

# Book of Jonah

## Week 1: God Loves the Lost

### Jonah 1

Dr. Kevin Maurice---- April 28, 2024

Good morning, Grace. It is so good to be here with you today to worship with you. Thank you, Tyler, and to the band and CiCi. for leading us this morning. They do such a great job.

Let's play a little game. We're going to do some word association. So, I'll say a phrase or a word and I want you to say out loud the first thing that comes to your mind. So, I'll say a word or a phrase, and you say whatever you think of.

We'll start kind of easy.

**Kevin:** BLUEBELL

**Congregation:** Ice cream

**Kevin:** There you go. SALT LICK.

**Congregation:** Barbeque.

**Kevin:** Yeah, it's almost lunch time ... we're getting there. REMEMBER THE \_\_\_\_\_.

**Congregation:** Alamo.

**Kevin:** Yeah, well done, we all passed middle school Texas history. That's the Alamo. TEXAS ...

**Congregation:** [different responses]

**Kevin:** There is a correct answer for this one, by the way, and it is Texas Longhorns. So, well done, most of you. Great. Now that we're all primed, let's try one from the Bible: JONAH

**Congregation:** Fish *or* whale.

**Kevin:** Yeah. What did you think of? What did you say? For many of us, when we think of Jonah, when we hear about Jonah from the Bible, the first thing we think of is a whale or fish. If you go to Amazon and you just search "Jonah books", this is what comes up. Jonah and the Fish, Jonah and the Whale ... there's a consistent theme here.



But if we focus on the fish, we are going to miss what this story is all about. Because the purpose of the Bible, the purpose of the Scriptures, is not to give us children's stories, or even to give us heroes that we're supposed to emulate.

The purpose of Scripture is to reveal who God is and who we are to Him. The Bible is all about God, and it reveals His character and His heart toward us. So, ultimately, the Book of Jonah is not a story about a big fish. It's a story about a big God.

So, please open your Bibles with me to Jonah 1. I'm really excited, because for the next four weeks we're going to be studying this book, and I love this book. All right, Jonah 1, let's dive into the story together ... pun fully intended, by the way. And if you're able, would you please stand with me as I read from God's Word.

“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.’ <sup>3</sup> But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

<sup>4</sup> “But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup> Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his own god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. <sup>6</sup> So the captain came and said to him, ‘What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.’”

I could not have timed that better [*referring to the sound of rain on the roof that just began*]. Oh, my goodness! Thank you, Lord! Please be seated. Wow.

The story of Jonah is primarily about three things. It's about a lost city, a lost prophet, and a lost cause. Those three things will teach us so much about who God is what He's like.

## The Lost City

So, let's start with the lost city. The word of the Lord comes to Jonah and tells him, “Rise, go to Nineveh.” Go to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. From around 900-600 BC the Assyrians were the terror of the ancient world. One historian calls them “the empire of eternal doom.”

Assyrian kings recorded the results of their military victories by the number of bodies they left behind. They burned people alive, they skinned people alive, and they bragged about it. They put up huge hieroglyphic panels in their palaces that would depict the grizzly details. And

if you were spared ... when the Assyrians took captives they would deport them to the far reaches of the realm. But before they did that, they would typically cut off at one of your arms or your legs.

Dan Carlin is the host of a history podcast, and someone once asked him this hypothetical question: If you had to be conquered by an ancient people, who would you want it to be? The Assyrians, the Romans, or the Mongols.

Carlin replied, “Well, it depends on who I am and where and what time in history, but it’s between the Romans and the Mongols. Never the Assyrians.”

Now during the time of the Assyrian Empire, the people of God are living in the Promised Land. But they’ve had this civil war, so the people are divided. The kingdom is divided. And their hearts toward God are divided.

Now the Northern Kingdom, Israel, has drifted farther and faster away from the Lord than their southern cousins. And because of this, God has actually allowed the Assyrians to invade that Northern Kingdom and begin to pick off and kill and scatter the northern tribes one by one. So, that’s when and where our story is taking place.

In verse 1, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah. And that is the standard opening for a book about a biblical prophet. God used prophets to speak His words to His people, especially before or during a time of crisis. And when a prophet calls out or speaks out against someone, it’s so that they might repent and turn back to God.

And from the start, we see that this is going to be a very different prophetic book, because God doesn’t give Jonah a message for the northern tribes or for the king of Israel or for the people of God. He tells Jonah, “Go to Nineveh.”

And that’s shocking. God is telling a prophet to leave home and go to a foreign people. Up to this point, prophets were only sent to God’s people. Now other prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—prophesied about foreign countries. Jonah is being told to prophesy to a foreign country. And most offensive is that God is sending Jonah to a lost city. It is a wretched place.

The Assyrians—make no mistake—are evil. They are vile and twisted. They have done things, and they do things, that God, in His justice, will ultimately repay them for. God will deliver justice. But at this moment in their history, God is reaching out to them. He’s reaching out.



Let's just recontextualize Jonah's mission: This is the equivalent of God calling a Jewish rabbi from New York City to go to Berlin in 1942 to preach to the Nazis.

Why would God help the enemies of His people? Why would God give them even the slightest chance of redemption? Nineveh's a lost city. And yet, God loves Nineveh. God loves the lost. That is a fundamental truth of Scripture. That's a conviction about His character.

God loves the lost. God speaks through a different prophet and says, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked. I desire that the wicked turn away from their ways and live."

In the New Testament, 2 Peter tells us that God is patient and He's slow to anger because He doesn't want anyone to perish. He wants everyone to reach repentance.

There's an author named Walter Wink who says it this way: "There is no one, and surely no entire people, in whom the image of God has been utterly extinguished. Faith in God means believing that anyone can be transformed, regardless of the past."

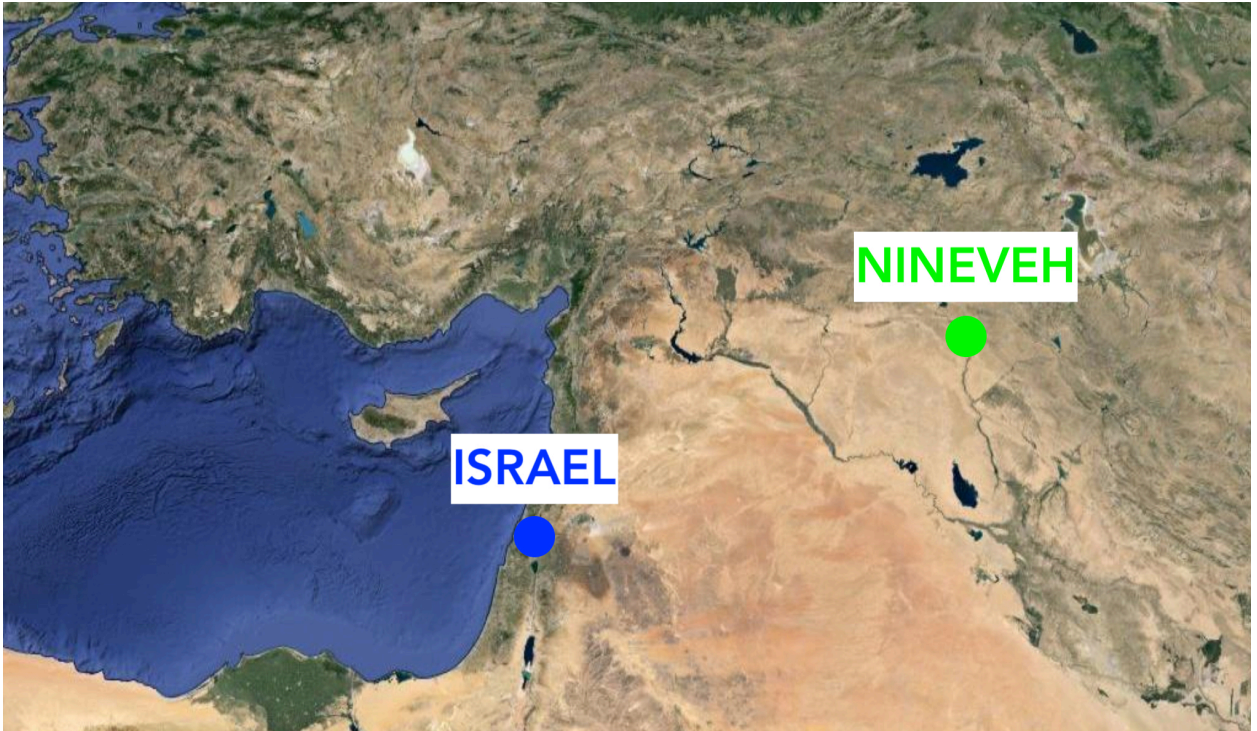
Nineveh is a lost city. But God loves the lost. And so, He sends Jonah. God tells Jonah, "Arise and go to Nineveh." And what does Jonah do? It says, "Jonah rose ..."—he got that part right—"... to flee from the presence of the Lord."

## The Lost Prophet

So, here's what we learn about Jonah: he's a lost prophet. God told him to rise and go, but Jonah rises and runs away. God says, "Get up." Jonah gets up one time so he can disobey four times.

Just look at the text. The author makes a point of showing us this. God says, "Arise ... up." What does Jonah do? He goes **down** to Joppa. He buys a ticket and goes **down** into the ship. He goes **down** into the deepest part of that ship. And then, once more for good measure, he lays **down** and falls asleep.

On top of this, Jonah is also directionally disobedient. Because God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh—that's in the east. Jonah goes to Tarshish, in the west. This is the ends of the earth. They don't have maps for what's west of Tarshish. This is as far as Jonah can possibly go to get away from God and from this mission. Jonah is in open rebellion. He's disobeying. He's running away from his Creator.



So, why does Jonah run? I mean, is he afraid? Is it that simple? Is the prospect of success so low and the probability of death so high that he thinks, *I'm not doing that?* Or does he feel like God is asking him to betray his national identity by going to his enemies?

Why does Jonah run? I think we learn the answer from Jonah's one other appearance in the Bible. He shows up in one other place, 2 Kings 14. And in three verses, we find out that Jonah was a prophet during a time when Israel had their worst king, their most wicked king.

The Bible says this king did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And Jonah, it seems, has no problem serving him. We are never told once that Jonah speaks up against this king. He appears to be on board with all the king's policies and he's willing to overlook all that sin stuff.

It's another prophet, less famous, a guy named Amos, who is the one who tells this king, "God is against you because of your sinfulness." Jonah never says that.

Because, as long as serving God fit in with Jonah's plans and Jonah's goals and Jonah's worldview, he was content. But now when God's plan is to offer redemption and salvation to Jonah's enemies, he's livid.

Why does Jonah run? Because he hates Nineveh. At the root of his rebellion there is hate.

Did you know that Jonah is the only prophet in the Bible who runs away from God? He's the only one. And he's resentful toward God for loving the lost city. And this blinds him to the truth that he's a lost prophet.

Because you are never farther away from God than when you think someone else is less lost than you are. You are never farther away from God than when you think, *I deserve His love, but not them. They don't.*

Jonah sees no reason for God to rescue “those people.” And that is dangerous theology, this idea that if I can’t see a good reason, then there must not be one. That’s the doctrine of a lost prophet.

And in Jonah’s rebellion, in his rebellious heart, we see the purpose of this book of the Bible. Because the story of Jonah, more than any other in Scripture, I think, holds up this mirror to its subject and exposes this deep pride and this hard-heartedness and this lack of grace.

And here’s the thing. The Bible isn’t only holding that mirror up to Jonah. It’s holding that up to our souls as well. The Scriptures are exposing this in us.

Because we need to ask ourselves, what’s our Nineveh? What is that place where “those people” or “that person”, to you, is the epitome of lost?

What would it sound like to your soul for God to tell you, “Arise, and go to Washington, D. C.” “Arise, go to Moscow.” “Arise, go to Iran.” “Arise, go to your neighbor with that political sign in their yard.” “Go to that family member who hurt you so deeply.” “Go to that parent who abandoned you.” “Go to that friend who deserted you.” “Go to that ex-husband who made your life miserable.” “Go to that bully.” “Arise, and go tell them that God loves them, deeply.” How would that strike you?

What’s your Nineveh? The place that if God clearly called you to, you would ask why? Who is your Nineveh, the person that you can’t imagine having anything to do with? *That place, those people, they’re too far gone. I’m not going there.* That’s the heart of Jonah.

This past Wednesday I was visiting the University of Texas to go speak at one of the college ministries. And during the day I began receiving texts and calls from some of the campus leaders, because there was this massive protest taking place on campus. It caused a huge disruption. And thankfully, things didn’t turn violent. But the things that were being said that were aimed at Jewish people—it was truly an evil and awful thing. People were yelling and screaming, and there was such vitriol. And then there were death threats, and so, people were arrested. Eventually, the protest disbanded.

And so, that evening I get down to UT and I park and I’m walking to this meeting room. And I’ve just got to confess to you that most of my walk I was thinking, *How dare they? How*

*dare “those people”? They are so ignorant and what they’re doing is so wrong, and what they’re saying is so disgraceful. They are so lost.*

And then very quickly, far too easily, my heart went to this place. *I’m better than them. I’m better than “those people.” Here I am ... I’m going to speak to a Christian group on campus. I’m the good guy.*

And I’m telling you this, and it’s probably the thing I hate most about myself—my spiritual pride. It shows up effortlessly. I don’t have to do anything. It doesn’t even take much for me to get there. I’m so much more than Jonah than I want to believe.

And so, that evening I’m walking back to my car, and probably because I was studying this passage and preparing for this sermon, God kept putting this thought into my heart. He said, *Kevin, yes, they are lost. And so are you. And I love the lost.*

Grace, there are people that we find it hard to love. We might even find it impossible to love them. There are people—and we won’t admit this—but deep down somewhere, I dare say, there are people that we hate. And the truth of this book is that God loves them. God loves them just as much as He loves you.

And what God wants is for His people to have a heart like His, a heart that overflows with love for the lost. And not just the lost people that we like, but also the ones that we don’t.

Because God loves people that we don’t think deserve it. The Book of Jonah demonstrates to us that when it comes to God’s love, “deserve” has got nothing to do with it.

Church, this is a hard truth--the reality that God loves people that we might hate. And if you think to yourself, *I never could see or think of that person with love*, you’re absolutely right. You’re right. You can’t. It’s only going to be the love and the power of God working in and through you that would enable you, that would allow you to do that.

So, I want to ask us this week to do something very specific. This week would you pray for your Nineveh? Just pray for them. Pray that God would help you to see people the way that He does. Pray that God would change your heart toward them. Pray that you might even be able to love as God loves.

This is why God was sending a prophet to Nineveh in the first place. God loves the Assyrians. God desires to draw them unto himself. And this is why God was sending Jonah specifically. He loves him. God desires to draw Jonah to himself. And he’s using this mission to weed out the sin in Jonah’s heart.

And that's why God doesn't give up on Jonah. God doesn't send another prophet. He doesn't just have somebody else go. He doesn't let Jonah get very far in his journey. Because God isn't done with him. So, He goes after him. God pursues His lost prophet, because God loves the lost.

God pursues people, whether they're wicked, evil Assyrians, or just wayward prophets. Ezekiel 24:16: God says: "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed ...". Lost city, lost prophet—God loves them both. So, He seeks after them. He says, *I'm bringing them back.*

And so, for Jonah, God sends a storm. God hurls this hurricane in Jonah's path. The ship is in danger of sinking, and so these pagan sailors are all praying to their gods, and they're throwing things overboard just trying to keep the ship afloat.

And Jonah could not care less. He's sleeping down below. The captain wakes him up and says, "Hey, help us out here. You pray to your God! Maybe that will help."

Eventually, the sailors learn that the reason for the storm is Jonah. And so, they ask him four questions. What's your job? Where do you come from? What's your country? Who are your people? All four of those questions are gut checks for Jonah from God. They're piercing questions. They're meant to show him just how far away he is.

And so, Jonah tells them, "I'm a Hebrew. I serve Yahweh, the God of heaven and the sea and the land."

And the sailors hear this, and now they're even more afraid. And so, they ask him, "What should we do?"

And he says, "Throw me into the ocean."

Now, based on what you know about Jonah so far, do you think that Jonah cares about these men? Do you think this is a selfless act? I don't. I don't think so. If he cared about them, Jonah could have said, *This is my fault. Turn the boat around. I know where God wants me to go.* This is his opportunity to repent. And Jonah doesn't do that.

He says, "Just toss me in." In other words, *I would rather die than do what God wants me to do.* What better way to avoid going to Nineveh? *The bottom of the ocean—that's as far as I can possibly get from those people.*

And these pagan sailors, these foreigners, these people who have more in common with those Assyrians than with the people of God, these men for whom Jonah cares nothing, refuse to sacrifice this stranger that they just met. They say, "We're not going to do that." The Bible tells

us that the men rowed hard to get back to dry land. “The men rowed hard, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.”

Notice that Jonah doesn’t do anything to try and save them. I’m not even sure he rows. The Bible says the men rowed, so Jonah doesn’t even pick up an oar. He doesn’t pray for them. He doesn’t tell them to turn to the God of the universe. He doesn’t repent in front of them. He does nothing. He says, “Just toss me over.”

That’s a recurring theme, by the way. Jonah’s understanding of God’s love for people is so shallow, God’s going to teach him in the deep end.

### The Lost Cause

The sailors finally realize this is a lost cause. *We’ve got no hope. There’s nothing that we can do to save ourselves. We have to throw him overboard.* They say, “O Lord, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood. For you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.”

So, very reluctantly, they throw Jonah into the ocean. And immediately the storm stops. They’re safe. And just look what happens. It says, “Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to Him.”

The sailors knew that theirs was a lost cause. They could not save themselves. So, they doom a man to death. They’re trusting that their lives are going to be spared because of the shedding of his blood.

But it wasn’t Jonah going into the ocean that saved the sailors. These men were far from God. They were completely lost. But God loves the lost. And so, God saves them. He saves them from the storm so that they might turn to Him and worship Him.

See, the story of Jonah is not a story about a big fish. It’s a story of a big God. And in this last part of chapter one, we’re starting to see glimpses of the bigger story. We are in the shadow of the cross.

Because of our sin, in our brokenness, we are lost—every last one of us. We are adrift at sea. We are in the middle of a storm. And on our own, we are a lost cause. We have no hope. There’s nothing we can do to save ourselves. And when you come to terms with that—when you see yourself as completely, utterly, hopelessly lost—that is when you’re in the perfect place to be found.



The Bible is all about God and His heart for people. And it's a story about a big God who loves the lost so much. He loves the lost so much that He's going to step into the story.

There's a theologian named John Stott, and he says this: "God always makes the first move ... Before we existed, God took action. Before we decided to look for God, God had already been looking for us. The Bible isn't about people trying to discover God, it's about God reaching out to find us."

Luke 19:10 says, "Jesus, the Son of Man, has come to seek and to save the lost." Hundreds of years after Jonah is thrown into the sea, Jesus is going to be thrown into the depths of our sin. He goes into the abyss. He goes into the grave to save us, because God loves the lost.

The Book of Jonah gives us a glimpse of the Gospel. It reveals the truth about God, the God who loves you and who pursues you, who seeks after you so that through Jesus He might save you. That's the deepest truth in the Bible.

Sink down into that truth and let it change you. Let it change your heart. Let it change your life. That's God's heart for you.

I want to close our time with a story of another lost cause on a ship in a stormy sea. In the 1700s, John Newton was a British sailor on the Atlantic Ocean, and he was intimately involved in the African slave trade. He profited from it. He rose through the ranks to become a ship's captain. And he justified his work, because to him, they were "those people." He saw those slaves as less than him. They were "other." He looked at them as "those."



One night John wakes up in the middle of a storm that is so violent that it's tearing the ship to shreds. As the storm rages on, the ship begins to sink. And John goes to the wheel, and he accepts death as his fate. And in his final moments he began to think of his mother who had taken him to church growing up. And he thought about some of the songs they sang. And he thought of some of the words he'd heard. And he began to think about Jesus.

Years later, John would write about that moment, and he would say: “I concluded my sins were too great to be forgiven. I waited with fear and impatience to receive my doom ... But then I began to pray ... to think of that Jesus that I had so often derided; I remembered His death: a death for sins not His own, but, as I remembered, for the sake of those who put their trust in Him.”

And in the middle of the storm, John Newton, a slave trader, a bitter man, a lost cause if there ever was one, prayed for mercy and for forgiveness. And he asked God to take his soul as he expected the ocean was about to take his life.

But John didn't die in the storm...well, not physically, at least. Spiritually, though, old John was dead. He was buried beneath the waves. And a new John, transformed by the love of God, was born.

He would go on to live his life with a deep regret about his contribution to the slave trade. He hated that he had participated in it and had profited from it. And so, he went out and he wrote and he spoke about the evil of slavery. He influenced others around him, including William Wilberforce. He became this major leader in the abolitionist movement in England.

But what John is most well-known for is a poem that he wrote that was eventually turned into a hymn. And the opening words are a testament to the truth that transformed his life. He wrote:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now I'm found,  
Was blind but now I see.

The love of God changed John Newton forever. It changed the way that he looked at himself. He had to learn that he was lost so that he could be found. It changed the way that he looked at other people. People that he thought he could never love, he spent the rest of his days trying to serve and set free.

John Newton's life is a story about the God who loves the lost. Jonah is a story about a God who loves the lost. The pages of Scripture are dripping with this truth. And this is our story—it's yours and mine: God loves the lost.

Would you please pray with me?

Heavenly Father, we thank You for who You are. We thank You for the gift that You've given us that is Your Word, that we might come to know You better and more fully through the Scriptures. Now we pray that these truths would not just live in our minds, but that they would take up permanent residence in our hearts, that we would be transformed by the awareness of who we are. God, transform us to be able to love others the way that You do. And God, we pray, whatever it might be, the people or the place or the person that is our Nineveh, this week, God, would You convict us and help us to see them the way that You do, with love? God, we pray these things in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

