

Family Worship Booklet

An underwater photograph of a whale's tail, showing the tail fluke and the surrounding blue water. The image is used as a background for the title text.

Jonah

God's astonishing Grace

God tells us that Ezra read from the book of the Law,
day after day, and that the people of God
were filled with joy!

Friday – Jonah 1:3 – Jonah begins his flight from God.

There's an urgency about Jonah's fleeing that is disturbing. We should be quick to obey and not quick to disobey, not that disobedience should ever be an option for the followers of Christ.

Summoned and commanded to go east, Jonah sets off in the opposite direction, seeking to go as far as he can from the immediate presence of God in his life. Ultimately, he's looking to get to the city of Tarshish. The exact location of Tarshish is unknown. The "Table of Nations" in Genesis 10:1-32 lists Tarshish as one of the cities of the sons of Javan. Javan has historically been associated with the islands in the eastern Mediterranean, and since Psalm 72:10 and Isaiah 66:19 associate Tarshish with distant places, the city may probably have been as far west as Spain. Jonah wasn't just going to down the road to escape God; he was going to the known ends of the earth.

When you are in a real relationship with God, one born of the Holy Spirit, running even a short distance from God is not easy. So you tend to find that when people start running from God, they try to put as much distance as they can between themselves and God, thinking that if they do so, it will be easier for them to forget His commands. And note, while it may involve travelling actual kilometres from those who will remind them of God's presence in their lives, often, it takes the form of behavioural distance, immoral, godless thinking and living.

Jonah travels south to the important seaport of Joppa. It was founded on the only natural harbour on the coast of Palestine, south of the Bay of Acco, and served as a crucial transport and trading centre for the surrounding region, especially Jerusalem (Ezra 3:7). This is the first of what will be several going 'downs' in his pursuit of imagined freedom from God. Once in Joppa, Jonah finds a ship travelling west to Tarshish, pays the fare and boards. Previously he rose to flee from the presence of the Lord; now, his actions are recorded as taking him on the stage of his journey away from the presence of the Lord. His only desire is to get as far as he can from Nineveh, specifically God's call on his life. But God is not to be played with. While we often sing about it and praise Him for it, we nonetheless often forget that God is on an entirely different plane from us. He can and does operate in the realm of time and space, but He is outside and beyond it all. So, when we read that God hurled a great wind upon the sea, we read about something only He can do. This is just the start of God's dealings with the fleeing Jonah, and we would do well to remember as we see this unfolding that no one can run from God.

Thursday – Jonah 1:1-3 – The danger of the task.

Yesterday we considered how difficult it would have been for Jonah to have gone to Nineveh to proclaim God’s message because of the journey involved in getting there and the sheer size of the city and its surrounding area. But it wasn’t just a matter of difficulty. This task would place Jonah in real danger.

Prophesying to God’s people in Israel and Judah posed dangers but going to an utterly pagan nation with a message of judgment from some unknown foreign God, as they would see it, you might be laughed at the first few times you tried to do so, but persist at it, and the probability of being stoned to death would have increased dramatically within a matter of days. The later prophecy of Nahum gives us some idea of the depths of depravity, wickedness, and violence that permeated and pervaded every stratum of Nineveh’s society (Nahum 3:1-7). So, going to Nineveh to call out against it was not a trifling matter it posed a real and serious threat to Jonah’s life, and we shouldn’t diminish or undermine that.

The third issue that Jonah faced was one I have called distrust. What do I mean? Well, we can’t consider the various issues/problems facing Jonah’s fulfilment of this call without setting it in the context of the bitter contempt and animosity between the Jews and the Gentiles. For the covenant God of Israel to even contemplate providing a Gentile city with an opportunity for repentance, forgiveness, and peace with Him would have challenged any Hebrew prophet. But to do so by declaring judgment on the pagan capital of the Assyrian Empire was beyond thinking about. Nineveh, after all, was the city from where the destruction of the northern Kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17:1-23) had been devised and then executed.

So that leaves us with several issues when trying to understand why Jonah fled from God’s presence. Which one do we choose? Well, I think that while these may have been contributing factors, Jonah 4:2 seems to tell us that ultimately Jonah took his decision because he didn’t trust God to do what he thought should be done. It’s never good to try and honour God or protect His name and character by deciding not to do what He commands explicitly, no matter how irrational it may seem. It will always end badly for you.

Q1. In what sense was the task which God gave Jonah a dangerous one?

Q2. Why did Jonah wrestle with the issue of not trusting God?

Q3. Why should we always trust God, no matter how good the reason not to do so may seem to be?

Monday – Jonah 1:1-3 – Jonah’s response to God’s command.

When God speaks with Jonah, His message is concise and clear. It is one marked by reality – go to Nineveh, that great city, - and tremendous responsibility – call out against it. And therein, we find the nature of the message; it is a command. As the voice of God comes and speaks to Jonah, what he hears is impressed emphatically upon his heart and mind. Like prophets before and after him, Jonah could not escape the fact that God was speaking to him in a direct and commanding manner. This is neither a suggestion nor a request for Jonah to consider. This is a task that God is confronting Jonah with, and God is expecting one response from Jonah – obedience. So it is with the commands of God that come to us as believers; they are not given to us to ponder over and weigh up in terms of their merits. We are not to mull over the pros and cons of whether or not we will obey. God’s concise, clear commands are given to us for one reason, and one reason only - to be obeyed.

So, how does Jonah respond? Well, the first thing to note is that Jonah does hear what God tells him to do, and he does understand the nature of what is being asked of him. This is not a case of God speaking and those hearing it being unable to grasp what is said. Sometimes it did happen in the New Testament that those listening did not get what He was saying. For example, in Luke 9:44,45, Jesus tells them that “the Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men.” Then we read, “But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them so that they might not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.” That isn’t the case with Jonah, and it’s not a scenario we can hide behind either, as one commentator writes, “It has been well said that our problem in obeying God is not that we do not understand what he is saying, but that we do!”

How does Jonah respond? He tells us (and remember, we know what Jonah does because he’s the one that tells us in this book) that he “rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.” But what does it mean that he flees from the presence of God, and why did he do so? Those are the questions we will take up tomorrow.

Q1. In what form does God’s instruction come to Jonah - as a suggestion, a request, or a command?

Q2. Does Jonah hear and understand what God tells him to do?

Q3. How did Jonah respond to God’s command?

Tuesday – Jonah 1:1-3 – Jonah flees from the presence of God.

Jonah heard God's clear, concise command to go to Nineveh and call out against it, but he decided not to do that; rather to flee to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord. But what does it mean to flee from the presence of the Lord?

God tells us that He is 'omnipresent', which means that He is present everywhere, all the time. Psalm 139 teaches us in clear, simple language, "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there, your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you." (verses 7-12). Obviously, Jonah did not flee the omnipresence of God, nor can we. He knew that he couldn't do so, for he says later in the chapter, in verse nine, when speaking of his fear of God, that "the God of heaven made the sea and the dry land."

Some would point to Scripture, like 2 Kings 13:22, which associates the presence of the Lord with the land of Israel and the covenant promises; and based on that, they would say that Jonah is speaking here of leaving the land where God dwells in the midst of His people, and, as such, he is fleeing God's presence.

Yes, this is true, but there is a more personal aspect to Jonah's fleeing than simply leaving the nation of Israel. After all, he was sent to Nineveh, far beyond the promised land's borders. Turning to another passage in the book of Kings might help us to understand the nature of this fleeing from the presence of God. In 1 Kings 17:1, we read, "Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." So, the prophet Elijah comes to Ahab and prophesies about the coming drought on the land, having been told to do so by God, in whose presence he had been standing. It is this presence of the Lord that Jonah flees from. We must take care when we come into the presence of the Lord and hear His Word that we do not flee from it and note that fleeing doesn't always mean running away physically; you can flee in your mind and heart, while remaining in the same place.

Q1. Jonah fled from the presence of God, but what did that mean?

Q2. What does the omnipresence of God mean?

Q3. How can and do we flee from the presence of God?

Wednesday – Jonah 1:1-3 – Why did Jonah flee from the Lord's presence?

Yesterday, we considered what it meant for Jonah to flee from the presence of the Lord and the command he had been given, but why did he flee? Let's note first that he did so immediately. There is hesitation as soon as the Word of the Lord comes to Jonah, telling him to "Arise, go to Nineveh,"; he does the first bit - he arises, but then he heads off in the opposite direction. In doing so, he's making it clear to God that he won't do what he's been told. But why? There are several possibilities; I discern three that I want to explore. Was it an issue of difficulty, danger, or distrust? I'll explain what I mean by each word as I take them up in turn.

First, 'difficulty' - by that, I mean the sheer scale of the task. God had told Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh. Nineveh was about 750 miles from Jerusalem, not an unheard-of journey, but it certainly wouldn't have been easy; there would have been numerous potential threats on such a journey. But getting to Nineveh wasn't the most difficult part. When God characterizes Nineveh as that 'great city,' He wasn't exaggerating. Nineveh is first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 10:11, where its construction is attributed to Ashur. But it was King Sennacherib (c. 700 BC) who made Nineveh into the flourishing capital of the Assyrian Empire. One record says he built a 'palace without rival'. To give you one idea of its splendour, some principal doorways were flanked by colossal stone figures weighing up to 30 tonnes, carved in the image of Mesopotamian lions, and bulls topped with depictions of human heads.

By the time of Jonah's 'second commissioning', we read in Jonah 3:3 that it "was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth" and in 4:11 that there were "more than 120,000 persons who did not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle". These two statements have resulted in much debate about the actual size and population of the city. I don't have the space to state and address those here, but the one I find most convincing regarding its size is the one which says that the name 'Nineveh' is used to speak of the city and the surrounding area, satellite communities. It's like the signs 'Ottawa population 1,000,000', which are a ten/fifteen-minute drive from the buildings on the city perimeter. As to the number of inhabitants, I think the 120,000 figure probably accounts for the immoral population as a whole and not simply children, meaning there could have been more than 500,000 people in the city. Nineveh wasn't a village or a town, whatever the final size and number. It was a highly sophisticated metropolis with all the modern amenities and facilities of the day. An extremely daunting place for one man to engage with.

Q1. What size was Nineveh, and how could this have affected Jonah's thinking?