

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

JONAH 1-2

The Honorable Marks Moore is a British judge. He sits on the bench in a court in southeast London.

Judge Moore seems to be your prim and proper English jurist. In typical British fashion he wears a wig and long robes - *but there's another side to Moore.*

Recently, a sex offender on trial, tried to make a break for the door. Only one thing stood between the defendant and freedom... and that was Marks Moore.

The main doors of the courtroom were barricaded, but the judge's corridor had been left open. When the defendant sprinted for the door, Judge Moore met him in the hallway. He grabbed him around the neck to bring him down. The two men tumbled down several steps. The bad guy jumped up and continued to race down the corridor. Judge Moore stayed in hot pursuit.

When the sex offender stopped to push open a fire door the Judge caught up to him and tackled him. Moore held him down until the prison officials arrived.

Proving, **you can't outrun the long legs of the law!**

Which is also what our book tonight proves...

Jonah teaches us **you can't outrun the long legs of the Lord.** You can't duck God. Jonah was a man who learned the hard way that you can't run from God.

The book of Jonah begins, “Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

The word “*Jonah*” means “*dove*” - yet by nature Jonah was hawkish. He was nationalistic - extremely pro-Israeli. Jonah believed strongly, and rightly, that the Hebrews were God’s chosen people, and were destined to rule over all the other nations of the world.

This is why Jonah’s first prophetic assignment had been a joy... 2 Kings 14:25 states of the Israeli King Jeroboam, “He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah...”

Jeroboam II ruled the northern kingdom from 786- 746 BC, and Jonah had predicted Israel’s victory and expansion under his reign. Hey, judgment on Gentiles and blessings on Jews - was right up Jonah’s alley.

Here was a prophecy that fit Jonah’s prejudice.

But now according to verse 1 “the word of the LORD” comes to Jonah with a different kind of request. He’s told to go beyond Israeli borders and call Nineveh to repentance. *And what was difficult about that task?*

Well, Jonah loved God, *but he hated Ninevites.*

Jonah was a spiritual bigot. He understood Israel was God’s *chosen people* - but that didn’t mean there wasn’t room in

God's heart for *other people*. God loved *Ninevites* just as much as He loved *Hebrews*.

It reminds me of the Chinaman and the Jew who eating lunch in a deli. With no provocation at all, the Jew walks over and punches the Chinaman in the nose. The Chinese fellow shouts, "*What's that for?*"

The Jew answers, "*Pearl Harbor.*"

The Chinaman can't believe it, "*We had nothing to do with Pearl Harbor. That was the Japanese.*" The Jew shrugs, "*What does it matter: Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese... you people are all the same to me.*"

Moments later the Chinese man walks over, and cold-cocks the Jew. The Jew picks himself up off the ground, and asks, "*What in the world was that for?*"

The Chinaman answers, "*The Titanic.*"

The Jew scratches his head, "*I don't get it. What did the Jews have to do with the sinking of the Titanic?*"

The Chinese fellow tells him, "*Goldberg, Feinberg, Iceberg - they're all the same to me.*" The moral of the story is that all racial prejudice is just that irrational.

One author writes, "*Never try to reason the prejudice out of a man. It was not reasoned into him and cannot be reasoned out.*" Think about it, it's illogical to judge a whole group on the actions of a few. Bigotry grows out of ignorance, or misconceptions, or personal grudges.

Somewhere along the line Jonah copped bigoted attitude. He assumed Jews were better than Gentiles.

Remember, in Jesus' day, the Jews had the same attitude. Rabbis taught that God created Gentiles to be nothing more than kindling to stoke the flames of hell.

Like Jonah, they hated anyone who was not a Jew.

We all need to know that racial bigotry is an affront to God! It narrows, and restricts, and puts limits on God's grace. It shrinks God's heart to one group - *their group*.

Prejudice is the ultimate selfishness.

Once, a lady in our church told me, "[Prejudice isn't a skin problem, it's a sin problem.](#)" And it's true.

Prejudice is *the pinnacle of pride*. To think that just because you're not like me, you're inferior - is heresy.

Prejudice is a sin against God's love and creativity.

The Prophet Jonah was definitely a bigot, *but he may've had justifications for his hatred of Assyrians*.

Most of us reject the kind of *irrational prejudice* that occurred in the deli between the Jew and Chinaman, **but seldom is bigotry so simple**. Racial prejudice is so *prevalent* because it gets more *personal*...

The Assyrians had assembled the most heinous, brutal, cruel, bloodthirsty army to ever roam the earth.

Assyria had become [a sword with no conscience](#).

After conquering a village they'd hold a man down on the ground - reach in his mouth - and rip out his tongue by its

roots. They amputated arms and legs. Hacked off feet. Plucked out eyes. Cut off lips and ears.

They would set fire to a man's wife and children before his very eyes. One Assyrian trademark was to set a pile of skulls outside the city gate to remind those who were left what would happen if they rebelled.

Often the Assyrians would skin their prisoners alive.

It's believed many of Adolph Hitler's crimes against the Jews were borrowed from the ancient Assyrians.

In 2 Kings 14:25 we have what seems to be a random fact, until we dig deeper. There we're told Jonah was from a town called "**Gath Hopher.**" It was a village about five miles west of the Sea of Galilee.

This was significant, for during Jonah's lifetime the Galilee was the site of terrible atrocities... Inscriptions in the ruins of Nineveh speak of military forays into the Galilee where Assyrian war parties would pillage and raid. Their attacks were designed to intimidate Israel's King. The king would pay blackmail money, and buy a few more years of protection from the Assyrians.

What if one of those raids occurred in Gath Hopher?

What if you lived in Gath Hopher and one day a band of Assyrians rode in and set fire to your fields - impaled your father on a spear - flayed your brother with a knife and burned your two sisters before your very eyes...

God says, "**Love your enemies...**" *Would you love these Assyrians?* All of a sudden, prejudice would take on a whole

new meaning. When you're victimized by someone of a different group, you tend to take out your anger on other members of that same group.

It's not right, but it happens. *Could this have set-off Jonah's prejudice?* It's possible Jonah had been violated by the Assyrians - or knew someone who had.

And Jonah knew God. He knew God is rich in mercy.

Jonah figured if he preached to Assyria, and they repented - it'd be just like God to forgive these wretched people, and treat them as good as He treated Israel. *That would be more than Jonah could stomach.*

Jonah wanted to see Assyria *slaughtered*, not saved. He prayed for Assyria's *destruction* not *deliverance*.

Jonah hated Assyria - *to hell with Nineveh!*

Here's a problem with following God... **God doesn't hate the people we hate.** The person who cheated you out of your money - who violated you or your loved one - who ripped off your innocence... God hates their sin, but He still loves the person and wants to forgive.

What do you want? This is where prejudice gets personal - this is where it can grow extremely toxic!

God loves your ex-spouse, do you?

God loves your alcoholic mom, do you?

God loves your abusive father, do you?

God loves your annoying neighbor, do you?

God loves your unsympathetic boss, do you?

What if God called you to share the Gospel with the person you hate - *to bring to heaven the person you've sent to hell a million times under your breath?* **You have more in common with Jonah than you think!**

Verse 3 tells us **“But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish 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 from the presence of the Lord.”** Jonah decides he doesn't want to cooperate with God's missionary efforts to the Assyrians and Nineveh. He declines the assignment.

Jonah walks 20 miles to the port of Joppa. Nineveh was east, so Jonah buys a one-way ticket west to the farthest destination he can find - the land of *Tarshish*.

We're not quite sure where Tarshish was located.

Some scholars believe it was a sleepy little fishing village around the rock of Gibraltar on the Atlantic coast of Spain. Others identify it with Britain. Ezekiel 26 identifies Tarshish as a exporter of tin. That's why the British isles were called **“Britannia.”** They were known for their tin. Regardless of its exact location, Tarshish was the civilized world's furthestest western settlement.

To sail from Joppa to Spain would've taken over a year, stopping at ports-of-call all along the way. A ticket to Tarshish was the equivalent of a slow boat to China.

And I'm sure Jonah bought a one-way fare. He was on the run from God. *He was attempting the impossible* - fleeing from the God who is everywhere.

Before we go further realize all disobedience to God is in the final analysis born out of prejudice. Maybe not racial prejudice, but a prejudice nonetheless. It comes from a preconceived notion that has no actual validity.

God wants you to witness to a friend, but you assume your friend has no interest... God calls you to a task, but you figure your spouse will never go for it...

God asks you to give, but you can't calculate how you can afford it... **Assumptions crowd out your faith.**

Realize, a person can be on the run from God and never leave their backyard. Lloyd Ogilvie writes, "**What instructions from God panic us? What prompts us to say, 'Anything Lord, but that'?** If God told us to communicate His mercy to some person, some group, some type of human need, what assignment causes us to dig in our heels?" Is there a prejudice in your life that you struggle to overcome?" What's *your* Nineveh?

Well, Jonah sets sail for Tarshish, but he never arrives. Verse 4, "**But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea...**"

Notice, God sent this storm. He conjured up the waves and He sent the wind. Often, the storm that hits *and rocks our world* - originates in the counsels of God.

God creates the storms to get our attention.

And this storm was a violent one. So much so, "**the ship was about to be broken up. Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was**

in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load.” They were afraid for their survival.

“But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep.” *You wonder if Jonah didn’t care what happened to him?*

The Prophet not only boarded the boat, he’d gone below. He was asleep in the hull - in the belly of the ship... *trying to hide from God.* You get the impression Jonah was in a state of denial. He even tries to stay asleep through the storm. *But God forces him on deck.*

Verse 6, “So the captain came to him, and said to him, “What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish.” The other passengers and crew had prayed to their gods, but to no avail. It was time for Jonah to pitch in a prayer. It was “*all knees on deck!*”

“And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this trouble has come upon us.” When God refused to answer their prayers, the crew assumed a rebel was on board. They decided to help God flush out the prodigal passenger.

“So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.” The crew rolled the dice - or perhaps drew straws - trusting God to pinpoint the culprit. Proverbs 16:33 declares, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” This is exactly what happened here.

“Then they said to him, “Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”

These questions were probably part of the official interrogation conducted by a sailors’ tribunal.

“So he said to them, “I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, “Why have you done this?” For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?” - for the sea was growing more tempestuous.

And he said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me.”

It’s amazing that it never crosses Jonah's mind to pray and repent, and perhaps God will deliver them.

Apparently, Jonah’s heart was so hard, **he’d rather die than deal with his prejudice toward Assyrians.**

Remember Jesus calmed the storm for His disciples.

But what a contrast between Jonah and Jesus. Both were asleep in the belly of a boat when the storm began to brew. The difference was that Jonah was in *a state of denial* - Jesus was in *a state of dependence*.

Jesus slept confidently in the boat, unconcerned about the storm because He was trusting in His Father.

Jesus could've calmed the storm for Jonah, *but He wasn't in Jonah's boat.* Jonah was trying to avoid God.

Verse 13, “Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them.” Hey, when you’re on the run from God don’t be surprised when the sea of life - *that is, circumstances* - turn against you.

Apparently, even after he was identified as the stow-away, the crew didn’t want to toss Jonah overboard.

They tried to out-row the storm and get to land. But they couldn’t. The choice was ditch Jonah or drown.

“Therefore they cried out to the Lord and said, “We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man’s life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O Lord, have done as it pleased You.” So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea...” And amazingly, “the sea ceased from its raging.” The storm grew calm.

“Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows.” The crew members are so impressed by what happened, they worshipped God. Even in his disobedience Jonah’s missionary effort begins. The sailors realize his God is the Creator and Controller of the sea and winds.

It’s ironic, but it was Jonah's obstinance and hatred of the Gentiles that provided an opportunity for these Gentile seaman to develop a faith in the true God.

God used Jonah's rebellion to cause their salvation.

This becomes the pattern in Jonah's life - God uses this prophet, more *in spite of him* than *because of him*.

Well, Chapter 1 starts with a “great city” - it includes a “great wind” - and now it ends with a “great fish.”

Verse 17 tells us, “Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” Here is where the story gets a little *fishy!* Imagine Jonah, he’s sailing through the air courtesy of the sailors who threw him off the ship - when splash, he hits the water.

He’s struggling to come up for air, when suddenly the lights go out. He’s surrounded by stifling heat, and soft tissue. He’s cooking in a mixture of juices and slime.

It reminds me of the cartoon that pictures Jonah at the front door of his house. He’s greeted by his wife, who scolds him, “For crying out loud, Jonah! Three days late, covered with slime, and smelling like fish! And what story have I got to swallow this time?”

There are skeptical people who have a hard time swallowing the story of Jonah - *that a human could survive in the stomach of a whale for 72 hours.*

In fact, did you hear of the atheist who asked his Christian friend, “Come on, how could Jonah survive three days and three nights in the belly of a whale?”

The Christian said, “*I don't know, but when I get to heaven I'm going to ask him.*” The atheist fired back, “Well, what if

Jonah isn't in heaven?" That's when the Christian replied, *"Then you ask him!"*

But hey, it's a legitimate question, how does a man get swallowed by a fish, and then survive for 72 hours in its belly? *We should ponder a few possibilities...*

First, in verse 17 the Hebrew word translated *"prepared"* implies a special, unique preparation. God didn't just pick the biggest fish he could find, and say, *"You're it."* This was a deliberately designed fish.

We assume Jonah was swallowed by a whale, but the Hebrew term is simply *"a large fish."* The Jewish rabbis taught that God created this particular fish on the fifth day of His original creation - for the unique privilege of chauffeuring Jonah. It swam the seas for thousands of years waiting on this one appointment.

Here's another thought, a baby is conceived in his mother's womb. God provides for that baby to float, eat, grow, and survive for 280 days in a sack of fluid.

Don't think I'm dumb enough to compare a pregnant woman to a whale. I'm stupid, but not that stupid. And I value my life. But if God can keep a baby alive in a woman's belly for 40 weeks, why can't He engineer a way to sustain Jonah in a whale's belly for 3 days?

Today's navy has nuclear subs that generate their own air and water - and stay submerged indefinitely...

Why then is it hard to believe that God can create a fish capable of carrying one man for three days?

Here's another thought... Since whales are the largest animals currently living in the sea we assume what swallowed Jonah was a whale. But it could've been a one-of-a-kind creature - a now extinct dinosaur.

Perhaps God created an animal with a cavity off its digestive track designed specifically for this prophet.

Even if this fish were a whale the story is still not impossible. The average sperm whale has a mouth 20' long, by 15' high, by 9' wide - *larger than a lot of bedrooms*. Whalers have found whole, man-sized squid and sharks inside these whales. Though it would be stifling in a whale's stomach - somewhere between 104-108 degrees - there'd be plenty of air to breathe.

The gastric juices in a whale's stomach would affect the pigment in a man's skin - but the chemicals don't digest living flesh. If they did, they would eat out a whale's own stomach. *A man could survive in its belly.*

In fact, over the years there have been a number of reports among whalers, of fellow fishermen who fell into the sea only to be found later, alive inside a whale.

One story is of a whaler named James Bartley. In 1891 he was lost at sea off the coast of the Falkland Islands. The accident occurred as sailors harpooned a whale. A few hours later as they were harvesting the whale's blubber they notice activity in its stomach.

When they cut open the animal's belly they found James Bartley alive and well - his skin was discolored, but he was

otherwise unharmed. Aspects of the story have been debated, but the scenario is possible.

Here's my point, in 1:9 Jonah refers to God as *"the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*

If God made the sea - and the billions of teeming life that inhabit the earth's oceans - then He can certainly create a fish capable of carrying Jonah for 72 hours.

And here's one final suggestion...

Regardless of what swallowed Jonah it's possible he was already dead - *drowned at sea* - or he died inside the animal. His dead body was preserved inside the fish; then he was resurrected and spit up on the shore.

Notice 2:1, *"Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly. And he said; "I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, and He answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice."* Look carefully at that last line. The word *"Sheol"* was the OT term for *"Hades"* - the abode of the dead.

It could be Jonah is speaking metaphorically. That the stomach of this fish was *a hell on earth*. Or he could be speaking literally. Perhaps he'd died, went to Sheol, and from there repented. In other words, it was from the afterlife that God gave him a second chance.

Remember in Matthew 12:40, Jesus said, *"As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."* The NT teaches that Jesus literally died on

the cross - went to Hades where He preached to the captives who were waiting on a Savior - then rose from the dead on the third day.

And in Matthew 12 Jesus compares his journey to Jonah's experience... Perhaps Jonah actually died.

His body was preserved inside the fish, while his spirit was praying from Sheol - that's when he was resurrected from the dead, just before he was spit up on the shore. *It's another possible interpretation.*

Chapter 2 records Jonah's prayer of repentance.

In total darkness, in stifling heat, in boiling gastric juices, surrounded by slime, in a seaweed body wrap...

Jonah prayed! Apparently, the belly of a fish provides a person with an excellent opportunity to ponder the error of their ways, and to plot a new course.

It reminds me of the young man who came to the elder of the village. He said he wanted to know God.

This elder took him to the river and held the young buck's head underwater for a long time. The young man fought, gasping for air. Finally, the elder let him up. He told him, "Son, when you become as desperate for God as you were for air, then you'll find Him."

It was in such a state of desperation that Jonah broke through his prejudices and cried in repentance.

We like to focus on what was going on inside the fish, but what mattered was what was going on inside of Jonah. Again verse 1 tells us, "Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from

the fish's belly.” His body was in the stomach of a fish, but his soul was seeking God.

Jonah had tried to run from God's presence, and escape His jurisdiction, only to wind up right back at the Master's feet! Psalm 139:7-10, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? (Jonah discovered nowhere!) If I ascend into heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.” I’m sure Jonah bought a one-way ticket to Tarshish, but when you’re on the run from God you actually get a round-trip ticket. He brings you back.

Jonah’s cry of repentance begins in verse 3, “For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me; all Your billows and Your waves passed over me.” Imagine, Jonah floundering in the surf. Going under for one last count.

“Then I said, ‘I have been cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.’ The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head. I went down to the moorings of the mountains; the earth with its bars closed behind me forever; yet You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord, my God.”

Jonah sunk to the bottom of the sea. But as is often the case, its on the bottom that Jonah begins to look up. Some people have to hit bottom before they can rise back up! In

Chapter 1 Jonah is running from God. Now in Chapter 2 Jonah is running back to God.

Verse 7, “When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple. Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy.” Jonah had made an idol out of his own prejudice. He had placed limits on God.

Jonah said he was committed to God, but it was a *commitment with conditions* - there were certain places Jonah wouldn't go - certain things Jonah wouldn't do.

Have you and I done the same?

Have we developed traditions, and convictions, and prejudices about God that have become more important to us than God Himself. Are we willing to analyze our prejudices to see if they're based on human wisdom, or if they're truly biblical? God will use the storms of life to challenge our faulty theology and break down the false concepts we've developed. It's in the belly of the whale that we're forced to see God as He really is, rather than how we perceived Him to be!

I love this cartoon. Jonah is standing on the beach with his cell phone, “Yes God, I can hear you now!”

Verse 9, “But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord.” Before Jonah was ready to preach God's mercy, he first had to taste the mercy he would preach.

His submarine ride was necessary.

You can't share what you don't possess! God first works in us the truths, that He wants us to give out!

“So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.” Here the story *really gets fishy*. It's one thing for Jonah to talk to God from the belly of a fish, it is another for God to speak to a fish. And the irony of all ironies, is this fish is more obedient than Jonah!

God orders him to barf up Jonah, and he does.

It's interesting the research that marine biologists have done with whales. Apparently, the animals communicate with each other through a sophisticated system of sounds - clicks, whistles, and pulse calls. Humpback whales actually sing to attract females.

A lot of effort has gone into understanding the communication pattern of whales. But God is the expert on whale-talk. Here, we're told the Creator spoke to the great fish, and the fish coughed up Jonah.

Notice, the three **P**s relating to the fish in this story.

God **prepared** the fish. The fish **perceived** God's will. Then finally, the fish **puked** Jonah onto the shore.

And I'm sure Jonah was quite a sight. Next week, we'll talk more about what would've happened to him in the fish. But he was probably stained white. *And stink!* Imagine, reeking with the smell of half-digested fish.

Jonah got a new lease on life - *and a second crack at ministry*. He came full circle. He *stopped running from God*

and *started running with God*. Jonah teaches us, we can't escape the calling and will of God.

Tonight, if you're on the run from God or God's calling... **God is fishing for you!** And He knows what it's going to take to bring you into His will. In fact, God can bring a storm - and God has prepared a fish...

He can intercept you and turn your life around. He knows what it'll take. He'll let you hit bottom, and force you to look up. He wants you to repent of your prejudices, and be open to whatever He has for you.

Let me ask you one final time, *what's your Nineveh?*

What's the one thing you've said you just won't do? The one place you just won't go? The one mission you just won't accept? The one person you just can't love?

Is your prejudice more important than God's will? I hope the answer to that question for all of us is **NO!**