

Should I Not be Concerned?

Book of Jonah

Introduction: Ask someone for their vote on the greatest sermon in history, and I'm guessing you'll get similar responses. The vast majority will point to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Some might vote for Paul's address on Mars Hill. A few could lobby for Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." A handful might suggest M.L. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. But if I'd cast my vote for a lesser-known sermon; it doesn't even have a title.

I'm talking about Jonah's message to the Ninevites in Jonah 3:4. The entire speech is only *five* words in Hebrew, *eight* words in English: **"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."**

There's no introduction, no felt need discussed, no points, no poems, no illustrations, no conclusion. The little sermon doesn't just break all the rules of homiletics; it shatters them. If you deliver this in Preaching 101, the professor won't give you an "F," but a complete zero. How could anyone vote this "The Greatest Sermon in History"? **You must grade it on results.**

This little eight-word sermon had an unprecedented effect on its hearers and sparked a revival that spanned all social classes from peasants to kings. It may have impacted the largest number of people in the shortest time in history; the sermon caused somewhere between 120,000 and 600,000 people to radically repent in under 40 days. It saved an entire civilization from extinction.

The most remarkable thing about the sermon and the resulting revival is that it almost never happened. All the laws of great preaching say that the preacher must prepare through deep prayer and diligent study. Jonah did neither. He thumbed his nose at God and ran in the opposite direction. When compelled to preach, he did so reluctantly, hoping that no one would respond. When they did, he was so distraught, he climbed a hillside and contemplated dying.

This sermon had little to do with the preacher, and everything to do with how God prepared the people to hear it, spoke to their hearts while they heard it,

and directed their response when it was over. The book doesn't end; it just stops, with God asking the question, "***Should I not be concerned about this great city?***" (Jonah 4:11)

Joel C. Rosenberg asks the question; IS AMERICA FACING A "JONAH" MOMENT, OR A "NAHUM" MOMENT?

In the Old Testament book of Jonah, the Hebrew prophet was sent by the Lord to the wicked city of Nineveh -- the capital of the Assyrian empire -- to preach a message of imminent judgment. When Jonah finally did start preaching in Nineveh, he didn't call the people to repentance. Rather, Jonah declared, "Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." (Jonah 3:4)

However, even though Jonah never called the people to plead to the One True God of Israel to have mercy on their souls and on their city, even though Jonah never called on the people to beg for forgiveness and turn away from their wickedness, that is, in fact, exactly what the Ninevites did.

But this was not the only time the word of the Lord came to Nineveh.

About 100 years or so later, the next generation of Ninevites abandoned the Lord and fell back into tremendous evil, violence, bloodshed, lies, sorcery, and other wickedness. In the Old Testament book of Nahum, we read that the Lord again spoke to the people of Nineveh, this time through a different Hebrew prophet named Nahum. Yet this time the people of Nineveh ***did not*** repent. They did not listen to God's word. They did not plead for mercy. They did not turn from their wicked ways and start praying, fasting, and begging God for mercy. And thus, mercy did not come. Instead, the judgment of God came upon the people, and in 612 B.C. the city of Nineveh was destroyed.

Is America in a "Jonah" moment, or a "Nahum" moment? That is, will we hear the word of the Lord that we have strayed far from the teachings of the Bible. Will we confess that our hearts are far from Jesus Christ and plead with the Lord for His mercy and grace and forgiveness? Will we fast and pray and earnestly seek God's face, or will we ignore the word of the Lord and continue in our sins and watch our nation continue to decline?

We look at this story and think God's big problem is Nineveh. That's not God's biggest problem. But when we read the story, we see that God's biggest problem is Jonah, the prophet chosen to bring God's message of repentance.

Before we get high and mighty and accuse America's problems on the democrats, the republicans, the rich, the homeless, the drug addicts, the criminals, the woke mob...whatever group you want to put there, let's search our own hearts and make sure **we're** not the problem; meaning us Christians who are called to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to a lost world?

The title of today's message is: **Should I Not be Concerned? PRAY**
Chapter 1 "Jonah Resists God"

The book of Jonah, chapter 1, verse 1. **"The Word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city...'"** You want to remember that word, **'great'** because that is going to come up again in this book. **"...go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before Me."**

Jonah was a prophet; he was not a priest. Priests served in the temple. They offered sacrifices. They led worship. A prophet was a reformer. A prophet was an activist, who spoke the word of the Lord to people.

When you hear from God, sometimes it's just three little words, and they can change your life. One day the Word of the Lord comes to Jonah and says, **"Go to Nineveh."** Jonah was a prophet to Israel. He had nothing to do with other countries. They didn't have a temple. They didn't know God. But the word comes to him, not go to Nineveh and preach **to** it; go to Nineveh and preach **against** it, the text says.

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. In the seventh and eighth centuries BC, Assyria was the great world power. It chewed up and spit out countries right and left. It would put the populations of countries that it defeated on death marches, and practiced genocide.

Nahum said, **"woe to the city of blood...full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims, piles of dead."** Nineveh was not in Jonah's comfort zone.

Nineveh is trouble. Nineveh is danger. Nineveh is fear. What do you do when God says, "Go to Nineveh, go to the place where you do not want to go"?

Now Jonah does arise in response to the Word of the Lord. He does leave home, but not for Nineveh. He heads for Tarshish. Anybody want to guess what direction Tarshish was in? Verse 3 says, **"But Jonah ran away from the Lord, and headed for Tarshish."**

Jonah thought, as everyone of us sometimes thinks, "I can run from God. He goes down to Joppa, which is the port city, where he found a ship bound for Tarshish. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

Don't overlook this little detail. The text says Jonah **paid** the fare. This is a big deal. Hardly anybody would be able to do what Jonah did. Jonah had money enough to buy passage for a long voyage, out of his pocket. He had mobility, he had options. Here's one of the dangerous things about money: it makes it easier to think you can run away from God, because you've got options.

Tarshish is significant, not just because it's in the opposite direction from Nineveh, but because in many ways it was the opposite kind of city. Nineveh was a military city. Tarshish had great wealth. That phrase **"a ship of Tarshish"** became a symbol of wealth in the ancient world.

This comes up several times in the Old Testament. In Isaiah it says: **"The Lord has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted, for every ship of Tarshish. The arrogance of man will be brought low."** It comes up again in Ezekiel. **"The ships of Tarshish will serve as carriers for your wealth, with your great wealth and your wares, you enrich the kings of the earth. Now you are shattered by the seas."**

Can you imagine that there was once a group of human beings so deluded that they would think that technology, wealth, and a clever economic system could make them secure?

Jonah ran away. He thinks he's running towards safety. He thinks he's running towards opportunity and security, but maybe what really looks safe from a human perspective is not actually safe at all. Maybe the only real safe place is to be in the will of God, even if the will of God takes you to Nineveh, to the scary place you don't want to go.

"Then the Lord sent a violent wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose..." Pause here...that word violent, in the Hebrew text, the literal word is great, it's the same word that described the great city of Nineveh. ***"...so 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."***

This is a very diverse, multicultural crew, displaying a vibrant religious pluralism. Each one prayed to their own god. When the sea is calm, any old name for any old god is okay, but when a storm hits, everything changes, and now you're hoping one of those gods turns out to be real.

Does anybody know what Jonah was doing at that point? He's sleeping in the bottom of the boat. The captain is stunned by this. He says to Jonah, ***"How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god. Maybe He will take notice of us and we will not perish."***

One of the ironies in the story is a pagan ship captain is calling the man of God to prayer. The pagan is doing what prophet's do...calling the man of God to pray. The prophet is doing what pagans do...sleeping when it's prayer time. God is up to something really, interesting, but Jonah does nothing at this point so the sailors all cast lots as a way of trying to define what is going and the lot indicates that the problem is Jonah.

Jonah answers, ***"I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of Heaven who made the sea and the land. And the people feared a great fear...and they asked him, "What have you done?"*** Then a very significant parenthetical insertion, ***"(They knew he was running away from the Lord because he had already told them so.)"***

Now the parenthesis is significant, and to understand this, you have to understand something about the words used for God in the Old Testament.

The most common is the word Elohim. That is the generic Hebrew term for the God of Israel, or for other gods.

Then another word that is often used for God in the Old Testament is the word Adonai, and that is generally translated "Lord," but it could be used in human relationships also. It's the word for lord or master. It was often used even in marriage relationships. We're told in the Bible that Sarah called Abraham "my lord." How many of you wives refer to your husband as "my lord."

Then there's another word that is used for God, four letters, Y-H-W-H. In Hebrew, you must supply the vowels in the text. This word was regarded as sacred by Israel because this is not a title; this is a name. This is what God revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai. When God said, "This is my name, I am who I am." Or "I will be who I will be."

Now, back to the story. The sailors had been praying to a bunch of tribal gods. Then they asked Jonah, "What's going on?" Jonah says, there is a God, there is one God, He is the God of Abraham and Sarah. He is the God of Moses and Miriam. He is the God who wants to be known. He is the God who created the seas and the lands. That's language that these Gentiles would know.

Now this is the reason for the parenthesis in the text. The sailors already knew that Jonah was running away from his god, they figured that's just the tribal god of Israel. Assyrians have their god, Tarshish has their god. They figured; he's just running away from his own god. They see this storm, and Jonah says, "There is *the* God. He's sent this storm. He is real, and He reigns over Heaven and Earth, He has a name, and He wants to be known."

God uses Jonah's failure to bring these people to faith. Whatever else this book is, it is not a story about a **human plan**. The Bible is not a story about a human plan but of God's plan.

The sailors ask Jonah, "**What should we do to make the sea calm down for us?**" Jonah says, now you imagine saying this, "**Pick me up and throw me into the sea and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great**

storm has come upon you." Now for the first time, Jonah says, "I'm not going to run from God anymore."

The next amazing development of the story is that the sailors **don't** want to sacrifice Jonah. Instead, the text says, **"The men did their best to row back to land. But they could not for the sea grew even wilder than before."**

Their lives are at stake, but these sailors have more compassion on the Hebrew prophet than the prophet has for the people of Nineveh.

Part of what the writer is telling us is that you must be really careful about judging who the good guys are and who the bad guys are, who is on God's side and who is not. You must be careful in making conclusions about who God loves. There is no room for a spirit of superiority, or judgmentalism.

Notice who they prayed to now, **"Then they cried out to the Lord, 'Oh Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man. For You, oh Lord, have done as You pleased.'"**

The storm is still raging, the sailors are afraid, and Jonah knows he is going to die. But he would rather die than keep running from God, and his body is thrown into the water. Suddenly, everything is calm-the storm is gone.

You can see Jesus all over this story. Jesus would come one day, be in a boat when the storm hit and calm the storm. He still does that for people. **"At this, the men greatly feared the Lord."** There's that word again. They feared the Lord with a great fear, **"...and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord."** That's an act of worship. **"...and they made vows to Him,"** as an act of commitment and devotion.

This is unbelievable; a pagan boat becomes a place of worship. The ship of Tarshish becomes a temple of the Living God. That wasn't Jonah's plan. That's the last thing Jonah was planning on. He was supposed to be going the other direction. It turns out that God's story is so big, we see Him at work in ways that Jonah or us cannot even begin to dream of.

Key thought from chapter 1: It is never too late to quit running from God.

Chapter 2 - "Jonah becomes Desperate for God"

Pretend like you have never heard this story before, so imagine what it is like to hear it for the very first time. Jonah is sinking into the sea, but the Lord **appointed** a great fish to swallow him. Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

This word 'appointed' could be translated 'commissioned.' It was a governing word. It is what a king would do if he was going to appoint an ambassador or a messenger or something; and the picture here is God saying, "Hey Fish..." The fish saying, "Yes, Lord?"

"Go pickup Jonah...and this is important: Swallow, don't chew... I'll tell you where to drop him off." The fish says, "Okay, Lord." **God appointed the fish.**

The point of Jonah is not that there really are fish that a human being, could survive in for three days. The point is it would take a miracle, and at the heart of our faith is this claim... there is a God, He is all powerful, and He raised Jesus from the dead and in Him all things are possible.

The primary word associated with God in the story, if I was going to pick one in the book of Jonah, is the word 'great.' It starts by God saying to Jonah, "I want you to go to the great city of Nineveh, because it turns out that God has a great heart for the great city. Then Jonah runs the other way, so the Bible says God sends a great wind, and it produces a great storm. Then these pagan sailors are converted through great fear. Then God appoints a great fish for Jonah. God is doing something great in the story.

If the main word for God in this book is 'great,' the main word for Jonah, the one that keeps popping up, is the word 'down.' Jonah is going down. God says, "Go to Nineveh," and Jonah goes down to Joppa, the port city. He boards a ship going down to Tarshish. In the ship, he goes down into the bottom of ship to sleep. Finally, he goes down into the water, and down into the belly fish, down to the depths of the ocean. Jonah has hit bottom.

Guess what Jonah does in the fish? He prays, saying, **"In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave, I called for help, and You listened to my cry."**

Jonah had gone a long time without honestly praying to God. Why do you think Jonah prayed in the fish? He had nothing better to do. Think about it, what else are you going to do in a fish? He had nowhere else to turn. I'll tell you a humbling thing: Do you know why in our world we so often have a hard time praying? Because we have so many other things to do.

The whole first chapter of the story of Jonah is human action. Jonah makes plans. Jonah has resources. Jonah is going places...and it is a disaster.

In the second chapter of Jonah, there is no action at all, just prayer. Jonah goes as low as you can go. Do you remember that old children's song - *There's a Hole in the Bottom of the Sea?* It is all about a child's delight in creativity and memorization. **There's a wing on the flea on the fly on the wart on the frog...on a limb on a log in a hole in the bottom of the sea.**

Jonah's in the guts of a fish in a storm by a boat in the bottom of the sea. And he discovers...God is there.

This is part of his prayer... Jonah 2..."***...the engulfing waters threatened me. The deep surrounded me. Seaweed was wrapped around my head when my life was ebbing away. When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord. My prayers rose to you.***"

Has anybody here ever been in over your head in life? Pray. God is never more than a prayer away. One of the amazing things about God is He is gracious. Even when Jonah, you, or I come to Him because we hit bottom and we have no place else to go, God still says, "Come to Me."

What happens next in this story is so laughable, I would not mention it except it is in the Bible. Jonah gets delivered on the third day. Now the third day is a big day in Bible stories. In the Old Testament, often when there was a dramatic rescue on the part of God, it would come on the third day. So, a reader would expect in this story that Jonah is going to get some dramatic

rescue event... a visitation from the angel Gabriel, fly away on a chariot of fire, or something like that.

Jonah 2:10, "**And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.**" This is like the Jr. High version of this story. If you wonder why the translators of the Bible did not choose a more dignified, churchier word than *vomit*, it is because in the original text, the Hebrew word is even more graphic. Jonah did not get dropped off by an angel. The great fish, appointed by God tossed his cookies, lost his lunch, launched the food shuttle, took a ride on the regurgitron...you get the point?

Jonah ends up on the shore, covered with shrimp cocktail and tuna salad, or whatever the great fish had eaten.

Jonah, we are told, is from a town called Gath-hepher, which is a few miles away from Nazareth. Does anybody remember another prophet who came from Nazareth? Jonah was asleep on a boat in a storm when everybody else on the boat panicked and woke him up.

Does that remind you of anybody else in the Bible? Jesus came up out of the water after being baptized, and a dove descended, and a voice says, "This is my beloved Son..." Jesus said toward the end of His life...He had one sign to give the world, and He called it the sign of Jonah. "**For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the Earth.**" And then comes the third day.

The message of Jonah is a little foretaste of the victory of Jesus who comes to meet us at the lowest place and says, "**Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Grave, is your sting?**"

Chapter 3 & 4 - "Lost and Found"

As we get to Jonah chapter 3, verse 1 says, **Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."**

Does it sound like God has moved on? God is not going to just forget it. God calls Jonah a second time. At the heart of Christianity there is an outward focus that we can easily forget as we face the demands of our lives, but God doesn't forget why he has called and saved Jonah... **to go**... to Nineveh.

When God calls Abraham, he says, I want you to leave behind your city, your family, your stuff.... and **"Go."** When God calls Moses, I want you to stop being a shepherd in Midian and **"Go"** back to Egypt. After his resurrection, Jesus told his followers, **"Just as the Father sent me, I am sending you."** In other words, **"Go..."**

3 "Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh." "Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

And Jonah's message is incredibly vague. It lacks all the characteristic features of Old Testament prophecy. There is no word from the Lord, there is no naming of sins, and there is no appeal for the victims of injustice. There is not even the mention of God, but **"The Ninevites believed God."**

The people farthest away from God, come to believe in God. **And they didn't just believe in God... "They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth." When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.**

Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. 8 But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. 9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

God even reached the animals. **"Let the animals be covered with sackcloth..." 10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their**

evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

When God delivered Jonah from the depths of the sea, the joke was on sin and death. And here, when God delivered Nineveh from the depths of their sin, the joke is on Jonah. The joke is on those of us who stop believing that God can reach the unreachable. The lesson is to those of us who trade in a God for whom all things are possible for a God of measurable, expected, sensible outcomes, when our God is and always will be a God of enormous grace, of unforeseen mercy, of impossible outcomes.

The book of Jonah reminds us of what Jesus was all about. Jesus can reach the unreachable. Jesus can touch the untouchable. Jesus will love the unlovable. Jesus can save Nineveh. Even if Nineveh is a friend or family member who hates God, even if Nineveh is a situation that seems hopeless, even if Nineveh is a place where no reasonable God should go.

So, the question for us is, **Will you go to Nineveh?** The God of anything's possible is waiting for you to join him. If you give your life to God's mission, He will make your faith so much deeper and stronger.

"When the Lord saw what they did, and how they turned from their evil way..."...then it says, **"...He relented."** He has grace. He says, "I forgive."

If this story ended with chapter 3, It would be awesome, but Jonah looks at all this...a whole city of Assyrians, brought to God through his lame preaching. He has never been used by God like this. Jonah chapter 4, verse 1, **"But all this was grievous to Jonah, a great evil, and he was very angry."**

Jonah was okay when grace was being given to him, but now it's going to Nineveh. Now Jonah is not okay. We think God's big problem is, "What are you going to do about Nineveh?" That's not God's big problem. God's big problem is, "What am I going to do about Jonah?"

Now for the second time in this story, Jonah prays. God gives grace to Nineveh through Jonah. Chapter 4, **"Jonah prayed to the Lord and said, 'Please Lord, isn't what I said when I was still at home? This is why I tried to**

stop by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, please, take away my life, it is better for me to die than to live."

First time Jonah's going to die, and he prays, "**God, let me live.**" This time he's in the middle of this amazing revival, he prays, "**God, let me die.**" He doesn't really want to die. This is like a child saying, "God, I want my own way, and I want it to be the destruction of the Ninevites." There's something else going on in this prayer that would be very apparent to its readers.

He says, "**For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.**" Now this is a passage that is quoted from Exodus 34:6. So Jonah is a person who knew God's word. Even in chapter two in his prayer he mentions the statement "**abounding in steadfast love.**"

In the Hebrew its **hesed**, steadfast love is the word for God's covenant relationship where God remains faithful to the promise.

Hesed has to do with the endless kindness of God that is bent toward our interest and care. Every time **hesed** is used in the Scriptures, it is joined to the verb "to do" or "to make," because it is an action.

Often this word **hesed** is translated in the King James Version as mercy; and it is a key to salvation. He says, "You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in **hesed,**" **in steadfast love.**" They didn't merit salvation. It was all an act of mercy.

And that's the same with our salvation. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "**By grace you are saved through faith and not of work, lest anyone should boast.**"

But Jonah is thinking, God? You said You were going to destroy these people and now you've given them your grace and mercy. I don't like the Ninevites, God. I thought You didn't like them either.

Ann Lamott says, "You can tell you have made God in your image when it turns out He hates all the same people you do." Jonah goes on this tirade and impugns God's character, and all God says in return is, **"Is it right for you to be angry?"**

It's a funny thing, Jonah received grace when he hit bottom. Now he's offended by grace when it goes to somebody else. Jonah has a judgmental, unloving heart. God has a harder time saving Jonah than He does saving Nineveh.

When Jesus came, the people that Jesus had the hardest time with were not the people that everybody considered, big sinners...people that you'd associate with a place like Nineveh. The people Jesus had the hardest time with were people who considered themselves righteous.

People matter to God. The jobless guy. The homeless guy. The wealthy and successful guy. They matter to God. God is not like us. Everyone matters to God. Depressed people. Educated people. Divorced people. People with different politics than yours. Conservative people and liberal people. Muslims. Atheists. New Age people. People of every race and culture. Young and Old people. People matter to God. When one of them is separated from God by sin, it breaks His heart. He would that none perish.

God looks at all that, and gives Jonah this little parable, and he asks this question. This is the climax of the story. "Jonah, you're concerned about your little shade. You're concerned about Israel, and you want to have Nineveh blasted. If it is right for you to be concerned about some people, isn't it right for me to be concerned about *all* people? Shouldn't we want grace to come to everybody?"

We never find out. The story just ends with Jonah sitting there. Why would a writer do that? Have you ever heard of the Prodigal Son? There is a father who has great love, there is a younger son who is rebellious and wicked, runs away and then ends up repenting. There is an older brother who thinks that he is obedient to the father but is actually full of resentment, self-righteousness and hate. Sound familiar?

Jesus tells this story and ends up by having the father talking to the older brother, like Jonah, and the father says, "You know, you've always been with me, but this brother of yours was lost, and is found, was dead and has now been made alive. **Shouldn't we celebrate?**" Guess what the son says? We never find out. We don't know. Where do you think Jesus got that idea? Why would a writer do something like that?

What will you say? How will you respond? It's your story now.