

Book of Jonah

Week 3: God's Blunt Instrument

Jonah 3

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Today we're looking at chapter 3 in a book called Jonah. And the key is this one word: satire. Satire is a noun. It's "a literary work in which human foolishness or vice is exposed or attacked through irony, sarcasm, or caustic wit." Irony, sarcasm, and caustic wit—I'm pretty good at that.

We're looking at the study of this prophetic book called Jonah, and Jonah is giving a master class on how to tell a short story. It is, I would say, the single best short story in the Hebrew Bible. And it's filled with satire. It has humor and irony and mood swings and suspense. There's no book with this kind of suspense. And it is dense with chosen words—specifically chosen words—to help us know what the key to the lesson is. The more you know about satire in literature, the greater appreciation you're going to have for this Book of Jonah.

Introduction to Jonah

Jonah is a special book. It's a different kind of book. It's the story of a rebellious prophet who is running from God. He is furious with God because of His attributes of *hesed*, His lovingkindness. That's what makes him mad.

And one of the things that's unique about this book, is that in the other prophetic books, we would study what the prophet is saying—his prophetic utterances. But in this case, it's more like a narrative. We're studying the man and the choices he's making as a prophet who was mean and self-righteous.

Now the satire is most obvious in this: the hero is really the villain, and the villains are coming off as the heroes. I mean, the story has these overly classic stereotypical characters. But the way they act is the complete opposite of what you would expect. And so, there are two run-ins with two different kinds of non-Israelis. And they don't act like non-Israelis. Meanwhile, the prophet is not acting like the prophet. The pagan sailors and the Ninevites themselves are a

humorous, comical contrast, showing what it looks like to repent or be humbled or to worship; while the prophet is arrogant and self-righteous. It's a great book.

The only person in the storyline that has hatred and anger towards Jehovah is Jonah. And do you know why? Because God so loved the world. That's why. Because God so loved the whole world. That's what infuriates this prophet.

Chapter One: "I Won't Go"

So, we're in chapter 3, and let me give you a quick summary to catch up and see this bigger context. Chapter 1 would be titled "I Won't Go."

Jonah 1:1

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."

The book starts off right off the blocks with God commissioning Jonah to go to the great city called Nineveh. Here's what it says: "Now the word of Jehovah came to Jonah, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.'" *Go to Nineveh, preach this sermon.*

Nineveh is the capital city of the empire of Assyria. And the Assyrians are Klingons. They have a warrior culture. And when they went to war, they specialized in excessive violence and untold brutality. They were merciless to all their opponents. And some of that was so that the battles didn't last as long. Their enemies surrendered quickly because they knew what was coming their way. And even in this historical part of the storyline, Assyria is not technically an enemy of Israel. But everybody knows it's just a matter of time. It's not if, it's just when Assyria will come down south and invade the northern tribes called Israel.

So, Jonah hears from God, *Go east, young man!* And so, he runs and finds the fastest boat he can to go west in the opposite direction. We're introduced to the character of Jonah as the man of God who was running from God. And in the context of understanding the feel and the contrast and the humor of the story, you see that the key word in chapter one is describing the movement of Jonah's life, and the word is "down." It says he goes down to Joppa, and he goes

down to the boat, and he goes down to the bottom of the boat. He ends up at the bottom of a fish and the fish is at the bottom of the ocean. So, how far down can you go, Jonah, before you get it?

And in this story in chapter 1, the only good guys are when Jonah gets on that boat and the Lord sends a terrific storm, and it's tearing the boat apart, and everyone will die. And when the sailors find out that, absolutely, the obvious reason this is taking place is because Jonah is on the run from God, it's the sailors who are reluctant to throw him overboard. They don't want any part of helping in the death of this prophet. They do it anyway, and when the sea calms down, the chapter ends with these pagan sailors worshiping God by name, Jehovah, and offering Jehovah sacrifices. That's chapter 1: "I Won't Go."

Chapter Two: "I Regret Not Going"

Chapter 2: "I Regret Not Going." His near drowning is saved by God sending a giant fish to swallow Jonah and take him to the bottom of the sea. And it's here that Jonah prays this prayer. And just to be clear, he never repents. He never asks forgiveness for disobedience. He just regrets the consequences for that. But he does thank God for His nature, His *hesed*, His undying devotion, His constant love. And he vows that if the Lord would let him live, he would obey whatever the Lord says.

So, in a fun and humorous and comical rebuttal to the downward movement of Jonah's life, it ends with him being thrown up, barfed onto the beach. And that's where we pick up in chapter 3.

Chapter Three: "All Right, I'll Go"

Jonah 3:1-3

**Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying,
2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the
message that I tell you." 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh,
according to the word of the Lord.**

"I Won't Go"—chapter 1. "I Regret Not Going"—chapter 2. Chapter 3: "All Right, I'll Go." Chapter 3 is take two. Chapter 3 is the God of second chances. And we're supposed to see how obvious this is, because the first verse of chapter 3 is almost word for word the same as the

first verse of chapter 1. “And then the word of Jehovah came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.’ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.”

Now we’re going to look at and study what he does in Nineveh. But to understand the full irony of what’s taking place here and the satire, you have to grasp this. You have to see Jonah’s bitter-filled, spite-ridden obedience. You’ve got to see that he said he would obey the Lord, and the passage is written in a way that says “Go to Nineveh and preach,” and so he went to Nineveh and preached. In other words, he’s doing the least possible that he could do and still qualify.

When I was reading this, I couldn’t help but remember when our children were young teenagers, and they would be asked to come out and help with yard work. How they defined obedience ... raking leaves, they would just hold the rake. To one of the kids, I had to say, “Honey, that’s not raking leaves. That’s holding the rake.”

“Da—ad ... there. There are your two leaves. Are we done yet?”

I’m not sure that’s obedience. And I’m not sure that’s raking. And that’s the fun part of this story. He goes to Nineveh, the great and grand city. It takes three days to get across it.

Jonah 3:4

Jonah began to go into the city going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

And here’s what he says. “Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey.” And here’s the sermon. “And he called out, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!’” Nineveh will be, literally, overturned.

“Overturned” is the key word to his sermon. It’s only five words, and this is the last word. “Overturned” is the same word used when Sodom and Gomorrah got what they deserved in Genesis 19. This is what Jonah is hoping for—fire and sulfur raining down, the anger of God obliterating this city. This is his sermon: “Forty days, and Nineveh will be vaporized.” There are only five words in this sermon. They are not happy words.

And the point is this: this is the worst Billy Graham evangelistic crusade sermon every spoken by human lips. I mean, it is intentionally vague here. Look at all that’s missing. There’s no mention of what they did wrong. There’s no mention of what to do to make it right. There’s

no mention of who's going to overthrow them. What's the most obvious thing that's neglected in this little sermon? There's no mention of God! I mean, God's name doesn't even get into this. There's no mention of Jehovah, the God of the universe, who's orchestrating this whole thing.

I think Jonah worked hard to make sure he could "preach" to Nineveh without saying a single word. He is intentionally sabotaging any hope of some kind of crusade revival here. *Forty days, people ... the clock's ticking.* What? Forty days, clock is ticking ... I bet he mumbled too. *Forty days, clock ticking [mumbled] ... Did he say something? Did somebody say something?*

Jonah 3:5

And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

So, that's what Jonah does. That's what he brings. And here's how the people respond. "And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least." And then the word reached out. It says, "The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and then went and sat in ashes."

Wait, there's more. And then the king "issued a proclamation and published it throughout all of Nineveh, 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God.'"

Wow. That is quite a response. This is the proud king of the most violent and dominating populace and empire in the world at the time. And he leaves all his authority. He leaves his throne and his robes. He's not the king. He gets that. And he finds himself dressing in burlap—you know, sackcloth of burlap—and lying as a commoner in the ashes, begging for mercy. And he doesn't leave it there. Are you listening to what he says? He says that everyone is going to be in this position of humiliation—humility and repentance—from the king and his nobles to the cows. *The cows—I want them repenting. I want them wearing sackcloth, and I want them abstaining from food or drink until we beseech the Lord.*

The cows are like, *Wait, what? What did I do here? I don't even wear clothes, and now I'm in sackcloth. What is this burlap?*

And then look at his command: “Let everyone”—including the animals—“call out mightily to God.” We’re going to scream until we don’t have a voice left.

Jonah 3:8-9

Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish.

And here’s the next section, verse 8: “ ‘Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish.’ ”

Look at this king’s view of God Almighty. He says, “Who knows? Maybe the Lord will relent. Who knows?” He doesn’t presume upon God. He understands what it means to be a sovereign. And he’s not obliging God by this activity—dressing these cows up, waddling around in the ashes. He’s not assuming. He says, *Perhaps mercy will come our way. Because we don’t want what we deserve here. We can’t earn our way out of this one into the favor of God. Who knows? We can only do what we can do.*

So, here we are, a second time where the evil pagans are the heroes and an example of what it means to go before the Lord.

Jonah 3:10

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that He had said He would do to them, and He did not do it.

And so, next, verse 10: “When God saw what they did, how they turned away”—turned over—“from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that He had said He would do to them, and He did not do it.” They turned over.

Now here’s the joke. This is what makes this whole thing humorous. There’s a punchline. The definition of satire: humor to mock human foolishness. Jonah’s sermon, his last words, were that they would be overturned. And here, what’s happening, when Jonah says, *You guys are going to be overturned ... (Sodom and Gomorrah... it’s going to be an ash heap ... you’ll be absolutely obliterated and vaporized. It’s going to be awesome.) You’ve got forty days.*

But the word “overturned” is also used in other passages in the sense of “to turn over,” which means to make it the opposite of what it was. “Overturned” can be “turned over.” And here in this passage, God says, *Look what they’ve done. They’ve turned over from their evil ways.*

So, here it is. I know, if you have to explain a joke, it’s probably not a very good joke. But here goes. Nineveh doesn’t get overturned because Nineveh turns over their evil ways and finds the mercy of God. I’m going to let that sit for just a second. There, two people laughed--there you go.

So, you’re supposed to get this joke. And there must have been some kind of crazy celebration when they realized after forty days that what they deserved was not going to come their way.

But let’s learn and celebrate the whole point of chapter 3. It’s not the story of Jonah—it’s the story of God and His nature.

Point #1: God Wants Everyone To Know Him

And what we see, which is glaringly obvious at first, is that God desires everyone to come to know Him—even Nineveh. And if we find ourselves becoming impatient with God and calling upon God to come back, at least before my daughter turns thirteen, or because the world is a wreck, or thinking, *Why don’t you get involved in this and rain down some kind of justice?*—it’s because God is patient for a purpose. And the purpose is that even Nineveh would experience some kind of repentance.

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

In 2 Peter chapter 3: “The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

So, the next time you find yourself being impatient with the Lord, you say, *Hey, He’s patient for a purpose, and that’s so that “any” and “all” would come to a place of repentance*

and find themselves in sackcloth and ashes. (And so they would enjoy a relationship with God, by the way.)

Point #2: God Is Sovereign

And so, the second point that's blaring, that I really want to tell you about here, is the nature of God being sovereign. He has a plan, He has the power to make the plan happen. Look at all the power that's happening here in this story. It's God who initiates and commissions Jonah and sends him. Jonah runs—it's God who hunts Jonah down and sends a storm. It's God who sends that fish—*Hey, I need you to go pick this guy up and give him a submarine ride.*

And the fish is saying, I'm vegan, I don't eat people.

And God says, You're not going to have to eat him. Just hold him for a second.

Then in the revival—just think about this revival that took place in Nineveh. It wasn't preceded by six months of synagogues doing 24/7 prayer vigils. *Jonah's going to Nineveh—let's all pray, make sure all gets ready, because ...*

Nothing happens. There's none of that. And then, Jonah gives this dreadful sermon, five words that aren't even clear about who's in front and what's going to happen. And God's Spirit humbles this very proud nation and shows them their sin is violence. And it's God who explains to them that this is what repentance looks like. It's God who shows them that, perhaps, who knows. They understand that God is not obligated by their repentance. This powerful, murderous empire with the most murders on the planet, repents, from the king to the cows. And God did it all.

We have to grasp the magnitude of this. If we try to make this contemporary, let's go to the worst prison in American modern history. It would be Alcatraz, the Rock, the island in the San Francisco Bay that was a prison for the worst prisoners, and frankly, probably the worst guards that we had. One writer said that Alcatraz was "the great garbage can of San Francisco Bay, into which every federal prison dumped its most rotten apples."

And then, let's just say, while Alcatraz is in full swing, some reluctant evangelist walks into the cell corridors and mumbles, "You're all going to die ... soon. You've got to go. You'll be vaporized in just a day ... or next month." And then Jimmy Hoffa comes down off his throne and takes off his royal garments, and Jeffrey Dahmer ... Even the guards ... The birdman of

Alcatraz, a terrible murderer---his birds are covered in sackcloth and ashes. And there's this giant revival that takes place. What would you say to that? Wow! It'd be written up everywhere.

So, with that in mind, what's the point? The point is that God did all of this. God always does all of it. When it comes to evangelism and the conversion of the human soul, He can't trust us with that. He allows us to get involved with it so that we can enjoy being in His presence while He's going what He's doing. He's provided great works in Jesus Christ for us to do, and we can be part of that or not be part of that. But He's going to do what He's going to do. And He does it all. He does all of this.

And when I was looking at this—for a month now I've been looking at chapter 3, and particularly this last week—I could not understand how to apply this passage, until I applied satire; until I saw chapter 3 as a big joke. And the punchline is Jonah and all that he brought to it. This chapter has inspired me, maybe for the rest of my life. Because all the emotional and maybe the intellectual difficulties I have with evangelism—it mocks that. The more I laughed at this chapter, the more I realized this: that God Almighty loves everyone—everyone—so much, and wants every single soul to come into a relationship with Him and experience repentance and forgiveness, that He will use a stubborn, self-righteous man who intentionally writes this terrible sermon so that no one would repent or even understand what the problem was. And it ends up with a historical revival. If He can do that with Jonah ... so, maybe I've got a chance, see? Maybe He can even use me. I mean, the standard here, the bar, is so low, that I'm reading this thing and thinking, *Wow! Jonah is such a blunt instrument in the hand of God.* God can drive a nail with a hammer—that's easy. That's what it was made for. But He can drive a nail with a screwdriver. He can drive a nail with a pebble. He can drive a nail without anything, just bare hands. He doesn't need anything. And so, if that's the case, then He can even use me to drive a nail. I can qualify as a blunt instrument.

I looked at this passage and I was inspired—so much so, that I'm committing to a forty-day challenge of being a little better than Jonah. I'm not reaching for the skies here, okay? But I'm not going to be threatened by evangelism. And I'm always threatened by evangelism. And I'm not going to be. Because I can be a little better than Jonah.

Forty days is between now and Father's Day. Between Mother's Day and Father's Day is about thirty-five days, so I'm just going to round. And I'm going to believe the whole time that God is doing the work, and I can do a little better than Jonah.

At Grace, our outline for evangelism to the people that God brings into our lives is—some of you know this—prayer, care, share. I would pray for them, and to be part of God’s work we get to share in fellowship and talk to God about things. Can we pray for our friends and neighbors? Sure. We do that. And then, we care for them. We look for chances to do good works in Jesus Christ and have an audience with someone. And then, we share.

Now, I don’t know about you, and I think I do know about you. I’m pretty good at the prayer and care. I have a hard time pulling the trigger over here on the “share.” Do you know why? Because I think, somehow, it might depend upon me, or I might be threatened by it. I might have to be good at something. And according to this passage, none of that matters. I mean, the Jonah standard is that I could walk into the gym and say, “In forty days God is going to incinerate everything you love and care for. Thanks, everybody.” And that would be like Jonah. (That wouldn’t even be a Jonah sermon, because I said “God.” He didn’t even say “God.”)

It doesn’t take much, is the point. Here’s the thing, the forty-day challenge. Join me. Because all you have to do is say something like, *Hey, maybe go to church*. I mean, that’s so ambiguous. That’s terrible evangelism. It’s only five words: There it is, five words—*maybe go to church*. And you’re thinking, *That’s terrible*.

And do you know what God thinks? *Oh, yeah, that’s terrible. But I use terrible. As a matter of fact, terrible is about all I ever get. But I can drive a nail with a screwdriver, a pebble, or with my bare hand.*

Chapter 3 emboldens me. I want you to join me in the next thirty-five to forty days to crash through, prayer, care, and just share. We’re going to have a summer series, it’s going to be super easy for anyone to get involved in. It doesn’t matter how mature or even pre-Christian you are. It’s going to be about how to become closer to God.

But I think, look, Jonah is literally a punchline to a joke on how bad an evangelist can be. And look what God did with the punchline. And if He can do that with Jonah, I’ve got a chance. I just need to have a sense of humor and not put any weight on it. I’m just going to do what I’m going to do. *Hey, maybe go to church*. Let’s practice that. Can we just say that together? Let’s just say that together. Ready? *Hey*—start with hey, because that’s one of the words—*Hey, maybe go to church*. Wooh! Jonah’s school of evangelism! We’re just a little better than terrible.

Well, that's chapter 3. And I love a good story. This is a great story. I love a great short story. This is a great short story. This is a Hallmark made-for-TV movie, because if you look at this, they all live happily ever after. It is an awesome story, and God gets the glory.

Oh, wait ... there's more. There's another chapter? Like who wrote this story? Chapter 1: "I Won't Go." Chapter 2: "I Regret Not Going." Chapter 3: "I'll Go ... Fine." Chapter 4: "I'm Sorry I Went."

Jonah 4:1-3

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. ² He 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. ³ Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Chapter 4, verse 1: "And Jonah was greatly displeased and angry with God." The word for "anger" here means, literally, "hot." He's burning with anger. And here's why he's so mad at the Lord. It says, "And then he prayed to the Lord"—okay, here's his second prayer— " ' 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. Now, O Lord, take my life away from me, for it is better for me to die than to live in these terrible conditions."

This guy was crazy sick. I mean, he is mocking God for the attributes that saved his life in chapter 2. And his self-righteousness is limitless. It reminds me of ... uh... this guy ... I'm so bad with names. Oh, yeah ... me. He reminds me of me.

And what we're going to see here is like the storm and the near drowning and in the belly of a fish for three days. When that's still not enough, chapter 4 shows up. Chapter 4 is one of the single best lessons about how God works and how He uses His sovereignty to root out sin.

Chapter 4 is the last act, and it is a showstopper. It is so suspenseful. It is the single most suspenseful story in the Hebrew Bible. And like every great short story, it's saturated and overflowing in suspense. You'll have to come back next week to find out what happens. Because

when we see how God works in that kind of life, it will change the way you view your past and your present, and you'll look forward to the future. Do not miss next week.

But this week, is there anybody out here that wants to join me in a forty-day, a-little-better-than-Jonah evangelism? Let's see some hands. From now until Father's Day, let's just figure out, *Hey, maybe go to church*. Let's keep the wrath part quiet, you know—something a little more positive.

Let's pray.

Lord, we love the humor that we find here, because we laugh at Jonah, and we laugh at ourselves. It's the nature of satire itself. It's told brilliantly in a way that we can see that You are God Almighty, and we don't even have to play a part. But we get to. And we don't even have to play a part well. But we get to.

So, Lord, I'd ask You that You would show us what You do when we just say things, even dumb things; that You'd show us the power of the spoken word as being part of Your great works in Jesus Christ that You've arranged before time, and that we'd play our very small part, so that we can enjoy being with You.

Thank You, Lord, for this story and how inspiring it is to us. If You can use Jonah, then You can use us. Help us be a lighthouse on this hill. In Jesus' name. Amen.