

JONAH—WEEK 1

THE RUNAWAY



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover picture is Michaelangelo's (1474–1564) depiction of Jonah on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City.

God calls Jonah to preach repentance to a people he doesn't particularly care for. Jonah refuses to do it and runs away, boarding a ship for Tarshish. That doesn't work any better than you'd expect, and he ends up getting tossed into the sea.

Eventually, Jonah finds himself in the stomach of a fish. Good; now he has time to think.

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Jonah, Week 1 — The Runaway
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1 Jonah 1:1–3 (NKJV)

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.” 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 isn't just an average believer; he's a prophet. So, what's up with him thinking he can *flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD*? Fleeing to Mars wouldn't get him away from the LORD.

Jonah is familiar with Genesis and Exodus. He knows that, “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*” He knows about Noah and the flood. He knows about the plagues in Egypt. The idea that's God's power is regional simply isn't in his library. What is he thinking?

Nothing. He's not thinking at all. His actions are totally irrational. His hatred of the Ninevites trumps all.

And thus begins one of the most illuminating books in the Bible. This book isn't just about Jonah; it's about us.

As we walk through this wondrous book, try to see yourself in Jonah. Don't just think about the plot; think about what's going on in Jonah's heart, which is full of hate, and his mind, which is not in charge just yet.

He's already gotten the first of many wake-up calls.

God is the great teacher. Sometimes we learn the easy way—He explains things and we gain wisdom. That's why we read the Bible (and devotionals like this one).

But other times we learn the hard way. Our sinfulness interferes with our thinking, and the lessons don't penetrate.

Learning often involves admitting we're wrong, and that doesn't come easily. We're too tense. Even though a big part of becoming a Christian is recognizing that we're sinful, that's not the same as embracing the concept. I'm happy to tell you how sinful I am, but don't ask me for any details. Real Christian relationships are supposed to be at a whole different level.

In a sense, we don't really know the things we think we know. We've memorized the lines in the creeds. We can even explain these doctrines, and we intellectually assent to their truthfulness.

But something's missing. When push comes to shove, we're not as committed as we thought.

So sometimes the LORD has to jam lessons down our throats.

That's what's about to happen to Jonah.

2 Jonah 1:4–6 (NIV)

Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.”

Everything about this passage is puzzling. The sailors instantly know this isn't a natural storm and start looking for the supernatural cause. How? Jonah sleeps through it all, even though the storm is so violent that it threatens to destroy the ship. How?

The first puzzle isn't too hard. The sailors are experienced, and they simply recognize that this is no ordinary storm. Tossing the cargo overboard helps, but they sense that the only real fix is to placate whoever is behind this tempest. The culture of the day is to call out to their gods, hoping that they'll chance upon the right one and get relief.

We don't have a specific explanation for Jonah's extraordinary behavior, but the ship's captain doesn't understand it either. “*How can you sleep?*” he asks.

This is there to confirm Jonah's out-of-touch state of mind. He's trying to pretend that things are not as they seem.

He's in his own little world of denial.

Denial is so common that it has its own cliché. “Denial isn't just a river in Egypt.” People are simply amazing in their refusal to admit the obvious. You do it. I do it.

Think back at some of the best examples of denial that you've personally witnessed. How could that person have been so oblivious? You may not fully understand, but at least try to come up with some good guesses.

Now do the same thing for the times when you were the one in denial. If you can't think of any, then ask someone else to point some out. Ouch! (Your children are positively gifted at this.) Most people aren't aware of how often they've been in denial.

If you struggle to think of a time you were in denial, that may mean you're in denial about that. Keep trying. This is worth the time because you know more about your own denial than someone else's. Thus, if you can find a good example, you'll be able to do a better job of analyzing why you were so oblivious.

What were you thinking?

3 Jonah 1:7–10 (NIV)

Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

This is one of those passages that doesn’t come out right in an English Bible. In the original Hebrew, Jonah doesn’t say, *“I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD.”* He says, *“I am a Hebrew; and I worship Yahweh.”*

Every god has a name—Zeus, Mercury, Ra, etc. The real God has a name too—Yahweh (YHVH in Hebrew). But because the third commandment explicitly prohibits taking this name in vain, Bible translators don’t print it. They substitute in “the LORD” out of respect.

But “Yahweh” was used by people like Jonah in conversation. Ruth used it conversationally too. In Exodus 3:16, God tells Moses to say to the elders of Israel, *“Yahweh, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—appeared to me ...”* (NIV).

Leaving out the name is confusing. The sailors ask Jonah, *“Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us?”* If he had said, “The LORD,” they would have said, “Yeah, but which lord?”

Jonah’s answer is unambiguous, *“Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”* He’s not one of those gods that lives on Mount Olympus; He’s the creator of everything.

Welcome to monotheism, boys.

The lesson for us in this passage comes from Jonah’s claim to worship Yahweh. Does he really?

Jonah is tight with Yahweh. He has the immense privilege of being a prophet. He has a direct communication channel. But when Yahweh tells him to prophesy to Nineveh, he refuses.

The idea that Yahweh is the LORD isn’t just some theoretical concept. He rules over everything, especially his “servant” Jonah. Refusing a command from the LORD is denying His lordship.

If the LORD tells you to do something and you don’t do it, is He really your Lord?

Looks like Jonah could use some servant initiation.

4 Jonah 1:11–16 (NKJV)

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.”

Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. 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 the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows.

Why did the other men have to *throw* Jonah into the sea? Why didn’t he just jump overboard?

Because that would have erased a perfectly teachable moment.

Notice that Jonah’s shipmates end up totally converted. “*Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows.*” The vows are especially impressive. Think about how this came about.

For starters, Jonah had been totally real with his sailing buddies. Though we don’t know the whole backstory, verse 10 gives us the essence. *For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.* There was no phoniness with Jonah.

Then he gets the sailors involved in a way that rivets their attention. Making them *throw* him into the sea, instead of jumping in himself, seems silly, but it’s clever psychology. The fear and stress of this process freeze the event in their memories. They won’t just remember what happened; they’ll remember how they felt. And then *the sea ceased from its raging.*

The genius of Jonah’s method is that it’s designed to stick. The sailors have had a conversion experience they’ll never shake. Normally, it’s not all that hard to explain away the end of a storm as a coincidence, even if the timing was perfect. After a few years, doubts are bound to creep in.

But not this time.

It’s easy to think we can’t evangelize the way Jonah did because we can’t plan on having a spectacular miracle back us up.

But every conversion involves a miracle. No one can come to Christ on their own.

To convert someone, you don’t need some big miracle to get their attention.

You need a big miracle to open their hearts.

5 **Jonah 1:17 (NKJV)**

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.

Why do people try to explain this as a natural event? It's a miracle; Jonah wouldn't have survived three minutes in the stomach of any creature that ever lived (other than the one *the LORD had prepared* specially for this event). Stomachs are designed to dissolve things, not preserve them.

The explanation for this miracle is simple—it's a miracle. The laws of nature aren't supposed to hold.

And that's the point. It's silly to try to explain something that's designed to be impossible to explain.

There's one exception though—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The point of trying to find a natural explanation for the resurrection is that you can't. One of the most useful exercises a Christian can go through is to try to find an explanation for how Jesus didn't rise from the dead. It's so valuable, it should be standard at some level in Christian education. We should all know what crucifixion is and how it kills, and how the first Christians knew that's what had happened to Jesus.

Working through all the attempts to explain away the resurrection takes some time, but a great benefit comes when you've exhausted the list. Then you understand why the first Christians were so solid in their faith.

But that's just the beginning. Intellectual assent to the resurrection is great, even essential, but then what? After confessing Christ as your Lord, what's the next step? Is it training in the Christian disciplines?

Not exactly. Behaviors aren't the core issue. That's not the next step, and that's not what the book of Jonah is about. It's about a change in perspective.

Before learning to act like a Christian, we need to learn to think like a Christian. Otherwise, training in Christian practices is just operant conditioning—like you'd do with a dog. That doesn't glorify God at all.

Thinking like a Christian begins with seeing ourselves as parts of a larger whole. The LORD chose us to participate in a glorious operation known as the Kingdom of God. We need to think of ourselves in this way. Always be mindful of your role in the Kingdom. That takes some getting used to.

So, the next step is to get used to it. How should you respond to your boss? That depends on what's best for the Kingdom. How should you talk to your neighbors? Same answer. Don't know what's best for the Kingdom? That's okay. Just get used to thinking that way. That's the beginning of Kingdom-living.

This is what Jonah gets wrong. He's a prophet, but he doesn't think of being a prophet as his full-time identity. Thus, he's not willing to prophesy just any old thing, just because God told him to.

Jonah isn't practicing the kingship of the LORD. The coming attitude adjustment will be legendary.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. When have you learned something the hard way?
2. What's the best example of denial you've seen?
3. Are you ready to do whatever God calls you to?
4. What causes you to remember something well?
5. How do you see yourself as a part of the kingdom?

Items for prayer: