



January 5, 2020
“The Mercy of God”
Jonah 1 - 4
Pastor Gary Hamrick

“Jonah and the Whale” is no doubt one of the most familiar stories in all of the Bible (although the word “whale” doesn’t appear in any English translation of the book of Jonah. It simply says a “great fish” swallowed Jonah). However, some dismiss the story as being fictional along the lines of *Moby Dick*, while others argue that it’s only an allegory (a picture of God’s love and forgiveness of sinners, but not a true story). Yet, Jesus mentioned Jonah twice in Matthew’s gospel as a factual story. We should interpret it as a real story with real people and real events that illustrate a central theme: the mercy of God. We all need God’s mercy (his love, compassion, and kindness)! In this message from the book of Jonah, Pastor Gary shares four characteristics of God’s mercy that are important for us to understand.

Historical Background

1. The book of Jonah is more narrative than prophetic book as the books of the other minor prophets.
2. This book is more about Jonah than it is about the message from God he shared with the people of Nineveh.
3. The name Jonah means dove.
4. The first mention of Jonah in the Bible is [2 Kings 14:25](#) during the time of King Jeroboam II, which would be circa 780 B.C. when the Assyrian Empire was increasing in power and dominance.
5. Hosea and Amos were contemporaries of Jonah.
6. Jonah preached an eight-word message to pagan people in what is modern-day

Iraq.

- a. **Jonah 3:4b** - *"Then he [Jonah] cried out and said, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'"*

7. Jesus referred to the accounts of the book of Jonah as being factual.

- a. **Matthew 12:38-41** - *"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.'"*
- b. **Matthew 16:4** - *"[Jesus said,] 'A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.'"*

8. There are documented cases of people being swallowed alive in the manner of Jonah.

- a. Human beings are capable of being swallowed alive by sperm whales, sulphur whales or a whale shark.
 - i. In 1955 there was a reported case of a 405 lb squid that was removed intact from the belly of a sperm whale, which easily demonstrates that a human being could be swallowed whole and intact.
- b. Pastor Gary shared details from the account of James Bartley as reported in the *Yarmouth Mercury* (England), who was swallowed alive by a sperm whale after falling overboard from a whaling vessel in the Falkland Islands.¹

9. Pastor Gary said, "You'll have to decide for yourself if this is a true story or not. I settled it years ago as a true story because I believe **Genesis 1:1**. If you can get by **Genesis 1:1**, then you can believe the rest of the Bible. If you choke at **Genesis 1:1**, you're going to choke on a lot of the rest of the Bible. So, it's factual [and] it is something that you have to believe by faith because none of us was there to eyewitness [these things]. ... Since Jesus said [the account of Jonah] was true, I will trust him over any [liberal] Old Testament professor [or theologian] any day."

- a. **Genesis 1:1** - *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."*

10. The major theme of the book of Jonah is the mercy of God.

11. A working definition of God's mercy would include his love, kindness, and

¹ https://www.newspapers.com/clip/17102260/james_bartlett_swallowed_by_whale_1892/

compassion toward people.

- a. **Psalm 145:8** - *"The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy."*
- b. Mercy is one of God's attributes.
- c. God opts for mercy long before he demonstrates wrath.

12. Who were the Ninevites?

- a. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire.
- b. The city was located on the east bank of the Tigris River.
- c. The ruins of the city are located just outside of Mosul, Iraq.
- d. The Assyrians were a godless and ruthless people who were notorious for their unspeakable war-time practices.

God's Mercy Is Undeserved

13. Pastor Gary said, "[In spite of who the Assyrians were as a people], God [said] to Jonah, 'I want you to go preach the good news to them in [the hope] that they might turn from their evil ways and turn to me. ... These people are worth saving.' [This is] very challenging. God extends his mercy even to the worst of the worst like [the] ruthless Assyrians. ... The fact is that all of us are in need of God's mercy."

- a. **Ezekiel 33:11a** - *"... 'As I live,' says the Lord God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.'"*
- b. **1 Timothy 1:15-16** - *"[Paul said,] 'This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy...' "*
- c. There is only one standard by which we will be judged, and that standard is Jesus Christ.
- d. God extends mercy to all because he wants all to be saved, and all of his mercy is undeserved!

14. While it's true that God believed the Ninevites were worth saving, Jonah decidedly did not.

- a. God called Jonah to go east to Nineveh, but Jonah set out to go to Tarshish, which was as far west as humanly possible!
- b. Pastor Gary said, "God could have chosen to put an end to Jonah's life right [then and there]. ... But God chose to spare Jonah's life, and more than that he chose to give Jonah a second chance."

God's Mercy Is Unexpected

15. When the sailors threw Jonah overboard, instead of allowing him to drown, God provided a great fish to swallow him and preserve his life until it was time to deliver

him to the bank

- a. **Jonah 1:17** - *"Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."*

16. Pastor Gary said, "Please note [that] God's mercy sometimes comes in different forms, and as miserable and unpleasant [as it was at the time] that fish was God's mercy for Jonah. ... Sometimes we can't see the mercy of God because it comes in forms that we weren't expecting, so we dismiss it [because] we don't see it as the mercy of God. We don't recognize it because sometimes it's unpleasant. Sometimes at the moment it's uncomfortable ... [or] inconvenient. But [it may be] that God has brought it along to reorder our steps in a big way or a small way. ... [Sometimes] those things that we dismiss as inconvenient things could actually be God's way of intervening in a merciful way to redirect our steps, even if it's just for the day or maybe it's for our lives? ... In fact, God may be using those [situations] to rescue us in different ways."
17. At some point Jonah recognized God's mercy and that his plan of rescue came in the form of the great fish.
 - a. **Jonah 2:7-8** - *"When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer went up to You, into Your holy temple. Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy."*
 - b. Pastor Gary said, "Jonah [admitted] that if we cling to worthless things that take the place of God, we can end up forsaking [his] mercy."

God's Mercy Is Unbiased

18. God had mercy and compassion on a ruthless, undeserving people!
19. **Jonah 3:1-10** - *"Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, '**Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!**' So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then the word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, 'Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce*

anger, so that we may not perish? Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.”(Emphasis added)

20. Pastor Gary said, “[God] doesn’t discriminate with his mercy. He doesn’t dispense it for some and withhold it from others. [God] is unbiased in his mercy. God is no respecter of persons. He loves all, he died for all, and he extends his mercy to all, even the Assyrian people.”

God’s Mercy Is Unlimited

21. **Jonah 4:1-3** – *“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. So he prayed to the LORD, and said, ‘Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country: Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!’*
22. Pastor Gary said, “What’s so tragic about what [Jonah said] is that [Jonah was saying,] ‘I would rather die than for you to show mercy to people that I don’t think deserve it.’ ... We have to be careful that we are not blind to the mercy of God. We are blind to the mercy of God when we want mercy for ourselves but not for others.”
23. **Jonah 4:4-11** – *“Then the LORD said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’ So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city. And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant. But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah’s head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’ Then God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?’ And he said, ‘It is right for me to be angry, even to death!’ But the LORD said, ‘You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left – and much livestock?’ ”*
- a. Most Bible scholars believe the reference to “one hundred and twenty thousand persons” is a reference to children.

24. God wanted Jonah to know that mercy was his prerogative and that he was unbiased for all because all need his mercy.
25. God, in his patience, extended mercy to Jonah in spite of his arrogance and prejudice.
26. [Psalm 118:29](#) - *“Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.”*
27. [Hebrews 4:16](#) - *“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*

Discussion Questions

1. Read [Jonah 1](#) to provide a foundation for your Bible study time.
2. Provide an overview of the life of Jonah. (See #1 through #6 above)
3. Read [Matthew 12:38–41](#) and [Matthew 16:4](#) and affirm the validity of the account of Jonah, the great fish, and the Ninevites based on Jesus’ statements and cases in which a person survived being swallowed alive. (See #7 and #8 above)
4. Read and discuss Pastor Gary’s remarks about the account of Jonah being a matter of faith in the truth of [Genesis 1:1](#). (See #9 above)
5. Spend time talking about the theme of the book of Jonah being the mercy of God. (See #10 and #11 above)
6. Allow the people in your group to share their experiences about the mercy of God.
7. Read and discuss [Psalm 145:8](#). (See #11a above)
8. Provide an overview of Pastor Gary’s comments about the people of Nineveh. (See #12 above)
9. Read and discuss [Ezekiel 33:11a](#) and [1 Timothy 1:15–16](#). (See #13 above)
10. Allow the people of in your group to share their experiences about seeing how remarkable it is to realize that God’s mercy is completely undeserved. (See #13 above)

11. Share experiences about times when you've been unwilling to extend mercy to people the Lord would have you extend mercy to. (See #14 above)
12. Read and discuss Pastor Gary's comments about the unexpected nature of God's mercy. (See #15 through #17 above)
13. Read and discuss [Jonah 3:1-10](#). (See #18 through #20 above)
14. Read and discuss [Jonah 4:1-13](#). (See #21 through #25 above)
15. Close your meeting by reading [Psalm 118:29](#) and [Hebrews 4:16](#), and thanking the Lord for his mercy and his offer to extend mercy when we come to him in prayer. (See #26 and #27 above)
16. Close your meeting by allowing the Holy Spirit to lead your time of prayer.

* Unless noted, all Scriptures quoted are from the New King James Version (NKJV)