

Jonah 1:1-16 – Jonah's Flight

In our last study we saw that Jonah was a prophet to Israel at a time when the nation was experiencing political and economic success. This was undeserved success because spiritually the people were being led by a king who did “evil in the eyes of the Lord”. It was an act of God's mercy and grace that the nation's immediate enemies had been defeated and the super power Assyria was in a weak state. Jonah had the privilege of prophesying the expansion of Israel's power and influence under Jeroboam II so no doubt his message was well received by his people.

But now Jonah has a word from the Lord telling him to leave his comfort zone and go some 500 miles away to “the great city of Nineveh” to proclaim God's judgement on it. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria where the people “worshiped the vicious god Ashur and a multitude of other gods and goddesses. Their brutality and cruelty was legendary.”¹ This was not an assignment that Jonah wanted so he arose and set off in the opposite direction, paying for a boat to take him to Tarshish. He was determined to flee from God, leaving his beloved country and people to avoid carrying out the Lord's commission.

No doubt once the ship was out on the open sea Jonah felt he had achieved his purpose. “In Solomon’s day the ships going to Tarshish would not return for three years.”² If Nineveh was to be overthrown in 40 days (Jonah 3:4) then Jonah would be well out of the way so he went down into the hold and fell into a deep sleep. But God had other ideas and hurled a great wind on the sea which caused such a violent storm that the ship was in danger of breaking up. The ship's crew, which would have been less than a dozen men, were so frightened that each started to call on his own god. They knew that this was an unusual storm and the pagan sailors had a sense of the presence of a god they did not know whereas Jonah, asleep, had no sense of the presence of the God he did know. Although we can never escape from God, however far we flee, we can find ourselves bereft of the felt presence of God in our lives.

The captain rebuked Jonah for his lack of prayer but we are not told that he did pray. Lots were drawn to see who was the cause of the trouble, and the lot fell on Jonah. So the sailors challenged him about what was happening. Jonah, who was called to be a witness to a pagan city and refused, found that the storm from God and the challenge of fearful men caused him to witness to pagan sailors. “He had told them earlier that he was fleeing from his God, but that had not concerned them—that was his problem and probably not all that uncommon.”³ But now he tells them that the God he worships “made the sea and the land” and they are very concerned.

The sailors ask Jonah what they have to do to him to make the sea calm down for them and he says they are to throw him into the sea. He acknowledges that the storm is his fault and seems to take some responsibility for the lives of the men in the boat. The sailors are reluctant to take this drastic action and try to row for shore. In the end they are forced to follow Jonah's advice but not without first praying to the Lord that he would not hold them to account for killing an innocent man. They acknowledge God's sovereignty as they hurl Jonah overboard and come to greatly fear Him as they see the sea calm down.

¹Dockery, D. S., Butler, T. C., Church, C. L., Scott, L. L., Ellis Smith, M. A., White, J. E., & Holman Bible Publishers (Nashville, TN: (1992). *Holman Bible Handbook* (478). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

²Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary : Old Testament* (electronic ed.) (Jon 1:3). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

³Matthews, V. H., Chavalas, M. W., & Walton, J. H. (2000). *The IVP Bible background commentary : Old Testament* (electronic ed.) (Jon 1:10). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

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Our passage ends with these once pagan sailors offering sacrifice and vows to the Lord. Their lives have been saved because one man has been sacrificed for them.

Open

- What is the worst job anyone has asked you to do?

Study

Read together Jonah 1: 1-16

1. What did the Lord tell Jonah to do and for what reason? Why do you think this might have been a surprise to Jonah?(Jonah 1:1-2 see 2 Kings 14:25)

2. The Hebrew of verse 2 is “Arise, go”, and the Hebrew of verse 3 is “he arose to flee”. What would you expect a prophet to do when God speaks to him? Why did Jonah do what he did and what did it cost him? (Jonah 1:2-3, see Psalm 16:11)

Commit Question

3. Jonah chose to disobey God and flee from him. What are the things that you are unwilling to do for God that make you want to flee? Consider the potential cost to you of disobeying God; what might you lose?

4. How did the Lord put a stop to Jonah's flight? What effect did this have on the sailors and on Jonah? Why the different reactions? (Jonah 1: 4-6)

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5. What questions did the sailors ask Jonah and how did he answer? Where do you find conflict between what Jonah said and what he was doing? How did his answers affect the sailors? (Jonah 1: 7-10)

Commit Question

6. Jonah had an inconsistent witness, his actions did not match his words, but God still spoke through him. To what extent do you think a lifestyle that is inconsistent with our beliefs damages our witness and hinders people coming to faith?

7. "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?" What does Jonah's answer to this question show about his concern for the pagan sailors and what does their response show about their concern for him? Why would this be surprising to the original hearers of this story? (Jonah 1: 11-13)

8. How did salvation come to the sailors and how do we know that this was more than just being rescued from the storm? (Jonah 1: 14-16)

Commit Question

9. "The ship with its pagan sailors can be compared to the world as it struggles for survival with its conflicting ideas. What does this say to us if we consider Jonah to be a picture of a sleeping church?"⁴

⁴Mackrell, P. (2007). *Opening up Jonah* (34). Leominster: Day One Publications.