

“A Whale of a Tale?  
Jonah and the Journey Outward (Part 1): Introduction”  
Psalm 48; Jonah 1-4

Did you know that there are actually three books of Jonah?

The first book of Jonah is the one we read as children. It's the cartoon, the flannelboard, the *Veggietales* version. God tells Jonah to do something. Jonah does the opposite thing. God sends a whale. The whale swallows Jonah. Jonah says “I'm sorry.” The whale spits Jonah out. And this time Jonah obeys God. It's all about obedience. The message: you should obey the Lord. For most of us, this is the only Jonah we read.

The problem is, the story ends after chapter 2. But there's four chapters in the book!

The second version of Jonah we might read is about Jonah the Missionary. We stick around a church long enough, and eventually Jonah the missionary shows up with his story. It's not obedience in *general*, but obedience to the Great Commission, to share the gospel with the whole world. We have a tough time obeying the Lord in this, like Jonah. Are we going to go to our Nineveh like God told us to, or not? Jonah eventually did, and it worked. We should go, too.

The problem with the missionary Jonah version is that it's only 3 chapters long. But there's four chapters in the book!

The third edition of the Jonah story is the four-chapter book we actually have in our Bibles. And it's the version of the book of Jonah that we actually need. We need it if we're going to be people engaged in God's mission. We need it if we're going to be obedient in general. Because the book of Jonah we actually have in our Bibles goes deeper than obedience to our mission. It goes to our hearts. It exposes what's actually going on in there. It messes with our sense of identity. It forces us to examine how we're looking at other people. If we read the real book of Jonah, we'll encounter, along with Jonah, the actual God we claim to serve.

So, since we're going to study the *actual* book of Jonah—the one we just read aloud—let's get to know it.

Let me give you the top ten things you probably didn't know about the book of Jonah that make it “a whale of a tale.”

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10. It makes a bad kids’ cartoon.
9. It definitely could have happened.
8. It might be made up, and that’s ok.
7. Pagans do most of the worship.
6. It’s in our Bibles despite the fact that it makes us look bad.
5. The sailors and the Ninevites represent the world.
4. Jonah represents us: Israel, the Church, preachers, Christians.
3. God represents ... God.
2. Jesus calls his mission “the sign of Jonah.”
1. The “sign of Jonah” is everywhere in the book of Jonah.

**10. It makes a bad kids’ cartoon**

This might be in the top-five Bible stories taught to children. This is *not* a story for kids. Kid versions of the story try to make it safe. They take out all the parts where Jonah yells at God. But there’s still crazy stuff that happens in it. A guy gets thrown into the sea in the middle of a storm! He gets swallowed by a sea monster and stuck in its belly. He’s vomited out. He preaches God’s wrath and judgment, not God’s love and mercy. Why would you want to teach this story to your kids? Do you like giving them nightmares?

**9. It definitely could have happened.**

What’s harder? For God to create the world out of absolutely nothing, or for God to use a fish to save a guy’s life? What’s harder? For God to raise Jesus from the dead, or to calm a storm? If you believe in God, then you already believe that the impossible is not impossible for God. It doesn’t make any sense to say “come on, can we really believe that this Jonah story can happen?” It definitely could have happened.

**8. It might be made up, and that’s ok.**

Some Bible-believing scholars think Jonah reads more like history. Others think it reads more like a short story. Like a parable--sort of like the stories Jesus told. Everyone agrees that it is full of crazy action, utterly backward characters, and a

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hard-hitting message. I am almost convinced that it’s a comic satire. That it was written as a politically-charged piece of subversive art, meant to stun and convict its audience even while it makes them laugh. To make everyone say “it’s funny, because it’s true.” Jonah is not grouped with the historical books, but with the prophets. The prophetic writings are literary works of poetry. I think it’s very likely that the book of Jonah is a prophetic literary book whose genre is the short story. As long as you believe that it *could* be true because God can do anything, it doesn’t make you less of a Bible-believer if you end up thinking that this is a short story or a parable instead of a piece of history. Jesus loves stories and parables, and he loved this story. Either way, the *message* is clear and powerful.

**7. Pagans do most of the worship.**

What’s amazing is that the pagan polytheists “who don’t know their right hand from their left” do more praying, sacrificing, repenting, and oath-making to the one true God of Israel than the Israelite prophet Jonah does. It’s almost like the pagans on the ship and in Nineveh are giving Jonah and Israel and us Christians a crash course on how to repent, have faith, and begin to love your neighbor.

**6. It’s in our Bibles despite the fact it makes us look bad.**

You can’t be one of God’s people reading the book of Jonah in the half-century before Christ and *not* realize that the criticism in this book is directed at people like you. It’s not a story of Israel’s prophet turning from his rebellious ways and loving God from the heart. It ends with Jonah still mad at God, and with God very disappointed in Jonah’s pathetic heart. But it’s in the Hebrew Bible! They knew it was the word of the Lord. They knew God had breathed this story out and was using it to teach, rebuke, correct, and train them in his own justice and mercy. It’s too good of a book to put on the banned book list. Too true. Too relevant. Too potentially transformative. And as it addresses *us* today, it’s going to hurt. But it will hurt to heal.

**5. The sailors and the Ninevites represent the world.**

This book shows that the world is inherently religious: humans want to worship. The book shows that the world can be cruel: when you’re ultimately worshipping power,

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you'll oppress people. The Assyrians whose capital was Nineveh were the most oppressive empire of the ancient world. This book shows us that the world is spiritually lost: the sailors don't know to which god they should turn; the Assyrians think their gods support their cruelty. This book shows us that the world is not so lost that it can't be found: the sailors turn to God, and the Assyrians turn from their wickedness.

#### **4. Jonah represents us.**

It's completely obvious that Jonah represents the most religious and patriotic of Israelites. He represents the nation. He represents Christians like you. He represents preachers like me. We are all meant to read this book and say “what a self-centered jerk he can be!” and then to look at ourselves and say “what self-centered jerks we can be!”

#### **3. God represents ... God.**

This is one of the most stunning portraits of the character of God in the whole Bible. So much of God's character in just 3 pages. God hates the wickedness of oppressive powerful people. Still, God sends them a messenger, pursuing them and condemning their wickedness rather than simply condemning them. God claims his people as his own, and chases them down—whether it takes a storm or a fish or a crazy job. God cares about and loves cities. He doesn't wish that anyone should perish, but that all would come to a knowledge of the truth. God even delights in animals. God offers hope. When people turn from wickedness and toward God, he forgives. God is compassionate. God pursues our hearts. His love and justice: It's all here in this little book.

#### **2. Jesus calls his own mission “The Sign of Jonah.”**

Twice in the gospels, people are trying to get Jesus to impress them with a miracle. He says he's not going to do any signs except “the sign of Jonah.” At the most basic level, the sign of Jonah, Jesus says, is this: just as Jonah was three days in the belly of the fish, so Jesus will be three days in the heart of the earth. Whether you're from Nineveh or the Netherlands, Israel or Indonesia, Jesus says, what counts is repentance of your sins and failures, and trust in Jesus who came out of the belly of

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the earth after three days to live a new life forever. Jesus gives us the sign of Jonah to point us to new life in him.

**1. The “sign of Jonah” is everywhere in the book of Jonah**

It’s not just the “three days in the tomb, three days in the grave” thing that is “the sign of Jonah.” Jesus says that he’s the real Jonah—the greater Jonah—the Jonah that Jonah was supposed to be. And in every scene in the book of Jonah, we find Jesus saying to us: *you are special. You are chosen. You are called.* But you are my people in order to join me in my mission: to bring my glory and grace among the nations, and to bring together a new people from every nation who are made new by my grace and made one for my glory. You’re blessed to be a blessing. You’re brought in to be sent out. You’re meant to be a people with as big of a heart as the heart of God—full of love and justice, like the heart of Jesus. We’ll see this reality, this “sign of Jonah,” in every twist and turn of this weird but wonderful story.

We’re learning the book of Jonah at the start of a year in which we turn our focus outward: toward our neighbors, toward our city, toward the world. Our attitudes, words, and actions will be challenged. God will pursue us. We won’t always like it. But we will see Jesus. We might even experience Jesus. If we do, we’ll never be the same. And Jesus might just turn us into a people who are ready to turn toward the nations with grace and truth, love and justice, humility and compassion.

May it be so.