

The story of Jonah being swallowed up by a great fish is no fairy tale (神话). Jonah was a real man, who lived in history, as real as you or me, or the person sitting next to you. He sat in the pew of the synagogues (犹太会所) too, and he preached from the pulpit. He was Jonah, the son of Amittai. (In those days, people didn't have last names, but people who had the same names were distinguished by who they were a son of). Jonah is also spoken of by the Jesus, as if he had really lived, and Jesus treats what happened to Jonah not as fiction but as fact!

In *Matthew 1* we read: 38 Then some of the scribes (文士) and Pharisees (法利赛人) answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." ³⁹ *But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. ⁴¹ "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.*

If the story of Jonah and his being of a great fish is not historical fact, there is no reason to believe that Jesus and his being in the tomb is historical fact. If Jonah's was not spit out of the belly of the whale then there is no reason to believe that Jesus arose from the grave either since God's word links these two events as facts.

So we do firmly believe this is a book of real things that happened, and Jonah was a real person, a true prophet of God, the son of Amittai! In fact the second book of Kings, tells us the historical time in which Jonah lived and preached. In chapter 14: 25 we read that under the kingship of Jeroboam the son of Joash God *2 Kings 14:25 ... restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hopher.*

This tells us that Jonah preached in Israel in the days of some military victories for Israel against the Assyrian enemy. Why did God give these victories to Israel. Not because Jeroboam was so good. In fact we read in *2 Kings 14:24 And he did evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin.*

The reason is given in *2 Kings 14:26 For the LORD saw that the affliction (苦难) of Israel was very bitter; and whether bond or free, there was no helper for Israel. ²⁷ And the LORD did not say that He would blot out (除灭) the name of Israel from under heaven; but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.*

The LORD came to Jonah with a special call. It wasn't a "*please do this if you feel like doing it*" kind of call. It wasn't "*a please do me a big favor Jonah*", kind of call! When your parents call you to the supper table, they are not saying, please come if and when you feel like coming. No their call has authority which you are called to obey. So if God calls you, it is not something you can just ignore, or say "*Thanks God, but no thanks!*" When God calls Jonah saying, *Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me!* God call is a command!

To Nineveh! A real place! A real city. It was the capital of the Assyrians, who were real people! And, as Jonah would have agreed, "a people with real wickedness". In fact theirs was a wickedness beyond norm of wickedness! Read the prophet Nahum and you will have no doubt about their wickedness. Today in the ruins of palace of Sennacherib, king of Nineveh, in what archeologists (考古学家) have name 'room 33' you will find carved reliefs of the Ninevites skinning (剥皮) some of their captives alive!

They were a naturally wicked nation. Yet the Lord in His mercy, is going to send a prophet to their city, to preach a message of judgment unless they repented!

But Jonah was an unwilling prophet. Why? It was because the Ninevites were a hated enemy of the Jews. Their prosperity (繁荣) had been at the expense of Israel. Jonah was truly afraid that because God was "a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of abundant in loving-kindness", that He might relent (怜悯) from judgment and forgive the Ninevites if they repented! This goes way too much against Jonah's grain. Jonah believed that since Israel was God's only chosen covenant (圣约) people, no one else could be worthy of God's mercy. Jonah was totally forgetting that He and his fellow Israelites were just as unworthy. So in his pride Jonah decides this time he's not going to let God tell him what to do.

He decides to run away from God! He will go somewhere where God will leave him alone. Jonah rose up, but not to go to Nineveh! He rose up to run to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. We don't know exactly where Tarshish was, but we do know that it was rich! Isaiah 2:16 ties together the ships of Tarshish with pleasant pictures or places. The Bible tells us that the ships of Solomon made trips every three years there for gold, silver, ivory, and exotic animals.

Jonah, rather than listen to God's call to do what he thought would be unpleasant, decides to board a ship bound for a rich, and pleasant country, where he thinks God will leave him alone to enjoy himself. Kind of like choosing to go to the beaches of Hawaii, instead of on a mission trip to the impoverished (贫穷的) cities of Haiti.

Don't get me wrong! There was nothing wrong in itself with going to Tarshish! The ships of Solomon and Jehoshaphat did it many times and they did not encounter terrible storms. The ship that Jonah was on did meet with such a storm, but it was because one man on it was disobeying his calling to do what God had called him to do.

You and I can also be very tempted to run away from the tough things that God calls us to do. Like standing up for what we believe! Like fighting for mercy and justice in a dark world! Like deepening our understanding of God's Will and Word and working hard to teach these things to our children! We so easily divert (偏离) our attention from these kinds of callings from God. Instead we let ourselves get totally caught up in the pursuits of wealth and all kinds of pleasurable experiences.

But will God let Christians get away with avoiding their spiritual calling? Did God let Jonah get away with it? No, for God did not let Jonah get away from Him! Jonah, because He is a child of God could not escape the watchful eye, and the loving, disciplining hand of our Father in heaven.

Jonah found out the truth of what David confessed in Psalm 139, *Psalm 139:7 Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? ⁸ If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there."*

Even when Jonah tried to take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Lord's hand will lead him, and His right hand held him!"

And how does he sometimes lead us, hold us and even stop us in our tracks if we are going the wrong way? He does it by bringing a storm of trouble! Jonah 1:4 But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest (暴风雨) on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up. This wind did not just arise because of natural cause and effect. It arose because God sent it. God wasn't just lucky that a storm came along to fit into His purposes, God created the storm!

Proverbs 30:4 Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name, and what is His Son's name, If you know? The answer is.... His name is the LORD, His Son's name is Jesus!

The ship was ready to break, the timbers (木板) were cracking and splitting, wind and sheets of rain lashed the men. And these rough and tough, sea-hardened mariners (水手), these men who prided themselves on their courage and strength, who figured they had seen it all, were panic stricken! They knew that they needed a Power greater than their own. *So they cried out, every man to his god!*

When man stands face to face with the ugly jaws of death, then suddenly all the things that were once so important become useless to them. He realizes the truth of Mark 8:36, *What does it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?*

The sailors throw all their cargo into the sea, to lighten the ship and to try to save their lives. They know they are looking death in the face. And a spiritual awareness awakens in them, roused from it's deep slumber (沉睡) by the monster of the storm.

But what about Jonah? Where is he in all of this? *"But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship; had lain down and was fast asleep!"* Was this the sleep of calm confidence in God? Was it because of a peace like the peace of Jesus who also slept in the storm.

Certainly not! Jonah is possessed by a false peace born of spiritual rebellion! Rebellion can cause a temporary spiritual insensitivity (麻木 , 无感觉) that is even worse than that of an unbeliever. It puts a person into a kind of stupor (恍惚 , 昏迷), where what is obviously wrong seems not so bad!

If God did not watch over us in these times of our running away, we would perish. God sure was watching over Jonah. Yet that awareness must never make us treat sin lightly. If you and I let ourselves run away from God's will, God sends storms and suffering that can be very intense and painful!

God sends the captain down to Jonah. God uses this heathen (异教徒) captain to shame Jonah, *Jonah 1:6 So the captain came to him, and said to him, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish."*

They decide that they will cast lots to find out for whose cause this evil has come upon them. These sailors sense that someone must have done something exceptionally evil, and they need to find out who it is. The truth of the matter was they were all sinners and they all deserved to die. But Jonah was running away from God in a way none of these other men were. So God reveals His displeasure through the casting of lots (抓阄) which falls on Jonah.

And it's at that moment that Jonah is finally brought to realize how ridiculously foolish he was to think he could outrun God! He tells them who he is, and who his God is: *Jonah 1:9 So he said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*

They were exceedingly afraid! They were not afraid of Jonah, but of Jonah's God because Jonah confessed that he was a prophet who was running away from God.

They ask him what they can do to appease the anger of God? Jonah tells them that if they throw him overboard, the storm will stop, the sea will be calm, and they will be saved! By his sinful actions Jonah was guilty of putting the life of these sailors in jeopardy (危险) and the only solution was to throw him overboard. As a prophet he knows that with certainty!

What is amazing though, is that the men don't throw him overboard right away. They are reluctant to send a man they believe to be a prophet of God to certain death. Perhaps they believed that since he had confessed his wrong and shown some remorse (懊悔), that God might pardon him.

Whatever the reason they decide to continue to try to ride out the storm and make it to land! They wanted to do everything they could to spare this man's life! Ironical isn't it? Jonah had not given a hoot (给予关注) about whether the lives of the heathen Ninevites were spared, and yet here these heathen men, are showing compassion and mercy to him and trying to save him. This is undoubtedly God's way of giving Jonah something to help him rethink his ways.

Isn't it amazing how God in the middle of all of Jonah's sin, still bring glory to His own name, and saves lives? For when the storm did not abate and they realized, there was no other way, the sailors did throw Jonah overboard. *Jonah 1:14 Therefore they cried out to the LORD and said, "We pray, O LORD, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O LORD, have done as it pleased You."* Notice how they pleaded for God's mercy!

Jonah 1:15 So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

Jonah 1:16 Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows. God was truly honored by the believing response of these heathen men. You and I know this is not the end of the story. We have heard that 1) God's calling are not to be disobeyed. We've heard that 2) God is someone we cannot outrun or escape from! And we've heard that 3) By punishing the guilty One, namely Jonah, the sailors are saved!

You can start to see the outline of a much greater Story! ...of another Prophet, who also became the Guilty One. Not because He rebelled the way Jonah did. But because He took the guilt (罪责) of His people's rebellion on Himself. For this reason He would be cast into the depths of a sea far more turbulent (动荡的) than Jonah did. Jesus was cast into the sea of God's wrath against your sin and mine. Jesus was cast into that sea so that like the sailors... we could be saved from the storm that would otherwise have swallowed us up! For that reason " *as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so would the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*" (Matthew 12:40) Jonah's being cast into the sea, was used to bring the sailors and the whole city of Nineveh to "fear the LORD exceedingly". Remember that we have a far greater reason to fear God exceedingly than these sailors and the Ninevites did. Jesus Christ descended into hell, as the Guilty One so that the sea and storm of God's anger against us would be stilled! But unlike Jonah, He was the guilty One because in love He took on the guilt of your sin in order to save your souls! Amen!