

Jonah 1

The Bible is a **window** that shows us God's heart. In the stories and in the writings and in the gospels we see what God is like. The Bible reveals God to us, just like the windows in a building reveal what is going on outside.

At the very same time the Bible is a **mirror** that shows us what we cannot **see** for ourselves. How is my hair? Is my tie straight? Without a mirror we have to trust the opinion of others. With a mirror we can see for ourselves. (see also 1 Cor. 13:12)

The book of **Jonah** is one of the best **windows** and **mirrors** in the Bible. It's an awesome story. It might be one of our favourite Bible stories. Especially the fish part, right?

If we want to look through a window or use a mirror, there are some things we need to ignore, or at least not focus on.

"What kind of wood is that?"

"Where was it made?"

"How thick is the glass?"

"How many other people have used this mirror?"

Those questions might be interesting and fun to explore, but they are beside the point of the window or the mirror. When we are using them the way they are meant, we forget about the wood and the glass and we focus on what is on the other side of the glass, or on our own reflection.

Here are some questions that might be fun to explore, but focussing on them would lead us to miss the point of Jonah.

“Did this really happen?”

“Was Jonah a real person, was he swallowed by a real fish?”

“Did Nineveh really experience a revival, if so, why was the city eventually destroyed?”

If you are into history and into questions like that, knock yourself out. But they can distract you from seeing God and from seeing yourself.

Here’s what we need to know.

First off, the Lord is the **living** God. Everything happens **before his face**. That was true in Jonah’s day and it is true today. The story emphasizes that by repeating it.

The Lord says, “the wickedness of Nineveh is ‘before my face’”. Jonah lives before the face of God. When he goes to Tarshish he flees from the face of God. Jonah lives with the same blessing that we do. “The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

‘Jonah’ is the **prophet** people of the Lord. His name means ‘dove’. In Hosea and the Psalms the people of God are referred to as my ‘dove’. So it is not just a story about one prophet, it is a story about the people of the Lord. In Jonah, the people of the Lord might be shocked and surprised, but a story has a way of getting inside us.

Nineveh was the capital city of **Assyria**. If you like reading the Bible stories in the Old Testament, you will remember Assyria. **Assyria** was a powerful **enemy** of **Israel**. Around 700 BC, close to the time this story was written, Assyria

ravaged Judah, taking 200,150 captives. Like all empire capitals, Nineveh was rich and beautiful and filled with stuff brought back from the colonies.

Tarshish was the **opposite** direction of Nineveh. It was on the Mediterranean, a shipping port. Tin, iron, silver, gold, ivory, apes, baboons and peacocks as well as precious stones, all came through Tarshish.

In running away, Jonah is trying to **escape** the face of **the Lord**. It turns out that is just not possible. Down to Joppa, down to the ship, down into the bottom of the ship, but he cannot hide from the Lord. The Lord who sees Jonah as he is running is also the Lord who can direct winds and waves. And he does.

Running away only brings **trouble**, even to **innocent bystanders**. The sailors did not ask for this. But they are caught up in Jonah's stuff with the Lord. The **sailors** are a **foil** to Jonah. They take the Lord more seriously than he does.

They are compassionate. He does not care, they don't want to harm an innocent man. Jonah just wants to die, they bow before the Lord, and make vows to him. And what of the fish?

Some people say that this is the story of the people of God and the fish is the exile. What is important and what will help us is to see that even as Jonah is given what he has asked for, even as he receives what is fair, he has run from the Lord, he has brought the danger of death to the sailors, the Lord rescues him from himself. The fish is the gracious **rescue** of the Lord.

In our own lives there are times when by running from the Lord we bring trouble and destruction to the lives of those around us. We end up, one way or the other in a crisis in a terrible place that we cannot get out of or manage. Our

lives became unmanageable to quote Bill W. (founder of A.A) It is only later that we are able to see that the crisis itself, the desperate place, the slimy choking dark, acidic fish, was sent by God who loves us so much that he is determined to save us from ourselves.

Someone else once fell asleep in the bottom of a boat. And we are his followers.

Followers of Jesus are the **prophet people** of the Lord today.

The wickedness of a fallen world has come up before the face of the Lord. He says to you and me, "Go, tell, cry against it, tell them, "Jesus is Lord". Show them, "Jesus is Lord".

What do you see in the window? What has the story shown you about the Lord so far?

The Lord cares. The Lord speaks through his people.

What do you see in the mirror? Are you on your way to Nineveh or settling in Tarshish? What of us as a congregation? Are we in Nineveh or booking passage to Tarshish?

So where is our Nineveh?

Maybe it is Edmonton, New York City, Baghdad or Kabul?

Maybe it is the people of St. Albert who live every day without any concern for the Lord. Maybe it is people trying to find happiness at the cash register, or trying to find life at the bottom of a glass.

Nineveh is the place and the people that the Lord is calling you and me to speak to. Where is our Nineveh?

Maybe it is the hard place in our own hearts, maybe it is the hard visit we do not want to have, maybe it is the confrontation we are avoiding, or the reality we do not want to face.

Nineveh was the capital city of the enemy. Could that help us to name our 'Nineveh'?

Where is our Tarshish?

Tarshish is any place we think we can hide from the Lord's call and mission.

Does running from the call and mission of the Lord look familiar to you?

It might be the comfortable life and future we can map out for ourselves. It might be our rec rooms where we can entertain ourselves and amuse ourselves and hang out with family while the rest of the world goes to hell.

Tarshish can even be a basement Bible study if all we ever do is go around in circles in the Bible, or if all we ever do is "share" more deeply but we never really do anything for the people of Nineveh.

It is possible for a whole church to hang out in Tarshish while a needy world, or a hostile world or a desperate world, or a world that just does not know the name of Jesus is ignored.

Where do we find ourselves in this story? Where does the Lord find us?

May the Lord be gracious to you.

May the Lord be gracious to me.

May the Lord be gracious to Nineveh.

And all God's people said, Amen.