

## **The Book of Jonah**

### **Lessons from a Runaway #2**

### **Jonah Chapter 2**

Hi, it's me again, Joe. The prophet.

Maybe I should give you my full name just in case you weren't here last Sunday. I am Jonah, son of Amittai, from Gath-Hepher near Nazareth in Israel. I lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century Before Christ, Before Coffee, and, thankfully, Before Cell Phones. Yes, I am the Jonah you read about in the Old Testament. But, again, you can call me Joe!

I've quite a tale for you today. It begins with me being lost at sea, although truthfully I was lost in a lot of other ways as well.

Here I was all by myself in the ocean, treading water to stay afloat, no life jacket (I'm only wearing this one as a precaution), when suddenly something big grabbed me, and pulled me under the water and it got really, really dark.

Actually things got pretty dark before that. Remember I told you I was a prophet. Well, one day God told me to go to the capital city of the great Assyrian Empire, a place called Nineveh. God wanted to me tell the people there that he had seen their wickedness and they better turn to him or they were doomed!

But I decided that I knew better than God, so I headed in the opposite direction. Went to the nearest port, which was called Joppa, and booked passage on a boat to Tarshish in sunny Spain – 3,500 kilometers away! I thought that if I was that far away God would just send another prophet to Nineveh! Big assumption.

But I was also scared. The Ninevites were known to be a brutal people. I knew that the chances were high that would kill me, and not quickly. People back then killed prophets when they didn't like the message they preached. It's not like today when you just ignore them or give them a T.V.show.

But I also knew that God could handle the Ninevites without me. Maybe cause an earthquake, or a flood, or a fire, or my favourite thing, turn everyone into a pillar of salt!

But most of all I was scared that if I went to Nineveh, and the Assyrians actually turned away from their sins, God might forgive them. I mean He's like that. Full of love and mercy and compassion. He'll go to any length to save people from their sin. I think he would even come to earth as a human

being and be crucified in our place to set us free from our sin and death. Now that would get people's attention!

But the Ninevites were the enemies of my people. I had already judged them. I had found them guilty and condemned. I wanted them executed. Just goes to show that God was right when he said that his thoughts and ways are different from ours!

Anyway back to me being lost at sea. I'm on this boat to sunny Spain when God sends this terrible storm. It was so ferocious that it soon it became clear that no-one was going to survive. The sailors realized this was no normal storm. They worked out that "Someone" on board had to be responsible. They worked out that it was me. I told them that I had run away from God. So they threw me overboard! I didn't even have time to tell them that I couldn't swim! I never want to go near water again but if I do, at least I'm prepared! (*Tugs at the life jacket he is wearing*)

I was in panic mode, and trying to tread water, when suddenly I got sucked below the surface by something with really bad breath. That's when I must have blacked out. When I came to, I thought I was dead. Then slowly I became aware of the kind of smell you only find at a fish market. Boy, did it stink! I opened my eyes and I thought I had died and gone to hell, because I was pretty sure that heaven had streets paved with gold and was filled with eternal light. But this place looked like a cave!

Then I thought. Maybe this is just a holding area before heaven. So I touched the walls. They were cold and slimy. That's when I felt something in my hair. Scared the Hades out of me. I grabbed at it. Thank God, it was only seaweed. I thought for sure that it was a bat, and I HATE bats. That's when I noticed that there were lots of small fish bones lying around my feet! Then I heard something that sound like a really loud yawn and about fifty gallons of sea water flew in and swirled around me along with a ton of fish.

Now I'm not the sharpest prophet on the planet but suddenly I got it. I wasn't dead! I was inside the belly of some kind of really big fish, or a whale or a sea monster. All I knew for sure was that it wasn't the Loch Ness Monster because the Scots hadn't invented her yet!

Now some people doubt my story because they don't believe anyone can be swallowed by a big fish. And yet they are quite ready to believe that God created the universe, parted the Red Sea, brought the walls of Jericho tumbling down and raised people from the dead! Honestly, I would have thought that having a prophet swallowed by sea creature would be real easy to believe!

Then the penny dropped. I was in the belly of this whale or whatever it was, and still alive, for only one reason. I had disobeyed God. This was my prison. This is where I would end my life. Now I don't know what you think about death-bed confessions, but let me tell you this. When you are living on that thin line between life and death you learn really quickly to forget about yourself and to think an awful lot about God. You get honest with him really quickly!

Now last week I shared with you some of the lessons I learned during the storm.

I'd learned that we should always obey God and do what he command.

I'd learned that you can't run away from God. He can always find you.

I learned that obedience is always a choice, and that all of our choices have consequences, so we need to choose carefully.

But I also knew that God is a God of second chances, because he loves us, and is inclined to be merciful towards us.

So guess what I did? I turned the belly of that sea creature into my prayer room.

I prayed like I'd never prayed before. I prayed around the clock for three solid days. I used my own words. This wasn't a time for a two minute prayer, or a time to pray someone else's words or even a time to pray that God would have the whale swallow Rev. Laura so she could pray for me!

No, this was a time to just cry out to God for mercy and forgiveness with my whole being! So I prayed and prayed and prayed and listened for the Word for God. I remembered his great deeds in the past. I reminded him of his promises. I reasoned with him that if he was willing to forgive the Ninevites their sins, should he not show a similar mercy to me. I promised that if I ever got out of this whale of a trap I would sing his praises, serve him with all my being, and that I would even go to Nineveh, if that's what he still wanted!

And the more I prayed, I realized that I wasn't praying out of desperation or fear anymore, because a calmness had come over me. I was praying in faith to the God who has the power to save us, whether we live or whether we die. When I had run away from God, I had forgotten how powerful He is. I'd forgotten He is Creator, and Redeemer. That His Spirit moves all over the earth. That Satan, the lord of darkness, is not in the same class as our God,

and can never win the great spiritual battle between the forces of good and evil.

So I prayed. And as I prayed I sensed God's presence. I felt his love and mercy flow over me and suddenly I didn't feel so scared and alone anymore. I don't know how I knew but I just knew – that all things would work together for good – even when those things were a disobedient prophet, an unexpected dip in the ocean and imprisonment in the belly of a great fish. So I asked God to deliver me, if that was his will. I asked him for a second chance.

Suddenly the great fish vomited and threw up and I went flying through the air and landed on the shore, half in the water and half out of it, I couldn't believe it. I was cold, and wet and very smelly but I was alive! I sat up and started to give thanks and praise to God, and as I looked out to sea I saw that sea creature sneak a quick look at me, as though he was checking up to make sure I was OK. Now tell anyone this, or they'll think I'm crazy, but I'm sure that sea creature winked at me just before it disappeared under the surface!

Now my eighth century Before Christ experience might seem like ancient history to you, but on that day I learned some timeless lessons that might just help you get through your lives.

First, always remember that God uses different methods to get our attention. A dream, a visit from an angel, a life experience, the wise counsel of a friend, a Sunday sermon, even a really big human- swallowing fish! And most of all, remember He speaks to us all the time through the Scriptures. So let me ask you, how is God trying to get your attention today?

Second, we need to listen to God when he speaks to us. Usually, that means we need to slow down a bit, and make time for Him, so His Voice is not drowned out by the demands of our daily living or by the competing voices of our culture. Trust me, you don't want to find yourself in the belly of a whale before you start paying attention to God!

Third, remember God answers prayer. Ask and you receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. But please, don't just get serious about prayer when you're in trouble. If you get serious about it every day, you might find you have less trouble in your life to begin with.

And, finally, always remember that only God has the power to save. Whatever sins you have committed. However horrible they seem to you. However far away you think you are from God. Don't give up on his saving

power. God has the power to save your marriage, to rescue your teen from drugs, to heal your diseases, to meet your financial needs, to help you overcome your addiction, to make your life whole again and to lead you into his eternal presence.

Well, I have to go now. (*Sniffs the air*) I think I need a shower! But I will be back next week to tell you about my visit to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Like my boat trip, it didn't quite turn out the way I'd planned.

Let's take time to reflect on today's message as we turn our attention to the video screens and listen to a song by contemporary worship leader Chris Tomlin. The song is called "*Our God*"

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5d\\_gm9zrnY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5d_gm9zrnY)

### **PASTORAL PRAYER.**

Almighty God, we thank you that you are living among us and that you are mighty to save.

We thank you that we can never escape from your Spirit and get away from your presence. (Zephaniah 3:17)

We thank you that whatever situations we face in life we can be confident that your hand will guide us and your strength will support us. (Psalm 139:6-10)

We thank you that you are as close to us as a whispered prayer and that you are a God of love, compassion and mercy.

Hear our prayers for all who call out to you today.

For the victims of acts of terror, and for those grieving the loss of a loved one.

For those living in countries afflicted by war, and for those refugees who have no home to return to.

For those who are judged on the basis of their colour or their ethnic origin, and for those who are pushed onto the margins of our society.

For those who are victims of abuse or bullying, and for those who are confused and conflicted.

Especially, hear our prayers for the people of the United States who are badly divided after their election, and who look on with either anticipation or fear as their new President is sworn in this week.

Lord, hear our prayers and the prayers of all your people and may your will be done in every life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.