

THE COMPASSION & MISSION OF GOD IN  
**JONAH**



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# **THE COMPASSION & MISSION OF GOD IN JONAH**

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# INTRODUCTION

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Few books have captured the imaginations of God's people as strongly as the Book of Jonah. For many of us, we can remember pictures (or flannelboards) of a wayward prophet and a giant fish from our childhood. Even if you're new to Christianity, you've probably heard about 'Jonah and the Whale.' But for this very reason, sometimes what we think we know about the Book of Jonah keeps us from understanding the depth of its riches. As we spend the next eight weeks in Jonah, our aim will be to see that there is more to this book than Jonah's stubborn disobedience and the giant fish who swallowed him whole. Running through this book like a braided golden cord are the twin themes of *God's compassion* and *God's mission* for the life of the world.

Despite his seeming ubiquity in our cultural consciousness, little is known about Jonah himself. In addition to information gleaned from **2 Kings 14:25**, we know that he was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the eighth century B.C., and that he prophesied at least in part during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753). But, as Douglas Stuart points out, few details beyond these "barest facts" are provided about Jonah in the Biblical text. We simply learn that he is a prophet, a son of someone called Amittai, "and God has called him to preach to Nineveh," a major city in the neighboring (and hostile) nation of Assyria.<sup>1</sup> Even the authorship and date of composition of the book are hard to state precisely.<sup>2</sup> These limitations, however, do not obscure the *message* of the book. Through the experience of a reluctant prophet and a humbled foreign nation, God still teaches His church important truths about His purposes and character.

The book of Jonah reminds us that the mission of God stands against the pretensions of human rebellion – whether it is the rebellion of those who think they can run from His

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hosea-Jonah*, vol. 31 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 431.

<sup>2</sup> Another issue, with some debate surrounding it, is the genre of Jonah. Is it an historical account of things that really happened or a fictional story to illustrate a larger principle? See "On the Genre of Jonah," in the appendix for a fuller discussion.

presence (Jonah), or stand against it altogether (Nineveh). Quite against our petty and self-regarding autonomy, God is on mission to draw people to Himself, so that He will be their God and they will be His people. And in this mission God cannot be obstructed or hindered. He draws the reluctant, wayward prophet back to Himself and causes the arrogant city to weep in humble repentance.

Moreover, through Jonah we see that God is not impressed by worldly wisdom, cunning, or even the greatness of human culture if it is opposed to Him. In Jonah, God's implicit but unrelenting declaration is that His power is stronger, His approval is worthier, and His fellowship is better than anything else we could conjure up or to which we could escape. With this conviction at the back of it, God's mission has a worldwide claim. He draws His people in, not to confirm them in their own greatness, but to make them the blessed witnesses of His greatness before a watching world.

And Jonah speaks another word on the compassion of God. In many ways it serves to illustrate His self-revelation in **Exodus 34:5-10**: He is Yahweh, "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." In Jonah we see that God's compassion is extended to people because they are made in His image. It is a compassion that moves from the great facts of our having been created by God and His having a personal claim upon our lives. The worth and value of every person lies precisely here – not in the name we try to make for ourselves in culture or through individual achievement. God's compassion is not, therefore, a respecter of persons. It extends to the lowest (as Jonah was in the belly of the fish) as well as to the meanest (as Nineveh was and as Jonah, resenting the mercy God showed the Ninevites, was shown to be). It is a compassion whose foundation rests not in our merit, but in God's character which is revealed in Christ – the culmination of God's compassionate mission.

As a church family, may our time in Jonah help us to grow in our understanding of what God is doing in the world and what our lives as His people this side of heaven are therefore all about. May it renew our belief in and desire for His Kingdom, which is above all and over all. May it more firmly convince us of our missional calling as His people and move us to diligently seek His compassion in the face of Jesus Christ.

Each week, we will hear one of the **Prophets** call us into worship, reminding us of God's unchanging character and His desire for every tongue, tribe, and nation to abide in His presence. Our confession of faith will come from **Exodus 34:5-10**. We will confess together what God has already confessed to us about Himself, remembering and being shaped by His gracious, merciful, and faithful character. Our assurances of pardon will come from **Paul's epistles** to the New Testament churches. We will be reminded that in saving us from our sins God has saved us to Himself as well as to each other as the one, unified body of Christ. Our closing word of benediction will come from **Jude 20-25**, encouraging us to go out in the knowledge that God has gone before us and will help keep us faithful because of His promise to present us blameless in Christ in His glorious presence.

This devotional is designed to encourage daily meditation and prayer in personal devotions and/or family worship. You are encouraged to use it the week prior to the associated sermon so that you and your family are prepared for worship. In addition to the Scriptures and associated questions, there are opportunities to pray for the various aspects of the Church. On Wednesdays, we will pray for the various missionaries, church plants, and missional ministries that we support at CCC through Faith Promise. On Saturday we have the opportunity to pray that our church family will continue to grow in our understanding and appreciation of our missional calling. If we have the Lord's Table or a Baptism, then we will prepare to receive this evidence of His unwavering love for us in Christ. On Sunday, the Lord's Day Sabbath, we will pray for the means of grace to bear specific fruit in our lives. Our desire is to continue to facilitate and grow in our dependence on the Lord through prayer.

May God bless our time in personal devotion, family worship, and corporate worship as we seek for the Church to grow in knowing God's unchanging love and living in a way that reflects our gratitude and His glory!

# SOLI DEO GLORIA!

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# SERMON SCHEDULE

DATE	CALL TO WORSHIP	ASSURANCE OF PARDON	BENEDICTION	SACRAMENT
SUNDAY, 1/5 JONAH 1:1-3	Isaiah 55:1-5	Colossians 1:15-23	Jude 20-25	Bread and Cup
SUNDAY, 1/12 JONAH 1:4-6	Isaiah 54:9-14	Colossians 3:1-11	Jude 20-25	Baptism
SUNDAY, 1/19 JONAH 1:7-16	Micah 4:1-5	1 Corinthians 1:21-31	Jude 20-25	Bread and Cup
SUNDAY, 1/26 JONAH 1:17-2:10	Isaiah 57:14-21	Romans 1:16-17	Jude 20-25	
SUNDAY, 2/2 JONAH 3:1-5	Hosea 5:15-6:3	Romans 10:5-13	Jude 20-25	
SUNDAY, 2/9 JONAH 3:6-10	Joel 2:12-14	Galatians 3:7-9	Jude 20-25	Bread and Cup
SUNDAY, 2/16 JONAH 4:1-4	Isaiah 25:1-12	Galatians 3:23-29	Jude 20-25	
SUNDAY, 2/23 JONAH 4:5-11	Zephaniah 3:9-13	Ephesians 2:11-22	Jude 20-25	Bread and Cup

# WEEKLY CONGREGATIONAL CONFESSION

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The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.” And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. And he said, “If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance.” And He said, “Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the LORD, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.”

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## Exodus 34:5-10



# JONAH 1:1-3

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## The Week of January 5<sup>th</sup>

**Monday, 12/30: ISAIAH 55:1-5:** Meditate upon God's promise concerning the effect our being satisfied in Him will have on the people around us.

**Tuesday, 12/31: COLOSSIANS 1:15-23:** Take time to give thanks for the reconciliation Christ has made between us and God. Pray for opportunities to talk about the glory and preeminence of Christ with those who do not know Him.

**Wednesday, 1/1:** Pray for the Robertsons serving through MTW in South America to plant and support churches that embrace their missional calling.

**Thursday, 1/2: JONAH 1:1-3:** What are some areas in which the call of discipleship seems overwhelming to you? What practices are you engaging to help you resist the temptation to flee from God's presence?

**Friday, 1/3: JUDE 20-25:** Give thanks to God for the blessing of His patience and longsuffering towards you and those you love.

**Saturday, 1/4:** Take time to read the preparatory letter and pray to prepare for the Lord's Table. Give thanks to the Lord that He has given us this meal to strengthen our faith in Him.

**Sunday, 1/5: THE LORD'S DAY SABBATH WITH THE LORD'S TABLE:**

Pray for the means of grace to strengthen our resolve to obey the Lord as new creatures in Christ, knowing that He loves us and is for us in everything He commands

# JONAH 1:4-6

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## The Week of January 12<sup>th</sup>

**Monday, 1/6: ISAIAH 54:9-14:** Reflect on a time when it seemed that your world was shaken up. How did you experience the steadfast love of the Lord during this time?

**Tuesday, 1/7: COLOSSIANS 3:1-11:** Give thanks to the Lord for the new life He has given you in Christ. Pray that our church may live out the unity that reflects that Christ is all, and in all.

**Wednesday, 1/8:** Pray for the Caltons serving with RUF at KSU to reach students with the message that true life is found in Christ alone.

**Thursday, 1/9: JONAH 1:4-6:** Reflect upon God's use of the pagan mariners to move Jonah to call out to Him. How has God used others around you to motivate you to renewed obedience?

**Friday, 1/10: JUDE 20-25:** Reflect upon God's power as the One who is "able to keep you from stumbling." Pray that He would fulfill this promise through the Holy Spirit as you look to Him in faith. Resolve to run to His throne of grace in your moments of temptation and failure.

**Saturday, 1/11:** Take time to read the preparatory letter and pray to prepare for Maverick Weathers' baptism. Pray that the Lord would draw us into a deeper sense of our need of Him.

**Sunday, 1/12: THE LORD'S DAY SABBATH WITH BAPTISM:**

Pray for the means of grace to strengthen our resolve to run to the throne of grace rather than away when we have sinned against God.

# JONAH 1:7-16

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## The Week of January 19<sup>th</sup>

**Monday, 1/13: MICAH 4:1-5:** How has God been faithful to fulfill the promise that many nations would desire to enter His house? Reflect upon and praise God for the worldwide reach of the Gospel of Jesus Christ!

**Tuesday, 1/14: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:21-31:** Take time to consider your calling in Jesus Christ. How has God used your weaknesses to draw you and others around you to boast in Christ alone?

**Wednesday, 1/15:** Pray for Grace Potter serving as an intern with RUF at KSU to help students to grow in their desire to know God and boast in His mercy alone.

**Thursday, 1/16: JONAH 1:7-16:** Who can withstand the storm that God sends? Reflect upon the fact that Jonah knows it is only by casting Himself upon God's mercy that the storm will abate.

**Friday, 1/17: JUDE 20-25:** How has God been faithful as you have patiently waited "for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life"?

**Saturday, 1/18:** Take time to read the preparatory letter and pray to prepare for the Lord's Table. Give thanks that the Lord has given us this meal as a visible reminder of His ever-present mercy to us.

**Sunday, 1/19: THE LORD'S DAY SABBATH WITH THE LORD'S TABLE:**

Pray for the means of grace to bear fruit of repentance leading to new life in Christ alone.

# JONAH 1:17-2:10

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## The Week of January 26<sup>th</sup>

**Monday, 1/20: ISAIAH 57:14-21:** How have you experienced God's comfort after a time of affliction?

**Tuesday, 1/21: ROMANS 1:16-17:** Praise God for the cultural-boundaries-crossing character of the Gospel! How does this challenge you to love and serve those who may be very different from you?

**Wednesday, 1/22:** Pray for Jim Whittle with Equipping Leaders International that the Lord would use his labors to raise up a generation of faithful leaders in India and beyond.

**Thursday, 1/23: JONAH 1:17-2:10:** What does Jonah's prayer teach us about God's purposes in disciplining His people?

**Friday, 1/24: JUDE 20-25:** Has the Lord ever used you to "save others by snatching them out of the fire" of sin? How did this experience shape your view of your calling as a Christian?

**Saturday, 1/25:** Pray for the worship service tomorrow. Pray that our church family would grow in our desire and ability to call out to the Lord in times of affliction.

**Sunday, 1/26: <sup>THE</sup> LORD'S DAY SABBATH:** Pray for the means of grace to increase our love for the Lord, for His people, and for our unbelieving friends and neighbors. Pray that these means would renew our hatred of sin and our desire to see others come to repentance and find life in Christ.

# JONAH 3:1-5

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## The Week of February 2<sup>nd</sup>

**Monday, 1/27: HOSEA 5:15-6:3:** Meditate on the fact that God is unchanging in His character and that His going out after His people is sure as the dawn. How does this truth encourage you to press on to know the Lord?

**Tuesday, 1/28: ROMANS 10:5-13:** Take time to give thanks for God's nearness to us in Christ. Pray also for opportunities to share the name of Jesus with those who need to call upon His name and be saved.

**Wednesday, 1/29:** Pray for the Mills serving through MTW in Thailand to boldly proclaim God's judgment against sin and grace and mercy in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Thursday, 1/30: JONAH 3:1-5:** How has God used His Word and His people to reveal to you your sin and to remind you of His love?

**Friday, 1/31: JUDE 20-25:** Are there people for whom you can't imagine them turning to faith in Christ? Ask the Spirit to help you imagine what it might look like for them to be saved and pray for opportunities to share the mercy of Christ with them.

**Saturday, 2/1:** Pray for the worship service tomorrow. Pray that the Lord would bring people to worship who need to be convicted of their sin and to hear the hope of reconciliation with God by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

**Sunday, 2/2: <sup>THE</sup> LORD'S DAY SABBATH:** Pray that the means of grace would stir our hearts to know God better through His Word.

# JONAH 3:6-10

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## The Week of February 9<sup>th</sup>

**Monday, 2/3: JOEL 2:12-14:** Are there areas in your life where you think you know all about what God will and will not do for you? Reflect upon God's invitation to return to Him "yet even now."

**Tuesday, 2/4: GALATIANS 3:7-9:** Take time to thank God for all of the ways He has worked through His people for centuries so that you could hear of Jesus Christ and turn to God in faith. Ask God to give you eyes to see how He is using you to draw others to Christ in faith.

**Wednesday, 2/5:** Pray for Mwamba Johnson serving with Vision Collegiate Ministries to bless his labors to make known God's compassion and mercy for all who turn to Him in faith.

**Thursday, 2/6: JONAH 3:6-10:** Reflect upon the King of Nineveh's humble repentance and upon God's lavish compassion. Are there areas in your life where you need to devote time to repentance and to being still to receive God's mercy afresh?

**Friday, 2/7: JUDE 20-25:** Reflect upon Joel's exhortation to build ourselves up in faith. How can you build up others in our Church? How can others build you up?

**Saturday, 2/8:** Take time to read the preparatory letter and pray to prepare for the Lord's Table. Pray that we would grow in our understanding and appreciation of the once-for-all character of Christ's atoning work for His people.

**Sunday, 2/9: THE LORD'S DAY SABBATH WITH THE LORD'S TABLE:** Pray that the means of grace would move us to encourage and build others up in love.

# JONAH 4:1-4

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## The Week of February 16<sup>th</sup>

**Monday, 2/10: ISAIAH 25:1-12:** Take time to give thanks for God's worldwide compassion and pray for God's people as they participate in His mission around the world.

**Tuesday, 2/11: GALATIANS 3:23-29:** What opportunities do you have to cultivate and enjoy the unity that we have as God's people? Give thanks that in Christ every wall of hostility is broken down!

**Wednesday, 2/12:** Pray for First Care Women's Clinic in Marietta that they would be encouraged in the Gospel and that the Lord would keep them from growing weary in doing good.

**Thursday, 2/13: JONAH 4:1-4:** What angers you most right now? Meditate upon God's character and His question to Jonah. Does your anger reflect God's character or is it something that God is softening in you?

**Friday, 2/14: JUDE 20-25:** Give thanks for God's patient compassion and His unwavering commitment to present us before Himself with great joy.

**Saturday, 2/15:** Pray for the worship service tomorrow. Pray that the Lord would use it to strengthen and motivate us in our missional calling for the life of the world.

**Sunday, 2/16: THE LORD'S DAY SABBATH:** Pray for the means of grace to bear fruit in our lives as reflected in our joy at the work of the Spirit in the lives of our church family and for our neighbors.

# JONAH 4:5-11

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## The Week of February 23<sup>rd</sup>

**Monday, 2/17: ZEPHANIAH 3:9-13:** Pray for God's mission to continue to advance among all peoples. Ask the Spirit to open your eyes to ways God is calling you to participate in His mission in your sphere of influence.

**Tuesday, 2/18: EPHESIANS 2:11-22:** Take time to enjoy your access in the Holy Spirit to the Father. Thank God for His work in your life and for His work of building His people up as a holy temple with Christ as the cornerstone.

**Wednesday, 2/19:** Pray for the Sawyers serving in Kenya that they would rejoice in the privilege of seeing God mercifully at work through them in the lives of those in Maasai Mara.

**Thursday, 2/20: JONAH 4:5-11:** How has God been good to you even amidst dry seasons and the doldrums? Are there ways in which you have taken His goodness for granted?

**Friday, 2/21: JUDE 20-25:** Take time to keep yourself in the love of God. Are there ways in which you have forgotten God's love for you or for His people? How can you encourage someone else in God's love today?

**Saturday, 2/22:** Take time to read the preparatory letter and pray to prepare for the Lord's Table. Pray that this means of grace would increase our love for Jesus, His church, and for our neighbors.

**Sunday, 2/23: THE LORD'S DAY SABBATH WITH THE LORD'S TABLE:**

Pray for the means of grace to bear fruit in our concern for and witness to our unbelieving friends, neighbors, and family.



# APPENDIX A

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## On the Genre of Jonah

When studying the book of Jonah, several questions typically come to mind. For example, “Did a gigantic fish *really* swallow Jonah?” Our minds often probe the story to see if it can endure scrutiny in today’s world. We ask with Brick (the inquisitive youngest child in ABC’s hit sitcom, *The Middle*), “Wouldn’t the whale’s digestive juices dissolve [Jonah]?” Although we may chuckle at first, perhaps asking Brick’s question so directly makes you a little uneasy. After all, if it can be shown that Jonah could not have survived in the fish’s belly for three days and nights, then perhaps it can be shown that the book of Jonah didn’t really happen. And if that’s the case, where do we draw the line? Can we trust the Bible at all? Or is this whole thing a sham, a collection of myths that can make us feel good on Sunday but that can’t be of any real help in the problems we face today?

The first thing we need to remember is that the book of Jonah is not about the great fish. It is not even ultimately about Jonah. The book is all about God – His compassion being on mission for the life of the world. As such, we need to remember that the main character in the book of Jonah is the Creator of every atom that will ever exist and the Lord of the earth, sky, stars, and sea. For God to preserve Jonah in the belly of this fish is but a small thing when compared to the panoply of His wondrous act of creation. And, as Tim Keller points out, “If you accept the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ (a far greater miracle), then there is nothing particularly difficult about reading Jonah literally.”<sup>3</sup> So, when juxtaposed with God’s mighty acts of creation and redemption, the events recorded in Jonah almost pale in comparison.

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet: Jonah and the Mystery of God’s Mercy* (New York: Viking, 2018), 4.

The next thing we need to keep in mind is that there is a better question than, “Is the book of Jonah historically accurate?” A more fundamental question is, “What literary *genre* is the book of Jonah?” Is it historical narrative, so that historical accuracy becomes an important matter of debate? Or is it a parable based upon real people and (possibly) real events from history, but not in such a way that the story records things as they happened in fact?

Leslie C. Allen argues that the book of Jonah is, indeed, such a parable.<sup>4</sup> He points to the way the book of Jonah weaves references and motifs from other parts of the Old Testament into its highly stylized narrative. For example, he highlights the way Jonah’s mopiness in chapter 4 echoes Elijah’s mopiness in **1 Kings 19**. Allen argues that the author of Jonah uses references to other Scripture to help broaden Israel’s understanding of God’s mission and compassion by means of this parable.<sup>5</sup>

Allen also helpfully reminds us that reading Jonah as a parable, rather than as historical fact, does not in any way diminish its status as the inspired Word of God. To argue that the book must be historical in order to be inspired “is in danger of restricting the Spirit of God and belittling the value of the parable as a genuine scriptural medium.”<sup>6</sup> So, whether or not we agree with Allen’s view on the genre of Jonah, he clearly demonstrates for us that we do not need to be afraid of arguments people make against the historicity of the events described in this book. Even if Jonah did not really go to Nineveh, and even if a great fish did not really gobble him up and spit him out three days later, this book really is the inspired Word of God. Regardless of its genre, it is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (**2 Timothy 3:16**).

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<sup>4</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 177.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: “The narrator is copying not because of his deficiency in narrative skill, still less as an act of plagiarism, but in order to create a contrast with the past or to use accepted truth as a . . . stepping stone to an unwelcome revelation . . . which would revolutionize both [the Jews’] understanding of the nature of God and their attitude toward pagans.”

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

There are, nevertheless, several reasons to conclude that the book of Jonah refers to real historical events. As we have already observed, the Bible is no stranger to miracles. Our God is on the move among His people and in His world. We believe in Christ's resurrection and in our own future bodily resurrection (**1 Corinthians 15**). The events in Jonah should, indeed, move us to awe at our God's power, and they should by no means make us feel embarrassed that we cannot give a rational or scientific explanation for exactly how they occurred.

Second, the stylized narrative of Jonah does not entail that the book is not describing events that really happened. Think about the way you tell stories from your life to your family and friends. You don't count a lack of style and dryness as evidence that you are telling them the truth. You count such things as bad storytelling! As Douglas Stuart argues, "Style is largely irrelevant to factuality; guilt by association (sensational equals fictional) is an inadequate basis for rejecting historicity."<sup>7</sup>

Third, and finally, historians have, indeed, argued that there seems to be little historical evidence available to verify the events recorded in the book of Jonah. And yet Douglas Stuart shows that all of these historians' objections are answerable and that, contrary to popular belief, there is a great deal of evidence to verify Jonah's mission to Nineveh.<sup>8</sup> One of the most common arguments against the historicity of Jonah is that the revival that broke out as a result of his ministry seems to have had little to no impact on Assyria in the grand scheme of history. Sinclair Ferguson acknowledges that "this is a serious objection. But," he argues, "it is one that lacks spiritual perspective. Take the United Kingdom; take Wales, or Northern Ireland, or Scotland. Within a similar period of time these small countries have witnessed remarkable revivals of religion, with no less remarkable occurrences than in Nineveh. But it is not long before these are memories of the past."<sup>9</sup>

From our North American context, we could easily add New England to Ferguson's list. It did not take terribly long for the land of the Pilgrims, the land of the Great Awakening, to become

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, vol. 31 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 440.

<sup>8</sup> See pages 440-42 in Stuart's commentary for a concise survey of the available historical evidence that verifies Jonah's mission to Nineveh.

<sup>9</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *Man Overboard!: The Story of Jonah* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 59.

a spiritually dry place compared to what it once briefly was. As Ferguson goes on to say, “The presence of the Spirit of God is a far more delicate matter than we are prone to imagine.” For this reason, “We need have no hesitation in believing that a revival of the magnitude described in Jonah chapter 3 really took place in Nineveh.” And, what is more, having wrestled with the question of the genre of the book of Jonah, we can devote ourselves to internalizing its message and pray that similar revival might take place in our own hearts, lives, and community!

# APPENDIX B

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## On the Sign of Jonah

The things we can learn from the book of Jonah extend beyond a knowledge of the events he experienced in his own time. **Matthew 12:38-41** indicates that Jonah teaches us something important about Jesus's ministry too. In this passage, Jesus encounters a group of scribes and Pharisees who demand a sign from Him, ostensibly to authenticate His message. But Jesus, seeing the willful unbelief behind their demand, rebukes their evil and adulterous hearts and announces that the only sign they will see is "the sign of the prophet Jonah" (**12:39**). In another confrontation with a group of Sadducees and Pharisees, Jesus repeats His rebuke and confirms that the only sign they will receive is "the sign of Jonah" (**Matt. 16:4**). Luke also provides a description of the first of these encounters and of Jesus's response (**Luke 11:29-30**).

Jesus's use of Jonah shows us that the story of this prophet is more than a cautionary tale against trying to outrun God, or against resenting the grace He shows others. Jonah served, in an important respect, as a sign of something that Jesus came to do. But what is that? Just what is the sign of the prophet Jonah?

Two possibilities have been proposed. The first is that the sign of Jonah is his preaching ministry. Jonah was sent to the wicked Ninevites. They were an evil and adulterous generation too. And yet, God, in great compassion, sent Jonah the prophet to preach about God's judgement and the need to repent. In the same way, this idea says, Jesus confronted the evil and adulterous generation of His day with "the sign of Jonah." Like Jonah, He preached about the Kingdom of God, God's judgement of sin, and the possibility of repentance. According to this view then, Jesus is saying that the only sign the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees are going to get is His preaching ministry.

The second possibility is that the sign of Jonah is the three days and nights he spent in the belly of the fish. Thanks to the disastrous consequences of his sin, Jonah was entombed in the dark belly of the fish, and, from the perspective of any outside observer, he was as good as

dead! Yet, after three days in his aquatic grave, God brought Jonah back to the land of the living, put fresh dirt under his feet, and restored Him in His mission. In the same way, this idea says, Jesus, by taking upon Himself the consequences of our sin and dying, spending three days entombed in the grave, and rising to new life on the third day, gave His generation (and all future generations) the sign of the prophet Jonah. According to this view, then, Jesus is saying that the only sign the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees are going to get is His death and resurrection from the grave.

Those who think the sign of Jonah refers to his preaching and call for repentance appeal especially to the passage in **Luke 11**, particularly verse 32: *“The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.”* Here Jesus seems to indicate that the sign of Jonah is his preaching—since the Ninevites repented when they received the sign of Jonah, they will rise up on the last day and condemn the scribes and Pharisees who received the same sign and did not repent. On the other hand, those who think the sign of Jonah refers to his deliverance from the belly of the fish appeal especially to the passage in **Matthew 12**, particularly verse 40: *“For just 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.”* Here Jesus draws an explicit parallel between Jonah’s experience in the fish and His own experience of death and resurrection.

The way to resolve the difficulty posed by these two possibilities is to recognize that the sign of Jonah refers to both his preaching ministry and his miraculous deliverance from the great fish. Jesus performs both these signs and demonstrates (more completely and finally than did Jonah) God’s judgment against sin, mercy for those who repent, and power over death. In fact, the entirety of **Matthew 12:38-41** brings this out clearly. Jesus compares Himself to Jonah both in His preaching of the mercy of God for those who repent and in His deliverance from death and the promise of new life for all who put their trust in Him. Thus, the sign He delivers is nothing less than the totality of His person and work. In an ironic twist, it is a sign the scribes and Pharisees will miss precisely because of their distrust of Jesus and unbelief in His message. It is a sign that reveals their hardness of heart; one that shows that they refused to follow Jesus, *not* because they lacked knowledge or evidence, but because of their unrepentant hearts and their lack of love for God and neighbor.

This is related to another difficulty we may wonder about. We know that many signs and wonders accompanied Jesus's ministry. For example: "the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (**Matt. 11:4-5**). So, we may ask, "Why does Jesus say that the only sign the scribes and Pharisees would receive is the sign of Jonah? Clearly there were other signs." The answer is apparent when we recognize the difference between a sign that confirms the eager hopes and expectations of those who receive it with joy, and a sign that confirms the hardness of heart of those who "*seeing do not see, and hearing do not hear*" (**Matt. 13:13ff.**). It's the difference between receiving God's good gifts because we know, trust, and love Him, and of putting Him to the test because we do not. There is only one sign for those who put Jesus to the test—the very sign that reveals His character and mission, but the very one they will miss because they do not have eyes to see God. But for all those who put their hope in Him, God is lavish in the signs of His grace and mercy toward them.

So, let us hear what the book of Jonah (and indeed the whole Bible) has to teach us as people who have our eyes fixed upon Jesus and our hope firmly in His promises. May the Lord keep us from hearts that doubt Him or put Him to the test—or that are tempted to think that we can run from His presence. Instead, let us put our hope in Him and so find Him faithful to be with us and confirm us in our calling, for His glory, our good, and the life of the world!