matter, murder doesn't matter, evil doesn't matter, sin doesn't matter. We can just sweep it under the carpet and forget about it.

God is supposed to be good and loving. But being good and loving means you care about the difference between good and evil. You want good things to happen, you hate it when evil things happen. So actually, God can't turn a blind eye to evil, and still be God. He has got to punish evil, it has got to be paid for. What the Ninevites don't know, and what Jonah himself doesn't really know, is that God himself was going to pay the price for their evil. That's what Jesus came into the world to do, and that's what his death is all about. He took our sin on himself and died instead of us. He paid the price so that we could be forgiven.

Forgiveness is not easy or cheap for God. It is supremely costly. It cost the life of his one and only Son. The reason God can give us so many chances to turn away from our sin and evil is that Jesus has bought those chances with his blood. That's wonderfully good news, but it's also wonderfully serious news. This 'forgiveness thing' is a life and death business. Jesus took death on himself to bring us life. It would be callous and foolish to shrug our shoulders and walk away from that. The Ninevites knew far less than us – they only had a one-sentence message from Jonah to go on, but they took it seriously. Let's be sure we take the message of Jesus seriously too.

4. The Wrong Sort of God



Jonah and his Gourd (J.L. Hurlbut)¹⁵

If I watch a film to relax, or if I read a book to relax, then I usually want a story with a happy ending. There can be all sorts of tragic events in the middle, but so long as everything is wrapped up nicely at the end, I go home satisfied. If you're trying to relax, you don't want something unresolved or open-ended or unhappy, because then it might still churn over in your mind afterwards.

We're not supposed to read the book of Jonah as a nice relaxing pass-time; the ending makes that perfectly clear. It *does* want to churn us up and get us thinking. Chapter 4 is deliberately unsettling. If we wanted a happy ending we would need to rip off the whole last chapter. If we had stopped at the end of chapter 3, we'd have had a perfectly lovely, tidy, happy ending. But the book of Jonah doesn't stop there.

Scene 1 – Aiming to fail

From the first word of chapter 4, it's clear that something is going horribly wrong. Look again at the last verse of chapter 3, and read straight into the first verse of chapter 4, and you'll see the strangeness of it:

¹⁰When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. ¹But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.

If you were reading Jonah for the first time, you might well be thinking, ‘What on earth is going on here?!’ Jonah is a preacher, he’s preached a message, and it’s been successful. He’s warned a whole city that judgement is coming, they’ve taken the warning to heart, turned from their evil ways, and destruction has been averted. So Jonah’s preaching has been enormously successful. Thousands and thousands of people have turned to God. But if *it’s* been so successful, why is *Jonah* so upset?

**Success
or failure?**

Well, the answer is simple: Jonah didn’t want success. He wanted his message to fail completely. He didn’t want any of the Ninevites to turn to God. He wanted them to be destroyed, every last one of them. He wanted them all dead.

The Wrong Sort of God

It’s only now that we learn why Jonah ran away at the very start of the story. He wasn’t afraid of the Ninevites. He was afraid that *God might have mercy on the Ninevites*, if they repented. Look at verse 2:

²He prayed to the LORD, ‘O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee 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.’

It’s obvious that Jonah can’t stand the Ninevites. But it’s not only that, it’s worse. To a shocking extent, Jonah can’t even stand God!¹⁶ Jonah complains that God is just the wrong sort

of God. God is ‘gracious’ and ‘compassionate,’ of all things! He’s ‘slow to anger’ and ‘abounding in love’ – and where’s the sense in that?? He’s a God who ‘relents’ from sending calamity. Can you see how annoying

**Where do you
stand with a God
like that!**

that would be for Jonah – how on earth do you know where you stand with a God like that? He is slow to pronounce judgement, he keeps holding back his condemnation, he relents from sending disaster on horrible people who deserve it!

Jonah is upset because God is just the wrong sort of God. Jonah is taking the wonderful things about God – things that we’d normally give thanks for – and he’s complaining about them. In fact he’s furious about them; he’s so angry he’s had enough of life. Look at what he says in verse 3:

³‘Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.’

⁴But the LORD replied, ‘Have you any right to be angry?’

God and Jonah are both looking at exactly the same events, but they’re coming out with completely opposite reactions. God is pleased, but Jonah is angry – angry enough to die. Jonah is in such a mess, that his request for death is almost based on the very fact that the LORD is a merciful God. Jonah has got his feelings so messed up that it’s as if he’d rather die than serve this patient, forgiving LORD – the God who won’t restrict his grace to Israel alone, the God who’s got time for these wretched Ninevites.

Any time we ever find our feelings in a mess like that – where we feel the opposite way to how God has said he feels about something – it should give us enormous pause for thought. Because if I feel one way, and God feels the exact opposite, then one of us has got our feelings out of joint; one of us needs

to change. And the thing is – it's a fairly safe bet it isn't God who's feeling the wrong thing.

Feeling the wrong thing

Let's take a quick step sideways for a moment, to think about feelings in general. Our world often tells us that feelings are always good things: Don't repress what you feel, express it. If you feel it, then it's true for you, it's good for you, and you shouldn't deny it.

Now, as Christians we're normally fairly aware that our thoughts can be right or wrong, sinful or godly. And so can our words, and so can our deeds. Thoughts, words and deeds, are a familiar enough grouping. But

**Thoughts,
words, deeds
– and feelings**

sometimes we forget that the same thing is true of feelings. I'm sure we've all been tempted to think this way: 'I feel angry about this and you shouldn't have angered me. I feel upset about this and you shouldn't have upset me. I feel hurt about this, and you shouldn't have hurt me.' Now often that may be right. If someone burgles my house, I might well feel upset and angry and hurt, and those feelings would be right and appropriate and proper, because stealing is wrong and I'd have been unfairly injured.

But it's not always right. If *I* was caught lying or cheating or stealing, and you rebuke me – gently but firmly – I might well feel upset and hurt and angry with you. But this time my feelings would be wrong and sinful and I would need to repent of them. You won't need to repent of rebuking me – especially not if you'd been gentle and loving – I need to repent of the original wrongdoing. I also need to repent of being hurt, upset and angry at you confronting me. It's no good me saying, 'You've upset me and hurt me by saying that

I lied and you shouldn't have done that.' Actually, you were right to point it out. I was wrong to have lied in the first place, and I'm also wrong to be upset at you for telling me the truth.

Jonah's feelings here are wrong, and he needs to get them sorted. The particular feeling that's most at the surface for him is anger, which makes it all the more ugly. It also makes it easier to recognise that it's wrong. But if you probed Jonah he would probably say he had a whole bunch of other feelings going on. He feels angry, he probably feels hurt and let down, maybe even betrayed by God. He's very upset by the whole thing. He's probably feeling many things – and he probably needs to repent of most of them. God makes him face up to that by asking him a question: 'Have you any right to be angry?'

Faulty Feelings

Just because I feel something, it doesn't mean I'm right to feel it. Sin is like a disease that works its way into every part of us. And that means our feelings can be sinful too, just like anything else.

And even when we're right to feel upset and hurt, those feelings can still be dangerous. It's so easy for us to nurture our hurt. But when you nurture a hurt, it doesn't sit still. It transforms itself – into bitterness and resentment.

If you've gently and truthfully rebuked me I have no right to feel hurt. But if I do feel hurt and angry I've still got two choices. I can nurse the hurt and turn it into resentment. Or I recognise it's wrong and turn my back on it. I can repent of it, and repent of the underlying sin that led to it.

Resentment or repentance - wrong feelings usually lead one way or the other.

What can Jonah say to that? After all, God has poured out his compassion and grace on him in enormous ways in this story. Jonah should already be dead, in a watery grave. If Jonah has experienced God's free mercy in his own life, how can he complain about God freely showing mercy to others? What right does Jonah have to be angry? There's nothing Jonah can say to that because he's got no right at all. So he doesn't say anything.

Scene 2 – Let's make it simple

But the book doesn't leave it there. The rest of this chapter gives us an illustration, to drive the point home. It's almost like a children's talk – the type that used to be called an 'object lesson.' You may have seen that sort of children's talk yourself: the speaker brings along an object, talks about it, and uses it to illustrate something. In the second part of chapter 4, God gives Jonah an 'object lesson' about a vine. Look at verse 5:

⁵Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.

At this stage Jonah still hasn't quite given up hope. It was a 40 day warning, after all, so maybe there's still a chance the city will be destroyed. He's probably hoping for something Sodom and Gomorrah style – fire and brimstone, obliteration from the heavens – so there's no sense actually waiting in the city. Instead, he finds some scrap of wasteland, makes a shelter and settles down to wait.

**Maybe there's
still 'hope'**

Now that part of the world is hot. If Jonah had been camping outside of London, then he'd have built a shelter to keep the rain off, the wind out, and the warmth in. But keeping warm won't be the problem at Nineveh. Image 5 (on the next page) is a picture taken near the site of ancient Nineveh, where people have reconstructed the old city walls.

It's hot and arid, the sky is bright blue, and the shadows are deep and strong. The sun is intense. Nice enough to sunbathe in – if you've got plenty of iced water to drink, and a cool swimming pool to plunge into when you overheat. But if

you're sitting out in that heat all day, you'd be really happy about a bit of shade to fend off the sun-stroke.



Image 5: Nineveh¹⁷

Jonah has tried to find himself some shade, and his shade is about to get even better, verse 6:

⁶Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine.

God provides this remarkably fast-growing vine, and it gives Jonah shade. And he's happy about it. In fact he's 'very happy.' This is the first time in the story that Jonah has been 'very happy' about anything. But it doesn't. Verse 7:

⁷But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, 'It would be better for me to die than to live.'

⁹But God said to Jonah, ‘Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?’

There’s that question again. It’s an important one, and we’re going to need to come back and think about it. First time around Jonah didn’t answer it, but this time he’s spitting mad, so he blurts out:

‘I do,’ he said. ‘I am angry enough to die.’

¹⁰But the LORD said, ‘You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?’

God seems to like asking Jonah questions, but Jonah doesn’t seem to like answering them. ‘What right have you to be angry?’ ‘Should I not be concerned about that great city?’ These two questions are important; if we get to grips with them, we’ll have understood the key to the book of Jonah.

No answers

Let’s start with the first one, this question about ‘the right to be angry.’ It’s asking us: What right do we have to demand that God should favour us and not others? God focuses the question down to this issue about the plant. But that leaves the door wide open for Jonah to condemn himself by his own words. And he does just that, in spectacular fashion. Jonah insists, in the strongest terms, that the vine is important to him. ‘It matters to me! I love it! It’s a comfort and a delight!’ And now that it’s dead, he’s furious. He’s all the more furious because of the sun blazing on his head, and the scorching desert wind. That plant was doing a really good job, and now it’s been cut off in its prime. It’s just not fair. In fact, because

the plant is dead, Jonah's angry enough to want to be dead himself.

Do you see what God has done here? Of his own free will, Jonah declares that a plant is worthy of the gift of life. He declares that it matters greatly to him. He declares his outrage at the plant's destruction. He declares how horribly wrong it is that the plant has been struck down.¹⁸

A plant. All this about a plant. A 'here today, gone tomorrow' plant. Not an animal or a person, not a family or a community, far less a whole city. All this over a plant. Can you feel the irony? If you can, you are at least one step ahead of Jonah.

This plant has come into Jonah's life, and provided him with a bit of shade, and just because of that he considers it worthy of his emotional investment. He's concerned over it, even

though it's not much more than a weed. But the thing is, the LORD is only doing for Nineveh what Jonah had just insisted *he* ought to do for a plant. He has concern for it. And so God poses him the question – Is it possible, Jonah, that a city might be worth at least some of the concern you are showing over this plant?¹⁹

Plants & Cattle

The comment about the 'many cattle' (v11) probably fits in with the conversation about the vine. It's not there to make some sort of equality-point – as if it was saying cows are worth just as much as people. It's there to make a contrast-point. The contrast isn't so much between 'the people' versus 'the animals,' as between 'the people *and* animals,' versus 'Jonah's silly vine.'

God would have every right to spare Nineveh if only because of the dumb animals in it. On any kind of reckoning, the animals alone are worth far more than this vine Jonah is so concerned about. If the plant is significant enough that Jonah is prepared to put up such a fight, how can he complain when God says Nineveh – with all it's people and animals – is significant enough to be concerned over?

That's something to make us sit up and think about our own world. How concerned are we for the cities around us? Do we see them as cities that God has concern for? Do we show as much concern for them as we do for our pot-plants or pets? Do we recognise that they deserve to face God's judgement, just like Nineveh? Indeed, they will face it one day, unless they turn to God. But just like Nineveh, God has compassion on them. He calls them to turn to him, he wants them to turn to him.

**Your city
vs
Your plant-pot**

That's the opposite of Jonah. On one level, the message of Jonah could be summed up as a warning to the rest of us: 'Don't be like Jonah.' Throughout the book, Jonah has been very ready to receive mercy and blessing himself. But he is stubbornly opposed to his enemies receiving anything.²⁰ We shouldn't be like that, especially as we've been shown even more mercy than Jonah.

So where might we be tempted to fall into Jonah's trap? It's probably at its most obvious any time we are dealing with people who are against us. They might be against us individually, in our day to day lives. Or they might be against us corporately: people who are against our nation or our social class; people who are against 'Christians' or 'the church,' or people who are against Jesus and God. Basically, we could be tempted by Jonah's trap, any time we're dealing with people who oppose us, or people who fundamentally disagree with us – people we might think of as opponents or even enemies. But Jesus calls us to forgive our enemies and pray for them. If we follow Jonah's line instead, we might find ourselves praying *against* our enemies, praying they will be condemned in God's judgement. We might end up delighting when they face misfortunes. Jonah thought he had the right to do that, but he didn't. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Let's not make the same mistake. People who follow Jesus Christ shouldn't be like that. God had compassion on the city of Nineveh, and so should Jonah. God has compassion on our world now, and so should we.

Compassion

That's Jonah's mistake at its most crude – responding to hostility with hostility. But there are subtler ways of failing to share God's compassion. It's easy to care more about the potted plant in our sitting room than the city on our doorstep.

If someone doesn't know God, if they aren't trusting Jesus – then they face a sobering, long-term future. God is the ultimate source of love and hope and joy, and everything good in the world. To walk away from him is ultimately to walk away from all of that too. To be cut off from him for eternity is a tragic loss. To reject him and then face his judgement is sombre.

God's attitude towards everyone is one of concern and compassion and mercy and love. That's true of bloodthirsty Ninevites, it's true of muggers and drug-dealers, and it's true of everyone else too. That's the God we see in the book of Jonah. And we're called to be like Jonah's God, not Jonah himself. God cares passionately about our world and so should we.

Pause for Thought

What is your 'long-term future,' beyond this life?
How does that shape the way you live now?

Let's finish this section by considering some ways that we can learn to be passionate for our world in the way that God is.²¹

1. Remember God's grace to us in Jesus.

To go forward with passion for our world, we first need to come back to God's grace to us in Christ. Jonah falls down on this – do you remember his words in chapter 2?

⁸Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. ⁹But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD.

Jonah knew about God's compassion. Jonah had experienced it himself – he knew what it was to be saved by God. But it hasn't really sunk in. He doesn't realise how little he deserves God's compassion. And so he doesn't learn from it. He still couldn't care less about the sailors or Nineveh. That's just not right. When you come across something good, the natural thing to do is to share it. (And that's the right thing to do too.) If we understand God's grace we won't want to hoard it for ourselves – we'll want others to know God as well.

**It's natural
to share**

2. Pray.

Let's pray for individuals specifically, and let's pray for whole communities and cities too. God doesn't go in for clones: we're not all supposed to be prophets to pagan cities, we're not all supposed to be evangelists like Billy Graham. There are other ways to be concerned for our world and its relationship to God – and prayer is one of the most important. Let's pray for people we know who don't follow Jesus. Let's pray boldly: let's pray that they might come to know God, experience his love, trust him and find joy in him.

3. Support gospel proclamation.

Does your local church have connections with any missionaries or evangelists? If it does then there'll be

opportunities to support those individuals with both money and prayer. Those are important and straightforward ways of supporting people involved in proclaiming the gospel message – so if you aren't involved in that, do consider it.

Another way we can give support is by inviting people who aren't Christians to come to events where they can hear the gospel explained, and by going along to events like that ourselves. Lots of people reject the Christian message without ever having heard what it actually says. Again, that's tragic, because the issues involved are profound. We should do what we can to give people a decent chance to make an informed decision. Not everyone will be interested, but some will – and we won't know who, unless we ask.

**Profound issues,
informed choices**

Gospel proclamation needs to happen throughout the world, and that includes the bit of the world where each of us lives. So ...

4. Be ready to tell others.

It is not always easy to explain the gospel to people. Sometimes we might be shy or scared about doing it. It's okay to be shy and scared. Lots of us are shy and scared about all sorts of things. What's not so okay is not caring about people, or just being careless of them. It matters how people respond to God. God wants everyone to respond well – to share in the joy of knowing him, loving him and being loved by him.

God wants us to have a heart like his – a heart that cares about eternity, a heart that beats with compassion for our world.

Making Connections

We live on the other side of the coming of Jesus. That means we can know what it is to be forgiven through Jesus' death. We know more than Jonah did, we've been given more – and so we have all the more reason to forgive others. In fact, Jesus' teaching on this is really strong. He calls us to keep on forgiving people, regardless of what they're like, or what they do. When Jesus calls us to forgive someone, there's no get-out clause. It isn't a two-way process, it doesn't depend on the other person repenting.

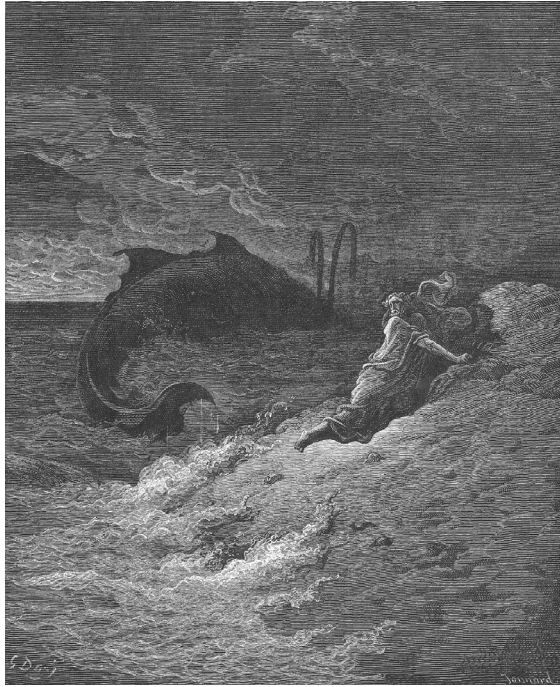
That's because forgiveness isn't the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation involves rebuilding relationships, and that is a two-way process. If the other person doesn't repent, things become much more difficult. If the other person remains hostile to you, there's a limit to how much you can do to rebuild the relationship. You can leave the possibility open, but you can't re-form a relationship unilaterally.

If the Ninevites hadn't repented, if they still wanted to impale Jonah on a wooden pole, there would have been no way Jonah could have built up a warm, brotherly relationship with them. But he could still have forgiven them. Reconciliation and relationship are two-way things, and so they depend on both sides. Forgiveness doesn't. It's about us letting go of our grievances – God will sort out the rights and wrongs, not us. Jesus calls us to forgive our enemies, and pray for their welfare (Matthew 5v43-48).

For Reflection and Discussion

- Have you ever harboured wrong feelings?
Are there any you need to repent of now?
- What is your 'long-term future,' beyond this life?
How does that shape the way you live now?
- How can you support the Gospel?

5 | Strong Words



'Jonah Cast Forth By the Whale'
(Gustave Dore)²²

We've seen the shock ending of the book. And that gives us the key to understanding Jonah's odd behaviour throughout. He *wants* Nineveh to be destroyed. He wants God to pass judgement on the Ninevites *now*. He wants them to be condemned in that judgement. He doesn't want them to have even a chance of repenting. He wants them to face God's wrath.

With that vital information in place, let's start to rewind the tape. Let's revisit some of those earlier, slightly puzzling scenes, and see if we can get a better grasp of what was going on. So let's rewind back to the start of chapter 3, immediately after the fish incident ...

Back to Square One²³

There Jonah is, sprawled on some beach. He's gulping in deep breaths, savouring the first air for days that doesn't reek of fish-gut. Being swallowed by a fish can't be very nice, and being vomited up by one can't be much better. Except that, at the end of it all, you're back out in the open.

It's hard to know what's going through Jonah's mind. There's gratitude and thankfulness – we know that from chapter 2. But there's no full-blown repentance – we know *that* from chapter 4. Jonah still longs for Nineveh to be destroyed. He may be grateful for the grace God's shown him, but he doesn't want God to be gracious to anyone else.

So what lessons has Jonah learned at this point? Well, he seems to have learned some negative lessons. He's learned it's foolish to rebel against God's word. You can't hear what God says, and then just shrug your shoulders, and walk off in the opposite direction. Jonah *does* seem to have learned that, because this time he doesn't run off to Tarshish. This time he goes to Nineveh. Chapter 3v1-2 gives us that little hint of déjà vu – it takes us right back to square one, where the whole story started – but then verse 3 breaks the spell:

What lessons?

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

² 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.' ³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh.

This time, Jonah obeys. We're not told his thoughts. Given chapter 4, perhaps he might have been quite 'pessimistic.' He might have been afraid his enemies would get off lightly. Or he might have been 'optimistic.' Maybe he's hoping the Ninevites will just ignore him, and be destroyed anyway.

We can't be sure – chapter 3 doesn't tell us his precise thoughts, because that's not what's important at this stage in the story. What's important is that he's required to obey. The word of the LORD has come to him, and now it's about to come to Nineveh. The city he hates so much is about to hear God's word of warning. They are going to hear it delivered by an authentic prophet. And so they will have at least a theoretical chance to repent. Jonah knew all this in chapter 1. Presumably he still knows it. And there's nothing to suggest he liked it any more the second time around.

But ... he goes. Part of the message of chapter 3 is that it's stupid and futile to turn your back on this God. It's foolish and pointless to hear his word and think you can ignore it.

Making Connections

God's word has to be reckoned with. That's how it was for Jonah; that's how it is for us. God hasn't just spoken through Jonah – he has spoken through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 1v1-3 makes the point that God has spoken his *definitive* word to us in his Son. Throughout the Old Testament, God spoke in 'many parts and many ways.' His word came on many occasions, it came in many forms, it came in many fragments. The message is there, clearly enough, in the Prophets (see Luke 24v27). But it is clearer again in Jesus; it's less piecemeal, more explicit.

Think of the word Jonah is given to preach in Nineveh. The warning is totally clear, but the message is not totally complete. Jesus makes the warning *and hope* of the gospel even more clear and complete – and it all turns on how we respond to him and his word:

'Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.'

(John 3v36)

We can't walk away and think there will be no comeback, any more than Jonah could. We stand in a more privileged position – so we have even less excuse if we refuse God's word to us in Jesus.

A Word about Judgement

Another part of the message concerns judgement. Jonah was commissioned to preach a message of judgement at the very start of the book – but he spends those first two chapters facing judgement himself. Now he's re-commissioned to proclaim that same word of judgement to Nineveh. Judgement is one of the big themes of the book.

That may sound negative, but that's only because of the state our world is in. Judgement – true judgement – is the act of declaring and upholding what is right, and condemning and restraining what is wrong. God is good and pure and right and true – so his judgement will be good and pure and right and true. But our world is impure and corrupt. That's not to say it's utterly devoid of good – there are flashes of beauty and goodness everywhere. And it's not to say it's as bad as it could be – even the ugliest situation could always be made worse. All of that is true – but it's also true that there's no part of our world that has escaped the taint of sin. There's no part of it that's straight-forwardly pure, no part of it that's uninfected by evil.

This is the world into which God speaks. And when God speaks, he speaks the truth. He says 'Yes' to what is good, and 'No' to what is evil – that's what his judgement means. This is good news – or it should be. But think about what our world is like, and think about who we are. If God is going to speak truly into our world, then he must speak a resounding 'No' to all that is wrong in our world, and all that is wrong in us. It's inevitable – our world stands condemned under God's judgement – and so that 'No' of condemnation is the first word to us that God must speak.

In a nutshell

God's judgement means him saying 'Yes' to everything good, and 'No' to everything evil.

The wonder of the gospel is that God doesn't stop there. The gospel tells us of the resounding 'Yes' that God has spoken in Christ – a 'Yes' of hope and forgiveness and restoration. Certainly God speaks much more than his 'No' – but he must not speak less. If he did, he would cease to be true; he would cease to be God.

Our world is corrupted by evil. Nineveh is a city corrupted by evil. God has spoken the word of condemnation to Jonah – so Jonah goes, and he speaks the word to Nineveh: 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.'

Forty days. Short and sharp – but not without purpose. When God warns of coming judgement, there's always a space between the announcement, and the moment when judgement falls. This is true of all the major messages of judgement throughout the Bible – Noah, Sodom, the Exodus, the Exile – and, indeed, the Gospel. There is always a space, always a delay, always a time period that passes. This period of time is crucial, and it's there for a purpose. Will the hearers respond?

A Tale of One City

We know the answer and we know it's good. We're seeing a re-run of the story we saw in chapter 1, but now we're seeing it on a huge scale. The sailors of chapter 1 were rough pagans who worshiped dumb idols and knew nothing of the true God. But when the reality of God's judgement confronts them head on – they feared, they believed, they repented. They realised it was deadly serious, and they took it deadly seriously.

We see the same thing begin to happen in Nineveh. The Ninevites are rough pagans too. Worse, they are violent, bloodthirsty pagans (see Image 6, on the next page).



A vulture carrying off intestines. In the culture of the day, intestines represented compassion. The message this picture was meant to convey was something like: 'All who resist Assyria will be treated without mercy or compassion.'²⁴

Image 6²⁵

We might have expected a very different reaction from such a people. Jonah, it seems, was desperately hoping for a very different reaction. He was hoping they would scorn his message, reject his word, and despise the God who sent him. Maybe Jonah was even willing for the mob to lynch him – maybe he'd have preferred that to their repentance.²⁶

But Jonah's hopes are dashed. It all goes horribly, horribly wrong for him. His worst fears come true – the city repents from top to bottom. Jonah can't even rely on the normal arrogance of kings. The king himself takes off his robes, gets off his throne, puts on sackcloth and sits in the dust.

**The arrogance
of kings?**

Repentance again

Chapter 3 confronts us with clear-cut repentance. These Ninevites are sorrowful and remorseful – just as Jonah was sorrowful and remorseful in chapter 2. However, in the light of chapter 4, we'll need to re-think chapter 2 carefully when we get there again. But here, in chapter 3, the sorrow and remorse very clearly flows through into unambiguous repentance. Repentance is a vitally important concept to grasp – and it does involve more than just sorrow and remorse. So it's worth our while taking careful note of what it is that makes the Ninevites repentance so clear-cut.

Clear-cut repentance

In a nutshell, when the Ninevites repent, they turn to God and seek his mercy. They turn whole-heartedly towards the one who has announced he is going to judge them.

It will help us to see how clear-cut this repentance is by comparing chapter 2 and chapter 3. There's several ways in which the Ninevites' reaction goes a few notches further than Jonah's reaction in chapter 2:

- Jonah recognises he is in distress (2v2). The Ninevites are in distress alright, but they also explicitly recognise that their ways are evil (3v8).
- Jonah recognises that God has acted against him (2v3), but there's no real sense of whether God was right to do so. Jonah simply doesn't comment. The Ninevites, by contrast, recognise that God is fiercely angry with them (3v9), and the implication is that his anger is perfectly justified in view of their evil ways and violence.
- Jonah calls out for 'help' – he desperately wants God to deliver him from the circumstances he's in (2v2). The

Ninevites call out to God too – they are hoping he might ‘relent,’ that he might show ‘compassion,’ that he might ‘turn from his fierce anger,’ so that they won’t ‘perish’ (3v9).

What sort of help?

They don’t explicitly use the word ‘mercy,’ but it’s pretty clear that’s what their after. The ‘help’ they need isn’t just deliverance from dangerous circumstances. They realise they need to be delivered from God himself. They need his mercy.

- The Ninevites resolve to give up their evil ways. And they don’t just *resolve* to do it, they actually *do* do it. God himself notices how they turn from their evil ways (3v10). Again, Jonah was never as explicit as that – he promises to offer thanksgivings and sacrifices, but doesn’t resolve to *turn from* anything.

So what does all of that tell us about what repentance means for us?

1. If we’re going to repent, we’ve got to recognise our own wrong-doing. We need to call a spade a spade. We are part of the evil of our evil world. Sometimes we are hurt by it, sometimes we are corrupted by it – but sometimes we also contribute to it. If we side-step our own responsibility for the wrong we do, we’ll never repent.
2. If we’re going to repent, we’ve got to recognise that we deserve God’s ‘fierce wrath’ too. God is angry with us – and he’s right to be angry with us.
3. If we’re going to repent, we’ve got to call out to God for mercy and forgiveness. The Ninevites did that in uncertain desperation. They didn’t know if God would respond, but they reckoned it was worth a go. We know better: God will *certainly* respond – he is full of mercy and

forgiveness. And if we know better, we should respond better too. We have all the more reason to come to God in repentance.

4. If we're going to repent, we've got to turn away from our wrong-doing. Turning to God, and turning away from sin, are flip-sides of the same coin. You can't do one without doing the other.

Remorse is not the same as repentance. Regret is not the same as repentance. Let's take a small example. Suppose I decide to catch a train without buying a ticket. And suppose I get caught and have to pay a penalty fare. I'm likely to regret that. I'll feel remorse about the whole situation. I'll regret that I got caught, I'll regret the fine, I'll regret the embarrassment of the whole thing. If I've brought shame or distress or confusion to the people around me, I'll regret that too. I might be ashamed and remorseful and regretful, and I might resolve never to get caught doing something like that again.

**Remorse is not
repentance**

But none of this is repentance. I could feel all that, and still feel sorry for myself, still feel I was unlucky to be caught, still feel hard done by, still feel resentful to the ticket inspector who caught me.

Repentance would involve recognising that it was *right* for me to be caught and punished. Repentance would involve admitting that fare-dodging was wrong, and that *I* was wrong to have done it. Repentance would involve resolving to turn away from it, and resolving to turn back obediently to God. Repentance would involve actually doing the turning. In short, repentance would involve calling out to God for mercy and forgiveness.

I was wrong

That's repentance. And it's a possibility for everyone – in fact, it's a demand for everyone. It's not optional. God created all of us, and he commands all of us – all people everywhere – to repent.²⁷

**Repentance is
not optional**

And one of the things we learn from Nineveh – brutal, violent, pagan city that it was – is that repentance is possible for everybody. Not just religious types, not just irreligious types; not just respectable types, not just despicable types – everybody.

That should make us ask some questions:

- Do you believe that for yourself? This side of heaven, repentance is something we need to keep coming back to, precisely because sin is something we keep sliding back to. What have you repented of recently?
- Do you believe that for the people around you? God calls your friends and family to repent. There's no one who is free from the taint of sin, no one who doesn't need to turn to God. And there is no one who is so far gone in sin that they can't turn God. When it comes to sin and violence and Godlessness, the Ninevite soldiers must have seemed pretty far gone. They would regularly disembowel live captives. I'd guess that none of the people you know do anything quite so horrible. These Ninevites turned to God and repented. So can anybody else.
- Do you believe that for the people of your city? Our world has lots of pretty Godless cities. But none of them are significantly worse than Nineveh. Do you believe God can speak to your city? And if you do ...
- Do you pray? God's word is powerful – when he speaks through it, people change. That's true even when the human messenger leaves a lot to be desired. That should

give us confidence – and that confidence should result in prayer. It's worth praying that God will change people through his word. It's worth praying that individuals and groups and even whole cities will come to repentance. It's worth it, because God is able to bring it about through his word. And he delights to answer prayer.

Pause for Thought

What have you
repented of recently?

As we come (again) to the end of chapter 3, we know that God's going to spare the city. We know that because we know how the story ends (and we're told in 3v10 anyway). *We* know, but at this stage, Jonah doesn't know that for sure. He knows God's interested in the city, and he knows God's concerned for it, and he knows it has repented. But does that guarantee its deliverance? Jonah can't quite be sure. Maybe there's still 'hope.' Maybe there's still a chance it'll be destroyed. As chapter 3 finishes, Jonah seems to be clinging on to some such 'hope.' And that makes us reconsider – What exactly did happen inside the fish then? Did Jonah repent or didn't he? We'll have to rewind a bit further to find out.

For Reflection and Discussion

- What difference does it make to know that, when God judges, he will say “Yes” to everything good, as well as “No” to everything bad?
- Can you think of times when you were remorseful instead of repentant?
What makes the difference?
- What have you repented of recently?

6 | Sorrow and Repentance



'Jonah in the Whale'
(Gertrude Hermes)²⁸

So what exactly is repentance? That's one question this story about Jonah keeps forcing us to ask. And we especially need to ask it as we move from Jonah 3 to revisit Jonah 2. Because, at first glance, it *does* look like Jonah has turned over a new leaf in this chapter. But we know from Jonah 4 that it wasn't such a new leaf after all. So – what is repentance? How is it different from what we see in Jonah 2?

A whole new leaf?

If you think back (or flick back) to our first look through Jonah 2, you'll remember that we picked out three points to do with being sorry over sin: Sorrow realises there's a problem; it cries out to God for help; and it thanks the God who saves. That might have seemed reasonable enough at the time. If you are like me, and you like happy endings to stories, then on the first read through, you probably wanted to assume the best of Jonah, and assume that he really was repenting.

Often it is good to give people the benefit of the doubt. But any doubt there was, any uncertainty there was – Jonah's behaviour in chapter 4 has blown it right out of the water. There is

**Benefit of
the doubt**

no doubt any more: Jonah fundamentally *has not* repented. He doesn't want God's love and grace to be shown to those wretched Ninevites, and that gives us a pretty big hint that he probably hasn't understood the love and grace God *has* shown to him. So let's use that knowledge – that something goes badly wrong further down the line – to see if we can spot any early signs of it here in this chapter.

There's a verse in the New Testament that I think gives us a clue about what might be wrong here in Jonah 2. It's a verse that talks about two types of sorrow:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.

2 Corinthians 7v10

On our first run through Jonah 2 we picked out the three points to do with sorrow – and they're true, no matter what sort of sorrow we're talking about.

'Godly sorrow' will realise there's a problem, cry out to God for help, and thank God for sorting it out. But – and this is the scary thing – 'worldly sorrow' could do some, or even all, of those as well.

Godly sorrow & worldly sorrow

Worldly sorrow (or remorse or fear or desperation) could well make someone cry out for help. When we first went through Jonah 2, we looked at a quote about there being no atheists in foxholes. Well, in a desperate situation, even a godless person might see the problem and cry out to God for help.²⁹ They might even feel thankful to God for a bit, and still go back to being just as godless afterwards.

Repentance is not the same as sorrow. Sometimes we make that mistake – we think repentance means feeling sorry or sad. But actually that's just remorse. And if that's all it is, then 2 Corinthians would call it worldly sorrow. Repentance isn't

just about feeling sorrowful or sad or regretful. Repentance is about *change*. It means recognising that we've done wrong, and turning away from it. (The Ninevites, to their credit, recognise this much, and at least start down the road to change.) Repentance is about turning away from sin, and turning back to God. Any sorrow can recognise there's a problem. If I'm to repent, I need to recognise there's a problem with me.

A Good Example

It'll be easier to see what's missing from Jonah's prayer in chapter 2, if we compare it to a genuine, unambiguous prayer of repentance. Psalm 51 is probably the best known (and most striking) repentance Psalm in the Bible. The whole Psalm is printed out below. As you read through it, look out for the differences between it and Jonah's prayer. In particular: What's different about the way this Psalm talks about sin?

**Spot the
difference**

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. ²Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. ⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. ⁵Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. ⁶Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

⁷Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸Let me hear joy and

gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. ⁹Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. ¹⁰Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. ¹⁴Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. ¹⁵O LORD, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. ¹⁷The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. ¹⁹Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Did you see what was different about that Psalm? David, the psalmist – he’s absolutely clear about his own guilt and transgression and sin. He knows he’s in the wrong, and that he needs mercy and forgiveness.

That’s completely missing from Jonah’s prayer. There’s plenty of distress and remorse, there’s plenty of crying out to God for help – there’s even thankfulness. But there’s no confession

**No sin, no guilt,
no forgiveness**

of sin, there’s no acknowledgement of guilt, there’s no asking for forgiveness. There is no repentance. So far, this is nothing but remorse and distress. It’s *religious* distress, in that Jonah calls on *God* to get him out of danger, and he thanks God. But even so, it’s still just distress. And distress is not the same as repentance.

Jonah's blindness

Let's pick out a couple of things from verses 8-9 to illustrate that. In verse 8, Jonah tells us that 'Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.' Now in abstract, that's true. But in context, it's bitingly ironic. After all, Jonah has refused to go to the people in Nineveh, he's refused to warn them against their idols. And he largely ignored the sailors in chapter 1 – the very men who were busy turning away from their idols to give thanks to God for his grace in saving them.

There's an unhealthy dose of pride and blindness in what Jonah says here. He's a bit like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable:³⁰ 'I thank you LORD that I am not like other sinners. Especially this tax-collector here. Or especially those pagan sailors there. Look at them, clinging to their pathetic idols. Doesn't it just make you sick?'

This is a classic sign of someone who is unrepentant, and who is becoming hardened or blind. They can see the speck in their brother's eye, but they can't see the whopping big plank in their own eye. It is amazing how deceitful sin can be, and how blind it can make us to our own faults, even when (we think) we can see them clearly in others.

So, because sin is so deceitful, let me pause and add a warning to myself, and to each person reading this. If you catch yourself thinking, 'So-And-So needs to hear this – I wish they were reading it and taking note' – if you're thinking that, then be careful. Maybe So-And-So does need to hear this, and maybe it's right and proper for you to recognise that. But most of the time, it shouldn't be your first thought. And it shouldn't ever be your only thought. Because our primary responsibility – all the time, always – is to ask ourselves, 'Do I need to hear this? Are

Pause for Thought

Are you applying Jonah to you?

there areas of my life that this applies too?’ So-And-So will have to answer to God about whether they’ve heard the message and taken it to heart. I will have to answer to God about whether I’ve heard it. You will have to answer to God about whether you’ve heard it. That’s were each of us should start.

Jonah didn’t, and that’s part of where he got into trouble. There might have been a time and place for him to think about the sin of the sailors, or the Ninevites, or other pagans. But that time and place was not while he himself was in the belly of a whale for having run away from God.

This isn’t a profound concept. The sailors aren’t in the whale. The Ninevites aren’t in the whale. Jonah *is* in the whale. And it doesn’t seem too unreasonable to suggest that a fair chunk of his thoughts should have been on whether *his own* conduct needed to change. And, once he’d got himself all sorted out and corrected, then maybe it would be fair enough for him to devote his time to pondering how others need to change. Let’s not make Jonah’s mistake. We each need to spot our own failings – I need to spot mine; you need to spot yours. That’s the place to start.

Where to start?

There’s a place for spotting others’ failings, so that we aren’t carried along with them, and so we can spur one another to change our ways. The Bible actually has a lot to say about that, and (especially if we live in a modern, individualistic, Western culture) we could probably do with giving it a lot more thought and attention. We do need to carry one another’s burdens and exhort one another daily. Sometimes I will be more blind to my own sin and you’ll be able to see it more clearly. Sometimes you’ll be more blind to your own sin, and others will be able to see it more clearly. Sometimes we can help each other clear up our own blind-spots.

But in an important sense, that's secondary. As we hear God's word and see how it both corrects and encourages us in our own lives, we'll want others to benefit from that same correction and encouragement. But if we start to correct others from God's word, without first taking to heart God's words of correction to us, then we're starting to become a Jonah, and a Pharisee and a hypocrite. That road leads to spiritual decay.

A dangerous road

And that's deadly. Verse 9 shows us why. In one sense, this is probably the best bit of Jonah's whole prayer:

'But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD.'

Now that sounds pretty good, doesn't it? And it would be, if Jonah's heart was right before God. But compare what Jonah says with what David says in Psalm 51:

¹⁶'You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. ¹⁷The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.'

Frankly, if our heart isn't right with him, then God couldn't care less about our efforts to please him, or do him a favour, or work for him. It's superficial, it's hypocritical. Whether we're trying to be some sort of super-prophet, or super-missionary, or whether we think we're holding our whole church together, or just doing our tuppence worth – whatever it is, if we're pressing ahead on a sinful track, God's not going to be the least impressed. It doesn't matter how grand our sacrifice of praise is, it doesn't matter how devout our prayers or actions, it doesn't matter how earnest our vows; God doesn't want our busy-ness – he wants our hearts.

Of course, God is tremendously generous. Even if we're rebelling against him, maybe he'll be gracious enough to use what we do, and bring good things out of it. He does it with Jonah in chapter 3, so he can do it with us. But if he does, let's not be too flattered. God can bring good out of what Satan does; he can bring good out of our hypocrisy too. So if we do choose to act sinfully, and God is still gracious enough to bring good out of it, let's not be too quick to pat ourselves on the back – because God will have done it in spite of us, not because of us.

God may well be gracious enough to give us a 2nd chance to sort things out with him. And a 3rd and 4th and 5th chance.

Jonah gets a whole string of them. But if you keep practice turning down God's chances to repent, you might discover you get rather good at it. Don't do that. One day it will be too late. Instead, let's be people who apply God's word to ourselves, and who take it to heart, and put it into practice.

Pause for Thought

What have you learnt recently
from God's word?
Have you put it into practice?

Mercy, Judgement, and the thing about Fish³¹

There's one more question we'll look at in this chapter: What are we supposed to make of the fish? When Jonah gets swallowed by this 'great fish,' is that a good thing, or a bad thing. God is acting in judgement, but is that judgement a 'Yes' or a 'No'? Is it an act of God's condemnation, or his mercy? The answer is intriguing, because it looks like you can make a reasonable case both ways.

We're perhaps most used to thinking of the fish as God's way of saving Jonah. And it certainly does work out like that in the end. God uses the fish to prevent Jonah drowning. God uses the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land. Without the fish Jonah

would have been dead – and chapter 2 is largely a prayer of thanksgiving. All that leans in the direction of seeing the fish as an tool of God’s mercy.

However, it’s not all so straightforward. It might be better to say that the fish *turns out* to bring salvation in the long run. But it’s not so obvious to begin with. If we didn’t know how the story ends, we would *not* think this was a good thing! Being swallowed by some enormous sea creature can’t exactly be pleasant. We wouldn’t normally think of it as a blessing. Indeed, neither does the Bible – it doesn’t normally associate giant sea creatures with blessings or salvation. Quite the reverse.

The sea crops up all through the Bible – as do giant sea creatures and sea monsters. None of the references to them are pleasant – they are all to do with judgement, chaos and destruction.³² When *we* think of a ‘giant fish’ we might think of friendly images: whales and dolphins, graceful and intelligent, creatures who produce enchanting ‘whale music.’ That might be what we think of - but it’s *not* what someone in Jonah’s day would have thought of. For an ancient Israelite, Giant Sea Creatures are not a good thing, and being swallowed by one is not a happy event.

Jonah has been stubbornly running away from God. God has sent judgement against Jonah in the form of a ranging storm – but Jonah’s so stubborn that he’d rather be thrown overboard than repent.

Cultural Context

Sea monsters do not have good connotations in the Bible. Our nearest modern equivalent is probably ‘Jaws.’ Imagine you are watching *Jaws IX*, and one of the characters is deep underwater, running out of breath, and about to drown. Suddenly Jaws appears – and swallows them. This is not good news. Things were bad, but now they are much worse. Terminally worse, we would expect.

That’s probably how the original readers would have reacted to Jonah being swallowed by his sea monster – *if* they didn’t know how the story continued.

So he's thrown headfirst into the depths of God's judgement – and then to top it all, God sends some great sea beast to swallow him. If the story had finished there, we'd have said Jonah had got what he deserved. He would have been someone who had provoked God's judgement and met a sticky end.

But the story *doesn't* end there. Jonah gets to taste fresh air and freedom again. And that's part of what makes Jonah distinctive – the very thing that brings judgement against him, also brings salvation to him. The sea monster consumes him – and then delivers him.

In one way, this isn't so unusual. Sometimes we think of salvation and judgement as opposites – but in the Bible they are not. *Condemnation* and salvation are opposites, and judgement is the process of deciding which one we should face. But although they are opposites, condemnation and salvation often go together in the Bible. The good is restored precisely as the evil is abolished. Judgement is God sorting things out – saying his 'Yes' and 'No.' Judgement brings about both salvation and condemnation.

In a nutshell

If judgement was a coin,
then salvation and
condemnation would be the
two sides of that one coin.

Think of the Flood: Noah is delivered, but others are drowned. God overthrows evil, to create a new start with Noah. The way judgement brings both salvation and condemnation is even more obvious in the Exodus from Egypt. The Exodus is the greatest Old Testament example of salvation. The Israelites are delivered from slavery and death, and set on the road to the Promised Land. But this salvation comes precisely through God passing judgement on (and against) Egypt. You can see that in each of the Ten Plagues. The Egyptians are condemned in the plagues; Israel is saved by them. You can see it in the parting of the Red Sea. God passes judgement

there to save the Israelites and destroy the Egyptians. But you can see it most poignantly in the Tenth Plague, the Passover. It's this judgement for Israel that actually wins their release. And it's in this very same plague upon the firstborn that the judgement against Egypt is at its sharpest. When God saves, he does so by overthrowing evil. God saves by judging.

So in one sense, it's not unusual to find condemnation and salvation together here in Jonah – that's what judgement means: saying 'Yes' *and* 'No.' It happens all the time in the Bible.

Judgement means Yes and No

But in one particular way, Jonah is very unusual. God's condemnation and God's salvation do normally come together – but they don't normally come together *on the same person*. In the Flood, most people were condemned, but Noah and his family were saved. In the Exodus, Egypt was condemned, and Israel was saved. But in Jonah, Jonah is condemned *and* Jonah is saved.

This is strikingly unusual – it only happens twice in the whole Bible: once in the Old Testament, here with Jonah, and once in the New Testament. But that unusualness may help us understand another unusual passage, this time in the New Testament. Have a look at Matthew 12v38-41:*

³⁸Then some of the Pharisees and Scribes answered him, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.' ³⁹But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks a sign! And no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. ⁴⁰For just as Jonah was in the belly of the sea creature three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. ⁴¹The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it – because they

repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.’

‘Jesus never compares himself to any of the Old Testament prophets, not even the greatest ones.’ That statement is very nearly true. And so it’s all the more surprising that the only exception is this passage in Matthew,³³ where Jesus compares himself to Jonah – to a prophet who falls so far short of God’s standards. And in many ways Jesus and Jonah *are* very, very different. But there is one crucial parallel – they both experience God’s judgement of condemnation *and* God’s judgement of salvation. Just as Jonah underwent God’s ‘No’ for 3 days in the belly of the sea creature, so Jesus also underwent God’s ‘No’ for 3 days in the belly of the earth. And just as Jonah experienced God’s ‘Yes’ on the third day, so Jesus also experienced God’s ‘Yes’ on the third day.

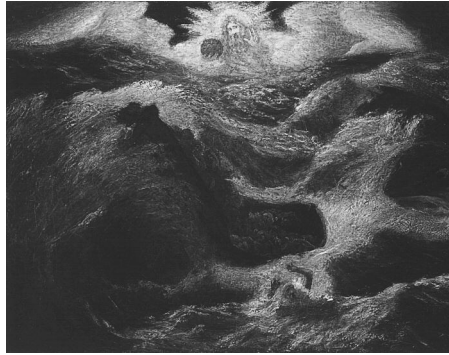
Surprise exception

In all God’s purposes, his judgement involves condemnation and salvation. But in Jesus Christ, condemnation and salvation are focused together on one person. In him justice and deliverance are brought together. Because he has faced God’s ‘No,’ we can hear God’s ‘Yes.’ He bears our punishment to win our peace. The cross is the place where wrath and mercy meet.

For Reflection and Discussion

- What have you learnt recently from God’s word?
Have you put it into practice?
- What have you repented of recently?
- Do you have someone who can help you spot your own blind spots?

7 | Don't Say a Word



'Jonah'
(Albert Pinkham Ryder)³⁴

When you understand the end of the story, sometimes the beginning makes much more sense. Murder-mystery stories often work that way. On the first read through, there are all sorts of loose ends that don't quite add up. But when you discover 'who-dun-it,' *and what their motives were*, suddenly everything else fits into place.

It's like that with the book of Jonah. Now that we know where the story ends up in chapter 4, we can better understand why it starts off the way it does in chapter 1. In chapter 4 we discover what Jonah's motives are, we discover what's been driving him all the way through. We find out that Jonah wants to see Nineveh destroyed. He's afraid that if he goes there and preaches, they might repent and be spared. And Jonah desperately doesn't want that to happen.

With that vital piece of knowledge now in place, let's rewind all the way back to the start. Let's revisit the scenes in chapter 1 to see what else they have to show us.

Scene 1 – Call and Response

Think about how the book starts. Verse 1:

¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai

Back in Old Testament times, when people first read the book of Jonah, they must have found the start of it both familiar and unusual. Jonah was a familiar figure – he's a prophet who

**Familiar
and unusual**

crops up in 2 Kings 14v25. But even there he's unusual. He's based in Israel, during evil times. Both before his day and afterwards, God sends warnings to Israel about the judgement to come. But, in 2 Kings, God's message through Jonah is different. Jonah speaks a message of blessing and mercy for Israel, and his prophecy is quickly fulfilled (it was to do with restoring the borders of the Promised Land). So Jonah is familiar, because he's already established in 2 Kings as a true prophet. But he's unusual because he's a prophet of blessing during evil days, when judgement is just over the horizon.

Jonah himself is both familiar and unusual, and his commission is familiar and unusual too. Verse 2 again:

²'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.'

This is unusual, as it's the only place in the Old Testament where a prophet is called to go on a preaching tour of a pagan nation.³⁵ But it's also familiar – it's the normal pattern God used to call people to proclaim his message. There are even echoes of Sodom and Gomorrah here. God acted in judgement against them because the 'outcry' against their wickedness had reached him.³⁶ Jonah's mission to Nineveh reminds us that God is the judge of *all* the earth, and he will 'do right' (Gen 18v25). Nineveh was a leading city of its day: proud,

successful and free-spirited. Maybe it thought it could ignore God, maybe it thought it was untouchable and indestructible. It wasn't.

That's something to make us sit up and think about our own world. When we think of a proud London, a successful New York or a free-spirited Paris, do we let them fool us into thinking they are untouchable and indestructible too? Maybe the various terrorist atrocities of recent years have dented that confidence a little. But it's easy to think that if these cities were destroyed the world would be as good as over.

The end of the world?

It probably felt like that in Nineveh's day. But the world did survive the eventual fall of Nineveh. (And Babylon, and Athens, and Rome, come to that.) It can survive the fall of London, New York and Paris too, if God decides that should happen. This world is God's world and it won't come to an end until he decides. In the meantime, all of our cities need to hear the same message: 'Repent, because God will judge our wickedness.'

That's something of the message Jonah was given to preach. And already these first two verses of Jonah have produced a funny mix of the familiar and the unusual. But it's Jonah's response from verse 3 onwards where we get the strangest combination of the familiar and the unusual. We'll see that all the more vividly if we compare Jonah's call to a more 'normal' prophetic call.

Let's begin with a perfectly normal example – God calling Elijah – and follow straight on with the Jonah version.³⁷

⁸Then the word of the LORD came to him [Elijah], saying,
⁹'Arise and go to Zarapheth of Sidon, and stay there'
¹⁰So he arose and went to Zarapheth.

1 Kings 17v8-10*

¹The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai saying, ²'Arise and go to Nineveh, the great city, and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.' ³So Jonah arose, to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah 1v1-3*

It's a surprising, upside-down start. Jonah does the 'arising' alright – but in entirely the wrong direction. Which raises the question we looked at before: Why does a prophet of mercy run away when he's given a message of condemnation? 'Is he too soft?' we might think. 'Maybe he can't cope with a message of condemnation, maybe it's too horrible for him to contemplate.'

But alas, no. As we have seen in chapter 4, the truth is much worse. Jonah runs away because he's too hard. He doesn't want to give the Ninevites the slightest chance of repenting. He *wants* to see them destroyed. And if God says that's on the cards, then why rock the boat by telling them about it? Don't say a word, that's the best policy.

But this upside-down start raises another question too. Will God's word be thwarted? The whole book begins with God's word coming to Jonah, yet within two sentences it looks like that

**Will God's word
be thwarted?**

word is in jeopardy. But we've read the whole book now, so we know that's not how it turns out. One of the major themes and encouragements of Jonah is that God's word will do its

job. Even in the face of stubborn rebellion by those who ought to be on God's side, his word will still achieve his purposes. That's how powerful God's word is; that's how powerful God is. And Scene 2 shows us that vividly.

Scene 2 – The Storm and the Response

God is the Judge of all the earth – we've heard that in verses 1-3. Now we see that he is also the King over all creation. He is the LORD who can summon heaven and earth to do his bidding, and in verse 4 he does just that. If we look at this in a literal translation, we'll see how vivid the language is:

⁴The LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was so great a whirlwind on the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the sailors were afraid and each one cried out to his own god, and they hurled the ship's cargo into the sea to lighten it for them.

But Jonah had gone into the ship's hold, lain down and fallen sound asleep. ⁶So the captain came and said to him, 'What are you doing sound asleep? Arise and call on your god! Maybe that god will spare us a thought so that we won't perish!'

Jonah 1v4-6*

God hurls a whirlwind onto the sea; in desperation the sailors hurl the cargo into the sea. Their efforts seem puny and pointless in the face of God's action, but at least they are trying something. This snapshot of action shows us a whole range of ways people can respond to God's judgement. There's fear and there's prayer, there's human effort of every kind. And there's comatose slumber. I don't think we are supposed to

Human effort of every kind

see Jonah's slumber as his peaceful trust in God's sovereignty. No, Jonah is just totally desensitised.

When the captain finds Jonah, he is not impressed by this. He tells Jonah to 'arise' – that's the second time Jonah's been given that command – and again Jonah does arise. But (also again), he doesn't take any notice of the rest of the instruction: to pray to his god in case that god might spare them a thought. Perhaps Jonah is aware that the LORD's thoughts are already focused on the ship – rather too focused for comfort. Whatever Jonah is thinking, he doesn't lift a finger to help the situation.

Scene 3 – Crunch Time (!?)

Jonah seems completely lethargic. We don't hear from him until the sailors pin him down directly. They cast their lots, it falls to Jonah, and so they demand some answers. There's a sense of desperate panic about the rapid-fire string of questions they ask. They cast around frantically for some clue about why this calamity has fallen on them; they are desperate for any information. Could it be something to do with Jonah's identity? Or his origin? Or his country? Or his people? They fling these questions at Jonah and at last he responds. These are the first words we hear him speak, and he says, 'I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land' (Jonah 1v9*).

You couldn't fault Jonah for orthodoxy. What he says is 'as sound as a pound.' It's just that it rings so hollow. He *says* that he fears the LORD. That's a normal Old Testament way of talking about what we call 'worship.' We have heard plenty about fear in Jonah chapter 1, but none of it has been shown by Jonah. He knows that the LORD is the God of heaven and he knows that

Fear and worship

this God has spoken his word to him. Jonah knows all that, but he doesn't like what God might have in mind, so he quite happily turns his back on God and runs off. We've seen Jonah the rebel, Jonah the runner, and Jonah the slumberer. But we haven't seen any sign of Jonah the 'worshipper,' Jonah the one who fears the LORD.

The sailors know none of the truth that Jonah knows. Before verse 9 they don't know anything about who the LORD is. All they get is a glimpse of his power, as shown in the storm. But that glimpse is enough to create a very healthy fear in them. To start with, it's largely a fear for their own lives. But at least that makes them aware that God is out there, and it drives them towards wanting to sort out things with him. Jonah has all this knowledge too, and far more besides. But despite all his knowledge, Jonah doesn't even show that basic fear. He shows about as much life and fear and sensitivity as a block of wood.

Let's think about that 'fear' concept for a moment. If someone asked you how you felt about God, would it occur to you to use the word 'fear' in any context whatsoever? 'Fear' might sound negative to us – and certainly there are all sorts of ways of being 'afraid of God' that are unhealthy. Perhaps that's why lots of modern translations decide to update verse 9, and use the word 'worship' instead. But 'fear' is what it originally says, and with good reason. The God we know is the awesome, fearsome, mind-blowing God who rules the whole universe. The most violent storm you have ever come across is nothing but a whisper compared to the power of our God. We couldn't even begin to control a hurricane – far less can we manage this uncontrollable God.

Pause for Thought

Do you fear God?

This is the God stoops down and cares for each one of us tenderly. This is the God who takes on our frail flesh and blood and becomes one of us in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. If we forget how fearfully awesome God is, we will take for granted how wonderfully precious it is to be his children. That seems to be Jonah's problem. He 'knows' the truth – or at least he can spout it on demand. But it doesn't mean much to him, it doesn't shape the way he behaves. The sailors, for all their pagan ignorance, have a far better grasp of this truth than Jonah:

The men became fearfully afraid³⁸ and they said to him, 'What have you done?!'

Jonah 1:10*

The more the sailors learn about God, the healthier their respect for him becomes. It's not merely respect, of course. In their case it's also terror, because they realise they don't know God, they realise they have lived in his world as though he didn't exist, even though he is their creator. And most of all they realise that his judgement is being expressed right now, against their ship. They are terrified.

Scene 4 – The Splash

The sailors may be terrified, but Jonah is still as unmoved as a log. It's as if rebelling against God has made him totally insensitive. He's not interested in life; all his thoughts are focused on death. Most of all, remember – he wants the Ninevites to die. He wants to keep God's word from them – that's why he's been running away, and that's why he's been prepared to put the sailors lives at risk. It's even more extreme – he'd rather see himself drown, than risk giving the Ninevites the opportunity to hear God's word from him.

At this stage in a violent tempest, any normal person who ‘feared the LORD’ would be calling out mercy. But not Jonah. He knows mercy is linked to repentance; and repentance would involve going to Nineveh. And that would mean risking that the Ninevites might turn and be saved. Jonah doesn’t want that risk. He’d much rather die himself – and so he tells the sailors to ‘hurl’ him into the sea (there’s that same word again).

When I first heard the story of Jonah at Sunday school, I assumed God must have told Jonah that the sailors needed to throw him overboard (Jonah was a prophet after all!). But there’s not the slightest indication of that in the text. The truth is probably much bleaker – it was Jonah’s own idea. He had no desire for either mercy or repentance. He would rather be hurled into the violence of the sea, than call on the LORD of the sea for mercy.

**He would
rather die**

By contrast, these rough sailors seem positively saintly. Jonah may not care about his life (or the sailors’ lives, or the Ninevites’ lives ...) – but the sailors care about his life and they do all the can to save it. But they are no match for the judgement of God, and eventually they have to recognise this. They’re reluctant and fearful – but eventually they hurl Jonah overboard.

And suddenly, just like that, the raging sea grows calm. The sailors feared the LORD already – but if anything, their fear is even bigger now than it was before (v16). They recognise how awesome God is. Not only can he call a violent whirlwind into existence, he can make it vanish too, and for sailors that’s just as startling.

People who know about the sea have told me that even after a storm stops, it takes the sea a long time to settle down again. Once the water’s all churned up, it can remain rough for hours.

But when God tells the sea to stop – it *stops*. It goes straight from raging storm to calm expanse. That's why the sailors sit up and take notice. The rest of their response is brilliant too (v16). They react just the way you'd expect a godly Israelites to. They fear the LORD, they offer sacrifices, and they make vows. They respond with true worship. Jonah *says* he fears the LORD, the sailors *actually* fear the LORD. Jonah's 'fear' rings hollow; their fear is real and godly.

This whole episode tells us something about what happens when God speaks. God is powerful, and his word is powerful. God is not to be trifled with, and nor is his word. That was Jonah's

**When God
speaks...**

mistake: he trifled with the word God had spoken to him. He thought he could ignore it, and avoid it, and forget about it.

We aren't Jonah, we aren't prophets like Jonah. But God has spoken to us even more profoundly than he spoke to Jonah. God spoke a little piece of his message to Jonah; God has spoken supremely to us in his Son (check out Hebrews 1v1-3). And he will be heard.

The word 'hear' in English is funny. It can mean 'listen and respond,' or it can mean 'listen, but without responding.' When we talk about needing to 'hear' God's word, we mean 'listen *and* respond.' There's an old-fashioned word that catches this better: 'heed.'

God will be heeded, he will be feared. And it may be by the most unlikely people. The gospel of Jesus Christ is powerful; it can surprise us by taking hold of unlikely lives. The person who heeds that gospel Word will receive salvation. The person who won't heed the Word will face condemnation – just as Jonah was hurled into the sea.

Whenever we hear the word of God we are faced with a simple choice. We may respond in a thousand different ways, depending on our different circumstances. But regardless of the differences, all those ways will fit into one of two stark types: we rebel, and end up with log-like slumber; or we heed, and end up with life-giving mercy. And we've all got to pick one or other. Let's pick wisely – let's heed.

For Reflection and Discussion

- What's the difference between 'healthy fear' and 'unhealthy fear'?
Do you fear God in a healthy way, or an unhealthy way – or not at all?
- Are there times when you are spiritually insensitive, like Jonah was? (Or are there issues about which you are insensitive?)
What can we do to restore, and maintain, a healthy awareness of God?
- What truths from God's word to you most need to hear – and heed?

Where to from here?

Congratulations! Our double journey is complete. We've followed Jonah to Nineveh, and retraced our steps back again. We've heard God's word to the Ninevites, and we've heard God's word to us ourselves.

Hearing God's word is both a tremendous opportunity, and also an important responsibility. I hope this book has helped you hear God's word in Jonah – but just as importantly, I hope you heed it. I hope you respond well to what God says in Jonah. God's word is rich and multi-faceted, and each reader is different – so our responses will vary. But as we finish, it is important that we do reflect on how God is calling each of us to respond. Hopefully you may be aware of particular things already. However, if nothing springs to mind, please do think back over some main truths we've seen (and ask some related questions):

- God. Who he is – the Sovereign Lord of everything, from whales and storms, to the fall of a lot. Do you 'fear' God? Do you respect him enormously?
- Sin. How serious sin is – sin in general, and specific sins in particular. Do you take your sin seriously?
- Repentance. And the difference between it and regret/remorse. Have you repented and turned to God? Are there any further things you need to repent of?
- God's boundless compassion. Even for violent, wicked people – and how totally that love is demonstrated in the death of Jesus for us. Have you grasped how much God loves you? Have you understood his great compassion for everyone else in our world? Do you share it?

God has spoken in Jonah. Let's respond.

Availability

This book is available in both paperback format and in e-book format (the e-book is free of charge). Information about how to order or download it can be found on the BeaconLight website:

www.beaconlight.co.uk

Follow the appropriate links, or search on the site for ‘Jonah.’

Acknowledgements

This book started life as a series of sermons on Jonah, and the sermons benefited greatly from material already produced on Jonah. In reshaping the sermons into book form I’ve tried to reference where most of the ideas originated. Where I know I’ve depended heavily on a particular source, I’ve referenced this in the endnotes. But I’m conscious this referencing process may be far from complete. Several items deserve particular mention, having had a ubiquitous influence on this present work, well beyond what is represented in the endnotes:

- Douglas Stuart’s commentary on Jonah in the Word Bible Commentary series.
- Luke Tattersall’s 4 part sermon outline, available on www.perspective.org.au.
- A series of 4 sermons on Jonah, given by John Woodhouse.

Endnotes

- ¹ I am not going to address the biological question of exactly what sort of sea beast swallowed Jonah, and so I will refer to it interchangeably as a 'fish' and 'whale' throughout.
- ² Jonah 3:4, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned' - only 8 words in the NIV. In Hebrew it's even more succinct - only 4 words!
- ³ This isn't entirely unusual. In the Hebrew Bible, what we call the books of 'the prophets' are called 'the Latter Prophets' - and most of the books we think of as history (Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings) are called 'the Former Prophets'. They are *all* counted within 'The Prophets'. That's because all these books are concerned with God's word entering human history. Some tell us the words of the message; others tell us the circumstances it was spoken into. Jonah, however, is still unusual - it's the only predominantly narrative book in the Latter Prophets.
- ⁴ Image courtesy of www.logoi.com/pastimages/sea.html (accessed 1/8/2007).
- ⁵ Cf. www.gatewaystobabylon.com/introduction/assyriankings.htm (accessed 5/10/2006). The following excerpt gives an account of Assyrian brutality:
- 'A captured city was usually plundered and burnt to the ground, and its site was deliberately denuded by killing its trees. The loyalty of the troops was secured by dividing a large part of the spoils among them; their bravery was ensured by the general rule of the Near East that all captives in war might be enslaved or slain. Soldiers were rewarded for every severed head they brought in from the field, so that the aftermath of a victory generally witnessed the wholesale decapitation of fallen foes. Most often the prisoners, who would have consumed much food in a long campaign, and would have constituted a danger and nuisance in the rear, were dispatched after the battle; they knelt with their backs to their captors, who beat their heads in with clubs, or cut them off with cutlasses. Scribes stood by to count the number of prisoners taken and killed by each soldier, and apportioned the booty accordingly; the king, if time permitted, presided at the slaughter. The nobles among the defeated were given more special treatment: their ears, noses, hands and feet were sliced off, or they were thrown from high towers, or they and their children were beheaded, or flayed alive, or roasted over a slow fire...
- 'In all departments of Assyrian life we meet with a patriarchal sternness natural to a people that lived by conquest, and in every sense on the border of barbarism. Just as the Romans took thousands of prisoners into lifelong slavery after their victories, and dragged others to the Circus Maximus to be torn to pieces by starving animals, so the Assyrians seemed to find satisfaction - or a necessary tutelage for their sons - in torturing captives, blinding children before the eyes of their parents, flaying men alive, roasting them in kilns, chaining them in cages for the amusement of the populace, and then sending the survivors off to execution. Ashurnasirpal tells how 'all the chiefs who had revolted I flayed, with their skins I covered the pillar, some in the midst I walled up, others on stakes I impaled, still others I arranged around the pillar on stakes. ... As for the chieftains and royal officers who had rebelled, I cut off their members.' Ashurbanipal boasts that 'I burned three thousand captives with fire, I left not a single one among them alive to serve as a hostage.' Another of his inscriptions reads: 'These warriors who had sinned against Ashur and had plotted evil against me ... from their hostile mouths have I torn their tongues, and I have compassed their destruction. As for the others who remained alive, I offered them as a

funerary sacrifice; ... their lacerated members have I given unto the dogs, the swine, the wolves. ... By accomplishing these deeds I have rejoiced the heart of the great gods.' Another monarch instructs his artisans to engrave upon the bricks these claims ... 'My war chariots crush men and beasts. . . . The monuments which I erect are made of human corpses from which I have cut the head and limbs. I cut off the hands of all those whom I capture alive.' Reliefs at Nineveh show men being impaled or flayed, or having their tongues torn out; one shows a king gouging out the eyes of prisoners with a lance while he holds their heads conveniently in place with a cord passed through their lips.'

Excerpt from Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage*, 1:271, 275–76, accessed 10/10/06: www.ldscs.org/inst_manuals/OTStudntMan32498000/Chapters/OTStudntMan32498000_21.pdf

- ⁶ This is a detail of the bottom panel of the Balawat gates of Shalmaneser III, on view at the British Museum. Accession number: ANE 121651. (A reconstruction of the Balawat gates is featured on the front cover.) © The Trustees of the British Museum.
- ⁷ Cf. I.H. Marshall et al (eds), *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester: IVP, 1996³), 1153.
- ⁸ In ancient ships the planks were often held together with mortise-and-tenon wood joints, supported by wooden pegs or internal rope lashings. Any gaps could be plugged with fibrous material. Sometimes resin or pitch was used to waterproof the hulls.
Cf. S. Vinson, *and as ship-construction terminology in Herodotus, Pollux and Documentary Papyri*, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 112 (1996), 197-204 (especially p198), accessed 10/10/2006 from: www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/ifa/zpe/downloads/1996/113pdf/113197.pdf
- ⁹ In Hebrew it says 'YHWH' (or 'Yahweh'), which is God's special, covenant name (see Exodus 3v15). In English, 'Yahweh' is usually translated as 'The LORD,' with small capitals.
- ¹⁰ Image courtesy of www.mainlesson.com (accessed 1/8/ 2007).
- ¹¹ Lieutenant General Lewis 'Chesty' Puller, U.S. Marine Corps.
- ¹² Image courtesy of www.creationism.org (accessed 1/8/ 2007).
- ¹³ This '3 day visit' phrase is slightly obscure and there are other options – although they all end up stressing that Nineveh is a big and/or important place. Cf. Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Waco: Word, 1987), 487-88, for a more extensive discussion.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Luke Tattersall, 'Jonah – the Reluctant Evangelist' www.perspective.org.au (accessed 16/5/2006).
- ¹⁵ Image courtesy of www.mainlesson.com, accessed 1st August 2007.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Stuart, *Jonah*, 503
- ¹⁷ Image 5 (Nineveh) © Bible Scene Multimedia, 2000. Taken by Mr Maurice Thompson and used by permission of Visual Bible Journeys.
- ¹⁸ These paragraphs are based on Stuart, *Jonah*, 506.

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- ¹⁹ Cf. Stuart, *Jonah*, 508, especially re: the *Plants & Cattle* comments.
- ²⁰ Stuart, *Jonah*, 434.
- ²¹ These applications loosely follow Luke Tattersall's.
Cf. www.perspective.org.au (accessed 16/5/2006).
- ²² Image courtesy of www.creationism.org (accessed 1/8/2007).
- ²³ Sections of this chapter lean heavily on John Woodhouse's talks.
- ²⁴ Cf. Brian Edwards and Clive Anderson, *Through the British Museum – with the Bible* (Leominster: Day One, 2004), 86.
- ²⁵ Exhibit on display at the British Museum, Accession number: WA 118907. © The Trustees of the British Museum.
- ²⁶ After all, in chapter 1, he would rather be thrown into the storm to drown, than risk going to Nineveh, in case they repented. See our discussion, p91.
- ²⁷ Cf. Acts 17v30.
- ²⁸ Gertrude Hermes, *Jonah in the Whale*, 1935. Courtesy of <http://www.bhikku.net/archives/03/jun03.html> (accessed 1/8/2007).
- ²⁹ On www.geocities.com/inquisitive79/foxholes.html (accessed 15/11/2004), an atheist comments against the 'foxholes' quote. He argues that when people seem to turn to a god during a crisis: 'It's desperation, not a conversion ... It is someone trying to escape death, nothing more'. He's right. Desperation isn't the same repentance; repentance involves much more.
- ³⁰ Luke 18v9-14.
- ³¹ This section particularly draws on John Woodhouse's sermons.
- ³² The Bible never describes giant sea creatures in friendly terms; e.g. the Leviathan (the terrible sea monster in Job 41) or the beast from the sea in Revelation 13.
- ³³ There is, of course, also the parallel passage, in Luke 11v29-30. And perhaps the allusion to Elijah and Elisha in Luke 4v24-27 should count too.
- ³⁴ Image courtesy of cgfa.sunsite.dk/r/p-ryder2.htm (accessed 30/09/07).
- ³⁵ Nahum is not a counter-example. His prophecy seems to have started life as a book (cf. Nahum 1v1). There is no evidence he ever went on a preaching tour to Nineveh to proclaim this message.
Cf. Tremper Longman III, 'Nahum', p769 in *The Minor Prophets (Vol 2)* edited by T. E. McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).
- ³⁶ Genesis 18v20-21.
- ³⁷ For added vividness, these verses are in a very literal translation.
- ³⁸ Literally, they 'feared with a great fear' contrasting Jonah's casual rebellion.