

Discovering God

*The Relentless Pursuit of God and God's Mission as
Seen in the Book of Jonah*

Ryan Stratton

Discovering God: The Relentless Pursuit of God and God's Mission as Seen in the Book of Jonah

by Ryan Stratton
www.revryanstratton.com

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revryanstratton@gmail.com

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New International Version

I dedicate this book to my beautiful wife and children.

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Introduction

If you were asked to explain God, how would you do it? What if you only had one book of the Bible, would you be able to explain who God is and what God's mission in the world is? What if you only had the book of Jonah?

This book is a rework of the sermons preached in the summer 2019. In this book, we are taking a closer look at the Old Testament book of Jonah. Some people say the events in this book did not occur because of the time of writing and the audience it appealed to at that time. The reality is, it doesn't matter whether the events of the book of actually happened. They are scripture, and there is so much we can learn from this short book.

I pray you find, experience, and live into the grace God offers you, and the rest of the world, as you take this journey into studying Jonah.

A Word From God

*“The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of
Amittai:”*

Jonah 1:1 New International Version

Take some time to read the first chapter of the book of Jonah in you Bible.

I recently told my congregation, there are two things to know about me, right off the bat. Number one, I am a really smart guy. Now, I know I do not always do things that make it seem like I am smart, but I do work really hard. I also had to tell them, I promise I am safety conscious. This was really important because the weekend before, I had gotten the church's zero-turn lawnmower stuck in a ditch. It would have been funny if this had been a one-time incident, but alas, it was not.

See, the parsonage has a few inclines that would make mowing them challenging. If you did not go at the right angle, I learned, the mower will slip back down the hill. And that is what got me caught in the ditch, the first time. Don't worry, we were able to get the mower out easily and I was able to finish what I needed to for the day.

This might be a good point to say this is my first time using a zero-turn lawnmower. Over the course of three mowings, I was able to get more confident and do more of the yard safely.

The next day, I decided I needed to finish an area of the yard that had not been able to be mowed because it had been real marshy and I needed that to dry up. The time had come. I put on my rain boots, walked through knee-high grass, and found the ground was dry enough for me to finish this patch of grass. I was excited!

I got the mower out, put in my headphones and turned on Pandora Radio on the Contemporary Christian station. I was getting more and more of the yard mowed, and it was looking good! At this point, I felt myself getting prideful and decided to go up a hill, close to the driveway, so I could easily go back and make another pass. This worked great, until...there was a little culvert ditch I did not see until it was too late. This time, the lawnmower had been backed up into the ditch.

Most of the time I am not easily embarrassed. When people drove by and saw the mower, and then the vehicle pulling a rope (that kept breaking), I felt I just needed to laugh at this

situation. Then, a friend came by, called his son, and they were able to get me unstuck.

The other thing I told the congregation they needed to know about me was that I do not like to be told something is too much of a challenge, or it is impossible. I have had this character trait verified on multiple occasions. My wife says this is one of the reasons we are married.

I do not believe there are impossible situations. There is always a way out and people who can and will be there when needed. Because of this, I was able to get the yard mowed before rain started the next morning. Every time I drive up to the house, I am thrilled to see the yard mowed! Mission accomplished, this time.

Now many people, including me at times, when faced with a seemingly impossible situation, will try to run and hide until the problem goes away. We see this all the time. People will run to drugs, alcohol, the arms of someone who is not their spouse, and more, just to try and run away from the situation for the moment and not think about it.

It really is amazing what people will do to get out of doing something or face a situation or issue without really dealing

with it. Most of the time, when the situation is faced and worked on, it turns out better.

As I study the scriptures and get older, I am understanding more and more how important it is to know who God is and what God's nature is like. If we do not understand this, we do not clearly or fully understand who we really are. (I'm not talking about who we *think* we are. I am talking about who God created us to be.)

Now we get to the biblical book of Jonah.

There was something my Old Testament professor, in seminary, said. Think about this. "If you only had the book (or passage) of _____ from the Bible, what could you tell people about God from the text?" This is essentially what we get to do and experience from the Bible. We get to learn more about the nature of God. Yes, we learn about human nature, but as we learn about human nature, we also learn about who God is and how God interacts in this world and with flawed humanity. The book of Jonah is no different.

As we take this time to study this short book in the minor prophets, take time to go to a new level of looking at the Biblical text. Take the time to see what the text is saying about who God is and what God's nature is. This is

something important for us to do because we can miss out on knowing God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit if we're only looking for what peaks our interest or what makes us feel good.

Enter Jonah.

The prophet. The whale. The story many have heard from childhood. This is a book that has captured the minds and hearts of many throughout the centuries. So much so that many stories and movies have used something from this short book of the prophets. In 48 verses, Jonah gives us a good picture of what happens when we try to run from God and how persistent God is to get us to do what he wants.

The story, we know, goes like this: Jonah hears from God to go to Nineveh to get them to repent. Jonah says no and decides to get on a boat to try and run from God. A storm hits the sea and the sailors are scared. When they figure out Jonah is the cause of the storm, they throw him overboard and he gets swallowed by a whale (though the text just says big fish we tend to still think whale). He spends three days in the belly of the fish and then gets spewed out on the land. Jonah hears God again and this time he goes to Nineveh. While he is walking through the city, Jonah proclaims the message of the Lord and the people are scared so

everyone, including the animals, put on sackcloth as a sign of repentance. God does not destroy the city. Jonah throws a fit. The end.

That pretty much sums it up, right? But, since this is one of the books in the Bible, we have to understand there is always something beneath the surface. There is something God wants us to know through this inspired story, this inspired word.

This really is a fantastic story. It is easy to try and say this book is about how we should not try to run from God. It is easy to say this book is about God's compassion for the people. It is easy to say this book teaches us about the human condition. But, if we take time to read and understand this story, we can see this book, like the rest of the Bible, is teaching us about the nature of God.

Our task, over the next four chapters is to see how, if we only had the book of Jonah, we could still teach about the incredible nature of the God who created the universe, including each individual person.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai.

Before we go any further into this story, we have to pause and think about who Jonah is. The only other time we learn of a prophet named Jonah is in 2 Kings 14:25, which says, “[Jeroboam, king of Israel (Northern Kingdom)] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea,^[a] in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant *Jonah son of Amittai*, the prophet from Gath Hepher.” (NIV) There really is not much about this guy. Even though we do not have much information, we do know who Jonah was supposed to be, a prophet of YHWH.

Look at his name. Have you ever thought about Jonah’s name before? Jonah son of Amittai. “The proper name means ‘Dove son of Truth (or Faithfulness).’” (Tribble, 493) Can you sense the irony and humor right off the bat? Jonah is supposed to be a faithful prophet of God, yet he does something very unfaithful and runs away from his assignment. We are not told why he does this in the first chapter, but he tries to run from God and hide.

When else have you heard about people who tried to hide from God, in the Bible? There are numerous accounts, but the one that stands out is Adam and Eve. This is the account you can read about in Genesis chapter 3.

Right after Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.” (Genesis 3:8)

The story of the fall and trying to hide ourselves from God has saturated and become part of just about every story we know. It seems to be human nature to try and hide from people and/or God when we are ashamed or feel guilty.

When we tell about the beginning of the fall, when the fruit was eaten, notice how we tend to focus on the people’s actions and their sense of separation from God. Have we noticed the great care and grace God offers by “searching” for the man and women in the garden? God knows where they are located but God is asking where their heart is. The man tells God they were afraid. Their hearts were in fear, instead of peace.

Through the fear in their hearts, God still comes to the man and woman and offers them a chance to live, even if it is not

in perfect peace as they were used to. God does this because the state and condition of every heart is known by him. Remember what God told the prophet Samuel when he went to anoint the next king of Israel after Saul, “the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7c)

Back to Jonah.

JONAH LEARNS HE CANNOT RUN OR HIDE FROM GOD

God knows what Jonah will do. God knows that Jonah will try to run and hide, but God still offers grace from the beginning by giving Jonah the chance to do what he is supposed to do.

Jonah does not surprise God when he flees. God knows everything about us. Jonah thinks he can run away from God by running away from his assignment.

Notice how the text says Jonah “went down to Joppa,” (Jonah 1:3) “gone below deck.” (Jonah 1:5) Jonah kept going down. The author is showing how the condition of Jonah’s heart is going deeper and deeper away from the presence and calling of God.

What we learn from this is God is not a person we can run and hide from. God is omniscient, meaning God is

everywhere. There is no place God is not. Here, we can remember the words of David from Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me

and the light become night around me,"

even the darkness will not be dark to you;

the night will shine like the day,

for darkness is as light to you. (Psalm 139:7-12)

So now we have to ask if there is anything you are hiding from God? Do you wish God was with you and answering your pleas? Rest easy, God is always with you. God has never left you. There is nowhere you can go God is not. The presence of God is always seeking to give your heart peace and vanquish any fear within.

God is everywhere. That is good news for us. This is not all this first chapter of Jonah teaches us about God.

GOD CREATED EVERYTHING

This might seem like a no-brainer but this is a reality and truth we have to understand, or at least believe. Jonah seems to know this, yet he does not seem thrilled about it.

When he gets on the ship, Jonah goes below the deck to take a nap. Suddenly, a great storm comes upon the sea and is threatening the boat and the crew on board. The sailors are terrified and are trying to figure out why they are having this bad luck. They want to know who “cursed” the boat by coming aboard.

After casting lots, which is similar to drawing straws, the sailors find it was Jonah who caused the storm. They rush to get him and bring him to the deck to question him. Now, they already knew why he was on the boat because he told them he was running away from God. This never sunk in until the storm hit.

The sailors questioned Jonah about who he is.

It's interesting they did not want to know who he was before, they only wanted to know his reason for going to Tarshish.

Jonah begins to tell them, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” (Jonah 1:9) It is easy for us to hear Jonah with a confident, prophetic voice declaring who he is; but we have to keep in mind Jonah is running from God because he seems to be unhappy with the task he was called to do.

Instead of hearing a bold voice proclaim, “I am a Hebrew and worship the Lord...” Maybe we should instead hear Jonah speak with a snarky, disgusted tone because, yes he is a Hebrew, but he does not or has not shown he worships the Lord since he has run away.

There are those who would try to make others feel guilty about running away, but pay attention to how Jonah is also showing us the human condition while teaching who God is. People run from God for many reasons. People will claim they *worship* God but live a life doing the opposite.

Jonah is telling the crew who he is supposed to be and what he is supposed to do. Maybe he has given up trying to pretend because at this point, Jonah is still trying to figure a way to get out of the assignment at hand, for unknown reasons at this point.

Yes, Jonah is a Hebrew. Yes, he is supposed to worship the Lord, but Jonah is unhappy with his lot in life. When the crew tries to decide what to do, Jonah steps in and says, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you." (Jonah 1:12) Jonah has thought about ending his life. He gets in his head that if he were gone, the lives of those around him would be better, would be safer.

But Jonah underestimates the image of God within humanity. He forgets that God desires people to live and to live in community with others.

What is remarkable is how the sailors try to avoid throwing Jonah overboard. They come up with every other idea. They even tried to row back to the land, back to safety. But the storm was too strong for them to row and they finally relented to Jonah's plea.

GOD CAN BE SEEN IN THE MOST UNLIKELY PEOPLE

The sailors throw Jonah overboard. But before they completed that task, they cried out to Jonah's God. "Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased." (Jonah 1:14) The

sailors began to plea to the Lord. They cried out to the Lord. What this means is they worshipped the Lord, in that moment.

We never know how our lives are going to touch those around us. Even if we are not living up to the life God set out for us, there is still his Spirit within us to touch the Spirit of another person. Pay attention to how people begin to act when you are around. You or I may not be the most perfect example of living for God, but maybe there is something about us that helps bring people to him.

I cannot remember where I heard this quote, but it sticks with me: “Your fingerprints never leave the lives you touch.” Because of the grace of God, the Holy Spirit within us reaches out to another person and offers the grace of knowing the God in heaven, the Creator of the universe.

As the sailors were *worshipping* God, they threw Jonah overboard. All of a sudden, the storm ceased.

They realized the Lord is the One who created the heavens, the earth, and the sea. The Lord created everything. So, they continued to worship the Lord by offering sacrifices to him and made vows to him. (Jonah 1:16)

Jonah is in the sea. He thinks his life is over, but notice this: God shows great compassion by allowing Jonah to live. God provides a huge fish, speaks to it, and the fish swallows Jonah. Jonah is kept *safe* in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Even though it is in the belly of a fish, God still desires his people to live and to experience real life, life in God's presence here and now not just in the life to come.

What an interesting way to end this chapter. But here we are, in the belly of the fish, learning about the nature of God. Remember this, the circumstance you might be in now could be something God is using to keep you alive and trust in God. You may not be in the best situation, in your mind, but you may just be exactly where God is wanting you to be. You never know who God has placed in your life that has the tools to get you out of the ditch. It is in these situations we are becoming more and more transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. Just look at what the Apostle Paul says in Romans:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we

also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

So, if this were the only book of the Bible you had in your possession, how much could you teach about who God is and what his nature is?

So far, we have learned:

1. Even though God knows our real heart, he still calls to us and speaks to us, giving us his mission.
2. There is no place we can hide from God. This should give us great encouragement because God never leaves us.
3. The Lord is the One who created everything.
4. People come to see and know God by our lives.
5. God offers grace and desires life for people

As we can see, this is who God is and what God is like. Fast forward to the New Testament, we can see all of this lived out in the person of Jesus Christ.

Bringing this chapter to a close, I am invited us to begin to memorize Hebrews 3:15, “today, if you hear [God’s] voice, do not harden your heart.” God’s word comes to us in many different ways. Do we have the ears and heart to hear?

Maybe someone needs to hear this word, as if it is from God:

“I know who you are and what you’re capable of, yet I still choose you for this life, for this calling, for this special mission I created you for. You can try to go as far from me as you want, but remember, I’m already there and I’m pursuing you with a love so great that I will do everything I can to keep you alive. I created this whole world. I created you! Because of you (whether it’s done perfectly or not) the most unlikely people will come to believe in me, know me, and worship me. You have a great role to play in expanding the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Hear Our Prayer

“From inside the belly of the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God.”

Jonah 2:1 New International Version

Many of us come to worship each week with hidden concerns, hidden feelings, harboring resentment, coming with doubts about your faith. The challenging thing is how do we allow the message of God to shape us into who God is making us to be?

One of the biggest doubts we seem to face is whether or not we believe God is done with us. Now, this can take on a variety of characteristics. One can become controlling to try and make sure things get done in the order and manner you want. One may stop trying to do anything new. One may begin to pray only at meal times, because this is when we are supposed to pray.

If we fall into these, or any other similar categories, it becomes harder to go to scripture. Why is this? I have learned that when we go to scripture, we tend to focus on what we know (or think we know) and disregard the rest. It is easy to go to verses that give us the good feels like

Philippians 4:13, John 3:16, Psalm 23, Jeremiah 29:11, Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 1:8, etc. I bet you even know what these (or most) verses are.

The point is, we like to have the Bible tell us what we want. We'll even read our own ideas, our own culture into the scriptures. As we said last chapter, remember the point of the scripture is to teach us who God is and who we are now, and who we will become.

I can hear it now, I learn most of what I know about God through nature. That is true. The Apostle Paul writes to the people in Rome, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what was made." (Romans 1:20a) The issue with this thinking is that we believe we learn about God just through nature (or other people) and the Bible is our manual for how to get into heaven.

As we dive into the scriptures we can see the main point is not for us to go to heaven. The main point is to love God and love people which brings heaven to us. This means, as we read, study, and pray the scriptures, we learn God is telling us so much about who he is so we can learn more and more about our own character.

One of the fascinating things about scripture that I love is how we can see something new each and every time we read and meditate on the passages. The same thing is true for the book of Jonah.

Maybe viewing the purpose of the book of Jonah is to tell us about the nature of God is a new or different concept than you have been taught before. That is good. The more we study scripture, the more layers we find. This reminds me of the movie *Shrek*. The donkey and the ogre are on their to rescue Princess Fiona from the dragon. Donkey is upset Shrek did not do more damage to Lord Farquaad's castle and knights.

Shrek is telling Donkey how there is more to ogres than people realize. He gives the illustration that ogres are like onions. There are many layers to peel back before you can understand what an ogre is about. We also have to remember that scripture is the same way.

Scripture has many layers, the more we read, the more we study, the more we hear God's voice speaking, the more we begin to understand about what the text is teaching us about humanity, what we should learn, but also what we should learn and know about God.

The book of Jonah is no different. Take some time, right now, to write down anything you have learned about God so far in this short book of the Bible.

In the last chapter, we left Jonah in the belly of the fish. He has been in the fish for three days and three nights. Remember we said this was actually grace because God did provide a way for Jonah to live.

You are probably going through something right now that makes it seem as if you are in the belly of a fish. The circumstances and situation you are in are not what you expected them to be. You are living with a diagnosis. Maybe you have gotten away from an abusive situation. Maybe you are running to find out who you are. Maybe, just maybe, you are in a situation you believe you don't deserve to be in and are angry about it. It is in moments like this we find people

may not be as open as they say they are, or we find it difficult to know where to turn.

One thing I can promise is this: God has not forgotten you. God still is with you and is doing a great work in, and hopefully, through you. It may seem as if you are all alone, but God has not left you.

Jonah was in the fish for three days and three nights before the fish ejected him onto the dry land. I'm sure there were times he felt as if his prayers did not get past the scales. There are many times I pray I feel as if the words, or thoughts, do not get past the shingles. But, as we read Jonah chapter two, we learn something about God.

GOD ANSWERS PRAYERS

This is huge. God will give an answer to our prayers. Sometimes the answer is "yes". Sometimes "no". Sometimes "not yet". Sometimes it's a combination of "not yet because you haven't done what I've already told you to do." God will answer prayers. The question now is, are we ready to pay attention for the answer.

Back to Jonah. He has been in the fish for three days and three nights. The scripture does not say when this prayer

was prayed, just that he prayed. What is interesting is what it was Jonah prayed:

“In my distress, I called to the Lord...” (v 2) Did he really?

“yet I will look again to your holy temple.” (v 4b) Has he done this already?

“When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord,” (v 7a) Interesting...

“But I, with shouts of grateful praise...” (v 9a) Has he done this before?

“What I have vowed, I will make good.” (v 9b) What did he vow?

“I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the Lord.’” (v 9c) Has he said this before?

The reason we should look closely at the prayer Jonah “prayed” is that it doesn’t seem consistent with what we have read so far about this prophet of God. It almost seems as if he is praying the prayer from memory because he has not lived the life the prayer suggests.

Besides looking at the life of Jonah to get the clues as to whether or not he believed this prayer, we can look at verse 10: “And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.”

Notice the word *vomit*. “The verb vomit, which returns him to dry land...evokes negative connotations. Rather than using a delicate word for ejection, the narrator uses a distasteful image. The fish does not stomach Jonah.” (Tribble, 504) Based upon this, and of course Jonah’s past actions, according to the text, even the fish cannot handle Jonah’s behavior and sarcastic prayer.

As we have seen, Jonah was not having his attitude adjusted. He was most likely mulling around in the fish’s stomach upset because he did not get his way. What does he do? He “prays” this prayer, maybe trying to get God to do what Jonah wants to do—run away from doing what God wants.

The interesting thing is that, maybe Jonah though his life was over in the fish and his prayers did not go past the scales, but God delivered Jonah by having the fish dump him on the dry land.

Yes, Jonah’s prayer may not have been sincere for him; but this teaches us God cares enough for his people that God will answer our prayers, even when our heart is not tuned toward God. Look at what Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount:

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

⁹ “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? ¹¹ If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11)

As we learn about the nature of God, we also learn more about the condition of humanity. Jonah is trying to make himself look good by “praying” to God and saying the “right” things in the prayer. This is something we all try to do.

We know that we cannot *make* God do anything by saying the right words in the prayers we pray, but we also try to keep ourselves looking good in the presence of God. Jonah is still trying to hide who he really is by praying this Prayer of Thanksgiving. It is possible that he is recalling the only prayer he could think of in that moment.

From Jonah we learn that humanity tries to cover sin up by attempting to make ourselves look *good* in the presence of

God. It is difficult to reveal our true nature because we do not like it when people look down on us, especially God. But remember the words in the book of James:

“Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” (James 5:16)

And also hear the Apostle Peter’s words: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.” (1 Peter 4:8)

What we have to understand is God knows who we really are on the inside (see chapter 1). God knows the condition and state of our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7, John 2:25) So we should be completely open and honest with God. This vulnerability reminds us of God’s unconditional love for you and I. We also remember that God never expects us to be perfect, humanity is not perfect; therefore, we come to God as we are.

There are times we will try to *hide* who we really are because we do not want to face the reality of God humbling us. But we also try to *hide* who we are by pretending everything is okay with our lives, even though we do not believe everything is right.

Through all of this, no matter what situation or life circumstance we find ourselves in, part of the nature of God we see in Jonah is: providing an answer to prayer.

When a mother has a sick child, it is marvelous how quick her ears become while attending it. Good woman, we wonder she does not fall asleep. If you hired a nurse, it is ten to one *she* would. But the dear child in the middle of the night does not need to cry for water, or even speak; there is a little quick breathing—who will hear it? No one would except the mother; but her ears are quick, for they are in her child's heart. Even so, if there is a heart in the world that longs for the things of God, God's ear is already in that poor sinner's heart. He will hear it. There is not a good desire on earth but the Lord has heard it.
(Charles Spurgeon)

Jonah's prayer was trying to get him out of that situation, whether he meant the words he was praying or not, God still heard the prayer.

God has not forgotten you. God will answer your prayer. The answer may not be what we are expecting, or coming from

where we want, but God answers every prayer offered to him.

No where, in the text, has Jonah proved he has done or said anything he has prayed. He was running away from God. The sailors had to ask Jonah to call on his God to help them (Jonah 1:6) but Jonah still went to sleep instead of being concerned about the safety of the other sailors.

Now, let's look at our own prayer lives.

I find it interesting the only thing Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them was how to pray (Matthew 6:5-14, Luke 11:1-13). When was the last time you or I asked another person, or Jesus for that matter, *how* we should pray.

Yes, there are many formulations on the best type of prayer. We can pray spontaneously, read prayers from the past, pray the Psalms, and more. But God is more interested in what is the state of our heart.

There are times we do not know what we should pray, and God has this covered as well. The Apostle Paul writes, "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself interceded for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our own hearts knows the mind of the

Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will." (Romans 8:26-27)

It is because of God's grace the Spirit he has given us prays to him. Too often we can neglect our prayer life and try to do things our own way. We try to do things on our own because, as I have heard many people say through the years, "I don't want to *bother* God with this small situation."

See, it is in the midst of difficulty that we learn how deep our prayers can be. We learn if we're just focusing on ourselves and our own situation, or if we are truly trying to seek out and accept the will of God for our own lives.

Jonah stays inside the belly of the fish for three days. You and I may in the situation we're in longer than we want, but there will come a time when we will be set free.

Every request we make to God is heard and answered. God had the fish spew Jonah onto the dry land. This signifies Jonah given the chance to begin anew.

Maybe you and I are given a chance to renew our commitment to Jesus, or even begin our calling, our mission, our life with God through Jesus Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit anew this day.

Think about that, we are given a new opportunity to do what God has called us to do. Live with that grace, accept this incredible gift from God, called life (here and now and in the life to come).

You have been given this incredible gift of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit within you. God has not forgotten nor abandoned you just like God never abandoned Jonah.

Let our cry to God, each day, simply be “Lord, hear our prayer.” Then, look earnestly for the answers that will come.

Relentless Pursuit

“Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give to you.”
Jonah 3:1-2 New International version

One of the things I hope we are understanding in this book of Jonah is that God never gives up on you. God is relentlessly pursuing you. God is relentlessly pursuing his people. God is relentlessly pursuing the world in so many ways. The Apostle Paul writes in his first letter to Timothy, “[God] wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4)

Cory Asbury, a contemporary Christian artist has a song out called Reckless Love.” I love the lyrics. The chorus goes like this:

*Oh the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God
Oh, it chases me down fights til I'm found leaves the ninety-nine*

And I couldn't earn it, and I don't deserve it, still, You give Yourself away

Oh the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God

Now that really sums it up, doesn't it? I think people can get concerned about saying God's love is reckless; so we're using we're saying that God's love is relentless. This means he never gives up. One of the verses for the song says:

When I was Your foe, still Your love fought for me

You have been so, so good to me

When I felt no worth, You paid it all for me

You have been so, so kind to me

Isn't this a picture of God in the Book of Jonah. Think about it. Jonah has been running away. He's been trying to escape God. He's been trying to go where God is not; or he thinks that God is not. He knows, because he is a Hebrew prophet that God is everywhere. That part of God's nature is that God is omnipresent. God is also all-powerful (omniscient) because God knows what Jonah will do; yet calls Jonah anyway for this mission.

But when Jonah was his foe God fought for Jonah to do the mission that God wanted Jonah to do. The mission was to go to the city of Nineveh and proclaim the word of the Lord that he was given in the first chapter. God told Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before him. (Jonah 1:2)

We have been looking at how we can see and experience and appreciate the nature of God by finding out more who of God is through this short book of Jonah. As we continue our journey through this prophetic book, we have to understand this is act 2 of the story. Act 1 of the story was God speaking to Jonah, Jonah running away, Jonah getting swallowed by a fish and then God speaking to the fish.

The book ends of act 1 for Jonah shows a word coming from God first to the person of Jonah and second to the fish who spews, vomits, disgorges Jonah from its belly because it is sick of Jonah being there.

In Act One, the very first thing we learn is how God is persistent God is. How relentlessly he desires his word to be to go to the city of Nineveh and he wants no other person besides Jonah to deliver this message.

Beginning Act Two, chapter three, verse 1 says, “then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.” (Jonah 3:1) Not only is God persistent, God is gracious in giving second chances.

I bet there are people reading this here and now that may need to go back to remember, a main point from last chapter is that God is not done with you. God is a God of second

chances and he's constantly working in us and through us so we become the people that he has called us to be. All so we can reach the people that he has called us to reach.

Remember Paul's words in Romans 10:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:14-15)

This is something very important, God is a God of second chances. Now you may not have done everything right the first time around, or the second, or the third, or the fourth, or the 50th time around. God is patient. God is relentlessly pursuing you and I so that we are going after the people that he is pursuing. The people he desires to know his salvation which is his eternal life, his presence here and now, and in the life to come. That is one of the beautiful aspects about the Christian faith, that we can have assurance of knowing that we are going to be in God's presence. We know that this life is not the end of the story. God is saving up for us to be with him in all eternity. Not only that but God is desiring to

use our lives to be part of the redemptive story of the world's transformation.

God says go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message he gave to Jonah. The very next verse says Jonah obeyed, this time. The New Testament, in Matthew 21, has a parable of Jesus about a father and his two sons.

“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

“‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

“Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go.

“Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered. (Matthew 21:28-31a NIV)

Jesus explaining the first son is the one who obeyed God because he did what God desired. This time Jonah obeyed. So he went out, he was probably reluctant as we have seen through Jonah's character so far.

The text says that Nineveh was a very large city, and it would take three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a

day's journey into the city proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4a)

What we see here is a picture of a reluctant prophet, reluctantly doing what God has called him to do. He's not even halfway in the city. He waits until he is about a third of the way in (about a day's journey), and according to the text, he proclaimed the Lord's proclamation once. This means Jonah did not go through the entire city. Jonah stopped after just one day, after only going a third of the way in. That is when he proclaims the single message, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." He doesn't even say this is God's declaration for them. It is almost as if that Jonah is not wanting to tell the Ninevites the whole story. But the very next verse says the Ninevites believed God.

What's interesting about that is Jonah, as we have said, did not say anything about God in the proclamation, but the Ninevites, the text says, believed God and all of a sudden a fast was

Proclaimed. All of them, from the greatest to the least put on sackcloth and the message even went up to the king who gave a decree that went out to all the people. Now what does this mean?

Think about what this is saying for who God is in our world. Number one, as we have seen in Chapter 1, it says that Nineveh's wickedness has come up before God. This is saying that God is concerned about holiness. God is concerned about us being holy. His people, really the not just his people but the entire world being holy, being recast into his image, being perfect, being just like him. In New Testament terms this means being like Christ.

God is concerned about our holiness. Here's the deal with that. None of us can measure up to this standard. None of us, as it says in Romans chapter 3, have lived up to the glory of God because it says it all have sinned and fall short of God's glory.

The other thing that we see is that Jonah went a day's walk, about a third of the way, into the city. He did kind of this half-hearted proclamation, but what we see is that when he proclaimed the Word of God, when we proclaim God's truth, God's Spirit works incredible wonders amid our timidity, in spite of our prejudices, in spite of our reluctedness to go.

Remember, as it says in Hebrews four, "the Word of God is sharper and active than any double-edged sword." God's Word works incredible wonders. Now, what happened?

In Jonah's message, he doesn't say "repent" but the people hoped that if they repented, God would relent from the destruction of their city being overthrown.

Let's talk about repentance for a moment. Repentance is one of those words, Church Words, that we like to say; but here's the thing about repentance, repentance means doing a 180 in our actions, in our words, and in our thoughts so we are not going on our own path anymore. The path we are turning around to, is God's direction.

Repentance means that we are going to have to make a change in our heart and life. That's what repentance means. In Greek, the word is *metanoia*, which is a change of mind, a change of heart which means that all of us are going to change and be given over to God's will. We like to say "repent" because we don't like to hear change, that we have to change in order to become holy in order for Christ to shine in and through us. That's a challenge for us; but see the incredible thing about grace is that God works in spite of us. We are all called to repent.

Jesus' very first sermon was, "repent for the kingdom of God is at hand" which means change your heart and life because God's eternal presence is here. His kingdom of heaven is

already here. Change your heart and life so that you are able to live in and experience this incredible place called heaven.

Verse 10 says, “when God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.” God desires holiness but God is about forgiveness.

We have an incredible picture of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. When he was on the cross, his arms were stretched out wide. He looked down and in the crowd. It was as if he looked through time past, present, and future. He said these incredible words, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” Think about that. What he was doing was looking at you and I because we do not know what we are doing because our desire is to follow our own heart. Our desire is to do things our way, our desire is to be in control of our lives. Our desire even, if we profess Christ, is most of the time to do things our own way. God desires to forgive.

One of the attributes of God is found in the book of Exodus chapter 33 verse 19. I love this verse because it's repeated multiple times throughout the scriptures. God is speaking to Moses and he says, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”

What we have not said up to this point is that Jonah, a Hebrew, is going to the pagans, the Gentiles, in Nineveh. Now, Nineveh is in the area of Babylon place that had many gods and worship the king. Jonah was going there to a place that the Hebrews did not like. In fact this was an area that captured the Hebrews and put them in captivity in exile.

Jonah was called to go there to tell Nineveh it's wickedness has come up before God. Why should Jonah care about this city? Because God cares about our enemies. When we read Joshua chapter 5, we see the commander of the Lord's army appearing before Joshua. Joshua bows down and asks, "are you on our side or you for the other side?" The commander the lord's army says, "neither I'm for God."

That's one of the things that we have to understand and remember as Christians. When Jesus says pray for your enemies he means, "don't let anything come between you and other people. Find a way to make it work."

God desires forgiveness. God desires holiness. God's Word works wonders in the world. When we live by God's Word we see how our enemies are overthrown. We'll talk about that next week.

Maybe our enemies are not overthrown in the manner in which we want but in the manner in which we may lead them to God.

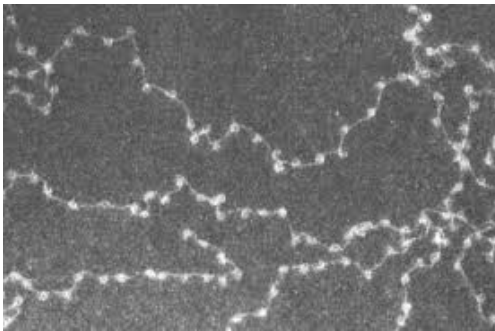
God is relentlessly pursuing you and I to do the mission we are called to. Are you ready for this work? It will not only change your life, but will change the world!

The Bigger Picture

“But the Lord replied, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’”

Jonah 4:4 New International Version

What do you see in these pictures?



What do you think? I bet these pictures are not what they seem to be. Here is what they are, from a zoomed out view:



Part of the issue with the fallen state of humanity is we often do not look beyond our own circumstances. We even often do not think big enough about God. When we read the book of Jonah, I hope we can get a big picture of who God is.

Remember a question we started this series with: “If you only had the book of Jonah, what could it teach you, and what could you teach others about who God is?”

REVIEW WHAT WE KNOW OF GOD THROUGH JONAH, SO FAR

1. God knows our hearts; yet he still calls us
2. We cannot hide from God. God never leaves us
3. The Lord is the One who created everything even you!
4. People come to know God through our lives
5. God offers grace and desires life for people
6. God answers prayer
7. God has not abandoned you or forgotten you
8. God relentlessly pursues you and I so we can reach the people we’re called to reach
9. God desires holiness from all because he is holy
10. God even cares for our enemies

Jonah 4

Jonah has left Nineveh after reluctantly obeying God and warning the people of coming destruction. Chapter three ended with Jonah seeing that God did not bring the destruction that was foretold. This made Jonah angry. Do you know why he was angry?

First of all, we have to understand anger is not a primary emotion. Anger comes from another emotion/feeling that has grown. Most of the time it is because of being hurt. When we get hurt, we can easily nurse that wound (emotional or physical) until we get into a place of anger toward something or someone else. The reality is, we are really just upset because of another cause.

Look deeper into who Jonah is. Remember prophets were only considered authentic and valid if the prophecies they gave actually came true. From what we have learned about Jonah, both in this biblical book and in 1 Kings 14, we see Jonah has not seemingly done very well. This could have been eating away at him. When he gave the message Nineveh will be overthrown, he went and sat down to make sure it happened. When Nineveh was still there, imagine how he felt about himself being a prophet.

There is a good chance Jonah was realizing people would view him as a *false prophet* which would make his life much more difficult because people would no longer listen to him. This would be a valid concern if the prediction he gave (from God) did not come true. I am sure the anger he was beginning to feel came from not tending to the deep emotional hurt he was feeling.

Let's pause for a moment and ask the question, "Why was Nineveh not overthrown (destroyed), or was it?" Jonah had it in his mind Nineveh would be wiped clean from the face of the earth.

But from what we have learned about God, through this short prophetic book, we learn, even more, how God does not work like we work and think like we think. Jonah had one end goal vision for Nineveh – to be destroyed. But remember in chapter 1, God tells Jonah, "it's wickedness has come up before me." (Jonah 1:2b) This was God's concern the whole time. So, when the text says Nineveh repented, God relented from destruction.

Anytime people turn away from wickedness, sin, self-love, self-pity, and turn to God, that person (that city, culture, country) has been overthrown by grace. So, Nineveh would have been overthrown, just not how Jonah was thinking it would be.

After we understand this, now we can look at what Jonah says to God. "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, and abound in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." (Jonah 4:2b) What is amazing is that Jonah says that God is good. He names the good attributes about God. This is part of what God says

about himself to Moses in Exodus 34. What amazes me is how Jonah knows the incredible goodness of God, yet is still angry at God.

This is the part of the story where we get to witness Jonah throwing a hissy fit and a temper tantrum. He says this is why he tried to *flee* from God, because he knew God would not bring the destruction as promised. He was viewing his mission, and life, like this:



When God desires he/we look at the world with a much bigger picture, such as this:



This is one of the things I love about reading scripture. Every time I read it, I see a much bigger and deeper view of God than I had before. I also see how much God is working in and through humanity. We see a picture of just how far the journey is to, as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.” (Matthew 5:48 CEB) Showing this kind of love is difficult because 1) we are not God and 2) humans, in our fallen state, love conditionally (i.e. if you treat me good then I will love you; if not, I don’t like you).

When things do not go our way, it is easy for us to throw a fit and get *angry* at God when the reality is we are really upset because we realize we are still so far from perfect. God has not even placed earth as the center planet. Our solar system is not even in the middle of the Milky Way Galaxy.



The weight of this realization is too much for us to bear at times, so it will manifest in anger and self-loathing. This is why the concept and truth of God's grace is so important for us. We have the opportunities to remember we are not the center of the universe.

Fast forward to the New Testament, Jesus never says "get your life in order and then follow me." He simply says, "Come...Follow me." (John 1:39a, 43b) This is an incredible picture of grace. The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 2:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ

Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.
(Ephesians 2:4-10)

We can get to a place where we understand and praise God for the grace that we did not earn. We can begin to follow Christ, but we also have to battle constantly with the urges we have (deep within us because of Sin) to not retort back to our fallen nature.

Jonah was a prophet of God. He knew the goodness of God. Jonah knew how merciful God is. Jonah still wanted to see his enemies go down. This is what we have to be careful of. There are people we don't like. There are people who don't like us. Yet, through it all, God is for all the world, not just you or I. If God can save you, through Jesus Christ, why do we forget God can save the people overseas? The people in the slums? The people in the White House? The people coming to our borders? Why do we still allow our anger to burn

against other people, that God is also for (as we saw in the last chapter)?

Jonah was allowing his prejudice to creep in and take over. He was allowing his desire for revenge to be demonstrated. Remember, this book was written during the time of the Jewish exile to Babylon, where Nineveh was. These people took away the livelihood and freedom the Jewish people had in Israel. For them, this book would have been really close to home. Why wouldn't God take care of and destroy our oppressors when they did this to us? Remember that God is still trying to work on, even the oppressors too.

What we have to be careful of is not allowing our prejudice and our stereotypes of other people groups to be the lenses with which we view the world. When interviewed about the future of planet earth, God skeptic and physicist, Stephen Hawking had something interesting to say. "When asked what human trait he'd like to change, Stephen Hawking replied, 'Aggression.' He said it could lead to irrational behavior, like sparking nuclear war and ending the world." (Stephen Hawking) This is why what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount is so important.

"Don't you see that whatever goes into the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But

the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, slander. These are what defile a person...”

And what the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 4, Galatians 5, and Titus 3:

²⁹ Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. ³¹ Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. ³² Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ. (Matthew 15:17-20a)

¹⁸ But if you are being led by the Spirit, you aren't under the Law. ¹⁹ The actions that are produced by selfish motives are obvious, since they include sexual immorality, moral corruption, doing whatever feels good, ²⁰ idolatry, drug use and casting spells, hate, fighting, obsession, losing your temper, competitive opposition, conflict, selfishness, group rivalry,²¹ jealousy, drunkenness, partying, and other things like that. I warn you as I have already warned

you, that those who do these kinds of things won't inherit God's kingdom. (Galatians 5:18-21 CEB)

¹ Remind them to submit to rulers and authorities. They should be obedient and ready to do every good thing. ² They shouldn't speak disrespectfully about anyone, but they should be peaceful, kind, and show complete courtesy toward everyone. (Titus 3:1-2 CEB)

What does this teach us about God? It all goes back to being holy which means being perfect in love. Which means we have to look beyond ourselves and our families and friends to try to grasp the bigger picture—God is working toward remaking (not destroying) the world. Redemption is God's plan.

God continues to show his creative nature with what happens next with Jonah.

Jonah goes east of the city. He finds a place, makes a shelter, and waits. He would have waited at least 38 days in this spot. (He walked one day journey into a three day journey length of Nineveh. This meant he would have 38 days until the destruction of the city.) It's easy to imagine the scene. We do it all the time when we're watching our favorite

movies and television shows with a character that is supposed to have something bad happen to them. We get our popcorn and drink, sit back, relax, and wait in anticipation (sometimes happiness) that the character will get what's coming to them.

But God is not one to be mocked, or break from his character. While Jonah is (patiently?) waiting for Nineveh to be destroyed, God causes a plant to grow which helps produce shade for Jonah. Oh, Jonah likes this. Not only does Jonah get to wait for the destruction of the city, but God was so good to him that a plant was provided for his own comfort. (Sense the humor here?)

But the very next day, God created a worm (irony) that ate the plant. Jonah's anger continued to burn, this time more so at God. Not only does God send the worm, but God also sends a "scorching east wind." (Jonah 4:8a) Imagine how Jonah was feeling now? Did he finally repent of his actions and attitude? Nope!

Jonah continues to have the gall to be upset with God. This time he stays mad because God provided and took away the comfort and shade. Jonah uses the excuse he does not want to live anymore because, as Jonah says, God is too *good* and *compassionate*.

Does God deal harshly with Jonah? Not really. Instead, God asks some real important questions about how Jonah's view of the situation and the world needs to change. This is where the book of Jonah ends:

God asks Jonah, "should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from the left—and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11)

Not only does God ask this of Jonah, but God also asks us this same question today.

So, I have to ask, where is your heart toward God? I'm sure I would hear that our hearts are great with God. This is definitely something we all desire. Now, where is your heart to the people of the world? The person who cut you off in traffic? The boss who isn't fair? The person who harmed you or stole something of yours? Where is your heart toward the judge who did not give a strong enough sentence to the defendant? This is where it gets difficult.

I sure hope the book of Jonah has come alive to you in a different way than before. I hope you are seeing new aspects

that were not visible before. Above all else, I hope we all come away with a much larger picture and view of God than we had before.

God is big enough that we can be mad at him, yet he still seeks to offer grace. This is where the picture and person of Jesus Christ comes clearly into focus.

Not only did God create the universe, create the world, create each and every individual person, God decided to come down and live life here on earth, as a human, for a time, so he could live and dwell among us. High and powerful people did not like Jesus Christ, still don't, and had him put to death. But catch this. Jesus *willingly* went to the cross. He *willingly* was humiliated, tortured, wrongly convicted, wrong executed. With his arms outstretched on the splintery cross, Jesus said, "forgive them." He demonstrated his incredible compassion and love for all of humanity (past, present, and future). What an incredible picture of God's compassion, love, and mercy for you and I today.

May we continue to seek to live in true peace with each other. May we continually repent and turn our lives toward God. May we constantly praise and glorify God, even when we do not get what we want. Above all, may we seek to

know and love God, and God's people, more and more each day. Amen

Appendix 1: What Jonah Teaches Us About God

1. God knows our hearts; yet he still calls us
2. We cannot hide from God. God never leaves us
3. The Lord is the One who created everything even you!
4. People come to know God through our lives
5. God offers grace and desires life for people
6. God answers prayer
7. God has not abandoned you or forgotten you
8. God relentlessly pursues you and I so we can reach the people we're called to reach
9. God desires holiness from all because he is holy
10. God even cares for our enemies
11. God has a much bigger viewpoint of humanity and history than we do
12. God is extremely creative in each individual's life
13. God is more patient than we are
14. God is big enough to handle it when we get mad/angry at him

Appendix 2: Research Paper

PURPOSE OF JONAH RESEARCH PAPER

Who is God? This is a question that is posed in the book of Jonah by different groups of people, by their words and by their actions. Jonah, a prophet of YHWH, hears from God and travels, off course, to Nineveh to proclaim God's judgment for their sins. When trying to understand and find the purpose of this book, several questions come to mind. Was Jonah a real prophet? Was the book that bears his name real or a tale? Why is it in the Hebrew and Christian canon? As we read through and examine the book, we learn what the purpose is—to tell us about the nature of God as experienced in the book of Jonah.

Jonah is one of those stories that seems like everyone has heard about and know what happens in the 48 verses of the book. Much in this story is so fantastical that it is possible this story is not about a real person or place, but rather about the state of the people of Israel. For example, “the size of [Nineveh] is exaggerated. The ruins of Nineveh are roughly three miles across, certainly not a three day's walk.”

(Collins 535) Collins also points out that there has never been that dramatic of a response to a prophetic proclamation. This would have been absurd, especially since there was no real repentance on the side of the Ninevites (that we read) just a demonstration with sack cloths and saying “I’m sorry” to God. “There is no historical record of any such repentance by any Assyrian city.” (Collins 535) This does not change the importance of this story to the Biblical canon, though.

When was Jonah written? “Unlike most prophetic literature, Jonah fails to locate itself in a particular historical setting.” (Tribble 465) This is a difficult book to date because it has “no superscription that places the book in the reigns of the kings of Israel or Judah or in the exile or in the post-exilic era; nor does the story contain references to known historical events.” (Tribble 465)

Here is how the story goes. Jonah, one of YHWH’s prophets, hears a call from YHWH to go to Nineveh and make the proclamation that God was about to destroy their land and people because of their sin. Jonah decides to go the opposite way and gets on a boat. While on the boat, YHWH sends a great storm and the sailors get scared. Jonah admits he is the one God is after with the storm and the sailors throw him overboard. While in the water, YHWH

sends a fish that swallows Jonah. Inside the fish, Jonah prays and three days later, the fish spews him out on the land. God called to Jonah a second time and gave him the same mission. This time, Jonah went, proclaimed the message, and the people of Nineveh repented and thereby causing God to relent from the destruction. Jonah gets mad and throws a fit. YHWH still tries to help Jonah understand compassion, but Jonah continues to be mad. End of story.

There is more to this story. This tale can teach us about the human condition and how we all try to run from God to hide. However, the point of Jonah is to teach us about God and the nature of God. When we understand more of who God is, we begin to understand ourselves on a deeper level. When we know ourselves better, we know we all fall short of God's glory, and we sin; therefore the Jewish people read and meditate on this short book each Yom Kipur.

Chapter one introduces the prophet as "Jonah, son of Amittai." Who is Jonah? The only other place we learn about Jonah is in the book of 2 Kings 14:25. There is not much said about Jonah other than, "He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. (2 Kings 14:25 NRSV)

At the beginning of this story, we have the opportunity to learn who Jonah is by learning about his character. The name Jonah means dove. Mainly, Jonah was to be about peace. For a person whose name means dove to proclaim destruction to a city is ironic at the beginning. Not only does Jonah's name mean dove, but his father's name, Amittai, means faithful or true. At the beginning of the narrative, we learn that God is calling, Jonah, son of Truth/Faithfulness. The reader gets drawn into the story, quickly, by learning that God calls a person who lives the opposite of what his name means, opposite of what he professes to believe. God still uses this person. The nature of God is to use and work through the most unlikely people, even those who choose to run from him, to bring God's word to the world, especially those people we do not like.

In the next scene, the next thing that happens is the "Son of Faithfulness" decides to go away from the mission YHWH has sent him on. What is happening is we see Jonah not being so faithful to the calling he has received, and, we encounter a God from whom no one can run or hide. "Neither Jonah nor any of us can run and hide from the Lord." (Schultz 24) Jonah is a lot like many of us, even today.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve tried to “hide” from God, but they realized they couldn’t because God is omnipresent, meaning God is everywhere. When they tried to hide, the reader also notices how Adam and Eve begin the blame game. Jonah does this very same thing, only this time, YHWH is blamed because of Jonah disobeying. Only this time, YHWH is blamed because of what Jonah says, “I am a Hebrew, I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” (Jonah 1:9 NRSV) The hypocrisy and tension he must have had in his voice are amazing. On the one hand, he was trying to demonstrate the fact he was part of God’s people by declaring himself to be a Hebrew; but on the other hand, it is almost as if he is blaming God for the storm because YHWH is the LORD of everything! What the reader is learning is the power and place of God in all of creation. Jonah was on a boat with pagans (non-Hebrew) people who worshipped other gods. Jonah was communicating to the sailors that YHWH is the one true God. The reader is left with the understanding that YHWH rules and governs everything in our created universe, even the sea creature YHWH has swallow Jonah. YHWH is now seen as a “saving” God because the fish spares Jonah’s life from the torrential sea. Jonah was going as fast as he could, away from the calling and command of God. How many people do this? However, this story teaches God is passionate about the mission the people are called to “thus,

to save them from themselves, to draw them back, God sends a fish, like he did for Jonah, to slow them down.” (Schultz 23)

From the belly of the fish, Jonah is praying a “psalm of thanksgiving.” If we pay attention to this prayer, the reader notices that Jonah seems to be reciting something from memory, because his actions and words from chapter one do not give any indication that Jonah actually did any of what he prayed (i.e., called to the Lord, remembering the Lord, have a voice of thanksgiving toward God). Lasine says, “the prophet could simply be reciting an existing psalm or portions of different existing songs which come the closest to fitting his unique and bizarre situation and expressing typical expectations concerning God as protector and rescuer. This would account for the ways in which the prayer clashes with the situation.” (Lasine 242-43) Never the less, God still answers Jonah and has the fish spew Jonah out on the dry land, after three days. What the reader now learns about God is that God will listen to, even the prayers we may not mean. God’s concern for the people is so great that every request is listened to in heaven from earth. “His deliverance from the fish allows Jonah a new beginning.” (Collins 535)

After the fish spewed Jonah back on the dry land, YHWH spoke, again, to the reluctant prophet, “Get up, go to

Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message I tell you.” (Jonah 3:2 NRSV) The reader is now paying attention to how God never gives up on Jonah by offering a second chance to do what he was told to do. This is not about Jonah. The reader is beginning to see how much God desires the people of Nineveh, the people who have sinned a great deal, to hear a message that should cause them to repent and change their ways. The reader is shown how compassionate God is, not just for God’s people, but for the rest of the world. This becomes even more evident when the people of Nineveh, including the king, all repent and God relents from the destruction that was planned. “The message [of Jonah] is a theological one. It presents a picture of God that encourages hope for grace, even when the sentence has already been passed.” (Walton 56) YHWH is desiring, even the most sinful people to be re-created. “As Isaiah 43:19 states, YHWH was doing ‘a new thing,’ but it involved a recreation that went beyond the salvation of the Jews. It aimed at the recreation of all humanity.” (Anderson 186)

In the final chapter of this short book, Jonah is angry at YHWH for not following through with the plans of doom for Nineveh. Jonah has found himself into a situation where, if he is a prophet of YHWH, now he has to answer for the unfulfilled prophecy. “It is clear that the book’s concern is not with Jonah’s emotional state; it touches on the larger

problem of his being made to appear as a false prophet.” (Childs 3246) Now he has to wonder what the rest of his people will think of him because YHWH did not do what YHWH said would happen. “Jonah provides a reason for unfulfilled prophecy: the overwhelming love that God has for all of His creation.” (Reimnitz 34) The reader can see this compassion from the words written, but the reader also has a chance to piece together the nature of who God is.

Jonah quotes God’s characteristics that are found in Exodus 34:6, “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” (NRSV) Jonah focuses on the positives attributes of the nature of God, meaning Jonah knows that God is good. YHWH demonstrates this compassion for Jonah, and the people of Nineveh when YHWH attempts to teach the hard-hearted prophet a lesson about compassion and who is really in charge of the universe. How does YHWH teach Jonah? Lasine sums up the emotions God was allowing Jonah to experience:

“God...prompts Jonah to experience a series of emotional ups and downs. First, Jonah feels ‘evil’ from the sun and then faint (vv. 6,8 NRSV). Next, he feels greatly happy or glad about the new shade-giving plant, only to become angry when the plant withers

that he renews his death wish. YHWH then characterizes Jonah's anger as being driven by 'pity.' The book then concludes abruptly, without readers having a chance to hear Jonah's response—if any—to YHWH's closing question concerning the appropriateness of Jonah's anger and God's implied pity towards Nineveh." (Lasine 246-47)

"In the end, the issue was not Nineveh's sinfulness, but God's sovereign right to be gracious, which Jonah affirmed by his response." (Walton 52)

The book of Jonah shows the reader flawed human nature. The reader is shown how people will flee from doing what God says to do and continue to live in prejudices even if injustices are happening to fellow human beings. Jonah is a character who is like many of us until God comes in and intervenes with grace and mercy. This short, four-chapter book, is about who God is and God's nature. When a person reads the Bible, the goal should not be for information only, but to be shown who God is. The goal of reading scripture, especially the book of Jonah, is to see how we should be living in this world and what kind of love and compassion we should embrace for all people. The purpose is to show the reader who God is so the reader can see what God is asking the people to do and to be like in this world. Walton brings up

a good question to end on, “If God’s grace can be stimulated by wretched Nineveh’s uninformed, minute steps in the right direction, how much more will that grace be stimulated by the informed repentance of Israel, his chosen people?”
(Walton 56)

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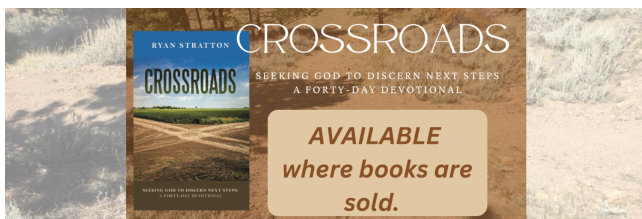
Ryan Stratton is the associate pastor at Williams Memorial United Methodist Church in Texarkana, Texas.

For over twenty years, Ryan has been teaching children, teenagers, and adults. He began this in his teen years when he practiced TaeKwonDo. He continued practicing and teaching this art form for fifteen years. After receiving a call to Christian ministry and leadership, Ryan began full time vocational ministry. Ryan's priority in life is to help people see and experience life beyond themselves and the purpose God has for them.

The most important relationships for Ryan are with his wife and his children. When not leading the church, studying the Scripture, speaking, writing (www.ryanstratton.com), or participating in community missions and outreach, Ryan is found spending time with his wife and children.

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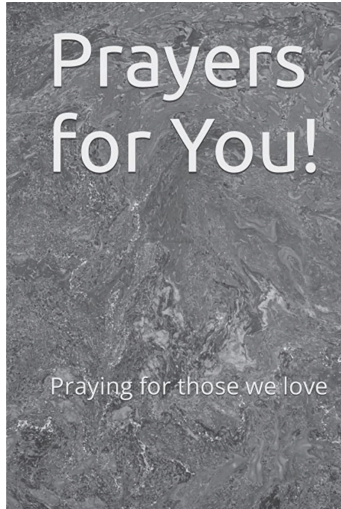
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