

The word of the Lord came to me¹, and asked me to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because of its wickedness.

And I thought, why me? Why should I preach to our nation's enemies, and do it all by myself? We need a team of fifty prophets² to make any difference there! So I ran away and took the first ship headed away from home, which happened to be for the city of Tarshish. In my nationalistic pride I ironically decided to try to hide in a foreign country, and hoped that the people were not a threat to us. Crazy!

But the Lord sent such a violent storm that everyone thought that the ship was going to break up. All of the sailors were panicking and crying out to their own gods. They threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship, and try to ride out the storm.

I was sleeping peacefully below deck, oblivious to all of the turmoil. The captain found me and woke me up to go call on my own God as well. In desperation, the crew finally drew lots and found that I was responsible for our trouble. I had told them that I was a Hebrew, but I felt no prejudice – they tried hard to keep me from having to be sacrificed. Finally I made them throw me into the sea so that they would be saved, and the storm was stilled³.

I knew I was going to drown, but the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow me. The bad news was that I had to stay in its stomach for three days and three nights.

From the nasty darkness I prayed and confessed my sin. Actually I did more praising God than confessing, and I never actually promised to go to Nineveh. But the Lord made the fish vomit me out onto dry land.

Then God spoke to me again and told me to go preach to Nineveh. This time I obeyed. The city was so big that it took me three days just to go through it.

I proclaimed God's judgment, which was that the city had forty days to repent or be overthrown. And to my total amazement, the people repented from the greatest to the least of them. Yes, even the king himself took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat down in the dust.

When God saw how they turned from their evil ways, He relented and did not destroy them as He had threatened.

I just couldn't stand it – it seemed very wrong, and I became angry. I railed at God, and told him that this was the very reason that I tried to run away. I knew God was soft-hearted to those who responded to Him.

So I just decided to give up. I told God I would rather die than live. I should have stayed inside the fish!

God, of course, questioned my right to be angry.

I stomped out of the city and sat down where I could watch what would happen to the city (in hopes that there would still be fire and brimstone⁴). I made myself a shelter and sat in its shade, and then the Lord caused some kind of leafy plant to grow up and give me additional shade. It was pretty hot, and I was very happy about that plant. But then the next day a worm chewed it up so that it withered. God then sent a scorching east wind (He had sent me so many things...), and the sun blazed on my head so much that I grew faint. Once again, I lost perspective and decided that it would be better for me to just die.

And God again questioned my right to be angry.

He spoke to me about what most concerned me. He rebuked me for being more concerned about a small plant than a city of more than 120,000 people.

It was very difficult for me to care for people that I knew would eventually abuse those of my own nation. I thought about how my fellow Israelites would feel about me evangelizing those that were not “chosen” by God as we were⁵. I decided that I could not face them.

So I found myself at the harbor once again, looking for a ship to Tarshish.

Think about how Jesus related to Jonah. He was provoked when the Jews asked Him for a sign⁶, and He reacted to them by connecting His upcoming death, burial, and resurrection to Jonah’s time in the belly of the great fish. It was not a prepared message like the sermon on the mount⁷ - He basically told them “this is all you are going to get” in the way of signs. But think of the connections, and why Jesus valued this story so highly, even though the Jews likely put it at the bottom of their list.

Jonah ran away from presenting the message of God’s kingdom to the world, while Jesus ran into battle to share that story. Jonah turned his back on God, while God (temporarily) turned His back on Christ. Jonah was swallowed by the fish for his own sin, but Jesus went to the heart of the earth for ours. Their three days in the dark was similar, though, where they both reached out to God and were blessed by them.

1. from the book of Jonah
2. 2 Kings 2:7
3. Jesus was also in the boat asleep in a storm, and it was stilled without Him having to jump in; see Matthew 8:26
4. Genesis 19:24
5. Deuteronomy 7:6
6. Matthew 12:38ff
7. Matthew 5-6