

Jonah

SPEAKER	Wes Neely
DATE	Sunday, August 4, 2024
PASSAGES	Jonah 1; Jonah 2; Jonah 3; Jonah 4; 2 Kings 14; Luke 23
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:15:32 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Jonah did not run because he was afraid of Nineveh. He ran because he knew God was gracious, merciful and slow to anger, and he did not want that spent on his enemies. The book ends mid-question because the question is being put to whoever is reading it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Jonah is designed to be read straight through in one sitting. It is a story, and stories lose their shape when you stop every few verses to comment.
- ◆ For three and a half chapters the book withholds Jonah's motive. That withholding is the point — you supply a sympathetic reason, and then chapter 4 takes it away.
- ◆ Jonah quotes God's own goodness back at him as an accusation. He was afraid the mission would work.
- ◆ Everyone else in the book behaves better than the prophet: the sailors, the Ninevites, the king, even the animals in sackcloth.
- ◆ To an Israelite reader the story is a warning shot. If Assyria repents and is spared, birthright is no protection against unrepented idolatry.
- ◆ Jonah and Jesus are placed in matching situations — a boat, a storm, a sleep, a city, a tree — and Jonah fails at every point where Jesus holds.
- ◆ In this story we are not Jesus. We are Jonah, and we are also Nineveh.

Hope has spent the summer on what Matt calls tiny texts — short books taken whole rather than one long study stretched across months. Wes took the whole of Jonah: four chapters, about two pages, six or seven minutes to read aloud. And he asked the room for one thing up front — let the story run.

Read it like a story, not a quarry

► 1:19:12

Nobody, Wes pointed out, was ever meant to read Jonah chapter 3 on a Tuesday and come back for chapter 4 next week. It has flow. His analogy: watching *The Lord of the Rings* with the friend who has read the Silmarillion and cannot let a scene go by without explaining which elf is related to whom. “Please let me watch the movie.” So he read it chapter by chapter and saved the commentary for the gaps.

The only outside fact he brought in is the only one there is. Jonah appears exactly once elsewhere in the Bible, in [2 Kings 14:23–25](#), prophesying under Jeroboam II of the northern kingdom that Israel would recover its borders. Israel was cramped, raided, near its low point, and Jonah’s one recorded message was national resurgence — and it came true. Hold that beside the man in this book; it tells you what he cared about.

1. A prophet running the wrong way

► 1:19:59

“Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.’ But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.”

JONAH 1:1–3 ↗

The direction matters. Israelites were not a seagoing people, and the open sea sat in their imagination as something close to outer darkness — to be cast into it was to be cast out. Boarding a ship at Joppa is not a travel decision, it is a statement about how far Jonah intends to get from God. Wes noted the irony sharpened later by Jonah’s own words: he tells the sailors he fears the God “who made the sea and the dry land.” There is nowhere on the map that is not covered by that sentence.

2. Everyone in the boat is better than the prophet

► 1:24:34

The sailors come off well and Wes wanted that noticed. They throw the cargo. They pray to every god they have. They wake the one man asleep below and tell him to pray too. When the lot falls on Jonah and he tells them to throw him over, they refuse and row for shore instead, and only when the sea beats them do they act — and then they pray that innocent blood not be charged to them. Afterward they fear the Lord, offer a sacrifice, and make vows.

“Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.”

JONAH 1:16 ↗

“You can’t really ask for more of their character or behavior,” Wes said — “especially coming from people who did not know the God of Israel the way that Jonah knew him.” Pagan sailors keep coming out ahead of the prophet, and they will not be the last group in the book to do it.

3. Three days in the dark

► 1:30:16

Chapter 2 is a prayer from inside the fish, and Wes pushed against the version most of us absorbed from children’s Bibles — no roomy chamber for pacing and reflecting. Weeds around the head, bars closed behind him, waters closing in to take his life. He may well have believed he was already dying.

“Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD.”

JONAH 2:8–9 ↗

Wes asked the room to hold verse 8 in mind, because it comes back. In Jonah’s accounting the idol-worshipping nations have forfeited steadfast love — that is settled. He is asking for deliverance out of a category he believes belongs to him and not to them. And he gets it: the fish vomits him onto dry land.

4. The most successful sermon in the Bible

► 1:33:53

Called a second time, Jonah goes. Nineveh is “three days’ journey in breadth” — hyperbole, Wes thought, for a city so vast that one man shouting in a square could not possibly reach it. After roughly a day of walking and preaching a single sentence, the entire city believes God. The king comes off his throne into sackcloth and ashes and puts the livestock in sackcloth too.

“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”

JONAH 3:10 ↗

“Jonah really could be the biggest success story in the Bible,” Wes said — a prophet who wanted no part of the assignment, delivering it with what looks like the bare minimum of enthusiasm, and getting a national repentance that Jeremiah and Isaiah never saw.

5. The reason, at last

▶ 1:37:20

“O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”

JONAH 4:2 ↗

Every charitable explanation collapses here. Assyria was terrifying and prophets who preached repentance had a poor survival record; fear would have been an understandable excuse, and Jonah does not use it. “Jonah didn’t want to do what God wanted because he was afraid that it would work.” He takes the finest thing that can be said about God — the confession Israel had been reciting since Sinai — and throws it at him as an accusation.

God’s reply is four words long: *Do you do well to be angry?* Wes offered a reading and flagged it as his own guess rather than Hebrew scholarship. A man that wrapped up in himself might have heard it as encouragement — *God is asking whether I need to be upset, so he must be about to give me what I want.* Jonah builds a shelter east of the city and sits down to watch it burn.

6. A plant, a worm, and a question

▶ 1:40:36

“You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

JONAH 4:10–11 ↗

That is the end. No chapter 5, no resolution, and the last two words of the book are about cows. Wes remembered reading it as a kid and turning the page looking for the rest. The abruptness is the craft: the question is left hanging because it is not really addressed to Jonah.

Read it as an Israelite before Assyria came, and it lands hard. Nineveh repents and is spared. Israel at this point is so covered in shrines and high places you would struggle to tell it apart from its neighbors — and it is still resting on the belief that steadfast love is theirs by birthright. That is verse 8 of chapter 2 turned back on the man who said it. The prophets all preach the same sermon, Wes noted; Jonah just tells it as a story instead of chapters of oracle.

7. Jonah and Jesus, point for point

► 1:47:05

The parallels are deliberate, and every one of them is a contrast. Both men are on a boat in a storm and both are asleep — but Jonah is on that boat fleeing God’s errand and Jesus is on his way to do it; Jonah sleeps through a judgment aimed at him, Jesus sleeps because he has nothing to fear. Stopping the storm costs Jonah his life over the side; it costs Jesus a word ([Mark 4:38–39](#)).

► 1:49:48

Then the cities. Jonah preaches to Nineveh and Nineveh repents; Jesus preaches to Jerusalem and Jerusalem refuses. Jonah goes outside the city by choice and sulks; Jesus is taken outside it. Jonah is put under a tree for comfort he did not earn. Jesus is put on one, and there is no comfort in it.

Which leaves the responses. Asked whether he does well to be angry over the plant, Jonah says yes, angry enough to die. From his tree, over a city that had just killed him, Jesus says “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Wes named what that sentence is made of: pity. The same thing God asked Jonah for and did not get.

8. We are not Jesus in this story

► 1:55:12

This was the turn Wes had been building toward. When someone who has crossed us falls on hard times, the honest reaction is often relief dressed as justice — *sounds about right, they had it coming*. He was careful not to flatten it: there is a place for righteous anger. What there is no place for is satisfaction in another person's ruin.

And the reason is the one the book keeps making. We are Nineveh. We are the ones who had to be told to repent so that we could be spared, and we did not know the gravity of what we were doing either. Jonah received mercy at every turn — swallowed and spat out unharmed, called a second time after running — and treated each one as no more than his due, while begrudging the same mercy to a city of 120,000 people who could not tell their right hand from their left.

Wes closed by praying it back: let us be more like Jesus and less like Jonah, and when we are tempted to enjoy an enemy's suffering, let us pity instead.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- 2 Kings 14:23–25
- Jonah 1:1–3
- Jonah 1:16
- Jonah 2:8–9
- Jonah 3:10
- Jonah 4:2
- Jonah 4:10–11
- Mark 4:38–39
- Luke 23:34

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Before chapter 4 explains him, what reason had you assumed Jonah had for running? What does it say about us that we reach for the sympathetic one first?
2. Jonah recites God's mercy as a complaint. Where have you found yourself wanting God to be gracious on your terms rather than his?
3. The sailors and the Ninevites both behave better than the prophet. Who has played that role in your life — someone outside the church whose response to God showed you up?
4. Jonah counted every mercy he received as no more than his due. What have you stopped noticing as mercy because you have grown used to it?
5. Name someone whose trouble you have quietly enjoyed. What would pity actually look like toward that person this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Wes Neely is the assistant pastor at Hope Chapel, and he works with the church's middle school and high school students — he referred to them from the pulpit as “my middle schoolers and high schoolers.” He also organizes Hope's summer fun nights, and he preached this message as part of the church's summer run of “tiny texts,” short books of the Bible taken whole in a single Sunday.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08f-74VzcWg&t=4532s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.