

JONAH

Part 1: “The God Who Defies Our Expectations”

Jonah 1:1–16

By David A. Ritchie

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Scripture Reading

“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. 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, away from the presence of the LORD. But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, ‘What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.’ And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.’ So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, ‘Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?’ And he said to them, ‘I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’ Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, ‘What is this that you have done!’ For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. Then they said to him, ‘What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?’ For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, ‘Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.’ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they called out to the LORD, ‘O LORD, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.’ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows” (Jonah 1:1–16, ESV).

Introduction

What’s the very *first* thing you think of when you hear the word “irony”? For some of you, you may dust off some vague memories you have from an English class when your teacher or professor told you that: **Irony** is a literary and rhetorical device that involves

a contrast or discrepancy between what is expected and what actually happens. That is certainly a correct definition of irony, and if you were able to rattle a definition close to that, then bravo.

However, if you are of a certain age, I am willing to bet that a technical definition is not the *first* thing you think of when you hear the word “irony.” For many of you, the first thing you think of is a song written by Alanis Morissette entitled “*Ironic*.”

“*Ironic*” was an international hit when it debuted in 1995 on Alanis Morissette’s album *Jagged Little Pill*. The song has a really catchy melody that gets easily stuck in your head, and all throughout the song, Alanis Morissette offers her listeners multiple examples of irony.

According to Morissette, irony is:

- Like rain on your wedding day
- A black fly in your chardonnay
- A traffic jam when you're already late
- A "No Smoking" sign on your cigarette break
- The good advice that you just didn't take

These examples are clever, humorous, and memorable. You would think that English teachers everywhere would rejoice for a pop song to effectively encapsulate the idea of irony in a way that is so easy to learn and memorize.

But there is a significant issue with Alanis Morissette's song "Ironic," and that issue is that is *none* of the examples I just shared are actual instances of irony.

Rain on your wedding day might be disappointing. A black fly in your chardonnay is gross and unsettling. A traffic jam when you are already late is frustrating, unfortunate, and undesirable. These situations can be correctly described in many different ways. But none of these situations are ironic.

In fact, the most ironic thing about the song “*Ironic*” song is that it is *not* ironic.

I mention this today because if you define irony according to the lyrics of a catchy but misinformed song from the 1990s, you need to find a better way to understand the concept. And I would humbly submit to you that one of the very best places you could ever look to see and understand irony is the Old Testament book of *Jonah*.

In popular culture and popular understanding, Jonah is perhaps most remembered for being a man who was swallowed by a whale and lived to tell the tale. But as we delve into this ancient story over the next four weeks, I am hoping that you will come to see that the whale—or, technically, the “great fish”—might be the *least* interesting aspect of the book of Jonah.

What is most fascinating about Jonah is its *irony*. Jonah is a story of dramatic reversals, sudden surprises, and subverted expectations. It is a book that is designed to challenge and disrupt the tidy categories of our minds about who God is, who God loves, and who God calls us to be as his people in the world.

Our passage today is from Jonah chapter 1. On the surface, this chapter simply recounts how God calls Jonah, how Jonah runs from that call, and how God sends a storm to reclaim him. But as we dig deeper, we will discover how scripture uses irony to reveal **"A God Who Defies Our Expectations."**

So for the rest of our time today, we will unfold three ironies of our reading. They are **1.) The Wayward Prophet, 2.) The Worshipping Pagans, and 3.) The Wondrous Mystery of God's Providence.**

Exposition

1.) The Wayward Prophet

Jonah is a prophet of the Lord. Now, when you typically think of the word prophet, you might think of a great bearded wizard who carries a staff and forecasts the future. And in the world of surrounding ancient Israel, that was often the case.

In the nations of the ancient Near East, prophets would read omens and signs so as to reveal the will of the gods to the kings. However, these pagan prophets were nothing more than speakers of religious propaganda who said whatever the king wanted them to say. Often such prophets were ultimately instruments to inflate the king's sense of significance and to convince the people to be unflinchingly loyal to their nation.

But the prophets of Israel and Judah were different. True Hebrew prophets were not political pawns who were used by kings. They were divinely commissioned representatives of God. True prophets of the Lord were people who had a radical encounter with God and, as a result, spoke God's word on his behalf. More often than not, prophets spoke truth to power and called God's people to righteousness and justice. Their job was to remind people of God's commands and God's promises. They reminded people of the consequences of forsaking loyalty to the Lord, and they reminded people of the hope of the kingdom of God.

So, in many ways, Jonah breaks the mold of what we should expect a prophet to be. Most prophetic books are about what a prophet says. But the book Jonah is about what the prophet does. Most prophetic books entail the prophet functioning as a representative of a righteous God to his people. But in Jonah, the prophet functions as a representative of a disobedient people to his God.

In fact, to fully appreciate the irony of Jonah, you have to understand the original call of Israel as a nation. Israel was God's chosen people—a special nation chosen from all nations of the world to receive the blessing of God's word and God's ways.

But Israel was never meant to keep this blessing for themselves. They were to be a kingdom of priests and a light to the nations. They were to radiate the goodness and grace of God to the world around them and, thus, bring the nations of the world to the knowledge of God.

However, this did not happen. Often Israel fell into pride and self-righteousness as the chosen people of God. They went through the motions of worshipping God, but in their hearts, they are far from him.

At the beginning of the story, this is who Jonah is. He is prideful about his ethnicity.¹ Self-satisfied and entitled, he has zero interest in bringing the word of the Lord to people who are not Israelites. He is a living representation of a self-righteous, self-serving religious faith.

He is a representation of Israel's disobedience.

Before the events of the book of Jonah, Jonah, the "son of Amittai" is only referred to once in the Bible in 2 Kings 14. Here, he prophesies that King Jeroboam II will be successful in recapturing lost territory and expanding the borders of Israel (2 Kgs 14:25). But ironically, this same chapter states that King Jeroboam is a wicked king who "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kgs 14:23). In fact, while Jonah is prophesying about Jeroboam's success, other prophets like Amos and Hosea are at the same time denouncing Israel's idolatry and injustice.

However, Jonah seems content being a political pawn of an evil king as long as it keeps him close to power and comfort. Like the pagan prophets of surrounding nations, he is satisfied furnishing religious propaganda.

But then something shocking happens. Jonah encounters God, and, perhaps for the first time in his life, he truly hears God. And ironically, God will send this nationalist prophet to the nations.

Verses 1 and 2 state: *"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'"* (Jon 1:1–2).

God commands him to arise and go to Nineveh. Nineveh is the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. At this point in history, Assyria is becoming the most powerful nation

¹ Commenting on Jonah 1:9, Keller writes, *"Though the question about race comes last in the list, Jonah answers it first. 'I am a Hebrew,' he says before anything else. In a text so sparing with words, it is significant that he reverses the order and puts his race out front as the most significant part of his identity. As we have seen, an identity has several aspects or layers, some of which are more fundamental to the person than others. As one scholar put it, 'Since Jonah identifies himself first ethnically, then religiously, we may infer that his ethnicity is foremost in his self-identity.... That is why, when loyalty to his people and loyalty to the Word of God seemed to be in conflict, he chose to support his nation over taking God's love and message to a new society."* Timothy Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah*, (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2018), 50–51.

on the planet. Assyria is a brutal and fierce nation bent on conquest and subjugation. They are enemies of the Israelite people. And yet God sends Jonah to speak to them.

The reason God sends them is that their evil has come up before him. But Jonah knows better. He knows that the only reason God would send him to speak to the people of Nineveh is that he intends to call them to repentance.

God confronts because he desires to save. He speaks truth because his heart is for mercy. This is all great and good when we are talking about Israel. But Jonah does not desire salvation or mercy for the people of Nineveh. He wants their destruction. He desires God's wrath to fall upon Nineveh and all of Assyria.

The word of the Lord shatters Jonah's preconceived ideas of who God should be. God gives Jonah a mission that is costly, uncomfortable, and even scary.

In this way, Jonah reminds us that our God is inviting us to join him in his work. Like ancient Israel, is called to be a kingdom of priests and light to the nations. But it is often easier to devolve into a faith that is self-serving, self-satisfied, and self-righteous.

Nevertheless, the Lord calls his people to something that is far beyond us. He calls us out of the slumber of complacency. He calls us to a mission that is profoundly costly but deeply worth it.

I wonder how God has called you to participate in his mission that is personally costly? How has God challenged you to serve him in a way that requires you to become uncomfortable? What will you do?

We already know what Jonah does. He does the exact opposite. Nineveh is to the east, so Jonah decides to go to Tarshish, which is the westernmost part of the map. God tells Jonah to "Arise." So Jonah goes down to the city of Joppa, down to a boat, and down in the innermost part of the boat.

Jonah's response teaches us something about ourselves. There are moments when the Lord shows us a truth we do not want to acknowledge. He calls us to an act of obedience that we don't want to do. He might even call us to lay down something we do not want to let go. And instead of obeying God, we attempt to run away from God.

Have there been moments in your life when you have tried to run away from God? If so, how do you tend to run from him? Maybe you try to make yourself so busy that you simply don't have time to obey him. Maybe you try to make your life so noisy that you can't hear the prompting of the Holy Spirit leading you, challenging you, and convicting you.

But God is more stubborn than we are, and he has his ways of getting our attention.

2.) The Worshipful Pagans

Jonah's plan is to travel to the ends of the earth to get away from God. He despises the peoples of the nations and refuses to preach to them, but, ironically, he finds himself on a boat with foreigners traveling to the most foreign place that he can think of just to get away from God.

But as it turns out, it is really tough to run away from a God who is omnipresent. As Psalm 139 says, *“Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!”* (Psalm 139:7–8). The Lord is not the national patron deity of Israel. He is the Lord of all creation. And Jonah is about to learn this lesson the hard way.

The Hebrew of the text is almost humorous. God literally throws (לְהַטִּיל) a storm at Jonah. The wind and the waves are so bad that the ship is thinking about falling apart.

It is in the midst of this storm that we meet a new set of characters—the sailors. These sailors are gentiles; they are not Israelites. As pagan sailors, we would expect them to be crude and immoral. But like Jonah, they break the mold of our expectations. And ironically, these pagan sailors become dramatic foils that expose Jonah's failings.

As the storm comes, Jonah is asleep and unconcerned, but the sailors are fully awake and concerned about the lives of all who are aboard the ship. Moreover, while Jonah seems numb and unaware of God's role in the storm, the sailors are able to quickly discern there is something spiritually significant and supernatural about their plight. Jonah does not call out to his God, but by the end of the story, these sailors will call upon the name of the Lord.

Jonah, the prophet, refuses to speak the word of God. But, ironically, when the pagan captain awakens Jonah, he echoes the very words that the Lord first spoke to him in Israel.

I imagine Jonah lying half-awake, half-asleep down in the dark hull of the vessel. Even in dreams and nightmares, he cannot escape the word of the Lord: *“Arise, go to Nineveh...”*

He is confounded. Jonah has graced the halls of the kings of Israel. He has foretold glory and victory for his beloved nation of God's chosen people. Why would God send him to speak on his behalf to a pagan city in a godless land? But he remembers the words, *“Arise, go to Nineveh...”*

He is scared. Assyria is the world's strongest and most violent nation. The Assyrians fetishize brutality and torture. They bully, they enslave, they conquer. Why would the Lord send his prophet into the very heart of this empire of godlessness and death? *“Arise, go to Nineveh...”*

He is enraged. Why would God send him to such a wicked city, if not to call them to repentance? It would be better if Nineveh drank the full cup of God's wrath down to the

dregs that Jonah's own people might be free from fear and oppression. *"Arise, go to Nineveh..."*

Jonah refuses to go. He cannot go. He will not go. Instead, he will forget his call. He will flee from his people and his God, and find refuge and rest at the uttermost end of the earth. He will run from the word of the Lord.

But then he is startled awake. The crew is frantic, the cargo has been abandoned, the ship is breaking, and the terrified captain is pleading with him. The command he gives Jonah is...*"Arise."*

Verse six states: *"So the captain came and said to him, 'What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish'"* (Jon 1:6).

This depiction of a pagan captain speaking the word of the Lord to an Israelite prophet would have been shocking and deeply challenging to the ancient Israelites. But this irony is meant to challenge us. It is meant to provoke us to see past the stereotypes of what we are often tempted to believe about those who look differently than we do, speak differently than we do, and think differently than we do.

I remember some years ago, when we were able to help with the start of Refugee Language Project, which is a local non-profit ministry to refugees here in Amarillo. RLP was beginning its mentorship program, and I had a friend whose family decided to become mentors to a refugee family from Myanmar.

When he began, my friend was pretty suspicious of Refugee Language Project, this family, the whole bit. But as he got to know this family, the Lord moved on his heart.

He saw in the father a man who was willing to sacrifice long hours—doing hard and dirty work that few Americans would be willing to do—just so his family would have a better life. He saw the gracious hospitality of a family from a war-torn nation who was willing to welcome strangers into their own home. He witnessed a work-ethic, a kindness, a joy, and sincerity that challenged him to his core.

Are we willing to see our non-Christian neighbors with the eyes of hope and love? Are we willing to admit when they, at times, behave more virtuously than we do?

We live in a world that often wants to divide us from one another and dehumanize us to one another.

But the mission of God often causes us to be reminded of our common humanity. And we need to be reminded that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. We need to be reminded that we share the same hopes, the same fears, and the same joys as our non-Christian neighbors. The only difference is that we know the God who will give rest to their souls.

But we cannot be a part of the mission of God until we know God's heart for those who do not know him. We cannot be missionaries to those that culture would call our enemies until we love them as God loves them.

Who are you most tempted to hate in this world? What would change if you began to see them as God sees them?

3.) The Wonderous Mystery of God's Providence

The winds of the tempest will not relent because God's call on Jonah's life will not relent; despite his stubbornness, despite his disobedience. The storm makes God's will unignorable and unavoidable to Jonah.

We too often encounter sudden storms that fall upon our lives. One moment the sun is shining, but then the next moment, the clouds darken, and it feels like we are being tossed in the wind and that our life is on the verge of falling apart.

Sometimes, like Jonah, we are the cause of our own storms. We fall victim to a storm that has been caused by our own foolishness and sin.

Sometimes, like the sailors, we encounter storms because someone else sinned. And sometimes, we encounter storms because we live in a world that has been fractured by sin at a cosmic level.

Regardless of the cause of our storm, do we have ears that are able to hear what the Lord might be speaking to us?

The message the Lord is speaking to Jonah is relatively simple. He needs to repent. The word "repent" can sometimes come across as a super religious or self-righteous sounding word. But to repent simply means to turn away from sin and to turn towards the God who is so much better than our sin.

Our passage reads, *"Then they said to him, 'What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?' For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, 'Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you'"* (Jon 1:11–12).

Is Jonah truly repentant in this moment? Or is this just a death wish? Is Jonah so committed to refusing his mission to Nineveh that he would rather die? We don't know for sure.

What we do know is that though the Lord has been speaking to Jonah, Jonah is just now truly listening. Likewise, God is always speaking, but sometimes we can only hear him in the storms of life because sometimes it takes a storm for us to listen.

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis writes, *"We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."*

But again, there is a beautiful irony in all of this. Though Jonah flees from his mission to call the gentiles to repentance, the Lord providentially uses Jonah's fleeing to cause the gentile aboard Jonah's ship to worship the living God.

The conclusion of our passage reads, *"Therefore they called out to the LORD, 'O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.' So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows"* (Jon 1:14–16).

Jonah fails in chapter 1, but God does not fail. We often fail in our own sin and refusal to respond to the call of God, but God's plan of redemption will not fail. He is bending all things toward a kingdom that is coming and a hope that will not disappoint.

Nevertheless, our God invites us to participate in the work that he is doing in the world. And we need to see that invitation for the privilege that it is.

Conclusion

But how are we to break loose of our addiction to comfort and convenience that so often prevents us from responding to the call of God? How can we truly love our enemies as God has called us to love?

We remember our own spiritual need. We remember the extraordinary love of God that has been revealed in Christ. We remember that, outside of Christ, we were not merely in trouble and in need of help. We were not sick and in need of healing. We were dead in our sins. By nature, we were children of wrath. We were once God's enemies.

But God showed his love for us while we were still sinners and his enemies. He sent Jesus to suffer our death so that we might live.

Interestingly the gospels tell us that, like Jonah, Jesus went down into a boat and fell asleep. And like Jonah, Jesus slept as a vicious storm raged around him [show image of Rembrandt's *Christ and the Storm*].

But unlike Jonah, Jesus was on this boat not as a way to avoid his mission but as a part of it. He came down from heaven to earth. Though completely God, he became completely man. And embracing our humanity, he slept on the boat in human weariness and weakness.

As the boat threatens to capsize, the disciples of Jesus wake him and frantically ask him, "Do you not care that we are dying?"

But here again, we have another example of irony. Because God cares more than we could ever know.

He cares enough to enter our suffering. He cares enough to get in the same boat as us. He cares enough to come into our storm—a storm caused by our sin. He cares enough to be the substitute who will be cast into death on the cross so that we might live. He cares enough to be condemned that we might be saved.

So Jesus rebukes the wind, and he speaks to the waters, "Peace be still." And in that instant, the storm is calmed. Creation recognizes the voice of the One who made it.

Like the ancient pagan sailors, the disciples marvel and ask, "Who is this?"

The answer is Jesus is the true and better Jonah. He is our savior; He is our God.

In this way, Jonah is not just a story. Jonah is our story.

Jonah represents the enduring call of the people to step out of their comfort, out of their bias, and out of their tribe to embrace the mission of God.

We have been called. Do we have ears to hear the voice of the One who calls us?

We have been sent. Will we go to where God sends us?

We have been loved. Will we love as God has loved us?

We have good news. Will we declare it and display it to our neighbors and the nations?