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JONAH 1:1-3

Jonah Series

[PRAYER] Lord, we have all of this in common that we have the Holy Spirit guiding us, we have Jesus Christ as our Savior, we've chosen this particular body to be part of a fellowship and to find our encouragement and our growth experience here. So Lord, I pray for each of us, my brothers and sisters here, that you would give us a greater understanding of what your church is and help us contribute to that larger picture of what you want us to do in this community. I pray for the vision of this church, that you would extend it. I pray for each one of us that as we extend our faith personally and we share others about who you are that you might be honored in our lives. Lord, grow this church. Make us an effective lighthouse. I thank you for the leadership that you've brought here, the people that you've brought here. Continue to grow us to be the people that you want us to be. Lord, right now we're going to open your word. So as we always do, we ask for you to guide us and guide our thinking and speak to us in some new ways that we didn't know before we walked in the door. So inspire us and encourage us as we look at your word now. In Jesus' name, amen.

Please open your Bibles to the book of Jonah. I'll give you a little bit of time to find it. You might have to look in your index to identify where the book of Jonah is. It is in a section of the scriptures that I want to talk about and let you know more about. They are what we call the Minor Prophets. Now we go through the Bible verse by verse. So if you're visiting with us today, I want you to know we're starting a new book. You've come on a good day. You're going to get an introduction to the book of Jonah. You're going to learn more about what the Bible says in the first three verses of the book of Jonah, and you're going to get a greater picture of what God wants for you. This isn't just an ancient book. It's a book that has practical relevance for our lives.

Now as we look at the book of Jonah, it's in a particular part of scripture that I want you to understand. We usually call this the white part of our Bibles because we don't go there very often. But after the poetic material in the scriptures (which is Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, those letters), then we come to the prophets. There are four what we call Major Prophets. These Major Prophets are called Major Prophets because of the size of their books, not because of the importance of their message. They're major only because the books are larger. So you have Isaiah. Jeremiah is the guy pondering there because he's like the weeping prophet or he's sad as part of his message. He wrote Lamentations. So you've got Isaiah, Jeremiah who wrote Lamentations, and then you have Ezekiel, and then you have Daniel, of course, the guy with the lions. So those are the four Major Prophets. They follow right there in scriptures.

And then there comes, right before the New Testament, twelve Minor Prophets. Not because their message is minor. Their message is a major message. In fact we could do a study and call it “The Major Message From the Minor Prophets.” The point is that there are several of them. There’s Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Twelve different Minor Prophets. Each one has a particular message, has a history that’s helpful to look up and understand because the history helps to see where the message is coming.

Now Jonah is different than the rest of them. So let’s just look at Jonah here. Jonah is different than the other Minor Prophets because in that book we have a narrative, where most of the others you just get the message. You look at Amos and you’ve got this gloom and doom coming and you’ve got the message of the prophet there. As we’re going through each minor prophet, you’ll see they have a message of destruction, a warning and so on, followed by a promise of deliverance, and that comes to repentance. That’s going to be the same thing true in Jonah, but it’s going to take place more in a narrative function. So as we look at the book of Jonah we’re going to learn more about the message that God had for him and then how that was explained and shared with the people of Nineveh.

Now I want you to know who the hero of the story is in Jonah. The fish is named four times, Nineveh is named eight times, Jonah is named eighteen times, but God is mentioned thirty-eight times. You’ve got to understand the hero of the book of Jonah is God, not Jonah. God is the hero. We learn more about Him. Jonah is not the hero, God is. Jonah is running from the Lord in chapter 1, gets swallowed by a fish. He’s preaching for the Lord in chapter 3, he’s complaining in chapter 4. All these things are happening, but it’s all about God and what God wants to do in people’s lives. So this is a story about God’s heart for His people. A story about God’s heart for a wicked country or city.

Nineveh is in Iraq. In that point in the history of the world, these guys were really bad people and God has a heart for them. We’re going to learn more about the compassion of God in the midst of this as He just has a heart for these terrible people, or at least they do terrible things.

He also has compassion on prodigals. So prodigal sons and daughters like Jonah who try to run away from the Lord. God is a compassionate God. He cares about them.

So if we take this picture of Jonah (and we now are going to add to it the outline of Jonah), you can simplify the outline this way: In Jonah 1 he flees from the Lord. In Jonah 2, Jonah is repenting. In chapter 3 he’s preaching. In chapter 4 we see that he’s complaining. We’ll take parts of each of those chapters as we go through to learn more about what happens.

But here I want to give you a summary of our message today. This is your takeaway. This is what I believe God wants us to understand from verses 1-3. When God speaks sometimes we don’t like the message, what He says. The solution for us is to get a bigger picture of who God is and not just think about ourselves. That’s the message for today.

I think we’re a lot like Jonah. He had a problem. I think you can learn something from anybody. Sometimes you learn what not to do. That’s what we’re going to find out here in the story of

Jonah, what not to do. We don't want to do the same things that Jonah did and get ourselves into trouble, so we want to learn what not to do in some respects from Jonah himself. We want to guard ourselves from that attitude that he had.

So let's jump into verse 1. Jonah 1:1 gives us the very first words of the book. They introduce this character Jonah and tell us more about him. It says – *The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai.*

The word *Jonah* comes from the word 'dove,' and *Amittai* comes from the word 'truth.' So dove of truth. You know in Bible times the meanings of names was very significant. So we have Old Testament names and New Testament names. The names that were present often indicated the person's life work or changing their name, in some cases, was significant. In this case Jonah's name is important. He is the dove of truth. He's the messenger that's bringing truth to someone.

Let's just pause for a moment because I want to make an application, take Jesus home, just with this one point. I think that the greatest problem in our world today isn't politics or have to do with economics or terrorism. I think the greatest problem that we can address today is Christians who will live up to the meaning of Christians. We're little Christians that need to stand up for Jesus Christ and say, "That is the way." When we do that then good things can happen.

Now if Jonah would have done that and stood up as a dove of truth to say, "I am a messenger of God's word," then that would have been great. But he didn't do that. He had a problem with this whole thing. It was a problem. He had a problem being called to do this work. God had a purpose for his life. He had a call for him and wanted him to do things.

Now I think Jonah genuinely liked his job. He's mentioned in 2 Kings in the Bible. He had a significant ministry. I think he liked what he did. But in this case God told him to do something. We're going to see what God tells him to do in a minute. But he doesn't like the message. He doesn't like what God tells him to do. That's important to understand because sometimes God does that to us as well. He tells us to do something we don't want to do. I think we can look at Jonah and say, "What a foolish guy."

But we can look at ourselves and say, "Man, there's sometimes I don't want to do what God tells me to do." If God tells you you need to apologize to someone and you go, "No, I don't want to apologize to somebody, that would make it look like I was wrong and they were right." Or God says, "You've got to be kind to that person." "You've got to be kidding me. That person is mean to me all the time." Or God says, "I want you to take a step of faith in this particular area of your life. I want you to be gracious to this person. I want you to tell that person about Jesus."

Sometimes we don't like the message. We don't want to do it just like Jonah. So I think we feel the same pain that Jonah felt as we're trying to move forward in life and God starts to speak to us. I can identify with that. I feel like I'm like Jonah sometimes.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai and the word of the Lord comes to us in our lives. God likes to communicate with us, starting in the Garden of Eden when God came to meet with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day. God is all about relationship with us. He wants

personal relationship. He wants to enjoy that. Every time you wake up in the morning you can say, "Good morning, Lord," and welcome the Lord into your life on that day. Even on those days when you go, "Good Lord, it's morning," and you've got problems you've got to deal with in the course of the day, you can know that God is the one who is going to guide you and help you through that process.

Every time you pick up God's word He speaks to us. He reveals these nuggets of truth that will apply to the most complicated situations of our lives. Every time you make the conscious decision to worship the Lord, whether that's here on Sunday morning or in your own private, when you worship the Lord, God welcomes you into the holy of holies and He speaks to you in your own heart about what He wants for you. Each day brings new opportunities with new words that God wants to speak into our lives.

Does God speak to you? I hope you say the answer is yes. He speaks sometimes through parents, He speaks through children, He speaks through husbands and wives, He speaks inside of our hearts, He speaks through a sermon sometimes, He speaks even through creation. God speaks to us. We need to be willing to listen to the message. I think that sometimes we miss the message that God wants for us because we box God in and we say He can only speak this way.

It reminds me of Elijah, another prophet, who went onto Mount Carmel and he was in a contest with the Baal prophets. There were all these Baal prophets there, almost a thousand of them. There was a contest between them and little old Elijah by himself. So he said, "You guys start praying that fire will come down from heaven." They prayed and they danced around and nothing happened all day. So Elijah says, "Put water all over the water and I'm going to pray." He prayed and God brought down fire to not only lick up all the water but burn up the whole altar and leave this space there. Like a lightning strike, God spoke.

Just a little while later Elijah is feeling discourage and he says, "I'm the only prophet in all of Israel, God." He's feeling discouraged. God says this to Elijah: "Elijah, I want you to go up on the mountain right there and I'm going to pass by."

This is what the Bible says: *The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind.* Oh. See, Elijah was used to God speaking in dramatic ways. Lightning coming down and now this big -- oh it must be God speaking. No. God was not in the wind.

After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Why? Because God was speaking in this gentle whisper.

How does God want to speak to you today? Not just today, at any time. How does God want to speak to you? We have to have this bigger picture of God speaking because He often speaks to us in odd ways, in ways that we might not expect. In the Old Testament there was a donkey that stopped Balaam from getting into trouble and God spoke through the donkey. It's really some

odd times and ways that God speaks to us today and we need to be willing to listen to that. We don't know exactly how Jonah heard the word. Whether it was an audible voice or how he heard this message. But he knew it. He heard the message and then when he heard the message the next question is, are you going to obey. That's where we come to the challenge that Jonah faces.

I've told you this story before, but I'm going to tell it again because it's a story I love to do. It's an illustration of what I do with young people who come into my office, many times. Not always. But if it's applicable, I try to do this.

This young man was fourteen years old and he was mean to his brother who was twelve. After a couple of weeks of working with him, his mom comes in and says, "He's not changing."
I said, "Okay, let me bring him in. Let's talk to him."

So I said to him, "What are you working on in your life?"
He said, "I'm supposed to be working on being kind to my brother and respectful to my mom."
I said, "Okay great. Is it better, the worse, or the same?"
He said, "It's the same." That's not good news for me because I'm trying to help people get better.

So I said to him, "Are you a Christian?" Now for him that's total change of subject. For me, it's not. We're talking about the same thing. But when I said to him are you a Christian, he said, "Yeah."

I said, "Does God speak to you?"
He said, "No," because he's thinking audible voice. His picture of God speaking is so small he can't imagine God speaking to him.

I said, "Does God speak to you?"
He said, "No."
I said, "Would you like Him to speak to you?"
He says, "Yes."

I said, "Okay. Here. Take my iPad and look up Philippians 2:3-4. Read those and tell me what is God saying to you right now." *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interest of the others.*

I said, "What is God saying to you?"
He just reads the verse to me again.
I said, "Look. Give it to me. I'll show you. God is going to speak to me right now. As I'm reading this, it's telling me in the last part *don't look at your own interest, but the interest of others*. It reminds me that my wife has an event going on this weekend and God is reminding me I need to be thinking of her event and not just thinking about myself."

I said, "And do you see that part about humility? *Value others above yourselves*. I'm working with you and I'm just reminded now, the Lord is reminding me that you are a King's kid and I

need to value you as more important than me. So God is reminding me of that through His word and He's speaking to me."

"Here you try." I gave him back the iPad. I said, "Read the verse. What is God saying to you?" Here's what he said. He said, "I think God wants me to share my electronic toy with my brother."

I said, "Yes! Did you hear Him speak? He just spoke to you."

"Now there's a second question. I asked you do you want to hear God speak and you said yeah. The second question is this: If you hear God speak, are you willing to listen? If in the course of this week you will listen to the Lord, He will prompt you and remind you to grow in your kindness toward your brother and respect toward your mom."

God wants to help us in the minor areas of our lives, the major areas of our lives. We do not know how Jonah heard the message in this particular story. I suspect this was an ordinary day for Jonah. He got up, got dressed, checked his Facebook, read the newspaper, whatever they did in those days, and in the midst of that God spoke and said something to him that changed his life. One sentence it looks like He's going to share with him.

Isn't that true? Sometimes we're going along in life and we get one sentence and it changes our lives. You get that phone call and it's either are you going to change our lives for the good or it's going to change our lives in a negative way. Something happens with one sentence and that's what happens here in the life of Jonah. An ordinary day that it happens, God speaks.

We need to be ready to listen to what God has for us. I just want to say it often comes in ways that we don't expect. I would suggest that God often comes to us through interruptions. We might even say that God uses interruptions to get our attention. Where we often react to the interruptions in life, we might want to ask the question, is God doing something here? When I see something really odd happening, I want to ask the question, "That is really odd. I wonder if God is doing something here. Because this isn't what should be happening. Maybe God is doing something here." So we want to listen to God's voice. We want to listen to what He's doing and what He's saying.

Let's look at verse 2. *"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."*

Go to the great city, a wicked city, about 550 miles north to Nineveh, modern day Iraq, north of Baghdad where Mosul area is now. He's in Joppa down there on the coast in Israel and God says, "I want you to go and preach to them because of their wickedness." That's where God tells him to go.

But notice when Jonah gets this message he needs to know that following instructions are his job. But he doesn't like the instructions. It's just amazing that God speaks, we don't like what He has to say, so we find ourselves in trouble because we don't like the message that God is saying. He's telling us to do something and we don't want to do it. Jonah had a problem here.

So what does he do in verse 3? *But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.* You can see on the map that's 2500 miles the other direction. He gets on a boat and he's going to head away.

I want you to see why Jonah's running away. I don't think he's running away just because he doesn't like the idea of going to Nineveh. Why doesn't he want to go there? I'll tell you why he doesn't want to go to Nineveh. The people of Nineveh are terrible people. The Assyrians would torture people when they took them captive. They were just evil. I will spare you the R-rated details of what they would do to people, but it's just terrible. In fact Jonah hated them, I'm sure. As did most of the Jewish people hated the Assyrians, hated the people of Nineveh. So I'm convinced that Jonah wasn't just afraid that they might kill him or attack him or mistreat him. But I think he was afraid that he might be successful and God might forgive them.

At the end of Jonah, if you look at Jonah 3:10 and then the first couple verses of Jonah 4 it says this – *When God saw what they did (that they repented in Nineveh, this is after the preaching and so on) and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.*

Verse 1 of the next chapter – *But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.* It's very typical that anger is caused because we see something that's wrong in life, or at least we perceive it to be wrong. So Jonah is angry because he sees something that he perceives to be wrong.

He prayed to the Lord, "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."

I think Jonah was afraid that he would be successful, that God would actually save these people. And that's why he doesn't want to go there. He doesn't want to offer them salvation. He doesn't want to bring the good news that God has for them. That's a really challenging place.

I hear this same kind of conflicted message sometimes in my counseling when there's a husband and wife at tremendous odds in their relationship. One of them, the one I'm working with, just really needs to forgive, she needs to move forward, and she needs to bring healing into the relationship." No way. I'm not doing that." There's this same "I don't even want him to come to Christ" kind of attitude.

I would suggest that this is what happens. When God speaks and we don't like the message because it makes us feel uncomfortable, it takes us into new territory. It causes us to do something we don't particularly like and He makes us angry, then we need to get a bigger picture of God. That's what Jonah is going to learn here. God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love. That bigger picture of God can help us know how to handle the situation better.

You see, when there's someone like the Ninevites or the people that we hate or that we look at and we disdain or we're disgusted by or whatever, there's two things that we don't know. One is how hard they fought in their struggle against sin and the other is how big the struggle is that they're facing. But we do know that God is gracious, that God can open up dark hearts, that God can do amazing things, and He often uses us to be a part of that. God wants to do that in Jonah's life. When God sends us a message or tells us to do something, we don't always know what God is doing. Our job is to obey Him and do what He's asking us to do.

Well salvation is going to be the goal, but repentance has to come first. That's why Jonah is going to be out there sharing the message that needs to take place. He has to go the long way. He has to learn some very important things here. The story about Jonah is a story about God who sees people who have potential. We see people without that potential sometimes, but God is compassionate on them. He sees that they have potential to change. So He sends Jonah with a message.

The message I want you to see is not a message that says God has a wonderful plan for your life. The message is you need to repent because your wickedness is wrong. It's just flat out. I think sometimes we water down the message that God has for people. Maybe sometimes we need to share that message that's hard and say, "Look, what you're doing is wrong." That's what Jonah's message was that he's going to come and share with those people.

God always wants to save people. We need to understand that when we don't understand what God is doing in the world we need to recognize God is bigger than our mind, God wants to save people. He loves people. He cares for them.

I like this acrostic. You can hardly see the red letters in there, but if you look closely you can. This is from John 3:16 – *For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* And that acrostic in the red spells 'valentine.' The idea of God's love for us is His valentine verse for us. God is compassionate. He loves and He cares for us. God's more gracious than Jonah. He's more gracious than I am. God saves people I would never save.

So Jonah is going to try to run away from God. He didn't want to go to Nineveh. He didn't care about the Ninevites. He didn't think God should care about them. He didn't want them to repent. He didn't want God to forgive them. He didn't want to have anything to do with these people. So in verse 3 it says – *But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.*

Notice in verse 3 two things. Two times it says who he's fleeing from. It's not Nineveh. It's not a place he's fleeing from; it's a person. Jonah, in the first part, *ran away from the Lord*. Do you see he ran away from a person, the Lord. Then the last part of the verse, he had *sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord*. He's trying to run away from the Lord. Running away from the Lord is not the solution to the uncomfortable message that God shares with us. In fact I think that if he had known Psalm 139, which was available to him at the time, he would know the message that we all need.

I'm going to read to you parts of Psalm 139 and I just want you to let this soak in. Here's the thing. When God asks you to do something uncomfortable, you need a bigger picture of God. God is doing something here that we may not understand and we need to follow His direction. You can't run away from the Lord, and that's what Psalm 139 is all about.

It says this: *You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.* So God knows us. Very important to realize that.

Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. So as we think about the darkness in our world we need to recognize that God is light in the midst of that.

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand—when I awake, I am still with you.

And the psalm ends this way: *Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

I would suggest that God speaks to us and sometimes we don't like the message that He shares. Whenever that happens in any area of our lives we need to realize we need a bigger picture of God. When we have a bigger picture of God, we're willing to submit to His direction and allow Him to work through us to accomplish His direction and what He wants in our lives.

I think the story of Jonah is a good story because it's contemporary for us. It's something we can all learn from. I think there's a little bit of Jonah in each one of us that needs to be addressed. So we can learn some valuable things as we move forward here.

If God speaking to you this morning, I want to invite you to talk to Him about that and allow Him to work in your heart. What is He telling you to do that you might not want to do?

[PRAYER] Heavenly Father, we come before you now and thank you for making yourself available to us, for talking to us, communicating with us. Lord, sometimes we become so self-focused that we don't follow your directions. So give us such faith and trust in you that we're

willing to obey you and follow your lead in our lives. Lord, thank you for this book written so many years ago, but one that has such practical applications for even our own hearts today. Speak to us now. In Jesus' name, amen.