

Study Prophets – Become Prophetic (Week 5: Jonah)

We've come to Week 5 in our series *Study Prophets – Become Prophetic*, and today we step into one of the most well-known and beloved stories in the Bible—

the story of Jonah.

Who wouldn't love this story?

It's got everything—adventure, comedy, and miracle all rolled into one. There's a storm, a runaway prophet, a giant fish, and a citywide repentance. I mean, even people who've never read the Bible know this story.

But here's the thing most people miss:

Jonah's story isn't really about a big fish.

It's not even mainly about Nineveh's revival.

It's about the **conversion of Jonah himself**.

It's about a man who *knows* God but doesn't *like* what God asks him to do.

He's a prophet who says, "God, I know who You are — and that's the problem! You're too merciful!"

In fact, someone once said Jonah is the *prodigal son* of the Old Testament.

The difference is this prodigal isn't wasting money — he's wasting his calling.

And yet, here's the good news:

God doesn't give up on runaways.

He doesn't cancel Jonah. He doesn't replace him.

He chases him down with mercy until Jonah becomes a living, breathing sign of that mercy himself.

So, if I could summarize the entire book of Jonah in one sentence, it would be this:

"Salvation comes from the Lord."

Not from our good behavior. Not from our theology.

Not from our "I'll try harder next time."

But from God alone — **whose mercy outruns our sins**.

Let's pray.

“The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’” (Jonah 1:1–2)

Now, Nineveh was not just any city. It was the capital of the Assyrian Empire—modern-day Mosul in northern Iraq. Archaeologists tell us Nineveh was one of the oldest and most advanced cities in the ancient world. But it was also one of the most **violent**.

These people were notorious for their cruelty.

They didn’t just conquer other nations; they terrorized them.

We’re talking about skinning prisoners alive, impaling people on poles, stacking skulls by the gates.

So when God says,

“Jonah, go to Nineveh and preach repentance,”

it’s like telling a Holocaust survivor,

“Go preach mercy in Berlin — in 1942.”

Or telling a father whose son was killed by terrorists,

“Go and tell them there’s still forgiveness.”

Jonah later admits, **“I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love!”** (4:2)

That’s why he ran! He knew if Nineveh repented, God would forgive them—and that was the last thing Jonah wanted.

And don’t we sometimes think like him?

“God, not that country! That group? No way! That person? Over my dead body!”

So Jonah runs. He goes down to Joppa, and buys a ticket to Tarshish. Now, Tarshish is the modern-day Spain, which is as far west as you could possibly sail in his time. And Nineveh was east. So, Jonah literally sails in the opposite direction.

He boards the ship, heads below deck, and falls asleep — physically and spiritually.

Below deck and falls asleep shows his spiritual state that a man who was supposed to be awake to God’s voice is now asleep to His will.

And what was the consequence?

The Lord sends a storm.

And it looks like not an ordinary storm — we’re talking *category five storm*. Because these professional, seasoned sailors start panicking. Tossing cargo, crying out to every god they can name.

And where’s Jonah? Below deck, **snoring**.

The captain finds him and shouts,

“Hey sleeper! Are you out of your mind? Pray to your God — maybe He’ll notice us before we die!”

They cast lots to see who’s responsible.

It lands on Jonah.

And Jonah confesses:

“I know this storm is because of me. I’m running from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. Throw me into the sea, and it will calm.”

Now here’s the twist – these pagan sailors try to save him first!

These unbelievers show more mercy than the prophet of God.

That’s how upside-down Jonah’s heart has become.

Sometimes that’s us, isn’t it?

As God’s people we are the ones who supposed to show mercy, go extra miles to love people. But how often do we fail? Even sometimes, non-Christians seem to be more loving and forgiving than us.

Eventually, the storm gets worse. So they had no choice but to throw Jonah out into the deep sea—and immediately the sea grows calm. And something amazing happens!

The sailors worship the God of Israel—the first revival in the story happens *on the boat*, not in Nineveh.

Then comes the part kids love — **Jonah and the big fish**.

Look at verse 17, “Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”

I want you to underline the word, “provided.”

In Hebrew, it’s *manah* — it means to appoint, to prepare, to ordain.

God didn't punish Jonah with a fish.

He *prepared* a fish — to save him.

And get this: That word “**provided (manah)**” is really important.

It shows up again and again in this book — like God *provided* a fish, then a plant, then a worm, then a wind.

Which tells us that all creation listens and obeys God, the Creator.

The sea obeys.

The fish obeys.

The wind obeys.

The plant obeys.

The only one who does not obey is who? **Jonah – God's prophet.**

Now, inside the fish. Imagine that: it's dark, it's slimy. No windows. No fresh air. Probably, it smells like a month-old sushi.

And suddenly — Jonah starts praying.

And to our surprise, it's not a prayer of panic or complaint.

It's not like, “God, get me out of here” prayer.

It's a *thank-you* prayer.

He says,

“In my distress I called to the Lord, and He answered me.

From the depths of the grave I cried for help, and You listened to my cry...

When my life was ebbing away, I remembered You, Lord,
and my prayer rose to You, to Your holy temple...

But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to You.

What I have vowed I will make good.

I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the Lord!’” (2:1-2, 7-9)

Jonah thanks God *before* he's even walking on the dry land again.

Why? Because he realizes something profound:

the fish wasn't a punishment — it was God's *provision*.

God had prepared that fish not to destroy Jonah, but to save him.

Think about this.

When Jonah was drowning, where he was engulfed by this cold, raging, dark water, he must have thought, “I’m done.” “The game’s over.” “Adios, everyone!”

And yet, at that very moment of death, God still made a way and pulled him out of his death – in such a bizarre way – swallowed by a big fish.

And I wonder, some of you may say, “Pastor Ho, I think I can resonate that with myself.”

You see, there was a season in my life where I felt like I was done with my life. I was literally in the “belly of the fish.” – A place of failure and rock bottom.

And I thought God was punishing me — but God was actually protecting me.

I thought I was drowning — but God was teaching me – somehow – to still breathe under His grace.

Beloved, the belly of the fish became Jonah’s seminary.

Just like that. **Your own “fish belly” moments can be the time and place where you learn and experience God’s amazing grace.**

R. T. Kendall says, **“The belly of the fish is not a happy place to live, but it’s a good place to learn.”**

Jonah had a lesson. **He learns that salvation is all grace.**

Even when Jonah runs, even when he rebels, even the moment, ‘I’m done,’ God keeps chasing him. God never gave up on him. Because God’s mercy outruns his sins. So, God’s mercy was not just for Nineveh — it’s for Jonah, too.

And my friends, it’s for us, too.

Now, the fish spits Jonah out on dry land— and I like to imagine him landing on the beach, probably, seaweed around his neck, smelling like low tide.

Then comes with the most beautiful phrase in this book:

Chapter 3:1, **“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.”**

Now, I want you to underline that phrase: **A second time.**

Don’t you love that?

My friends, we serve God who gives us second chances.

So, God speaks again to Jonah:

“Arise, go to Nineveh.”

This time, Jonah obeys.

He walks into the great city and preaches what might be the shortest sermon in the Bible:

“Forty days, and Nineveh will be overturned.”

Just five words in Hebrew.

No illustrations. No PowerPoint. No piano softly playing “Amazing Grace” or “How Great Thou Art.”

Just five words—and the entire city repents.

From the king down to the cattle.

You’d think Jonah would be thrilled, right?

Nope. He’s furious.

He says,

“(See?) Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (4:2-3)

Jonah still wanted **justice**, not grace. He still wanted Nineveh destroyed, not delivered.

So this angry, dissatisfied Jonah goes outside the city to sulk.

Now, God pursues him again.

Verse 6, **“Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant.”**

Here’s that word again, manah (provided) a plant to grow over Jonah, shading him from the sun. Jonah’s happy again.

Then God provides (manah) a worm to eat the plant, and a scorching wind to blow it away.

Jonah’s comfort disappears — and he explodes. “I just want to die!” (v. 8).

But God gently asks him, “(Jonah), Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?”

And look at how Jonah responds (probably with his angry voice): “It is! And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.” (v. 9).

I'm just thinking at that very moment, God could have said: "Okay! Enough is enough!" "As you wish!"

But our God is merciful.

He says to Jonah again so tenderly like a loving, patient father to his immature child.

God says:

"You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow ...

But should I not be concerned about that great city, with more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left — and also many animals?" (4:10-11)

Interestingly, that's how the story ends— with a question.

No resolution. No epilogue.

Just a divine question hanging in the air.

We don't hear Jonah's answer.

And here's why.

God left the story open in this way — because now, God wants *us* to answer.

It's as if He's asking us:

"So what about you?

Will you rejoice when your enemies repent?

Will you go to the people you'd rather avoid, with the message of God's mercy and salvation?"

That's the heart of this book.

And here's something many people miss: the name "**Nineveh**" literally means ***City of the Great Fish.***

(Isn't that interesting?)

Their chief god was Dagon—a fish-man deity.

So imagine this: Jonah, freshly vomited by a giant fish, walks into a city that worships a fish god.

To them, **Jonah is a sign from heaven!**

Jonah was living testimony that the God of Israel controlled the sea, commanded the fish, and saved this disobedient and rebellious prophet, and with that Jonah as a sign, God is sending this message to the people in Nineveh that this powerful God is willing to extend His mercy even to them.

So, it's as if God was saying, with Jonah as a visible sign of His invisible grace, "Even your idols point back to Me. I am the One you need to worship; you need to fear; and I am the One who can heal you and save your nation."

Centuries later, Jesus said,

"Just as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation." Then Jesus said: **"And now something greater than Jonah is here."** (Matthew 12:39–41)

Jesus is greater than Jonah. Why?

Because Jonah ran from sinners — **Jesus ran toward them.**

Jonah was thrown into the sea for his own sin.

Jesus was nailed to the Cross for our sins (Sin of the world).

Jonah stayed in the belly of the fish for three days and came back alive.

Jesus stayed in the grave for three days — He was literally died, and yet, on the third day, He rose from the dead! Hallelujah!

Jesus is the ultimate "sign of Jonah" that proves God's mercy outruns our sins.

You see, mercy is the family trait of God's children.

Jesus said: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:44-45)

Look at what Jesus said here: "You may be children of your Father in heaven."

By how? By loving our enemies. By praying for those who persecute us. Because that's what Jesus did.

God's mercy shines forth to everyone just like He sends sun and rain to everyone so that we, as God's people, should do the same.

Soon after Jesus said this, He also said: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (v. 48) In other words, be perfectly merciful, as your heavenly Father is perfectly merciful.

The problem is:

We want to receive mercy, but we don’t want to be merciful.

We like grace ... when it’s for me and for our own people.

But we struggle with grace ... when it’s for them, on the other side of the camp, the people who seems so terrible to us.

So God asks us the same question today:

“Should I not have concern for that great city?”

My friends, who is your **Nineveh**?

Who’s the person or group you’d rather not see in heaven?

Who’s that name that stirs resentment when you hear it?

God says, *That’s the one I’m sending you to.*

And be merciful to them as I was being merciful to you.

Remember: Mercy is the family trait of God’s children.

Here’s the story that resonates the beauty and the power of mercy.

It goes back to the time when slavery was still ongoing in America. There was a man named **Ned** — an enslaved Christian who loved Jesus.

His master was cruel, once beating him so badly that Ned could hardly walk.

Sometime later, a fire broke out in the master’s house.

While everyone else stood watching, Ned — still limping from his wounds — ran inside and dragged his master out.

When the master came alive, he asked, “Ned, why did you save me after everything I’ve done to you?”

And Ned said, **“Sir, Jesus saved me when I didn’t deserve it. How could I not do the same for you?”**

That broke the master’s heart. He freed his slaves and spent the rest of his life telling people, “I saw the gospel the day the man I beat carried me out of the fire.”

That's what mercy looks like.

That's the gospel in motion.

Beloved friends, Jonah's story is not really about a fish.

It is the story of our heavenly Father — the God who never gives up on us and who always gives us another chance.

It is also the story of His call for us to grow into His heart — to become like Him, full of compassion and mercy.

Even today, God's question at the end of the book of Jonah still echoes in our hearts:

"Should I not have concern for that great city?"

The answer is, of course,

"Yes, Lord, You are right."

Our response should be, of course,

"Yes, Lord, we will be merciful as You are."

So, may the Holy Spirit help Smith Chapel today, so that our lives may become **living signs of God's mercy**, and our words may become prophetic voices of the gospel of God's mercy, leading many people to Jesus Christ. Because, indeed — **"Salvation comes from our living Lord Jesus Christ."** Amen.

Closing Prayer

God of mercy and grace,

Thank You for being the God who never gives up on us—

the God of second chances,

the God whose mercy always outruns our sin.

We confess that, like Jonah, we have often run from Your call,

held back forgiveness,

and drawn lines where You desire to cross them.

Today, we surrender to Your heart.

Open our eyes to see our own Ninevehs—

the people and places You are calling us to love.

Give us courage to go where You send us,

and compassion to forgive even when our hearts resist it.

In those moments, fix our eyes on Jesus—

the ultimate sign of Jonah—

who went down into the depths for our salvation

and rose again to bring us home.

Make us more like Jesus:
merciful, humble, and bold—
living as Your prophetic people
who declare with our lives that **salvation comes from the Lord.**
And for every prodigal and seeker in this room,
let this be the day they hear Your voice calling them home.
Draw them near to the God who loves them
more than they could ever imagine.
In Jesus' name we pray,
Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. Who or what is your “Nineveh” — the person, group, or situation God is calling you to love and forgive?
2. Have you ever felt like Jonah in the belly of the fish — trapped, broken, or at rock bottom? How did God use that time to shape your heart?
3. How does Jesus' example as the “greater Jonah” change your view of God's mercy and your mission?
4. What would it look like this week for you to live out the truth that “*Salvation comes from the Lord*”?