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"100 Key Passages: Big Idea - Love to Share"

Jonah 4:1-11

Some of the Books of the Bible feel like they would take days to get through. But there are other books that are actually short enough to read in one sitting. The Book we're going to look at tonight, Jonah, can be read in 5 minutes and 11 seconds. I did it this afternoon. So I decided that we would do it today. I would just ask you to turn to the Book of Jonah. For those, again, with our pew Bibles, that's page 1,381. The Book of Jonah.

Jonah is one of the prophets of Israel. A prophet is a person who gave advice to the King and talked about what God wanted the people of Israel to do. Occasionally he looked into the future. Jonah's story doesn't so much take place looking into the future as it is about something extraordinary that happens. When I tell the story of Jonah—you remember the story. It's about Jonah and the—whale. Right. It's about Jonah and the whale. That's what everybody remembers about Jonah. As a matter of fact, this story becomes the inspiration for other great stories. For *Pinocchio*, who is swallowed by the whale. For *Moby Dick*, where the whale chases Ahab. For Shakespeare in *Love's Labour's Lost*. God knows how to tell a story. This is a story that's 3,000 years old that will change your life tonight. It's more than just a fun story. So if you have found Jonah, follow along.

This is how it starts. It says, "The Lord gave Jonah, the son of Amittai, a message, 'Get up. Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh and announce My judgment against it because I've seen how wicked its people are.' But Jonah got up and he went in the opposite direction to get away from God. He went down to the port of Joppa, and there he found a ship leaving for Tarshish, exactly the opposite way from Nineveh. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to escape from the Lord by sailing to Tarshish.

"Then the Lord held a powerful wind over the sea, and a violent storm threatened to break the ship apart. Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors shouted to God, 'Help! Help!' and threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. All the time, Jonah is down below in the ship sound asleep. The captain went down below and yelled at him, 'How can you sleep at a time like this? Get up. Pray to your God. Maybe your God will pay attention and spare our lives.'"

Well, the storm kept going, so the crew cast lots, like dice. They threw dice to see who had offended the gods and caused the terrible storm. When they did it, the lots identified Jonah as the culprit. "Why has this awful storm come down on us?" the sailors asked. 'Who are you?

What do you do? Where are you from?' Jonah answered, 'I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.'

"When they heard this, the sailors were terrified because Jonah had already told them that he was running away from his God. 'Why did you do it?' they groaned. Since the storm kept getting worse, they asked, 'What should we do to you to stop this storm?' Jonah said, 'Throw me into the sea, and it will be calm. I know this terrible storm is all my fault.'"

Well, instead, the sailors rowed even harder, but the storm was too violent. They couldn't get to land, so they cried out to Jonah's God, "Lord, don't make *us* die because of him. Don't hold *us* responsible for his death. Lord. You've sent this storm upon him for Your good reasons."

"Then the sailors picked Jonah up, and they threw him overboard into the sea, and immediately the storm stopped. The sailors were awed by God's great power, and right there, they offered a sacrifice to God, and they vowed to serve Him.

"Now the Lord in the meantime had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah up. Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights. Then Jonah prayed to God from inside the fish. 'I cried to the Lord in my great trouble, and He answered me. I called You from the land of the dead, God, and You heard me. You threw me into the ocean, and I sank down to the bottom of the sea. I was buried beneath the waves, and then I said, 'God, You've driven me from Your presence, but I still believe. I'll look once more on Your holy temple. I was imprisoned in the earth,' Jonah prayed, 'with gates that locked shut forever, but You God, You snatched me from the jaws of death. As my life slipped away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer went out to You.'

"He finished the prayer this way, 'Those who worship false gods turn their backs on God's mercies, but I will sacrifice to You with songs of praise from inside the whale, and I will fulfill all my vows for my salvation comes from the Lord alone.' Then the Lord ordered the fish to spit Jonah back out onto the beach."

The Lord spoke to Jonah a second time, the same way the Book started. "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh and deliver the message I've given you." But this time Jonah obeyed, and he went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all. On the day that Jonah entered the city, he shouted out to the crowds, "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed," and the second day, "...thirty-nine days," and the third day, "...thirty-eight days."

"The people of Nineveh believed God's message, and from the greatest to the least of them, they declared a fast." That means they didn't eat any food, and they put on dirty, old, ugly clothes to show how sorry they were.

"When the King of Nineveh heard what Jonah was saying, he stepped down from his throne, and he dressed himself in burlap and sat down in mourning. Then the king and his nobles sent this decree throughout the city, 'Nobody not even the animals can eat or drink anything at all. Pray earnestly to God. People must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence. Who know? Maybe even yet, God will change His mind and hold back His anger from destroying us.'"

Well, when God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil, God changed His mind and did not carry out the destruction He had threatened. Good news, huh?

But this change of plans upset Jonah. He became very angry. He complained to the Lord, "Didn't I say even before I left home that You would do this, God? That's why I ran away to Tarshish. I knew that You are a merciful and compassionate God. You're slow to get angry. You're filled with love that never fails. You're eager to turn away from destroying people. So just kill me now. I'd rather die if what I predicted won't happen."

"The Lord replied, 'Is it right to be angry about this?' So then Jonah went outside the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city. 'Well, maybe God will change His mind and He will destroy it anyway.' Then God arranged for a leafy plant to grow up behind him. Soon it spread its leaves over Jonah's head, shading him from the sun, and that made him comfortable. Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

"But God also arranged for a worm. The next morning at dawn, the worm ate the stem of the plant so it withered away. As the sun grew hot, God made a scorching wind come out of the east on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and he wanted to die. He said, 'Death is better than this.' Then God asked Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?' 'Yes, yes, angry enough to die.'

"Then the Lord said, 'You feel sorry for the plant even though you did nothing to put it there. It came up quickly. It died quickly. But Nineveh, this great city, has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?'"

That's the way the story ends. What a strange ending. Isn't it? It ends with a question. It's obviously more than a fun story. It's more than just, Jonah was swallowed by the whale, and then God spit him out three days later.

You know why this story is so hard for the Jews to understand? You know why it would be for us to understand if we really understood it? Because do you know where Nineveh is? Nineveh is in Baghdad. Baghdad is in Iraq. Iraq is a country that is filled with what many people consider to be enemies, and so it's as if God turned to a Jewish person or an American and said, "I want you to go to Iraq and stand outside the city gates of Baghdad and yell, 'Forty days from now, God is saying this. He is going to destroy the place.'" You wouldn't want to do that, would you? You'd be afraid that you'd be killed, and you'd be afraid that even if you didn't get killed, God would not kill them. You would want God to get them. They're the enemy.

Well, that's how Jonah felt. Jonah had to learn lessons from God about people that he did not like, and I'd like us, especially you second graders, to help me teach the adults four lessons that God taught Jonah. The first one is at the very start of the Book of Jonah. Remember that? It said the Lord gave a message to Jonah. He said, 'Get up and go to Nineveh,' but instead, Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the Lord. But the Lord sent a storm. So did Jonah obey God? No, he didn't. God said go here, and he went there, right? But did Jonah get away with it? Did God lose him? No, God knew right where he was, didn't he? And God sent a storm to turn him around.

The first lesson that the Book of Jonah teaches, second graders, is that **God speaks to us and tells us what to do**. God wants to tell you big things, and you need to listen because when God speaks, you need to choose. Am I going to follow God and do what God wants or am I going to go in the other direction?

The very first lesson of the Book of Jonah is that God tells us what to do, and we get to choose whether we obey, and there are always consequences both ways. Sometimes we think if I just obey God, all the good things will happen to me, right? But maybe not. What if God tells you, "Don't cheat on tests?" Wait a minute. God has told you, "Don't cheat on tests." And you come up to a test and your friend who is really smart has their paper right there, and you can look over and read on that test all the right answers, and you don't know the right answers. Well, if you don't look, are you going to automatically get the right answers? I don't think so. Sometimes doing good things is hard, but there are always consequences one way or the other.

So Jonah runs away from God. God sends a storm, and then Jonah starts to experience the consequences of what he has done. In verse 12 the sailors are panicked, and they are saying, "What can we do to stop the storm?" And Jonah says, "Throw me into the sea, and it will become calm. This terrible storm is all my fault." Now the Lord had arranged for a great fish to swallow Jonah for three days and nights. And it swallowed him, and from inside the fish, Jonah prayed to God. "As my life was slipping away, I remembered the Lord. **My salvation comes from God alone.**" That's the second lesson.

Let me ask you a question. Did God send the fish to punish Jonah or to rescue Jonah? To rescue him. That's right. God sent the fish and—think about this. Did God know that Jonah was going to disobey? He must have. Because He sent a fish from the opposite direction so that the fish would be right there at exactly the right time to swallow Jonah and to keep him safe. The second lesson I get from the Book of Jonah is that when we confess that we've messed up, God rescues us. Jonah learns, "My salvation comes from God alone."

Okay. Are you ready now for the third lesson? It's in the next chapter. Verse 1 says, "Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time." This time Jonah obeyed. Okay? It's never too late to start obeying God. One of the things I love about God is He is a God of second chances. And third chances. And fourth chances. So if you messed up last week and you say, "I'm sorry," you can follow God again today whether you're a second grader or an eighth grader or an eighty-eighth grader. God is a God of second chances.

So I guess I'd ask you, what is God telling you to do today? Where is God calling you to go? Probably not to Nineveh. Not to Baghdad. But **God is almost always calling us to love someone.** God is almost always bringing somebody to our minds or in front of our lives whom He wants us to love. Who is God calling you to love today? Who really needs your love? The people of Nineveh were far from God, and they needed to be loved by God. The God of second chances is giving you a chance tonight. Okay. That's the third lesson.

The fourth one comes out of the last chapter. Jonah 4, verse 1. God gives Nineveh a second chance. The God of second chances gives Jonah a second chance, and he obeys Him. Now the God of Nineveh wants to give Nineveh a second chance like Jonah, and they said, "Yes." They said, "We're sorry. We didn't know that You were God. Now that we know that You are God, we'll obey you." And did that make Jonah happy? No. Jonah is actually mad that these people aren't going to get destroyed because he doesn't like them. It says, "This change of plan greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry so he complained to the Lord about it. Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? This is why I didn't want to go to Nineveh."

Do you know what that means? We don't learn about that until chapter 4 that God and Jonah were having a long conversation. Apparently Jonah had known he was supposed to go to

Nineveh, and he had said, "I don't want to go. If I go, I know you. You'll forgive them, won't You? I don't want that. I want You to destroy them. They are hurting me. Destroy them." So Jonah complained to the Lord. "That's why I ran away. I know that You are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager, God, to turn people back from being destroyed."

Doesn't that sound like the kind of God you want? But Jonah is mad because he wants God to love him, and he is not crazy about God loving the jerks. He wants God to hurt the jerks. The story of Jonah is, God doesn't want to hurt jerks. God wants to rescue them. "Just kill me now, Lord. I'd rather die if what I wanted to have happen won't happen." He sounds like a crybaby not getting his way, doesn't he?

God's response is, "Shouldn't I feel sorry for the 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness?" That's the last lesson. **God loves other people as much as God loves us.** God wants to give other people a second chance as much as God wants to give us a second chance, and God wants to use you to give somebody else a chance.

The story of Jonah is a story for all of us. You know, there are only two books in the Bible, out of 66 Books in the Bible, there are only two books that end with a question. The Book of Nahum and the Book of Jonah. They are both prophets, and both of them talk about the city of Nineveh. The Book of Nahum ends with a question. It says, "Where can anyone be found (except Nineveh) who has not suffered from your cruelty?" Apparently the Ninevites hurt people all the time, but Jonah ends by talking about the mercy of God. "Shouldn't I show compassion on all these people?"

The Book of Jonah shows that God always gets the last word, and the last word wants to be good. The Book of Jonah ends with a question because God is still asking that question of you. God not only loves you, but he wants to rescue you. Remember God sent the whale? God not only wants to rescue you, he has something for you to do. He has someone for you to rescue, to love, and often, Jonah reminds me that I don't want to do it. Jonah's story reminds me that I know that God wants me to love other people and talk to them about God's love, but I don't want to share God's love as much as God wants me to share it. It's very important to God, but it's very hard.

I think often we don't share God's great good news because we have the wrong message to share. Either we are like Jonah—I mean, let's face it; Jonah's message was not really fun, was it? Jonah's idea of telling people about God—God hates you, and He is going to destroy you in 40 days. Is that the way people need to hear about God? No. God hates you and is going to destroy you in 40 days. That's not the message that I believe God wants us to send. He wants us to tell people that there is right and wrong, and we need to turn to God and to the love and mercy of God. Some of us don't do it because we don't want to sound angry so instead of telling people about God, we love them, and we're nice to them, and we have great friends and good relationships. We serve them. We really need people, but we never tell people about God.

I think that we need to do both. We need to love people and serve them and show them that God is doing something different in our lives, and then we need to answer their questions about God or about why we are acting the way that we are. Jonah and you and I are sent out into the world to help people, and what we're sent to help people with is to help them choose sides. That's really what God is sending you out to do. He's asking you to love people and to help them to choose the right side.

Can I show you a picture of somebody? Those of you who are second graders probably don't know this man. Do you see the man in the white robe on the right side? He's an archbishop. His name is Tutu. Desmond Tutu. The short little guy there. And he's walking hand in hand with the man in the fancy suit. The man in the fancy suit has been in jail for 27 years, longer than you have been alive. He was in jail because he wanted to free his people, and they put him in prison. This is the day that the jailers let him out of jail, and they are walking away from the prison, and they are going to a church because the government is afraid of this man in the middle, and they want to re-arrest him if he does anything wrong. So instead of going to the local stadium and having a big protest rally, they said, "It can't get us in trouble if we go to church."

So the very first night that Nelson Mandela was out of prison, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, there in the white, takes him by the hand and walks him in the church. And do you know what happened? The army walks right behind him and surrounds the church. The church is packed with people celebrating that Nelson Mandela is out of jail, and just outside is the army unsure of what is going to happen next.

So little Desmond Tutu, do you know what he does? Just when the church service is about to start, he walks back outside all by himself, and he turns to the guards who are holding their guns, and he says, "Come on in. Come on inside. You can keep your guns if you need to, but come on in," and then the next thing, this little man does—he starts to dance. "Come on in. You're on the wrong side of this. You're on the wrong side of this. Come on in. Come to the winning side." This little man—and all these people had guns—he invites them, "Come on in. I don't hate you. Come to the winning side." Do you know that the unbelievable thing is? About half of the soldiers came inside. And the whole country was different because of that. God is asking you to go and love people and ask them to come to God's side. Not that you're bad people. But God loves you. Come on to the winning side.

The next time you read the Book of Jonah, and I hope it's this weekend, I hope that you will read again about the great whale and about the plant that Jonah had and loved, and you will understand what it means when God calls you to ask somebody to come to the winning side. Will you pray with me.

Lord Jesus, I thank you very, very, very much for these second graders. They have just heard their first sermon with their Bibles on their laps, and I pray that it made some sense to them, and I pray, God, that it filled them with some questions, some questions that they can ask their moms and dads, their grandmas and their grandpas. About Jonah and You, You who rescue us when we fall into the ocean, You who come after us when we run away, You who teach us how to love people who are far from You. Lord God, bring me onto the winning side and love me so that I can show others Your love. In Your Name, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*