

Bearded Men – The Minor Prophets – Jonah, Part 1

Bearded Men

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Bible Text: Jonah 1

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I want to encourage you this morning to open your Bibles to the Book of Jonah. The Book of Jonah is in the context towards the end of the Old Testament in a group of books that we have labeled the Minor Prophets. Those whom we've emphasized, at least in this message series, as the Bearded Men. Those individuals whose message was not very refined, it was kind of rough around the edges. Their personalities were a little rough, their message was a little rough but what we've noticed over the course of the last couple of months, is that the message is actually very strategic not just to their day, thousands of years ago, but to the 21st century as well.

As you turn to the Book of Jonah, just a couple of introductory comments before we dig into chapter 1. This is probably one of the best known characters and stories in all of the Bible. Even individuals who have never opened a Bible, never been to church, have heard the famous story of Jonah and the whale. Such a famous story that years ago, the first animated classic known as *Pinocchio* used a spoof of Jonah and the whale as the main chase scene in the movie. It's in our culture, it's something that we know of, we use allusions to it. It's just well-known. But what it's well-known for most of the time, is people using it as an excuse or a reason to disbelieve the Bible. How on earth could a story like that happen the way the Bible said it did? By the way, that's the teaser for next week; we're going to do the details of the famous great whale story.

Some years ago, as a college student, I was invited by a local church to come and to interview to be their Youth Pastor, to be their Student Pastor. We had talked on the phone and they had seen, for lack of a better term, a resume but that night came when I went up to the church there was a group of about 5-6 individuals, the committee that was in charge of hiring the new Youth Minister. They asked me about my salvation, they asked me about my upbringing, my experience, etc. but there comes a point in every one of those discussions where you have to have a theological discussion. Where are you on your view of the Bible? Where are you on your view of this and that? They turned to probably the eldest individual in the room, this wise, stately looking man. He turned to me and said, "Son, we need to discuss the finer points of your theological perspective." I said, "Ok, sir, what is it?" He said, "Tell me about Jonah." I said, "What about Jonah?" He said, "Do you believe the story of Jonah just as the Bible wrote it?" I said, "The fact that he was swallowed by a whale, three days later spit up on the seaside?" He said, "Absolutely. Do you believe it happened just the way the Bible said it?" I said, "Yes, sir." He turned to the group and said, "We're good." And they said, "What do you mean?" He said, "If he believes that, he believes it all." So when we come to the story of Jonah, if we'll believe this, we've got it all covered because this is the wildest of the stories and it is not by accident that Jesus Christ equated His death, burial and resurrection to the person in the story of Jonah.

Last but not least, Jonah is not just the story of a wayward prophet. It's not just the story of the Ninevites and their conversion. It's the story that parallels our life, of the people of God being called to the lost, dying world. How do we respond? How do we act? What is our commission in this lost world?

I want to invite you to turn to the Book of Jonah, chapter 1. Today we'll read verses 1-16,

“Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me. But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken. Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep. So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not. And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou? And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land. Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous. And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you. Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them. Wherefore they cried unto the LORD, and said, We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee. So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows.”

This story, which is: yes, about a wayward prophet; yes, it is about being swallowed by a whale; yes, as we'll see in the days ahead and weeks ahead about being taken up on the seaside three days later. But here in chapter 1, it is a story, a parallel, a picture for you

and me as the church of Jesus Christ, how do we respond? How do we live? How do we wake up a lost and dying, godless, Bible rejecting world?

The first thing we need to notice from the life and the story of Jonah is this, that as a child of God, you possess a calling. In fact, if we were in the New Testament, we might call it a commission. Every one of the Gospels ends with Jesus sharing with his followers, his disciples, to go into all the world. That's exactly what he tells Jonah. He says, "Jonah, there is a world out there known as Nineveh. It is lost and it is dying and I want you to go."

You need to understand something of the Minor Prophets. We've studied them going up into Israel, the northern tribes; we've studied them going to the south, to the southern tribes of Judah. But here is a lone prophet whom the Lord commissions not to go to the north, not to go to the south but to go to a lost, dying, pagan world. It's a calling that is incredibly clear.

Notice what the Lord says in verse 1, "Go to Nineveh." He doesn't come to Jonah and say, "Hey Jonah, you and I need to have a conversation. The world out there has gone crazy. It's unraveling. You wouldn't believe what those pagans are doing so I just thought, how about tomorrow kind of go up that way, kind of see what's going on and bring a report back and let's just kind of talk about this." No. He said, "Go to Nineveh."

Now understand, when Jesus offers the Great Commission in the New Testament, he says, "Go to the world." That's a very clear declaration. Now, I know some of you are nervous. You're saying, "I'm scared about going to the world." I've got good news for you: the world has come to you. You don't have to go to Nineveh today for Nineveh is knocking down your door. It's knocking in the tv, it's knocking through the internet, it's knocking in the street, it's knocking in Wal-Mart, it's even knocking in the church. It's everywhere. Nineveh has come to us. So, the clarity of this message is: you don't have to go very far because they're coming to you.

But in this clarity, it's not just about Nineveh, it's not just about a lost, dying world. I want you to notice that in verse 1 it's a very clear negative message. Notice what he says, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me." For the next few moments, allow me to get on the proverbial soapbox about what we know as "church." For the last 2-3 decades, we have tried to be sensitive to the sinner. We have tried to put it in language that they will understand. We've tried to put it to music that they will like. We've tried to create environments that they will be attracted to. Let me ask you a question: how's this worked out for us? We've told them they can have purpose. We've told them they can be happy. We've told them they can have their best life now. And what has happened? Nineveh has gone out of control.

The message is clear, God said, "I want you to go to Nineveh and tell them they are sinners." Now, folks, that's politically incorrect but that's Bible. And God said what we are to do is to call it what it is. Can you imagine being at a Braves game. The pitcher rears back and throws a pitch. It lands in the catcher's glove. There's no call. The catcher

doesn't know what it is, the batter doesn't know what it is, the managers don't know what it is and 45,000 fans are going, "What is the call?" Folks, let me tell you the call, they have thrown the ball and thrown a ball, is what they've done. And it's about time that the people of God called out the sin against God. He said, "Call it out, cry out that they have sinned and they have rebelled. God has established a standard and you have transgressed against it." It's very clear.

Here's the problem about our calling: for the most part, the church of Jesus Christ has not been clear about the message. We've compromised the message. I gave you a couple of weeks ago a great definition of compromise. I didn't invent it but I think if I say it enough eventually people will think I said this so here it is: compromise is trading or exchanging an eternal truth for a temporary pleasure. Compromise is saying, "God, I don't want to satisfy you, I'd rather satisfy me." He is eternal and your body is temporal.

Notice what happens in Jonah's life. It says, in verse 3, he "went down to Joppa." Later on, "he went down into it." Verse 5, "he went down into the sides of the ship." Do you notice the trend there? That three very specific times it says "Jonah went down." When we run from the calling of God, the very clear calling of God, and say, "I don't want to be a part of that, I'll go the opposite direction," eventually you go down, down, down until you're at the bottom of a ship in the middle of an ocean and no one knows how you're going to get out.

You say, "Well, Jeff, how does that relate to my life? How does compromise happen today? We don't live in the Middle East. We're not getting on boats to Tarshish and the Ninevites, as they did in the Bible, don't exist in that manner so how does this parallel to my life today?" Well, Jonah took three steps in compromise.

Let me tell you the three steps that most people take. Step #1: we go down and quit making church a priority in our life. I had this conversation with an eight year old this week and if he got it, you can get it. The things of God are like eating. If you went to Golden Corral, the all-you-can-eat buffet for one meal a week and that's all you ate, you'd be sick. Can you imagine if you didn't even go that one time? But, what happens in our physical life is when we eat from the Word of God on a regular, daily basis it sustains us.

Do you know that when I was my children's age and George Gallup and these guys did statistics, they said that a regular church member was somebody who went to church three out of every four Sundays. Now we said if your average attendance is more than once a month, you're regular. That means that if you're in church 15-18 Sundays a year, you are a regular church attender. And you want to know why Nineveh is busting down your door. That's the first slippery slope. When you start justifying, you start compromising saying, "God, this activity, this endeavor, is more important than you." That's Step #1.

Step #2: he goes and gets in the boat. It's not just about saying, "Ok, God, you're not as important as you should be in my life, I'm actually now going to get in the boat of the

world. I'm not going to do what you've called me to do, I'm going to do what they've encouraged me to do." And it's amazing how we can justify, how we can rationalize our behavior. But, understand that Jonah's in a boat going the wrong direction. But, you know what? It was safe and it was secure in that boat and we'll talk about that in a moment.

Look where he ends up: in the bottom of a boat, asleep. He's asleep. You say, "What is so significant about that?" There's a storm around him, the world is caving in and he doesn't even know it. I cannot express to you my absolute unbelief at how many believers in Jesus Christ that I've had conversations with in the last few days who didn't even know what DOMA was, the Defense of Marriage Act. Didn't have a clue what the Supreme Court in our country has been ruling on. You say, "How does that happen?" You're asleep is what has happened. You say, "Well, how did I fall asleep?" Because you've been in the boat in the world and not with God. You say, "Well, how did this happen?" Over years. It doesn't happen in a day, it doesn't happen in a weekend. That is why statistically four out of every five teenagers that we graduate from our Student Ministry will not be in church when they're 30. It's a slow frog in the kettle compromise. It happened in Jonah's life and guess what, folks? It's easy to cast stones but it's happening in many of ours. And it's happening in our culture's life as well. The church of Jesus Christ as a whole has become basically ineffective in reaching our culture. Why? We tried to reach it on their terms and it got us nowhere. It's about time maybe we reached it on God's terms.

Which leaves us with a twofold choice: we can either be silent in safety or we can surrender. Let me show you what those two concepts mean. Look in verse 6, "So the shipmaster came to him," that's Jonah, "and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper?" They did not even know his name. It's like checking into a hotel under a false identity. You know when you do that, you're up to no good, right? It's like creating an email account with a fake name, a Facebook account, because you don't want anybody to know who you really are. "What's your name?" "Sleeper." That's all they knew to call him.

He gets on the boat and, by the way, there are no other passengers, there's only mariners. This is a business boat and not a recreational vessel, so to speak. It says, "What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not." They come to Jonah and say, "Help us out. We don't have the answer but we think you do. Please, please help us."

Verse 7, "And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots." They're absolutely silent. Jonah doesn't say anything. He actually sits there in absolute silence. It reminds me of a time when I was a teenager and understand, one of the things that teenagers in early days of college do is they like to participate in activities that they did as little children as bigger teenagers because it's just a lot more fun. For example, Red Rover, Red Rover, let Jacob come over is cute as a five year old but you take a couple of lineman and football and that's a lot of fun to watch. Ok? So, teenagers realize that and I remember there was a time at my house, there was a bunch of guys over, and being

teenagers and going back in time, we decided that it would be a “brilliant” idea to play hide-and-seek again. We hadn’t played hide-and-seek in ten years of our lives, here we were basically full grown adults at least in physical stature, definitely not in mental stature, and it was at my house, the house I had grown up in. It wasn’t a very large house but we made it open season. Obviously, my parents were not home when this took place. You could hide inside, you could hide outside and we decided to have a good time. When everybody began to disburse, I had a plan. Why? This was my house, it’s where I grew up. In my parents’ bathroom they had a door that opened up and when that door was opened, there was an access hallway. It hid a secret, dirty, laundry department. In other words, there was a built-in cabinet in their bathroom that you would put the dirty clothes in.

Here was the beauty of that: not only did the other guys not know about this feature in my parents’ house, but none of them was small enough to get into it. I mean, this is the perfect hiding spot and I’m just the right height to get into it. So, I look around, I get in there, I close the door gently and it was amazing. For 30 minutes, man, they walked by, they talked about me, they questioned where I had gone. I could hear them, I could feel the vibrations, I could feel them walking within two feet of me. What were they doing? Begging to hear from me. What was I doing? Sitting in dirty clothes.

Now, you think about that for a moment. It’s all fun and games until you start breathing. And that’s exactly what was happening in Jonah’s life. That’s what happens in our life when we decide, “You know what, I’m just going to stay somewhere. I don’t want anybody to know I’m even here. I just want to hide in my cave.” Guess what? You can hide in your cave, they’re looking for you and you’re among smelly clothes. He was silent but he was safe. You see, as long as he was in the bottom of the boat, the Ninevites weren’t getting saved. As long as he was in the bottom of the boat, he never had to confront the lost world with an eternal truth.

We pick it up in verse 8, “Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou? And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew.” He finally spoke up. But he was in this environment that was safe and silent and secure.

Allow me to share that the 21st century Christian, as a whole, has a real bad disease of wanting to hide in the dirty clothes closet. Why? Because the world is nasty. The world is awful. They’re like, “I don’t want to be a part of any of that. I’d rather be in the dirty clothes alone than out in the world.”

This was pictured this week in my home. Traci and Marshall were at Kids’ Camp and we left the little two in Texas with my parents and so I was left at home all by myself with a Honey-Do List. Dangerous, dangerous proposition in my life. When I’m home alone, as most men do, I participate in activities I would never participate in if Traci was there. One of those is the sleeping arrangement. In our house, we have a very important rule: our bed is only allowed two people, her and myself. I wish that our little dog, our Boston Terrier, could be the third. I love our little Boston Terrier, little Dixie, and I think that she

needs to be a part of this, but Traci won't have anything to do with it particularly since we had a very unfortunate incident a couple of months ago, shall I say, accident. Y'all interpret that for yourself. And so she has said, "No dog on the bed." So, guess what happened this week? Oh yeah, you got it. Momma wasn't there so the dog was gonna be. So I laid it all out the way you're supposed to. I put the blanket, because I knew she messed up the comforter and I was in trouble, so I put this nasty old blanket up there. I was like, "We're going to make this happen, Baby Girl." That's what I call her, she's my baby girl. God didn't give me any girls so I have to have this one.

She gets up on the bed. Now, think about this: this is the bed that every day she eyes and goes, "Oh, I wish I could be a part of that. It's going to be good." She gets up on the bed, snuggles up next to me. I'm thinking, "This is great!" Five minutes later, she jumps off the bed and goes and gets in her cage. What? Do you know why? Safety. Security.

You know, the world is massive: seven billion people that we have been called to reach with the one single message that allows them to be forgiven and never spend an eternity in a place called hell and yet, most Christians and most churches would rather jump off into a little 2 x 2 foot cage and be nice and safe and secure.

See, that was the choice that he made at first but then picking up in verse 8, he made a different choice. Rather than safety and security, he made this choice of surrender. Literally the word "surrender" means to come to an entity or institution and say, "Ok, everything I have it is yours. I hold nothing back. Even if my very life is taken." That's exactly what Jonah did. He says, "Here's the deal, it's my fault. I've got the answer and the answer to your problem is for me to die to myself. Throw me in and everything will be okay." The problem, though, is that we like the safety and we like the security. And it is a big, bad awful world out there and we say, "Well, but something might happen to us."

I'm about to do something that I don't know if I've ever done before in preaching. You see, there is this sacredness to preachers that you may or may not know: we all have stories that we never share from the pulpit. We've all got stories that we say, "Well, I just don't know if I should tell that publicly. It's hysterical privately and it's impactful but when you go public with it, it's a whole new genre." So, after 22 years of preaching, for the very first time in my ministerial life, I'm going to share with you one of the stories that I said I would never tell publicly. I will be careful, brother, I got ya.

It's while we were serving in Mississippi. That should be enough right there. We were there and we had a television ministry program and it aired a week delay. In other words, the Sunday morning service actually aired the next Friday, to be technical. There was a week delay in that programming. Well, on that Sunday morning I had preached a message straight from the Word of God about the exclusivity of Jesus. And talking about that Jesus is either Savior for all or he is Savior for none. And one of the problems is we live in a world where a lot of people are very faithful about the wrong teachings. And I expressed my concern about people of other faiths and other religions and I said, "You know, some of the most faithful religious people in the world are Buddhist but they're

wrong and your faithfulness will not get your sins forgiven, just because you're faithful." One of the areas that I went, was in the area of the religion or the faith known as Islam or Muslims and I talked about their passion and that passion that often brings an unbelievable aggressiveness. Obviously, in light of the 9/11 events, I said, "Gosh, it doesn't matter how much money you put up. It doesn't matter how many planes you crash." I said, "All that passion in the world means nothing if what you're passionate about isn't true."

After I had said that, I got to thinking, you know, this television program has the possibility of reaching about a million people. It reaches into parts of Memphis, it reaches into parts of Birmingham and there's a good statistical possibility that somebody of the Islamic faith might possibly hear what I said and not like what I said and might come after me. So, I decided to share with some folks that I was just a little bit concerned. You know, just in casual conversation, didn't have any special meetings.

A couple of days later, I get a phone call, an individual by the name of Charlie calls me up and he says, "Brother Jeff, are you going to be in your office this afternoon?" I said, "Yes, sir, why?" He said, "We need to have a talk. I'm going to come by." I said, "No problem." So, he comes by and usually he was very jovial but he was very serious. He walks into my office, closes my door and says, "Sit down." Now, I think I have offended this guy. I am scared. I'm like "Uh-oh, what has happened that I don't know about?" He says, "Pastor, I understand that you're a little nervous." I said, "Sir?" He said, "I understand that what you preached on Sunday morning you're nervous about going over the airwaves Friday night." I said, "Well, concern may be a strong word but you never know how people are going to respond." He said, "Pastor, I want you to know something." I said, "What?" He said, "I called the boys." I said, "The boys?" He said, "I want you to know we're ready and we're excited. We're ready and we're excited about it." I began to unpack that with him. It wasn't just about engaging in a firefight, it was about the fact that their faith and their belief in Jesus Christ was of such a critical nature that if they had to take a bullet for it, it was worth it.

Do you know what the problem is? Most of us aren't even excited enough about Jesus to go to church. Most of us aren't even excited enough about Jesus to forego a promotion or a negative aspect in life. Most of us so badly want to be like my little dog and jump in the cage and close the door, cover our ears and say, "No, no, no, no, no." Here is this man saying, "We're excited about the fact that we have the possibility of defending the name of our Savior."

Listen to me church. Listen. We live in a world where Nineveh has attacked on all fronts. And we've got an option: we can either look at this as the glass half empty and say, "Oh my, oh my, where's my cage?" or look at this as the glass half full and say, "Do you realize that of all of the generations that have come and gone, of all the nations that have come and gone, the Lord has looked down upon us and at this moment and said, 'You are worthy to suffer. You are worthy to give up. You are worthy for the fight.'"

Folks, we have a choice. We can either be silent in a stinky dirty clothes closet or we can surrender and do what the Apostle Paul did in Acts 27:40, I love that passage. Where the ship is going to be wrecked and he says, "Pull up the anchors, set the biggest sail we've got and let's go Mach 2 with our hair on fire right into the side of the cliff." Those are the options. Folks, we should be excited that the Lord has said, "They're coming to you. You don't even have to go. They're there. Share and discuss and tell them who I am."

Which brings us to a very important conclusion. It's a conclusion that you sense in the attitude and the actions and the words of Jonah but you don't see in the context of chapter 1. This story actually takes place historically or chronologically in the Book of 2 Kings. In the Book of 2 Kings 14:25 it actually mentions the prophet Jonah. It talks about that during this kingdom and in this time period, that he was a prophet calling out to those who were in Nineveh. That's chapter 14. In chapter 17, the people of Nineveh, who will repent in chapter 3 of Jonah, attacked the Israelites and slaughtered them all.

Now do you understand why Jonah was so afraid? But I want you to notice a very important conclusion: what would have happened if he would have stayed in the bottom of the boat? He would have died. What would have happened if he'd gone to Nineveh? He's going to die. Do you see the situation? Folks, we're going to take this boat known as the church of Jesus Christ, one day our Lord is coming back but it's time to crash it into the side of the cliff. Because if we shut up in silence, the culture will kill us. If we speak up, they will kill us. So, you can either go down in a ball of flame and glory or you can be found in a dirty clothes closet crying and wasting away in misery.

It reminds me of Joshua going into the Promised Land. Twelve spies have been sent out, ten came back and said, "There's no way. We can't do it. They're bigger. They're stronger. There's no way." And he got up and he said, "You know what, as for me and my house... In other words, if it's just the five of us, we're going. You're welcome to join me." And time after time in the Scripture, we see this entity known as the remnant. We see this entity known as the groups of people who hunker down and said, "We will not give in. We will not give up. And we will not shut up though they take our very life from us."

Listen to me, church: they're going to take it from us. You can either have it taken with your mouth open or your mouth shut. The option is yours.