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Answering the Call Jonah 1:1-3

Intro: Mt 12:39-40 – today, we are going to begin a study of what appears to be one of the most difficult stories in the Bible to believe. This story has been the subject of extensive ridicule from all levels of society; it's been the focus of Hollywood caricature for years and the punch line of many a poor joke. Bible skeptics save their deepest criticism for the “ridiculous” premise of this book – that a man could be swallowed by a whale and live to tell about it. Yes, our study today is in the Book of Jonah.

There are plenty of reasons given why so many people refuse to accept and believe the historical nature of the story of Jonah's experience. Some people just can't accept the abundance of supernatural events that happen throughout the story. It is a fantastic story! Some point to the unprecedented nature of Jonah's mission to Nineveh; as the reason for their doubt. Why would an Israelite prophet travel so far from home? Some point to the reference to Nineveh is the past tense, (was); the supposed grossly exaggerated size of Nineveh; or the supposed inaccuracies; and even that the book contains words supposedly uncommon to the vocabulary of the time Jonah was living.

We could spend several weeks looking at and answering all the criticisms of this book but that's not what we are here to do. I'm not so much concerned with what the world says about the Book of Jonah as I am what the Book of Jonah has to say to us. Suffice it to say that there are satisfactory answers to all the “problems” mentioned above. First, if one has difficulty believing God can perform miracles then they have a bigger problem than just the Book of Jonah, as we will see. They are actually questioning God's omnipotence. Other prophets went to foreign lands to carry God's Word: Elisha went to Zarephath and Elisha went to Damascus. Using the past tense is a common tool of narrative writing; the reported size of Nineveh could very well include any suburbs; the so-called inaccuracies are unproven and the “late” words appear in early and later OT books.

I don't waste much energy trying to answer the criticisms because the story of Jonah has already been verified by the highest authority on truth and

historical accuracy – Jesus Christ Himself! [Mt 12:39-40](#) – in this passage, the story of Jonah and his fantastic experience is presented as historical fact. Jesus doesn't qualify it as a myth, legend or an allegorical fable as many do today. He simply references it as a fact. So, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator, savior and Judge of the whole world accepted the entire record of Jonah as absolutely real. And not just real, but important!

Here, Jesus links the historical experience of Jonah as an illustration of His own literal resurrection; reinforcing the veracity of the story. Jonah's experience is actually a picture of the work of Jesus. Jonah will give his life to appease the wrath of God that is coming upon others. But death didn't hold Jonah; after 3 days and nights of imprisonment, he is alive and free. This is a glorious picture of Jesus and His sacrifice in an unexpected place. Jesus believed the story of Jonah to be historical fact; so much so that he labeled it as an analogy of His own death and resurrection. If the type isn't true, then the very essence of Christianity isn't true. As Christians, we have no option but to believe the historical accuracy of the Cross and the empty tomb. Our entire world view and eternal destiny are at stake. By the same token, we have no option but to accept and believe the story of Jonah.

If we accept that Jonah's story is true, we must also acknowledge that Jonah was a real man and a prophet sent from God, not just some fictional character in a parable. Now, as we go through our study, you may be surprised to learn just how much of a scoundrel Jonah actually was. This may prompt you to wonder why in the world God would waste valuable space in His divine Word for someone like Jonah. The truth of the matter is – the Book of Jonah is not really about Jonah. Like every other book in the Bible, the Book of Jonah is about God, it's about what God is like – His character and nature. These aspects of God are clearly seen in the way He deals with Jonah.

One of the main attributes of God this book teaches us is His mercy. What's this story about if not God's mercy? We see God extend mercy to wicked Nineveh, which makes Jonah angry. God extends mercy to Jonah himself, which Jonah certainly didn't deserve. God even extends mercy to the pagan sailors in [ch1](#). All these were recipients of God's mercy. In reality, all these were unworthy of God's mercy; just as we were; just as our noisy neighbors are or that annoying co-worker is or that loud-mouthed relative we can't seem to be rid of. These are the ones we should love for Christ's sake. The

story of Jonah warns us against limiting our love and sympathies to only some people and excluding others.

Another great lesson Jonah teaches concerns the sovereignty of God. Most Christians don't have a problem with the sovereignty of God except when the sovereign will of God conflicts with our own human will – which is all the time! “I know the Bible says I shouldn't do this, but I want to and I'm going to!” Think of a Christian who begins to stray from the Lord and gives up Bible reading, fellowship with other Christians, church attendance, and giving to support the Lord's work. Each of these duties is clearly prescribed in God's Word, but the Christian neglects them. What happens then? Does God crush the human will to accomplish His own purpose? Does He give up or change His mind? Or does He accomplish His purposes in some other way? The answer is in the Book of Jonah.

1-3 – Speaking of God's sovereignty, the book opens up with a lesson on this very subject. Here we have a divine commission given to Jonah and Jonah refuses to obey it. So, the book begins with a formal expression of God's sovereign will and a man's determined opposition to it.

The location of Tarshish is disputed but is believed to have been on the far coast of Spain, beyond Gibraltar. If so, it means Jonah was determined to go as far as possible *in the opposite direction* from which God was sending him. Nineveh was east of Israel, Tarshish was west. It's as if he walked out of his house in Israel and looked as far as he could to the East, down the long road that led around the great Arabian desert to the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and then turned on his heels and took off running down the road to the West.

Why did he do it? It could be that he was overcome with the mission's difficulties, which are laid out very well in the commission. God told him Nineveh was a great city and it was! It was so large, it took 3 days to cross it and had 120,000 infants (4:11). It was the capital of the great Assyrian empire, with walls 100 feet high and wide enough that 3 chariots could run abreast around them. For one man to arrive all alone with a message from an unknown God against such a city was ludicrous in the extreme. What could one man do? Who would listen? The men of Nineveh would ridicule the strange Jewish prophet. Of course, Jonah knew they were capable of much worse than ridicule. True, the mission was difficult but the story never

implies that it was these difficulties that caused Jonah to rebel.

Maybe it was danger? The 2nd word God used to describe the city is “wickedness.” If Jonah picked up on that and refused to obey for that reason, it would be understandable. The more we learn of Nineveh the more dangerous the mission seems. The entire prophecy of the Book of Nahum was against the wickedness of Nineveh (3:1-4). What was one poor preacher to do against such wickedness? What would stop them from adding his body to the large pile of carcasses? All this could’ve made Jonah afraid but again, the story never indicates that it was danger that turned him in the opposite direction.

We discover the reason for Jonah’s rebellion in ch4, after God’s already brought revival and deliverance from judgment to the Ninevites. Jonah explains that it was precisely because of this outcome that he had disobeyed originally. He knew God was gracious and that God wasn’t sending him to Nineveh only to announce a pending judgment. He was sending him so Nineveh might repent (4:2). The reason Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh was because they were the enemies of Israel and he was afraid that if he went to them with a message of judgment, they would believe it and repent, and God would bless them. He didn’t want them blessed! God could bless Israel. But bless my enemies – over my dead body! So, Jonah fled to Tarshish.

We can condemn Jonah for his selfish rebellion but how far are we from his sentiment today? We haven’t been sent to Nineveh but the commission that’s been given to us is not less demanding than Jonah’s. Jonah’s commission consisted of just 2 main words: go and preach; which is exactly what we were told to do in the Great Commission. We are to go into all the world and preach all that we have been taught by Jesus. The people we meet as we go about our business all have great needs. They need Jesus first, but they also need friendship, understanding, direction, some have pressing physical needs. We’re called to go, yet we remain inactive. We’re called to preach yet we remain strangely silent. Our silence is strange because we have such a wonderful story to tell!

Verse 3 explains Jonah’s attempt to get away from God and the consequences of it. It’s surprising that Jonah didn’t think of these consequences before he ran or consider how impossible it is to escape from

God. Jonah lived late in OT history, long after the Psalms were written; so he had ample opportunity to know [Ps 139: 7-10](#). Jonah had to have known these words so why didn't he remember them as he set out in the ship for Tarshish? What if the name of the ship was The Wings of the Dawn? That would've been a good name for a ship; and if so, it would have suited Jonah's situation to a T! Did he notice the name as he boarded? Did he notice the rats getting off as he stepped on? No, Jonah was so set on disobedience that he wouldn't have noticed any of these things. No more than we do when we take our "wings of the dawn" to sail away from God—whether it be preoccupations with a person, a job, a hobby, an attitude, a cherished sin, or some other form of disobedience.

Yet, here is our first great lesson regarding God's sovereignty. Built into Jonah's first attempts to get away from God are two results that follow anyone who tries to disobey Him. First, Jonah's trend was downhill. He wouldn't have described it that way. He'd have said he was "improving" his life, just like we do when we choose to go our own way instead of God's. But it was still downhill. We see this in [v3](#), where we're told Jonah went "down" to Joppa. It's always that way when a person runs from the presence of the Lord. The way of the Lord is up! ([Phil 3:14](#)) So, any way that's away from Him is down. The way may look beautiful at the start. The seas may look peaceful and the ship attractive, but the way is still down.

There's another result. It's seen in the phrase about Jonah paying "the fare." Understand, Jonah never did get to where he was going (thrown overboard) and obviously didn't get a refund on his ticket. So he paid the full fare and didn't get to his desired destination. But, it's always that way. When you run away from the Lord you never get to where you're going, and you always pay your own fare. On the other hand, when you go the Lord's way you always get to where you're going, and the Lord pays the fare!

Jonah only illustrates one half of that statement. Jochebed, the mother of Moses, illustrates the other half. She conceived Moses during a time of great persecution by the Egyptians, when Hebrew male newborns were thrown into the Nile to die. When Moses was born, his parents hid him as long as possible. Eventually, his cries became too loud so Jochebed made a small boat of bulrushes and covered it with tar. She put Moses in it and set it in the reeds by the riverbank and put Miriam, Moses' sister, nearby to see what would become of him. Jochebed entrusted the life of her newborn son

to God, allowing Him to do as He wished with the child.

You know the rest of the story. The baby Moses was discovered by the daughter of Pharaoh and his cries touched the woman's heart so much that she determined to save him and raise him in the palace. But the child needed a wet nurse. Where could she find one? This is when Miriam came up and offered her assistance. "Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" "Yes," said the princess. Jochebed was brought.

Jochebed was able to receive back the child she most dearly wanted. She would have done anything to have kept him. She would've scrubbed floors in the palace! She would have given her right hand to have her baby back but it wasn't necessary. Instead, Pharaoh's daughter gave the child back, declaring, "Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you" (Ex 2:9) I will pay you. Jonah went his own way, paid his own fare, and got nothing. Jochebed went God's way. thus, God paid the fare, and she got everything. When you run away from the Lord you never get to where you are going, and you always pay your own fare. But when you go the Lord's way you always get to where you are going, and He pays the fare.

In a way, Jonah's story is over now; the story of his choice, his disobedience. God has given His command. Jonah has disobeyed. Now Jonah must sit back and suffer the consequences as God intervenes supernaturally to alter the story. This is clearly evident in the contrast between the first 2 words of v3 "But Jonah" and the first 3 words of v4 "But the LORD". It's true that Jonah had rejected God, as we sometimes do. He's allowed to do it. God's sovereignty does not rule it out. But now it's God's turn to respond and His response will be more substantial than Jonah's.

God will do 3 great things. First, He'll send a great storm. It'll be a storm of unusual ferocity, so fierce even experienced sailors were scared. There's another storm in the NT that also frightened experienced men on the Sea of Galilee. The men were the disciples and Jesus was with them, asleep in the boat. Initially, they tried to row out of it. But they were in danger of sinking and were scared so they woke Jesus up crying, "Lord, save us!" Jesus asked, "Why are you so afraid?" Then He got up and rebuked the winds and waves to a great calm. (Mt 8:26-27).

Note the contrast. The Lord who can calm the troubled waters of your life is the same Lord who can stir them up to great frenzy. What He does depends on whether He is with you in the boat or, a better way of putting it, whether or not you are with Him. If Jesus is in your boat—if you're going His way and trusting Him—then, when the storms come, you can cry out, "Master, help me!" and He will calm the violence. But if you're running from Him—if He's not in your boat and you are disobeying Him—then He will stir the waves up.

Second, the Lord prepared a great fish. Later, God will also prepare a small worm to eat the root and destroy the plant that shades Jonah. On the one hand, God uses one of the largest creatures on earth to do His bidding. On the other hand, He uses one of the smallest. Size makes no difference to God. He'll use whatever it takes to get the disobedient one back into the place of blessing. Are you running away from God? It will be painful, He will see to it. God will use whatever it takes to get His people right, because He's faithful to Himself, to you, and to His purposes.

Finally, God saves a great city. This last act, like the others, is an act of mercy. The city didn't deserve saving. Yet God saved it, graciously preserving it from destruction for a time. God's perseverance will be discussed later but it's important to look at one aspect of it in this present connection. Paul wrote: "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6).

Usually, we look at this verse as a statement of the "eternal security", which it is. God will certainly continue His work in us, no matter what happens. He'll preserve us for heaven. But this verse also means God is so determined to perfect His good work in us that He'll continue to do so with whatever it takes, whether we obey or disobey. Are you going in His way? Then He'll bless your life and encourage you. Will you run, as Jonah did? Then He'll trouble your life. He'll even break it into pieces, if it enables you to walk in His way once again. If you disobey, you'll find your initial disobedience easy. But later, the way will grow hard. If you obey Him, you'll find the way paved with blessing. 😊