

“By describing the Old Testament context behind the text of Jonah and then applying the same text to our contemporary world, Bishop Solomon has brought this ancient biblical book alive and real to our experience. In the process, he brings out the rich teaching about the nature and ways of God found in Jonah. Tough questions about God arising from this book, like, ‘Can God change His mind?’, are sensitively and accessibly handled.”

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Teaching Director,  
Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka

“The story of Jonah is often considered an entertaining tale, but it is also a sobering story. For Jonah’s legacy is much more than the proclamation of God’s message to a wicked nation like Nineveh. The book of Jonah points to a deeper issue, as Dr. Solomon points out, that God’s mission field is not only the unevangelised, but also our own hearts—where we may harbour an unwilling spirit or a half-hearted commitment. Dr. Solomon combines meticulous scholarship and a call to discipleship as he expounds on the book of Jonah. *God in Pursuit: Lessons from the Book of Jonah* is written with the skill of a scholar and the heart of a pastor. It will inspire young and old alike as well as challenge those who may be running away from the will of God!”

**Dr. Patrick Fung**

General Director, OMF International

“As one who has learned to read Robert Solomon’s periodic published Bible reading notes with high expectation, I am thrilled to see *God in Pursuit: Lessons from the Book of Jonah*. Here is the same thorough preparation, the consideration of Old Testament themes with New Testament eyes, and the same careful life-application I have learned to value so highly.”

**Dr. Kenneth J. Stewart**

Professor of Theological Studies, Covenant College,  
Lookout Mountain, Georgia, USA

“In this lively modern commentary, *God in Pursuit: Lessons from the Book of Jonah*, the author reflects on the surprising events of the book of Jonah: how the reluctant prophet who endures storm, shipwreck, and the deep turns into the petulant missionary who struggles to accept the consequences of his vocation. Deftly using Scripture, more recent Christian poetry and relevant Christian biography, he shows how the prophet’s life—from the darkest depths of human existence to moments of comic irony—can still speak to us today with a surprising note of challenge. A book to stimulate our imaginations and to probe our hearts.”

**Rev. Dr. Warren R. Beattie**

MA Programme Leader and Tutor in Mission Studies,  
All Nations Christian College, UK

“Bishop Solomon’s exposition goes to the heart of the story and is not bogged down by issues like, ‘Was the fish a whale?’ Each chapter begins with an exposition (what it meant to the first Jewish hearers) and concludes with an application and reflection section (what it means to Christians today). The author shows that the book is centred on God. As we begin to comprehend the nature of this compassionate God, we understand our mission to this world. Instead of running away from our divine calling, we choose to engage in it, no matter whether the work is hard or easy. A valuable book for all Christians to read.”

**Rev. Dr. Anthony Y. F. Loke**

Old Testament scholar, preacher and writer, Malaysia

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# God in Pursuit

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Lessons from the  
Book of Jonah



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# Preface

Like the stories of Noah and the Ark, David and Goliath, the story of Jonah and the Whale is often taught in Sunday school, delighting children with its fascinating account of a prophet being swallowed whole by a big fish, to be spat out three days later, still alive. The problem with teaching such stories in Sunday school is that for many, they will be remembered only as fantastic tales; when the children grow up, some may question these accounts or dismiss them as fables.

Many get hung up on the incredible idea of a whale (or more accurately, a huge fish) swallowing a man, who is then able to survive in its belly for three days. It seems impossible, but they forget that God is a God of miracles: the same God who raised Jesus from the dead (Ephesians 1:20) is more than capable of rescuing Jonah from the belly of a fish.

It is significant that Jesus himself referred to the story of Jonah and compared Jonah's experience of being in the fish's belly to His own experience of being "in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40). In referring to Jonah's ordeal as a fact, Jesus was affirming the historicity of the book of Jonah. It is also significant that Jesus used Jonah's story to point to His own impending death, burial, and resurrection. If we take Jesus' word seriously, then we must

also take the book of Jonah seriously. In a commentary on Jonah, Bible scholar Homer Hailey notes, “Denial of the historical fact of Jonah’s experience becomes a forerunner of the denial of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.”<sup>1</sup>

Besides pointing to Jesus and His work as our Saviour, the story of Jonah also illustrates the mission of God. It shows a God who is actively working in our world and in our hearts as He seeks to win us for himself, and who will go to great lengths to achieve His eternal purposes. There are twists in the story of Jonah, one of which is the conversion of the pagan sailors and the people of the city of Nineveh. Jesus observed that the men of Nineveh who repented at the preaching of Jonah would participate at the judgment of the generation to which He preached (Matthew 12:41). As radical as the book of Jonah must have seemed to its first Jewish readers in its implications, it remains so to Christians today.

The story of Jonah is as simple as it is incredible:

God commands the prophet Jonah to go to the Assyrian city of Nineveh to preach against it. But Jonah runs away, only to run headlong into a storm and end up in the belly of a large fish. God rescues him and gives him a second chance. This time Jonah obeys, the city repents, and God spares it from divine judgment. Jonah, however, gets angry with God for treating Assyria—Israel’s enemy—mercifully. The story ends with God asking the question, “Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?” (Jonah 4:11).

This question challenged Jonah, and continues to challenge us today. It demands a response from us—one which can change us

and align our lives to the purposes of God. For the story of Jonah is really a story about God—about who He is, how He loves us, and what He expects of us.

Theologian Sinclair B. Ferguson notes in *Man Overboard! The Story of Jonah* that the book of Jonah is really about “how one man came, through painful experience, to discover the true character of the God whom he had already served in the earlier years of his life. He was to find the doctrine about God (with which he had long been familiar) come alive in his experience”.<sup>2</sup>

As we read deeper into the book of Jonah, we will come to see that it speaks of two mission fields: the world around us, and our own hearts. It will remind us that God is a missionary God who is in pursuit of the Nineveh world and His Jonah servants. It will challenge our understanding of God, of spiritual life, and of our mission on earth.

**Robert M. Solomon**

Pentecost 2016



## Jonah 1:1–17

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# 1

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## God Calls

If you were asked to describe a prophet, how would you begin? Would you model your description after prominent Old Testament prophets like Moses and Elijah? Or would you base it on John the Baptist, with his rough attire and diet, preaching a message that cut to the heart (Matthew 3:4–10)? What all these prophets had in common was that whether they were speaking to common folk or elite rulers, they spoke the truth courageously and faithfully, with a fearlessness that came from their fear of

God. They were messengers from God (Mark 1:2)—sent by God bearing His message.

Throughout the history of Israel, God chose specific individuals to be His prophets. They came from a variety of backgrounds and possessed a range of qualities. Some, like Elijah and Elisha, were formidable characters who performed miracles and bore an aura that commanded fear and respect. Some, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, came from priestly backgrounds. Others, like the shepherd Amos, came from simpler backgrounds. All, however, had this in common: God spoke to them and gave them messages to convey to the people.

We often think of prophets as people who predicted the future. That was true, as their messages had elements of things to come, both imminent and in the distant future. But their messages were not all about the future. Often, they spoke against the sins of the people, their idolatry, and their social ills.

The story of Jonah begins with a simple statement: “The word of the LORD came to Jonah” (Jonah 1:1). This shows that it was God who took the initiative—just as Jesus reminded us, “You did not choose me, but *I chose you* and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit” (John 15:16, emphasis added). God’s calling always begins with Him taking the first step in calling us and choosing us.

Not only did Jonah experience the divine calling to be a prophet, but he also received a specific command: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me” (Jonah 1:2). Here we can see the two key



characteristics of a true prophet of God: the coming of God’s word to the man, and his being sent by God. It is a combination of God’s word and God’s will.

But what do we know about Jonah?

## **Jonah the Dove**

The name Jonah means “dove” in Hebrew. An Israelite may have found this significant, as they would have remembered the important role that a dove played in the great Flood (Genesis 9:8–12). Noah sent a dove out periodically to check on the situation after the rain, and when it eventually did not return he knew it was safe to leave the ark. The dove acted like a thermometer—it assisted in discerning what was going on. Doves are also mentioned several times in the Old Testament. For Christians today, the dove is a representation of the Holy Spirit, who descended on Christ at His baptism “like a dove” (Matthew 3:16). For this reason, the bird features in many Christian emblems.

We are also told that Jonah was the “son of Amittai” (Jonah 1:1). In Hebrew, his father’s name means “faithfulness”.

Jonah’s name and pedigree thus held great promise for his ministry: As “the son of faithfulness”, he could have had a powerful ministry of presenting the truth “as it is”, of giving an accurate picture of reality.

But the Bible also tells us of another side to being like a dove. Israel (Ephraim) is described as “like a dove, easily deceived and senseless” (Hosea 7:11). As the story of Jonah unfolds, it reveals a

picture of Jonah as both kinds of dove—one that was sent by God to tell the truth, and one that was full of faults and foolishness. In a way, Jonah was like the nation of Israel. Israel was supposed to have reached out to the nations of the world to spread the truth about God and to be a blessing to them (Genesis 12:2), but she stayed at home instead. Jonah, too, was sent to the Assyrians, but he chose to run away.

Not much is said, however, about what Jonah did before or after the events recorded in the book of Jonah. The only other Old Testament passage that refers to him is 2 Kings 14:25:

He [King Jeroboam II] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, 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.

We know that it is the same Jonah because he is identified as the son of Amittai. His address, Gath Hepher, was a small town in what is today the region of Galilee. Gath Hepher, meaning “wine press of digging”, was located about 5 km northeast of Nazareth. In Joshua 19:10–13, it is described as a town on the border of Zebulun and Naphtali that belonged to the tribe of Zebulun. Today, it is identified by some with the modern town of Khirbet ez-Zurra. Nearby lies the village of el-Meshhed, the site where Jonah (Nebi Yunas) is traditionally said to have been buried. This site was mentioned by fourth-century theologian and historian St. Jerome in his *Commentary on Jonah*. He identified it as Gath Hepher and, according to local tradition, is

said to have visited Jonah's tomb.<sup>3</sup> Jerome refers to Gath Hopher as "an inconsiderable village", which if true would make Jonah something of a country boy.

Medieval Jewish geographer Benjamin of Tudela also gives many details about the area in his book, *The Travels of Benjamin*. He too noted that Jonah's tomb was located in the area near Nazareth.<sup>4</sup> Some traditions, however, place Jonah's tomb at another site—in the town of Nebi Yunus (Prophet Jonah) near Mosul in modern-day Iraq. Mosul lies near the ancient site of Nineveh.

While we don't know whether the incident described in 2 Kings 14:25 took place before or after Jonah was sent to Nineveh, what is clear is that Jonah was a true prophet, because God's word had come to him, and he had delivered God's message to Israel obediently.

This incident happened during the reign of King Jeroboam II of the northern kingdom of Israel (793–753 BC). After King Solomon died, the kingdom of Israel split into two: the southern kingdom of Judah, where the royal line of David continued; and the northern kingdom of Israel, where various non-Davidic royal houses were established.

These were spiritually terrible days for the northern kingdom. The nation had sunk to a new low in apostasy. The rebellious Jeroboam son of Nebat had not only established a rival breakaway kingdom in the north, but also set up rival worship sites in Dan and Bethel. He feared that his people would go to the temple in Jerusalem, which was in Judah, to offer sacrifices, and eventually return their allegiance to the southern kingdom, so he sought to give them alternative gods to worship (1 Kings 12:26–30). But

this broke God's commandments and inevitably led to a sordid history of blatant idolatry. Israel would eventually have a line of 19 kings, none of whom was good.

Jeroboam II, son of Jehoash, continued this reputation. "He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit" (2 Kings 14:24). Jeroboam II reigned for 41 years, a relatively long reign for a king who did evil. He continued to support the cultic and false worship of God in Dan and Bethel, which used the golden calf as the object of worship (1 Kings 12:28)—an abomination in God's eyes. He also tolerated and condoned the mistreatment of the poor, as well as all kinds of social sins and injustices.

Throughout this time, God sent many prophets to cry out against Israel's idolatry and injustices and turn the nation back to Him, but their message was constantly rejected. Amos thundered the message of approaching punishment, saying, "I will not relent" (Amos 2:6), while Hosea was told to marry a wayward woman and take her back repeatedly, to show how God was willing to forgive and restore Israel if she repented and returned to Him.

Given these circumstances, the assignment that God gave Jonah was an unusual one: he was sent to prophesy national expansion and economic prosperity for Israel.

## Jonah’s “Difficult” Message for Israel

It was a difficult time to be a faithful prophet of God, delivering messages to a wicked king and nation. Imagine having to prophesy to disobedient people. A prophet was likely to be dismissed as crazy or ignored altogether. Worse, he could be attacked if he persisted in preaching hard truths. Amos was vehemently opposed and warned by Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, to stop prophesying because “The land cannot bear all his words” (Amos 7:10). Years later, Jeremiah would be rejected, mocked, and thrown into a deep pit to die.

Jonah, however, would probably have had a relatively easier time. After all, his message for Israel spoke of military and political expansion. This was exactly what happened: Jeroboam II was able to recapture lost territories and restore the nation’s former boundaries. He was victorious against the Syrians, capturing their city of Damascus (2 Kings 14:28) after they were weakened by the rising power of Assyria in the late 9th century BC. This had also been prophesied by Elisha (2 Kings 13:14–19). The successes would make Israel so proud of her newfound power that she would start to believe that she was favoured by God. They would assume—wrongly—that their prosperity was a sign of God’s favour on them, prompting Him to warn them, through Amos, of their presumptuous complacency and impending judgment (Amos 6:1–7).

Jonah’s prophecy must have fallen sweetly on the ears of his hearers. After all, people like to hear good news. Anyone who prophesies that things would get better and that “all will be

well” is likely to receive a warm welcome; a preacher with such a message is a lot more likely to be appreciated than one bearing a hard-hitting message calling for repentance. He might even be greeted with enthusiastic applause—instead of a violent crowd waiting to stone him.

But how did Jonah feel about delivering his prophecy to an evil nation?

Imagine having to convey news of continued prosperity to a businessman who has made a fortune from cheating people. A godly man might find that difficult. Jonah too must have found it unpalatable to bring good news of national expansion to a wicked king and a people who were straying from God.

Worse still was the reputation that Jonah risked acquiring—something dreaded by any true prophet of God—that of being a false prophet.

## **Israel’s False Prophets**

For a prophet to exercise his ministry, the word of the Lord has to come to him. But what if a man claimed to be a prophet even though he had not received the word of God? He would then be a false prophet—and there were many such men in Israel.

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God expressed His displeasure regarding false prophets, not only because they dealt in falsehood, but also because they caused serious spiritual damage to those who bought their lies:

“I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say, ‘I had a dream! I had a dream!’ How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their ancestors forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?” declares the LORD. “Is not my word like fire,” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” (Jeremiah 23:25–29).

God compared a prophet who relied on his own dreams (which could easily have been caused by the previous night’s dinner!) with a true prophet who conveyed His solid, reliable word. One was like straw, which could not satisfy human hunger; the other was like grain, which would sustain life and provide strength.

Not only did false prophets rely on self-concocted dreams, but they also plagiarised each other’s messages. “I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me,” God said in Jeremiah 23:30. A man surrounded by false prophets would find himself in an echo chamber of falsehood, in which lies would ricochet from one false prophet to another.

It has been observed that if a lie is repeated enough times, it will eventually be mistaken for the truth. We can thus understand why God was so deeply against false prophets. Their messages were lies, they were not sent by God, and they did terrible damage. He

said that they “lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them” (Jeremiah 23:32).

False prophets also learned to milk the crowd with nice-sounding words. They were experts in bringing soothing messages such as “You will have peace” or “No harm will come to you”—even when the people were in fact facing impending judgment (Jeremiah 23:16–18). They gave in to the temptation to sweeten the hard message.

Since Jonah’s message was relatively easy to hear, we may be led to ask: was Jonah himself a false prophet?

## Discerning a True Prophet

Under the Mosaic Law of God, there were two tests to check if a prophet was a true messenger of God. First, if he had prophesied that something would happen, what he said must take place:

You may say to yourselves, “How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?” If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously, so do not be alarmed (Deuteronomy 18:21–22).

Second, a true prophet would always point people to God, and nothing or no one else:

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a sign or wonder, and if the sign



or wonder spoken of takes place, and the prophet says, “Let us follow other gods” (gods you have not known) “and let us worship them,” you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer (Deuteronomy 13:1–3).

An accurate prediction must also be accompanied by godliness. A man who claims to be a prophet must be assessed not only on the accuracy of his message, but also the testimony of his lifestyle. Jesus, in warning His listeners against false prophets, described how difficult it was to spot them if one focused only on outward actions. One had to look deeper to discern whether a prophet was true or not. He said, “They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:15–16).

We can thus discern a true prophet by examining his message as well as his character: both his actions and his attitude should be the subject of our scrutiny. It is possible to show outwardly pious actions, while being inwardly far from God.

Jonah certainly passed the first two tests. What he prophesied did occur: Israel restored her lost borders “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” (2 Kings 14:25). And when he preached to Nineveh later, its people would repent and turn to Yahweh, and not to other gods.

But what was Jonah’s character like? Jonah was not an idolater, nor did he tempt others to practise idolatry. While he had serious shortcomings—as further testing would reveal—we will see that

he still demonstrated a heart of repentance and obedience. More importantly, Jonah showed obedience in delivering the good news to Jeroboam II, even though this may have made him sound like a false prophet seeking to flatter his audience. Was this because he understood the heart of God?

## **Justice and Grace: Jonah Understands**

Why did God send a sweetened message through Jonah? Why did He bless Israel with expansion and prosperity, even though she had turned away from Him? The Bible gives some helpful background information:

The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash (2 Kings 14:26–27).

God ruled His people with both justice and compassion. He poured out His wrath upon them for stubbornly rejecting His love and laws, but He also lamented, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?” (Hosea 11:8). As the apostle Paul reminds us, God is both stern and kind (Romans 11:22). He is both a God of justice and a God of grace, remembering mercy in His wrath (Habakkuk 3:2).

Perhaps that is why Jonah, a godly prophet, brought God’s message of good news to Jeroboam II, even though he might have cringed at the idea. Only an unquestioning trust in God’s sovereignty,

justice, and wisdom would enable a true prophet to deliver such a message.

It is also possible that, like other prophets, Jonah had prophesied a longer message for Israel, but this has not been recorded. The prophet Joel, for example, strongly condemned the sins of the people of Judah and urged them to repent, but also brought comforting words—that God would drive out their invaders, give them new oil and wine, and restore what they had lost during the years of famine and war (Joel 2:18–27). If the book of Joel had recorded only the second part of the prophet’s message, we would think that Joel only had good, comforting words for the people, when in truth he also had harsh, disturbing things to say.

Perhaps Jonah’s prediction of the restoration of Israel’s borders also formed a part of a longer message that included harsh statements, but his listeners chose to focus on the pleasant parts. If this were indeed the case, Jonah’s credentials as a true prophet would have been even stronger, for he would have demonstrated willingness to deliver both judgment and blessings without flinching.

## **Are You God’s Messenger?**

Whether the message is stern or kind, the important thing is that the messenger must remain true to God. He must deliver the message faithfully, no matter how unwelcome, and he must deliver it with a heart that is faithful to God and reflects His holiness. A preacher, for example, has to remind himself not to let his sermons degenerate from spiritual messages into spiritual massages. He must resist the temptation to please his listeners by

giving feel-happy messages that are easy on the ears. And he must remember that God is both stern and kind.

Perhaps God is sending you to a loved one, relative, friend, colleague, or fellow church member with a message from Him today. It might even be a difficult message. How are you delivering it? Are you procrastinating, or even outright ignoring God's task for you? And what can you tell others that will lead them to walk closer with God today?

## Reflect

- How does the word of the Lord come to a person, and how does He send someone? Reflect on your own experience receiving and responding to His word. Where might we go wrong in this process?
- Reflect on the characteristics of a true prophet as spelt out in the Bible. Was Jonah a true prophet? How can you tell a true prophet from a false one? How might a person be mistaken in what God has told him, or in being sent by God at all? How can you tell?
- Reflect on your experience of hearing the word of God.
- When and how did it come to you? How and to whom did God send you? What are you doing about it? How do you deliver good or bad news? What can we learn from the prophets in the Bible?