

Intro:

- This week I get the honor of kicking off our next Northstar Sermon Series in the book of Jonah.
- For the next several weeks we are going to walk through the book of Jonah together and learn from the Lord through it.
- I am actually very excited for this series. Jonah is an often forgotten and often misunderstood book.
- For instance, if I say the word the name Jonah, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Probably something like this (show VBS whale picture).
- Jonah has become synonymous with only one thing: his multi-night stay in casa de fish.
- And that is very obviously a part of what happens in Jonah.
- But the book of Jonah is about so much more than God's miraculous work in sending a fish to swallow Jonah.
- It's a book about race and nationalism, since Jonah seems to be more concerned over his nations' military security than over a city of spiritually lost people.
- It's a book about God's call to mission, since Jonah at first flees from the call and later goes, but regrets it.
- It's a book about the struggles believers have to obey and trust God.
- It's a book about those things and so many more aside.
- Let me read to you a quote from Tim Keller on the book of Jonah:

“The book of Jonah yields many insights about God's love for societies and people beyond the community of believers; about his opposition to toxic nationalism and disdain for other races; and about how to be “in mission” in the world despite the subtle and unavoidable power of idolatry in our own lives and hearts. Grasping these insights can make us bridge builders, peacemakers, and agents of reconciliation in the world. Such people are the need of the hour.”

- This is part of why I'm so excited for us to walk through this book together as a church.
- If you're here or you're listening and you're a Christian, Jonah is a book that will teach you about God's character and his love for the individual and for the masses... and for cattle, as you'll see at the end of the book.
- If you're here or you're listening and you're not a Christian, Jonah is a great place for you to jump in and learn about who the God of the Bible is and what He cares about.

Intro to Jonah

- So with all that said, let me tell you a little about the book of Jonah.
- It was written sometime between the middle of the eighth and end of the third centuries B.C.
- The author of the book is anonymous, but it is likely that the story itself came directly from Jonah's own retelling.
- The book itself is an ingenious and artfully crafted work of literature. We'll talk a little more about some of why this is true later.

- You also need to know that the story of Jonah is in a form of literature that is very rare to scripture. It is satire; the exposure of human vice or folly through humor, irony, or ridicule. The author of Jonah tells the historical account of Jonah's Nineveh epic by highlighting the ridiculous nature of most of what Jonah did and said.
- Finally, it's important to understand the structure of Jonah. The author of the book clearly had great intentionality in the way that he crafted the narrative. Let me throw up a slide to show you what I mean.

SCENE #1 Jonah, the pagans, and the sea	SCENE #2 Jonah, the pagans, and the city
Jonah and God's Word	
1:1 God's Word comes to Jonah	3:1 God's Word comes to Jonah
1:2 The message to be conveyed	3:2 The message to be conveyed
1:3 The response of Jonah	3:3 The response of Jonah
Jonah and God's World	
1:4 The word of warning	3:4 The word of warning
1:5 The response of the pagans	3:5 The response of the pagans
1:6 The response of the pagan leader	3:6 The response of the pagan leader
1:7ff How the pagans' response was ultimately better than Jonah's	3:7ff How the pagans' response was ultimately better than Jonah's
Jonah and God's Grace	
2:1-10 How God taught grace to Jonah through the fish	4:1-10 How God taught grace to Jonah through the plant

- The whole book can essentially be viewed as two "scenes". The first scene involves Jonah's fleeing from God's call and the second scene involves Jonah's eventual obedience to God's call, albeit begrudgingly.
- But look at the similarities in both scenes.
- In both scenes God gives a command to Jonah. In one scene he obeys, in the other he doesn't.
- In both scenes the pagans that Jonah interacts with are ultimately more righteous than he was in their actions.
- In both scenes God graciously teaches Jonah about His abiding love both for him and for the people (and cattle).
- And do you know what is amazing about this structure? It's exactly the same as the structure of the story of the prodigal son. The only difference is that in Jonah, we see Jonah play the role of both the younger and the older son.

- In the first scene, Jonah is the younger brother. He willfully disobeys and goes his own way to ultimately find chaos and destruction only to be saved by the gracious action of the Father.
- In the second scene, Jonah is the older brother. He obeys the Father, but he does it begrudgingly and in the end is angry when the Father forgives the Ninevites.
- In both the story of the prodigal son and in the story of Jonah, the narratives end with the Father asking a rhetorical question.
- This similarity to the story of the prodigal son is the reason we've entitled this sermon series "Jonah: the prodigal prophet."
- We aren't the first to make this observation. Tim Keller also wrote an excellent book on Jonah titled the Prodigal prophet for the same reasoning.

Jonah 1:1-3

- So there's the intro to Jonah. If you have never read the book in its entirety, I would encourage you to do that between now and our time together next week. Read it in one sitting (it's only four short chapters) and look back at the notes from this sermon. You'll begin to see the things we've talked about so far jump out from the book.
- But for this morning we are going to focus on the first three verses of chapter one.
- So if you have your Bibles, turn with me to Jonah chapter one verse one and read along with me.

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." 3 But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

- Alright, so right away some questions probably jump out to you:
 - a. Who was Jonah?
 - b. Why didn't Jonah want to listen to God's command?
 - c. Where is Nineveh and what had they done to arouse God against them?
 - d. Why would Jonah believe he could flee from God?
- So let's go through those real quick. First off, **Who was Jonah?**
- Jonah, the son of Amittai is mentioned in one other place in the Old Testament, besides the book that bears his name.
- The other mention is in II Kings 14:23-29, where Jonah prophesied during the reign of King Jeroboam in Israel.
- In that passage it is said that Jonah prophesied the retaking of great lengths of land for Israel, despite the fact that Jeroboam was a king who did evil in the sight of the Lord.
- This retaking of the Israelite borders did occur, but what is interesting about this prophecy from Jonah are the counter prophecies that we have from Amos about how these same victories for Jeroboam would be undone.

- This contrast in Jonah's prophecies and Amos' begins to give us some insight into who Jonah was. He loved his country. He loved his people, the Israelites. He believed deeply in God's promises to his people. And from what we learn from Jonah's response to God's call in chapter 1, we can safely assume that Jonah hates the enemies of the Jewish people.
- That leads us into our next question, which really is one of the major questions of the book which we should ask ourselves, **why didn't Jonah want to listen to God's command?**
- First off, we need to note that what God asked Jonah to do was an unprecedented thing in redemptive history up to this point. God had used his prophets to speak out against nations, but this is the first time that God had commanded one of his prophets to go to another nation altogether.
- What's more, the nation God is calling Jonah to go to was the fiercest empire in the world at this time, the Assyrians.
- We'll hit on this more later, but the Assyrians were a ruthless pagan nation that would eventually capture and destroy Israel.
- Jonah going to these people and "calling out against them" would have been like a Jewish rabbi standing on the streets of Berlin in 1941 calling on Nazi Germany to repent.
- So we can probably surmise that in part, Jonah didn't want to listen to God because he felt the mission was foolhardy and would lead to his death.
- But from what we learn about Jonah in the rest of the book, I don't think it was the impractical nature of the mission that drove Jonah to disobey God, it was the impractical theology of the mission.
- Jonah knew what God would do for the Ninevites. He knew that he would lead them to repentance and show them mercy.
- But Jonah didn't want to see the Assyrians receive mercy, he wanted to see them receive justice.
- He wanted them to suffer the wrath of their wrongs, not revel in the mercies of the almighty God.
- Jonah knew, as he will say later in the book, that God would be gracious and merciful to the Ninevites. And that, ultimately, is why he didn't want to go.
- Catch this point as we go through the book of Jonah, guys: **the book of Jonah isn't about a fish, it's about a man wrestling to reconcile the mercy of God with His justice.** It's about a man who wants a God of his own making, a God who simply smites the bad people, like the Ninevites, and blesses the good people, like Jonah and his countrymen. But when the real God, not Jonah's counterfeit, keeps showing up, Jonah is thrown into fury or despair.
- Now let's turn to our third question: **where was Nineveh, and what had they done to arouse God against them?**
- I gave you some of the answers to this a moment ago, but we'll dive a little deeper now.
- Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. The city itself was about 220 miles north of present-day Baghdad, and it was the biggest, baddest city of it's day.

- The book of Jonah accounts that the city itself would take three days to walk from end to end.
- The Assyrians were the dynasty of the day during Jonah's time, and they were ruthless.
- One historian is quoted as saying that Assyrian history is "as gory and bloodcurdling a history as we know".
- There are accounts of Assyrian armies cutting off the legs and one arm of their enemies, leaving the other arm so they could shake the victims hand as he was dying.
- They forced friends and family members to parade with the heads of their decapitated loved ones on poles.
- The Assyrians have been labeled by at least one historian as a "terrorist state".
- Truly, if there were a nation of the day that we could understand Jonah's hatred of, it would be this one.
- And from what we understand from history it is no wonder that God's wrath was aroused against them.
- But do not forget that God's intention in sending Jonah is to give the Ninevites a chance to repent.
- Is this not the gospel in a nutshell? The Ninevites were wicked and cruel beyond measure by any standard, not only those of the day. They were evil and they deserved judgement. But God, in his mercy, decided to send Jonah to warn them and call them to repentance.
- And what we learn from the New Testament is that we have the new and better Jonah. A man who didn't flee from God's call, but embraced it in order to purchase salvation for us. This is and has always been God's heart.
- And finally we turn to our last question that arises from Jonah 1:1-3: **why did Jonah think he could flee from God?**
- Take a look at this map of the ancient near east in the time of Jonah.
- All the way over to the east you see Nineveh written just above the word Assyria.
- And then all the way to the west you see Tarshish with an arrow and a question mark.
- We don't know where Tarshish was, but what we do know is that Jonah was trying to get there by sailing the Mediterranean.
- Look at the path that Jonah took after hearing God's call. He was literally running as far in the opposite direction as he possibly could.
- Why? Did Jonah really think that he could run from God?
- I think the author of Jonah means this action of Jonah to be the most senseless and humorous choice that Jonah made.
- Jonah knew good and well that he couldn't run from the presence of the God of the universe.
- But he went anyway.
- He did all he could to avoid God's call to preach repentance to a group of wicked people who he knew didn't deserve it.
- And in doing this, he missed the deep wickedness in his own heart entirely.
- A wickedness that ran so deep that he would directly turn away from the presence of God to avoid the repentance and healing of thousands which he deemed as unworthy.

- Jonah knew he couldn't flee from God, but he thought that he would rather try to do what was impossible than to do what God was asking of him.
- And here again is the mercy of God displayed boundlessly. Because God was just seeking to show grace and mercy to Nineveh, that great city, he was also seeking to show it to a single man whom he loved, Jonah.

Application:

- So what are we to take from these first three verses of Jonah?
- Since we asked four questions about the passage, I thought it perhaps best to give four application questions, one for each of our questions.
 - a. In what ways are we, like Jonah, so blinded by our own interests and assumptions that we fail to care about others, especially those who are our enemies?
 - b. Are we willing to lay down our counterfeit ideas of who God is or should be before the one true God who has revealed Himself through His Word, or will we refuse God's commands because they aren't what we want them to be?
 - c. Do we see the Ninevites as more wicked than ourselves? Or do we recognise that, just like the Ninevites, none of us would have any hope in this life were it not for a loving God who pursues us?
 - d. Are we fleeing from the presence of God because of frustration at who He is, what he has called us to do, or what he has chosen not to do?