

Jonah: God's Messenger AWOL

Jonah 1-4

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The military acronym AWOL stands for absent without leave, but in Jonah's case it could easily stand for absent without *love*. Our goal today is to learn not to act like Jonah, because like Jonah we are all called to missions. All of us are called to fulfill the Great Commission, to make disciples of others, wherever we are. It need not be in far-away places. It may be in our workplaces or among our circle of friends. Jesus saved us not just so we can go to heaven one day, but so that we could participate in the work of advancing His kingdom now. Ephesians 2:10 says that God has prepared in advance good works for His children to do. Let us not be like Jonah. Let us listen to God's calling.

For some context, Jonah was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel, during the reign on Jeroboam II. The king disobeyed God, yet God still showered Israel with grace and prosperity. Jonah's contemporaries were Hosea and Amos, who spoke of the impending exile of Israel in Assyria (Amos 5:27, 2 Kings 17), of which Nineveh was the capital.

In chapter 1, Jonah failed to submit to God's will and reflect His concern for the nations. Knowing that Assyria would one day take over Israel and knowing the Assyrians' reputation for vicious torture of their enemies, Jonah refused to travel the 550 miles from Samaria to Nineveh. Instead he took a boat headed to Tarshish, in Spain, at the end of the known world in the opposite direction as Nineveh. Perhaps he was afraid of the Assyrians, perhaps he had nationalistic hatred for them, or perhaps he was afraid of losing his reputation if he helped the enemy. Jonah knew he couldn't hide from God, but maybe he thought that if he resisted, God would call someone else. The fact that he slept below deck shows his indifferent attitude towards the impending destruction of Nineveh, and the sailors on the ship. But God intervened, and as the storm got worse the crewmen cast lots and found Jonah was to blame. When Jonah said he worshipped the God who created the land and the sea, they all knew that this God was the only One that could cause such an unnatural storm. And when the storm calmed immediately after throwing Jonah overboard, they worshipped God.

Perhaps Jonah would have preferred to drown rather than complete his mission, but God rescued him. Inside the fish, Jonah experienced God's mercy and forgiveness. In chapter 2, Jonah prays to God, repenting of his disobedience. He praises God for His mercy in vv. 1-7.

Then in v. 8 he mentions that those who cling to idols forfeit God's grace. Though he likely was referring to the Ninevites, he could have also been referring to himself when he abandoned God. And so in v. 9 he renews his commitment to obey God, and acknowledges that salvation comes from God, not just for Jews but also for the Ninevites.

In chapter 3, Jonah observed God's mercy and forgiveness. He went to Nineveh and preached a simple message, only 5 words in Hebrew. Interestingly the word "overturned" could mean destroyed or turned around, in other words repentance. Though Jonah didn't want them to repent, God had already prepared the Ninevites to receive his message. History tells us that there was a plague, famine, and solar eclipse at around this time, which would have made the Ninevites more receptive. And so they believed. Even the king put on sack cloth and sat in the dust. Furthermore, he made a proclamation taking their repentance to another level, requiring people not to drink, and even having animals wear sackcloth. He proclaims that they should call on God urgently. In v. 9 he says "Who knows?" because he didn't know whether God would spare them. But God is a merciful God, and He relented.

Then in chapter 4, we see that Jonah failed to embody God's character and share His compassion to reach people isolated from His love and salvation. In v. 2 Jonah refers to himself nine times, showing where his focus was. He was angry that God was being Himself, gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love. This description of God is common in the Old Testament (see Exodus 34:6). God is gracious, desiring to show favor to us. God is compassionate, like a mother towards her baby. God is slow to anger, patient (2 Peter 3:9). God is abounding in love (*chesed*), pursuing people in love. Jonah still held out hope that God would act out of character and destroy Nineveh, so he waited. God showed grace to Jonah by providing the vine for shade, then to teach him a lesson He provided a worm to kill the plant and a scorching wind. He challenged Jonah in vv. 10-11 for being angry about a mere vine but not caring at all about a city of 120,000 people who were spiritually lost. Jonah valued the vine more than all those lost and clueless people.

If you have faith in Jesus, you are also called to prioritize Christ's mission, proclaim His character, and reflect His love to a lost and dying world. How much do you value those who are spiritually lost? Do you value your comfort above the salvation of others? Do you cling to idols, or are you willing to give up what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose, to bring others into God's kingdom? Are you more concerned with God's kingdom, or things of the world?

Does your idea of success just involve career advancement, increasing wealth, buying a home, and having your own family? Or is your idea of success reflecting Jesus' love to everyone around you wherever you are? Do you reflect God's love at work, or are you only concerned with your own material ambitions? Today only 10% of the world's population believe in Jesus. 20% are only nominally Christian, 40% have access to the gospel but haven't responded to it, and 30% have no access to the gospel at all. There is a need. Do you share God's concern for these people? Don't be satisfied with intellectual knowledge about God. Let it change your life and your heart. Share His heart for the lost. Reflect God's character to others. Let God use you wherever you are.