



SUNDAY SCHOOL MAY 11, 2025

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OLD TESTAMENT

Jonah 1:1-10

JONAH TRIES TO RUN AWAY FROM GOD

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.”

But Jonah set out 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 his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.

The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up; call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.”

So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”

“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

Then the men were even more afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!”

For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

OVERVIEW

Jonah 1:1–10 introduces the story of the prophet Jonah, who receives a divine commission from God to preach against the wickedness of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. Instead of obeying, Jonah attempts to flee in the opposite direction by boarding a ship to Tarshish. A violent storm arises, threatening the ship and its crew, prompting them to seek out the cause of the disaster. Jonah ultimately confesses his identity and disobedience, recognizing that the storm is a result of his flight from God.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

Literary Setting: The Book of Jonah is one of the twelve minor prophets in the Old Testament. Unlike most prophetic books, it is more narrative in structure than a collection of oracles or sermons. It is a story *about* a prophet rather than a collection of his prophecies.

Theological Themes in This Passage:

Divine Call and Human Resistance: Jonah represents a prophet who defies God's will, contrasting sharply with other prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah.



God's Sovereignty over Nature: The storm demonstrates that God's power extends even over the sea and Gentile sailors.

Inclusivity and Universality: God's interest in Nineveh, a non-Israelite city, challenges the idea that Yahweh is only concerned with Israel.

The Irony of Pagan Faith vs. Prophetic Disobedience: The Gentile sailors fear God and act with reverence, while Jonah, the Israelite prophet, runs away.

HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Nineveh and Assyria:

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, a ruthless power known for its military brutality and oppressive rule. By Jonah's time, Assyria had already become a **formidable enemy of Israel** and would later conquer the northern kingdom in 722 BCE.

Tarshish:

The exact location is debated, but it's commonly thought to be a distant western port — possibly in southern Spain — representing the **"ends of the earth"** from an Israelite perspective. Jonah's attempt to flee symbolically reflects an effort to escape God's jurisdiction.

Sailors and Sea Travel:

Maritime travel was dangerous and often seen as chaotic or threatening in the ancient Near East. The sea was associated with untamable forces, **often used metaphorically to represent disorder or rebellion against divine order.**

Religious Syncretism (combining religious beliefs) and Paganism:

The sailors represent non-Israelite religious practitioners who, ironically, display more spiritual sensitivity than Jonah does. This reflects a subversive critique of Israelite religious complacency or ethnocentrism.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

Probable Setting of Events: The reign of Jeroboam II, based on 2 Kings 14:25, where Jonah is mentioned as a prophet during this time. **He was a powerful king of Israel (786–746 BCE) whose long reign brought territorial expansion and economic prosperity, but also growing social injustice and spiritual complacency.**

Probable Date of Composition: Many scholars believe the Book of Jonah was written during or after the **Babylonian Exile** (6th–4th century BCE), even though it's set in the 8th century BCE.

Political Environment: The Assyrians were a looming threat in the 8th century. Later, in the exilic or post-exilic era, Jonah's message may have served as a theological reflection on divine mercy and the potential for Gentile repentance.

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION & MODERN-DAY CONTEXT

Metaphorical Themes:

Jonah as Everyman: Jonah represents the human tendency to run from uncomfortable responsibilities, especially when they involve showing grace to those we dislike or fear.



The Storm as Internal Crisis: The sea storm can be seen as a metaphor for personal or societal turmoil that arises when we resist a moral or divine calling.

Gentiles as Models of Faith: The sailors, representing “outsiders,” ironically act more righteously than God’s chosen messenger. This raises timeless questions about who truly embodies faith, especially relevant in interfaith or multicultural societies.

Modern-Day Relevance:

Avoiding Responsibility: Like Jonah, individuals and communities today often avoid challenging injustices or uncomfortable truths, especially when it involves confronting enemies or extending compassion to outsiders (e.g., refugees, political opponents).

Spiritual Hypocrisy: The text critiques those who claim to follow God yet behave contrary to divine compassion and justice, a theme still relevant in religious and political settings.

God’s Universality: The passage expands the view of divine concern beyond one’s nation or faith group — a radical idea in Jonah’s time and still challenging today.

SUMMARY

Jonah 1:1–10 sets the stage for a prophetic story rich in irony and theological depth. God calls Jonah to preach against the wickedness of Nineveh, a hated foreign city. Rather than obey, Jonah tries to flee across the sea to Tarshish. His disobedience triggers a violent storm that threatens the ship he boards. While the Gentile sailors cry out to their gods and show reverence, Jonah sleeps, oblivious. When the storm intensifies, Jonah confesses that he is fleeing from the Lord and acknowledges his guilt.

This passage explores deep questions of obedience, prejudice, divine sovereignty, and spiritual humility. It begins the unraveling of a prophet who must learn — through storm, sea, and unexpected mercy — the extent of God’s grace and the challenge of human pride.



NEW TESTAMENT (GOSPEL)

Matthew 12:38-45

THE SIGN OF JONAH

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”

But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.

“The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and indeed something greater than Jonah is here! The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and indeed something greater than Solomon is here!

“When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none. Then it says, *‘I will return to my house from which I came.’* When it returns, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So will it be also with this evil generation.”

OVERVIEW

Matthew 12:38–45 recounts a confrontation between Jesus and some scribes and Pharisees who demand a miraculous sign to prove His authority. Jesus responds by condemning their request as coming from an "evil and adulterous generation" and declares that the only sign they will receive is the “sign of the prophet Jonah.” He then compares the people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South favorably over the current generation, warning them of impending judgment. The passage ends with a stark metaphor: a man from whom an unclean spirit has departed, only for the spirit to return with others—leaving the man worse off. Jesus likens this to the spiritual state of His contemporaries.

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

This passage follows a sequence of growing conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders in **Matthew 12:**

Matthew 12:22–37: Jesus heals a demon-possessed man, leading to accusations that He uses the power of Satan.

Matthew 12:33–37: Jesus challenges them on the nature of good and evil words and fruit, pointing to the heart’s condition.

So, by the time we reach verses 38–45, Jesus is answering leaders who are skeptical despite all they’ve seen. The demand for a “sign” comes not from curiosity or faith, but from a hardened refusal to believe.



HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Religious Authority: In 1st-century Judea, the Pharisees and scribes were seen as religious gatekeepers. They prized the Law and tradition and were suspicious of anyone, like Jesus, who taught with authority yet defied their expectations.

Messianic Expectations: Many Jews of the time were awaiting a Messiah who would perform signs and wonders and overthrow Roman rule. Jesus did not meet their military or political expectations, which contributed to skepticism.

Roman Oppression: Judea was under Roman rule, and spiritual longing was often entangled with nationalistic hope. A miraculous sign was, to some, proof of divine backing for revolution or restoration.

Oral Culture & Miracles: In a world without mass media, miracles served as tangible divine endorsements. Prophets like Elijah and Elisha had performed them. But Jesus refused to perform signs on demand, particularly for hostile audiences.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

Date of Event: Jesus's public ministry is generally dated between 27–30 CE.

Context of Matthew's Gospel: Likely written between 70–85 CE, possibly for a Jewish-Christian audience in conflict with the synagogue after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

Reference to Jonah: The story of Jonah dates to around the 8th century BCE, during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25).

Jesus uses a well-known prophetic narrative—Jonah's being in the belly of the fish for "three days and three nights"—as a foreshadowing of His death, burial, and resurrection.

SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION & MODERN-DAY CONTEXT

A. The "Sign of Jonah"

Metaphorically, Jonah represents **death and resurrection**—a time of isolation, repentance, and rebirth. Just as Jonah emerged to preach repentance to Nineveh, Jesus will rise and offer salvation to all.

Modern Application: Faith should not depend on spectacle. We, like the Pharisees, often seek certainty through signs (e.g., health, wealth, or success). But Jesus insists that the greatest sign is His resurrection—a transformative event calling us to repentance and trust, not proof-seeking.

B. The Queen of the South & Nineveh

Both are **Gentile** examples who responded to God's message, unlike Jesus's own generation. This critiques religious insiders who miss the truth right before them.

Modern Application: Outsiders (social, cultural, or religious) may sometimes be more receptive to spiritual truth than those who assume they already possess it.

C. The Return of the Unclean Spirit

This functions as a metaphor for **spiritual relapse**. A person or community may clean up their act temporarily (religiously or morally), but without genuine transformation or spiritual filling, they remain vulnerable.



Modern Application: Behavioral change without deep spiritual renewal is unsustainable. Societies or individuals who remove one evil without replacing it with good are open to worse outcomes—e.g., political revolutions that fail to build just structures, or rehab without purpose.

SUMMARY

In **Matthew 12:38–45**, Jesus denounces the demand for a sign as rooted in unbelief and wickedness. He offers the “sign of Jonah” as the only valid sign—a veiled reference to His death and resurrection. He points to Gentile examples of repentance (Nineveh, Queen of Sheba) to shame His generation’s hardness of heart. He ends with a haunting metaphor of a person cleansed of evil but left empty—only to become worse off than before. Jesus warns that superficial repentance, without true inner transformation, leads to spiritual ruin.



ADDENDUM

More about Jonah

Who Was Jonah?

Name Meaning: "Jonah" means *dove*, often a symbol of peace or innocence — an ironic name for a prophet who runs from God's mission of mercy.

Biblical Mentions: Aside from the Book of Jonah, he appears briefly in **2 Kings 14:25**, where he prophesies during King Jeroboam II's reign, saying Israel would expand its borders. This positions Jonah as a *nationalistic* prophet, likely loyal to Israel's interests — possibly why he resisted going to help Nineveh (Israel's enemy).

Prophet of Irony: Jonah is one of the most reluctant and flawed prophets in scripture. He's angry at God's compassion, runs away from his mission, and prefers judgment over mercy. He becomes a mirror for Israel (and us) to examine spiritual arrogance.

Literary Uniqueness:

- A *narrative tale* rather than a traditional prophetic book.
- Uses satire and reversal — pagan sailors act faithfully, the prophet resists God.
- Ends unresolved, inviting reflection more than conclusion.

Connecting Jonah to Mother's Day

While this passage doesn't mention mothers directly, several **symbolic and thematic parallels** can make for a rich Mother's Day reflection:

1. God's Persistent Call = A Mother's Persistent Love

- Just as God doesn't give up on Jonah — even when he runs — many mothers (and mother figures) persist in guiding, calling, and caring for their children through resistance, rebellion, or indifference.
- God's mercy is *relentless*, as is the nurturing love of many mothers who continue to reach out even when rejected or misunderstood.

2. Jonah's Flight = Children Struggling with Responsibility

- Jonah runs from responsibility — just as children (even adult ones) sometimes flee from what's hard, uncomfortable, or compassionate.
- A mother's role often involves **teaching responsibility**, helping children face what they'd rather avoid — whether chores or forgiveness.

3. The Storm = Emotional Turmoil of Rebellion

- The storm stirred by Jonah's disobedience can represent the emotional storms that arise in family relationships — tension, avoidance, reckoning.
- Many mothers are **anchors** in family storms, helping bring calm, redirect focus, or offer truth amid chaos.



4. The Sailors = Outsiders Who Show Care

- The pagan sailors show compassion, try to save Jonah, and even pray — modeling empathy and action.
- This can speak to **spiritual motherhood** — the nurturing actions of women beyond biological mothers: adoptive moms, mentors, neighbors, or church leaders.

5. Jonah's Honesty = A Model for Vulnerable Conversations

- Eventually, Jonah confesses, facing truth about himself.
- On Mother's Day, this can be a time for **reflecting on difficult truths** — family tensions, missed opportunities, or healing — and finding a way back toward love and restoration.

Have you ever tried to run away from something important — maybe even from someone who loved you?