

## **Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 15 February 2021 Today's topic: God Came Anyway**

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: Jonah 1:1 (NIV).*

Jesus quoted fourteen of the thirty-nine books that comprise the Old Testament. He knew them all; He inspired them all. And, as a young man, He would have been taught them in the synagogue. In the New Testament books that contain Jesus' quotes, however, He directly quoted verses from fourteen of them.

One of those books was Jonah, the one we're in now. A fifty-thousand-foot overview of Jonah's story is that God tells Jonah to go to the wicked city of Ninevah to preach His Word to them. Jonah gets scared and runs away, so God has a big fish scoop him out of the sea, and Jonah spends 3 days inside the fish. There, Jonah prayed earnestly for mercy, so God had the fish spit him out onto dry land. Jonah then goes to Ninevah and obeys God. Surprisingly, the Ninevites take the message to heart and repent, which makes Jonah angry. As the book ends, God reminds Jonah that it is His place to show mercy.

Jesus quoted Jonah twice in the New Testament. Most likely, it was the same conversation, recorded differently because the approach taken in both citations is different. Both talk about 'the sign of Jonah,' pointing to the three days it would take for God to deliver His people from sin. Yet one (Matthew) talks about both Jonah being in the belly of a fish for three days as well as the witness of the Ninevites, while the other (Luke) talks only about the Ninevites' witness.

Yet the most amazing part of the whole miraculous story is contained in the very first words: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah." The word of God came to Jonah. The word of God – the most powerful force in the universe – came to a lowly man who God knew would be frightened, intimidated, repentant, and angry. And God came anyway.

Our world isn't so different from Jonah's; our hometowns could be thought of as little Ninevahs. We know wickedness; we are rebellious. We sin against God in what we think, say, and do. We ignore God's commands; we ignore Him; we run away. I'm the worst sinner I know; how about you? You and me: we're Jonah. We're the sinners of Ninevah. We deserve to be wiped out...and God comes to us anyway. God sent Jonah to Ninevah. God sent Jesus to us. The same Jesus who recounted Jonah's story told His disciples (including us) that this is important to remember.

It's the sign of Jonah, it's the message of the Gospel: in the middle of our worst sins, God came to us anyway.

For further reading: 1 Kings 14:25, Matthew 12:39-41, Luke 11:29-32, Jonah 1:2

*Lord God, thank You for coming to us. And thank You for Jonah's story.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 16 February 2021 Today's topic: God and Ninevah

*"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." Jonah 1:2 (NIV).*

Ninevah was a city founded by Noah's grandson, Cush. Cush was one of the first full generation after the flood, and he would have been brought up hearing the eyewitness accounts of antediluvian Earth and the people who God saved during the flood: things we know little of today. Cush would have been a man familiar with the words of God, how God had spoken to Noah, and to Noah's son's, and how lonely and forlorn the world would have been in the years it was being re-populated. No matter what happened later, it's likely he would have taught to understand the consequences of sin.

Yet many generations had passed since Cush, and by the time God spoke to Jonah, Ninevah had devolved into wickedness. We don't know the sins of which Ninevites were guilty, but let's be honest and say that doesn't matter. Wicked is wicked, and if the city had become an affront to God, then it surely must have been wicked indeed. But before we judge Ninevah, let's keep a few things in mind.

As we mentioned yesterday, God spoke to Jonah. He cared enough about mankind to speak to a man directly, and to inspire him onto a difficult mission. God loves us, and whether it was 2600 years ago to Jonah, 2000 years ago in Jesus, or speaking to your heart through Him today, God loves you, and each of us, and wants only the best for us. He addresses us where we are.

Also, don't forget that God cared enough about wicked Ninevah to both respect it and call out its sins. God could have sent two angels to Ninevah as he did to Sodom and Gomorrah, but, instead, he sent Jonah to give it another chance. He even called it "great," both to respect and mock the Earthly 'greatness' of its sins.

Last, God SAW Ninevah. The inhabitants of old Cush's city lived in defiance of the living God, but they were only fooling themselves. God recognized THEM and desired to let them know it. So, He ordained a witness and sent him on his way. What happened after that is what comprises the rest of this book.

The lessons God wanted to pass on to Ninevah still apply very much to us today, especially in an age where America seems more like wicked San Francisco than San Francisco seems like traditional America. We are Ninevah, and praise God that He's been merciful to us thus far. If a Jonah comes to us, I hope we listen to him.

For further reading: Genesis 10:11, Nahum 1:1, Jonah 1:3

*Lord God, all praise to You for Your mercy. Thank You for the lessons of Jonah and Ninevah. Help me to heed them today.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 17 February 2021 Today's topic: Face Your Ninevah

*But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. Jonah 1:3 (NIV).*

What's the point of this foolishness? Jonah tried to run from God, forgetting that there is nowhere on this Earth to run where God is not already there.

This verse refers to Tarshish, which was a city founded by another of Noah's descendants, this one a great-grandson. We don't really know where Tarshish was. It may have been in Spain, or Sardinia, or Carthage in Africa, or maybe what became Tarsus, in Turkey, where the Apostle Paul came from. What we do know is that it was a place that was far from Ninevah, and far from where Jonah found himself. He got on a boat to take him to Tarshish so that he could (he thought) get as far away from God and Ninevah as possible.

Fat lot of good that did him.

There is no hiding from God. He is everywhere; He is in everything. Psalm 139 says it best: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there." God made everything by speaking, and he knows every thought of every heart who has ever lived. He knows the blades of grass in every field. He knows the clouds in the sky; the stars throughout the universe. Everything is under him.

Jonah knew this, but fear makes us do stupid things...like running away from God. Only Jonah wasn't stupid. In fact, he had good reason to be afraid. Ninevah was known throughout the Mesopotamian world as a brutal, sinful place. And God had just personally told Jonah to go there and call out its inhabitants. Imagine if God told you to go to Tehran and denounce radical Islam in the center of the city: would you immediately go, or would you be afraid? For most, you know the likely answer.

That means we aren't so different from Jonah.

So, it makes sense to, again, ask "what's the point of this foolishness?" Maybe God hasn't asked you to preach His word to sinners, but is there something in your past you run from? Anything you don't want to admit, or are hiding? God sees it; God already knows it. He loves us and wants only His best for us, and that means He wants us to face our fears, confront our sins. He wants us to face our own Ninevah's.

For further reading: Genesis 10:4, Exodus 4:13, Joshua 19:46, Psalm 139:7-8, Jeremiah 20:9, Jonah 1:4

*Lord Jesus, help me to face my fears today, to not hide from You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 18 February 2021 Today's topic: When the Storm Hits

*Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. Jonah 1:4-5 (NIV).*

These verses bring up a couple of different thoughts. One is the thought of Jesus, sleeping in a boat while his disciples panic in a storm. The verses naturally evoke that thought because the situations seem similar. Except that Jonah isn't Jesus; he can't save anyone (though he'll try). Still, the thought makes sense.

But the bigger thought that comes to mind is panic. All of us panic. It's an psychological reaction when something confronts us with immediate dread or unthinkable fears. An event throws us off our game and our meter pegs. Yet panic is hysterical, unnatural. It's a primal reaction by creatures who've supposedly evolved beyond our primal urges.

Or have we?

In this part of the story, God sends a great storm to stop Jonah from fleeing. He does it knowing what will happen; He does it knowing that the sailors onboard will panic but that Jonah won't. Have you considered that maybe God sends storms, or at least allows them, into our lives to get us off the dime?

Maybe you're caught in a sin; maybe you're resisting doing the right thing. Maybe you're ambivalent about a matter of faith; maybe you're lukewarm on taking a stand. There could be a thousand different maybes affecting you right now, and if a storm happens, what will you do?

Will you run around and pray to false gods? Will you look for someone, something else to blame? Will you throw away things to lighten your load? Will you panic? Or will you chill out, take a nap, and wake up to find that God is there with you despite how you ran to hide? Fact is, God is with us at all times, in all places. Our geo-location is irrelevant to Him: He's here before, and He'll be with us no matter what.

What will come to your mind when something unexpected happens to you?

Panic doesn't help anything because the world will always hit us with unexpected crises, unforeseeable losses, and changes. Yet when those happen, God will still be God, Jesus will still be Jesus, and we'll need to rely on Him more than ever. Will you?

For further reading: Psalm 107:23-26, :Luke 8:22-25, Acts 27:18-19, Jonah 1:6

*Lord Jesus, I panic far too often. Too often, it's my go-to emotion. Forgive me for this selfish, short-sighted reaction. Abide with me and calm me when the world tries to close in and spin me around.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 22 February 2021 Today's topic: Panic in the Storm

*The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish." Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" Jonah 1:6-8 (NIV).*

Do you know what makes this miraculous story believable to a skeptical world? The people's reaction. When they panic, they look for someone to blame. Rather than accepting that it's something beyond their control, they want to blame someone. They go as far as to (literally) roll the dice and try to let chance tell them who's to blame.

Thousands of years after it happened, we're the same. Take last week's winter storm in Texas, where I live. It was REALLY unpleasant, but I was raised in the North, and winter storms happen every year. You know: in winter. But they don't happen like that in the South, and when they do, they usually don't take down the power grid, then the water lines, then the gas lines. Severe weather messes things up; it happens during the summertime, too. It shouldn't surprise us when it happens during the winter.

But most of us weren't prepared for it, especially when power was out for days for so many people. Immediately, folks (especially in the media, which thrives on crisis) started looking for someone or something to blame for our situation. It was the fault of the windmills that generate between ten and twenty percent of Texas' power. It was the fault of the government, who squandered money (which is what governments do best). It was the fault of developers, who over-taxed a flimsy power grid. It was Ted Cruz. We must blame someone!

Now, let's be real. No person is responsible for a freakish winter storm (not even Ted Cruz). We aren't any more responsible than the men on Jonah's boat. Yet when crisis hits us, we look for the exit door and try to get away. We should own that. Instead, we roll the dice and play the blame game just like those men on the boat.

Wouldn't it be better to step back and ask what we can learn from the storm? Are we truly prepared? Where have we put ourselves in our relationship with Christ? Are we carrying baggage that we should cast overboard?

Before a real storm hits, maybe we should ask ourselves these questions.

For further reading: Jonah 1:9

*Lord, forgive me for panicking. Help me to trust You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 23 February 2021 Today's topic: He's God, We Aren't

*He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Jonah 1:9 (NIV).*

Give credit to God, especially when you know you've made mistakes. That should be the end of the blog post, right? After all, it pretty much sums up one of the largest messages from the Bible. So, we're done for the day, right?

Almost done.

Jonah knows who he is, and who God is. That surely must have made him aware of his guilt in thinking he could run away from God. Jonah knew he was a Hebrew, a member of God's chosen people, a witness of the power and glory of the same God who caused the storm in which the men now found themselves. Maybe the other men didn't know who THEY were, but Jonah did.

So, in a simple expression of faith, Jonah witnesses to the frightened crew. Recall that the crew found itself in the terrible storm while Jonah cat-napped through it. So, they threw cargo overboard, then cast lots to assign the blame, and that blame fell on Jonah. None of this is coincidental, even though they can't see it (and even though it's beyond their control...sort of like us). But Jonah knew, and he stated the fact that his God IS God. That his God is Lord over the sea raging around them.

Jonah knows who God is and he's unafraid to tell these strangers, even under duress. Like Nehemiah, like David, like Daniel, like Paul (would), Jonah God had control over the sea and land.

Now, what about you? Do you know who YOU are, and do you know where you fit in with God's order? Most important, do you know who God is? The same God Jonah witnessed about is the same Triune God we know through the New Testament. He's the same God who told Jonah to go to Ninevah, and from whom Jonah fled. Our God is the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land, and who still has dominion over them today. Jonah knew Him that way.

But Jonah never got to know God also as the God who would die for him, who would practically run to the cross so He could die in my place, in your place, in his place. You and I get to know Him as Father, Spirit, and the Son named Jesus: the God of Jonah, just making Himself known differently to us. Same God who, unbeknownst to Jonah, was about to perform a miracle.

Give God the credit because He deserves it. He's God. We aren't.

For further reading: Nehemiah 9:6, Psalm 96:9, Daniel 2:18, Acts 17:24, Jonah 1:10

*Lord God, You are the God of Jonah and You are my God. All praise to You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 24 February 2021 Today's topic: Are You Terrified?

*He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.). Jonah 1:9-10 (NIV).*

Why would Jonah telling his shipmates that God was God terrify them? The men on the ship found themselves in a storm that threatened to sink their ship. If this huge God Jonah talked about could create a storm to stop or punish him, what could He do to them? To paraphrase Luke, they were "sore afraid." They were terrified.

Are you now or have you ever been terrified of God?

Studies show that most people fall away from church (or outright reject it) because we who are the church come across as un-authentic. We are hypocrites; we're unkind; we say or do things contrary to what they believe Christians should say or do. Friend, one unkind contrary hypocrite to another, let's own this and admit they have a good point. Let's pray to our Lord today that He forgives & helps us truly change.

Yet I also wonder how many of those people are actually terrified of God yet can't admit it. How many people are like Jonah, running from something they don't want to do? Or who don't want to admit that God is God and they aren't. I wonder how many people today live in fear of God. Not the awesome knowledge of His majesty, power, and just love, but actual dread of Him.

Nearly every Muslim does. I'd venture to say a large chunk of American Christians do. Peel back the stinky onion of atheism and you'll find most self-professed atheists are terrified of admitting God is so powerful. Even more than that, many people are terrified to think that God is both loving and just. That He would hold them accountable.

Yet they don't look deeper than that to find the God David knew, or Daniel, or Noah, Moses, or the prophets. They don't look to know Jesus, who was God and man at once. Jesus, who showed love, patience, and understanding in everything He taught. Damaged people may be truly terrified of Jesus because embracing Him means letting down their guard, being vulnerable.

That's the most terrifying thing of all, especially when you've been hurt. Truth is, we're all damaged in some way; we all hurt. Yet the God of Jonah loves us anyway. Jesus loves us anyway, especially when we're terrified.

For further reading: Jonah 1:11

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 25 February 2021 Today's topic: Own It

*The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?" "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you." Jonah 1:11-12 (NIV).*

How could Jonah know that the sea would calm down if his shipmates threw him overboard? The simple answer is that, unless God had revealed it to him (and that's possible), he couldn't. Yet Jonah was conscious of his guilt for trying to run away from God. He understood that He had wronged God and disobeyed His direct order. He knew he was guilty, so perhaps he simply believed that God would have mercy on the men onboard that ship if he took responsibility.

The referenced Old Testament verses for today talk about when King David strayed from God's purpose and ordered a census of his forces. While the angel of the Lord was punishing Israel for David's misbehavior, David owned up to responsibility for the calamity and asked that God deliver His punishment only on him (David) and not on God's people.

That's what leaders do. They own up to mistakes and take responsibility when bad things happen because of their decisions or actions. It's what David did; it's what Jonah did. It's what me and you need to do, too, whenever we fall short. Mistake at work? Own it. Mistake in your relationships? Own it. Mistake that only you and God know about? Own that one, too...especially that one. Then, be willing to endure the consequences because you're never alone. Trust that relying on God's mercy is a much better alternative to relying on the decisions of men.

Yet sometimes God tells us to stay with the ship. Acts 27 tells the story of Paul and another storm. Paul was being shipped to Rome as a prisoner, and he advised the ship's crew to stay onboard until it ran aground. That storm, too, was brought by God's divine purpose, in this case to get Paul to Malta so that others might hear about Jesus. The Gospel spread as a result of Paul's shipwreck on his roundabout trip to Rome. Sometimes, God wants us to stay onboard until the last possible moment so that His purposes may bring glory.

Especially to others. As we'll see, the men soon listened to Jonah and obliged his request. Remember that the next time you find yourself in a tough situation of your own making. Hopefully, you'll at least be on dry ground.

For further reading: 2 Samuel 24:17, 1 Chronicles 21:17, Acts 27, Jonah 1:13

*Lord Jesus, save me when I'm foundering. Forgive my wrongs and help me to take responsibility when I should. Help me to lead as You would lead.*



## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 1 March 2021 Today's topic: Fighting Against God

*Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Jonah 1:13 (NIV).*

Have you ever fought against what you knew was the right thing to do? Maybe it was God telling you, through your conscience, what He wanted you to do. Instead, you resisted it. Lots of resisters live among us, and most of them are resisting doing the right thing even though they know deep inside that they should.

King Solomon knew about that. Perhaps Jonah had heard Solomon's proverb that "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord." If God has determined that something will happen, it's going to happen. Speak the world into existence? Gonna happen. End it on a time of His choosing? Gonna happen. Only Son born/only Son crucified; disciples scatter/disciples gather; Great Depression; post-war boom; the day you are born and the day you will die: all of them will happen when and only when God commands it.

Find yourself in a severe Mediterranean storm so bad that the other men onboard want to throw you overboard? Yep, that, too, no matter whether you hop on the first boat to Tarshish or hot-foot it to Ninevah as soon as God stops talking. What God ordains can't be unordained.

So, we're just pawns, right? We're just bit players in a cosmic comedy for the pleasure of this other-worldly God?

As Joe in DC might say, "come on, man!" You surely don't think so little of God, or yourself, do you? After all, the same God who ordains that anything and everything can and will happen also ordained that part about His only son dying on that cross. He choreographed up all of human history so it would lead to that singular climactic point at Calvary. He did it so that the humans He created as His very good creation could return home to Him and live with Him. For love's sake. It was to bless us in a way we couldn't bless ourselves.

Just like He was working to bless Jonah, and maybe even those men on the ship. Just like He's working right now to bless you.

Come on, man, again. I'm being blessed in a pandemic? When my friends and family have spent a year in anxiety or worse? I'm blessed by living in a world of sickness, war, and violence? That's God at work?

Actually, He is at work through them. He's at work to bless me and you DESPITE those terrible things, those fallout consequences of mankind's sins. Stick around here for a few days and you'll find out how He blessed Jonah that way.

For further reading: Proverbs 21:30, Jonah 1:14

*Lord God, You do bless me in ways I don't understand. Praise and thanks to You for that.*

## **Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 2 March 2021 Today's topic: Best of Bad Choices**

*Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased." Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. Jonah 1:14-16 (NIV).*

When your back is up against the wall, you have nowhere else to go. Maybe your choices have boxed you into a corner; maybe God has boxed you there. Maybe you're out of all other options and the only choices available to you seem to be bad ones. Which is the least bad; which is the best of our bad choices?

We all run into tough situations. Next time it happens to you, ask Jesus. Seriously. Perhaps that is the exact moment He's been preparing you for. And when you ask Jesus, do so while remembering your vows to Him.

Yep, you heard me. If you have made a vow, or a promise, or even said you'd do something (no matter how small), keep your word in talking with the Lord. He's looking for us to be genuine in all matters. But what about when you can't?

The men on the ship were in a bad way. They had made a genuine agreement – a vow – to take this passenger to his destination. They didn't believe in this God who Jonah spoke of; they followed idols; there's no indication that the men on Jonah's ship renounced their pagan gods. Yet, despite that, they did recognize that God is God and that He had sent this misfortune to them because of Jonah's actions. So, they prayed to God and asked for His mercy, and acknowledged the reality of their situation.

They were afraid, and understandably so. Not only did they fear for their lives (both from the storm and from God), but they recognized that, to oblige Jonah, they would have to throw him overboard to certain death. To make things worse, it meant breaking their vow. But what other choice did they have? They could break their vow, or they could pray for mercy then consciously do an unthinkable thing.

What would you do? If it were you and someone else, and the someone else was encouraging you to kill him, would you, knowing that doing it and breaking your word to do it are terrible things to live with?

And if that's true during the best of bad choices, what about all our other sins?

For further reading: Numbers 30:2, Deuteronomy 21:8, Psalm 66:13-14, Psalm 107:29, Daniel 4:35, Luke 8:24, Jonah 1:17

*Lord Jesus, I pray You had mercy on the men of Jonah's boat. Have mercy on me when I make hard choices, too.*

## **Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 3 March 2021 Today's topic: Big Fish**

*Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Jonah 1:17 (NIV).*

No, this isn't Pinocchio; no, the 'big fish' wasn't a whale. No, believe it or not, this isn't some fairy tale or myth or impossible story.

You know what this is? It's history. Real, live history. If you believe that God created the world, then you believe He did it by speaking everything into being. That's a miracle. And if you believe in the parting of the Red Sea, that's a miracle too. And Elijah being fed by ravens. And Jesus rising from the tomb. All miracles, all history as recorded in the Bible.

That includes Jonah spending three days inside a big fish.

Now, "Big Fish" is one of my favorite movies. Maybe you've seen it; a Tim Burton movie about a son coming to terms with his father. The father's tall tales of extraordinary events in his life alienate his son, who doesn't see how the larger-than-life stories are an important part of who his dad really is. The title of the movie comes from how the dad used his wedding ring to catch a giant catfish. Yet as you watch the movie, you come to see how the big fish isn't just the catfish: it's the father himself.

Or maybe it's the son, my son, specifically. When he was a boy, my son was always full of tall tales. Much like his dad, he would exaggerate things he did or said. And he dreamed big dreams. As a grown man, I couldn't be prouder to watch how my own big fish swims through the world, working to make those dreams into reality.

And that's no tall tale. Maybe Jonah needed to think about that. Having just endured a God-sent storm of (literally) Biblical proportions, chilling out inside the belly of a fish may have been the extraordinarily humbling thing Jonah needed most. Or maybe he was passed out. Truth is, we don't know. All we do know is that Jonah was there, alive, inside the big fish, safe from the raging storm, and safely on his way to Ninevah.

Years later, Jesus, no ordinary fish Himself, used Jonah's story to give His people a sign that pointed toward His eventual resurrection. Three days Jonah stayed inside the big fish; three days Jesus slept in His tomb. And when he/they came forth, things began to change.

Pinocchio didn't change things, though life changed Him. And Tim Burton's movie didn't change much, though it is poignant and moving. My son is still working through change. But Jonah and Jesus actually, miraculously, historically did, and that's no big fish story, even though it actually is.

For further reading: Matthew 12:40, Matthew 16:4, Jonah 2:1

*All praise to You, Lord, for saving Jonah and us.*

## **Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 4 March 2021. Today's topic: God's MO**

*From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. Jonah 2:1 (NIV).*

As chapter 2 starts, we learn that Jonah is conscious inside the fish. He is consciously praying to the Lord, his God. At this verse, two thoughts come to mind.

One, bravo Jonah. Praying is the best thing he could do.

And, two, fish are gross; ew.

My wife loaned me a Bible study on Jonah. It was done by Priscilla Shirer, and was one of the studies her ladies' group recently completed. As I read it, my wife commented about Jonah being in the fish, about how they are slimy, and they smell. They're sleek and agile, but also oily and messy. I can imagine that, even in the warm Mediterranean sea, it wouldn't have been pleasant, or comfortable. And Jonah was alive through it.

Jonah was in the fish for three days. Maybe he was in its mouth, or in its stomach. By the end of the first hour, Jonah would have been in shock; by the end of the third day, he would have been panicked. And he would have smelled awful. He would have smelled so bad, so much like the fish, that he wouldn't even be able to tell anymore. So what did he do? Jonah prayed. When he realized he might very well be dying (digesting actually) Jonah prayed. He realized the desperation of his predicament and so he humbled himself to his God.

Notice that it's personal for Jonah. He understands that he has nowhere else to go, doesn't know where he is, and that things seem hopeless. So, he clings to faith to talk with the God who made all things, including the hungry fish.

Even more than that, however, consider what God had done. Jonah had rebelled against Him, directly walked away from a mission that God had hand-picked for him. And the men on the ship had turned on him. And he might have drowned in a churning sea. And now, he was in a fish.

But God had intervened. As Ms Shirer said, God had personally intervened to make a hopeless situation into something hopeful. Jonah wasn't dead yet, and when he realized it, he prayed. He reached out to the God who had already reached out to him.

If you think about it, that God's modus operandi all the time. He always reaches out to us before we reach out to Him. In fact, that's how it has always been, from Eden even to now. Even when Jonah was all slimed up in the fish.

When Jonah realized that, he prayed. He must have prayed a lot during those three days. Tune in next time to see some of what he prayed.

For further reading: Jonah 2:2

*Graceful Lord, You always reach to me before I reach to You. Thank You so much for that!*



## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 8 March 2021 Today's topic: Praying

*In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. Jonah 2:2-3 (NIV).*

Jonah spent 3 days inside a stinky, oily, slimy fish. We had salmon patties for dinner last night, and smelling the can of salmon when it was opened made me think that this was how Jonah smelled after just a few minutes inside the fish. Imagine how he reeked after three days. He probably smelled so bad that he couldn't even smell himself anymore.

During those three days, he prayed. He probably prayed psalms, which would have been known to him because they would have been written several hundred years before he lived. The psalms were hymns sung during worship; they still are in many churches. And the psalms were both poetry and hymn; song and spoken word.

What the psalms are most, however, is heartfelt worship. Some of them – like the ones paraphrased in these verse – are cries from desperate people. People who have nowhere else to go and realize how wrong their sins were. “In my distress” is prayed by a person who knows they are in a bad way; a person who sees their situation as desperate because they believe they are going to die. Wouldn't you or I feel the same way if some giant fish swallowed us whole?

And yet...

...and yet, don't gloss over the next part of the prayer, namely where the man said 'and the Lord answered me.' Even when he believed he was in the realm of the dead, even when he was desperate, even when he was in a bad way, in distress, and deep in his sins with nowhere else to go, the man inside the fish prayed and knew that God had listened to him. Even as he was in the pitch-black innards of a fish swimming in the deep sea.

Knowing all that, do you think God hears us when we say a quick prayer in the car? Or at the dinner table? Or in the shower, at our desks, sitting in the recliner, on the sidelines at our kid's ballgame? Do you think God hears us on the rare occasions we actually hit our knees? The fact is, God hears ALL of our prayers. And He answers them, even if we don't always understand the answers.

If a man stuck in a fish can pray, what's stopping us?

For further reading: 2 Samuel 22:5, Psalm 18:6, Psalm 42:7, Psalm 86:13, Psalm 120:1, Lamentations 3:55, Jonah 2:4

*Hearing Lord, hear my prayer. I'm a sinner and I really need You today! Forgive my sins against You.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 9 March 2021 Today's topic: Toward Jerusalem

*I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.'* Jonah 2:4 (NIV).

Since the days of Solomon, when Jews pray, they pray facing towards Jerusalem. Hundreds of years before Islam adopted this same custom, Jews worldwide were already doing it. Many still do today. Does it mean that God hears prayers more from those who face towards Jerusalem than from those who don't?

No. So why do it? Respect. You know, that little thing in such short supply in our world today. God deserves our respect and so much more. Is it asking too much that we give Him a little of what is rightfully due to Him?

Even Jonah understood that. Inside the fish, he had no idea where he was, or which direction the temple lay. He didn't know if it was day or night, deep or in shallow water, if he was going to live or die. All he could do was pray respectfully to God, understanding that God heard him and might have mercy on him yet. He could pray HOPEFULLY to see the light again and turn towards Jerusalem out of respect for His creator.

So it is with us today. Even when we feel furthest away from God, He's always close with us. If we feel distant, it isn't because God is distant, because He isn't. The Lord is always ever-present with us, even when we're struggling the most. Even when we're mired deep in our sins. Even when the world is hitting us hard.

That's the best time to remember to go to God and open our hearts. Tell Him exactly what's on our minds. Tell Him exactly what we're feeling, what we're going through, what has us fixated, anxious, or scared. Tell Him about that guilt we deny. Tell Him all about it and do it respectfully because, even when we're angry, He's God and we aren't.

He wants our inmost thoughts and feelings, even with the bark off. When it gets hard to talk with Jesus about what bothers us most, maybe turn east (or whatever direction, depending on where you are) and remember that God once made His earthly home there. That He met with Abraham on that hill. That Jesus frequently walked it. That, as Twila sang, "out of Zion's hill salvation comes."

It worked for Jonah. When he realized he was completely at God's mercy, he earnestly prayed. He prayed not knowing where he was or what would happen to him. The same should hold true for us.

For further reading: 1 Kings 8:48, Psalm 14:7, Psalm 31:22, Jeremiah 7:15, 1 John 1:9, Jonah 2:5

*Lord Jesus, there is nowhere I can go where you aren't already there. I turn to where Your house once stood so I might know You and ask for Your forgiveness and comfort.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 10 March 2021 Today's topic: Out of the Depths

*The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit. Jonah 2:5-6 (NIV).*

Jonah is acknowledging that HE was sinking down, that the consequences of his rebellion had taken him as low as he could go. He had tried to run away from God and it had brought him lower than he had thought possible. Indeed, at that time, he had traveled deeper in the sea than any person had ever been before.

Yet through it all, God was there. God sustained him. God heard his prayers. God would deal with Jonah's life as He saw fit. Jonah was alive for a reason and he had hope – both a wish and a promise – that God wasn't through with him yet. That God would bring him out of the depths for some unknown purpose.

That's a concept understandable even in our world. I'm reading a great book about C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien that my friend, Tom, sent to me. It's about how their faith after World War I shaped their lives and their literature (specifically the Chronicles of Narnia and the Lord of the Rings). You can't read those books without immediately grasping both the heavy Christian themes woven into the stories AND the focus on war as the cruel, refining experience that it is.

The book describes in detail the horrors both men endured fighting on the Western Front. If you've never read much about that war, I encourage you to at least once, if only to learn what hell on earth must feel like. It was years of front-line service in a flooded, fetid, rat-infested trench, under constant fire only 500 yards or so from an enemy who would gladly kill you just for sticking your head up. Tolkien survived the Somme with his Catholic faith shaken but intact. Lewis was an atheist at the time, yet the hellish conditions he endured made him question the very nature of hope. Years later, he confessed his belief in Christ as the only logical outcome for someone who based their life in reason.

Jonah had reached that same conclusion without coming under enemy fire or comprehending Jesus Christ as a man. Only God could take him to safety; only God could bring life out of death in the abyss. Centuries later, these simple truths still govern our skeptical world of spiraling sin. Like Jonah, Tolkien, and Lewis, it seems we only learn our desperate need for God when we've sunken as close to hell as we can get. Yet even there, the Lord beckons us.

For further reading: Job 17:16, Job 28:9, Psalm 30:3, Psalm 69:1-2, Jonah 2:6

*Lord Jesus, only You bring life from death.*



## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 11 March 2021 Today's topic: Immanuel At All Times

*"When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple." Jonah 2:7 (NIV).*

Continuing a thought from the other day: when we are at our lowest, our prayers still rise to God. More importantly, He always hears them because He's always present.

In this verse, Jonah recognized that he was low, that he was dying, that he was in a place where his actions had put him. Then he prayed, and his prayers ROSE to God. God was above the depths; God was over him; God was still holy in His temple. Did you catch what Jonah missed?

He remembered God. It's safe to assume that the terribly strange circumstances of being inside a fish had preoccupied Jonah up to now. Worries about himself preoccupied Jonah's mind until he reached the point of desperation. That's when he remembered God. He remembered God and began to pray, and he immediately realized that God was bigger than all this. That God heard him, even from inside the fish deep in the sea.

Jonah forgot that God was there.

One of my favorite parts of "The Shack" is when Mack is talking with God the Father (Papa) about marks on His hands and Papa says that they are from Jesus' crucifixion. "Don't ever think that what my son chose to do didn't cost both of us dearly. Love leaves a mark. I never left him and I never left you."

God never left Jesus, even on the cross, even in the tomb, even descending to hell, even during resurrection. God the Father, Son, and Spirit was still fully God and fully man during the entire time. The mystery of the trinity is beyond our comprehension, how the Father could completely turn from the sin laid on the Son but still be fully with Him. It is impossible to separate them, to make them less than three-in-one. Everywhere one goes, they go together. Everywhere.

Including with Jonah. God never left Jonah. God was there with Jonah inside the fish. Even when Jonah didn't think about it. Even when his (understandable) worries got him down, God was there with him. As soon as Jonah remembered God, he realized this and knew his prayers were heard.

God was with him. Immanuel; "God with us," which is another name for "Jesus." Before Jonah knew Jesus, Jesus was with Jonah.

It's the same with us. No matter what terrible things happen; no matter when phenomenal and wonderful things happen. On top of Everest or at the bottom of the Marianas Trench, God is there. When we are rebellious in sin or giving glory in worship, God is with us at all times.

For further reading: 2 Chronicles 30:27, Psalm 11:4, Psalm 77:11-12, Jonah 2:8

*Oh omnipresent Lord, You are everywhere. Praise to You, You are always with me.*



## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 15 March 2021 Today's topic: Get With The Program

*"Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'" Jonah 2:8-9 (NIV).*

"Get with the program:" you've probably heard that time-worn phrase.

Jonah couldn't perform a sacrifice. He had no fire, no animals, no priest, no place that was ritually clean to perform a proper sacrifice in accordance with the laws of Moses. It's true that Jonah's prayer could be a promise for future sacrifices, but it doesn't quite read that way. Instead, it's an acclamation of Jonah's thoughts of the moment, thoughts of the present.

The only thing Jonah could sacrifice was himself, and that's precisely what God wanted. Indeed, Jonah was again fore-shadowing Jesus, who would make the sacrifice Jonah couldn't, then bring the salvation that comes only from the Lord.

You could say that Jonah was getting with the program. You know what has to come next in this lesson.

What can we learn from Jonah here?

First, idols are worthless. The Bible doesn't waste words, even as it reiterates or, in some places, repeats. God continually labels idols as worthless because they aren't Him and anything other than Him is both idolatrous and worthless. What idol are you chasing today? Wealth? Kids? Status? Porn? Appearances? Lies? You know in your heart they're all worthless, that some are even harmful, but we chase them anyway.

What's more, we chase our pet idols without even knowing we're taking Jesus along for the ride. He's with us at all times, even when we are at our very worst. Yet we do it anyway. Drugs, booze, sex, abuse, vulgarity, deceit: pick your poison and when you use it, your Savior and mine is included in what you do.

For God's sake – literally – get with the program already.

Yet there's always good news. The good news is THE Good News. Salvation is still free and available from our co-located Savior at any second. He wants our entire self, our entire sacrifice. He wants us to let go of it and let Him take away the guilt and hurt of it. He wants us to follow Him no matter what we've said or done, then use our lives in His service. Giving, caring, praying, serving, loving, praise: like Jonah did here, our focus becomes Jesus instead of an idol when we live out these behaviors He inspires. In doing so, His Kingdom grows and we are freed from the guilt of our prisons. Or the inside of a fish, as we'll soon see.

Salvation from Jesus. THAT is the program.

For further reading: Numbers 30:2, Deuteronomy 32:21, 1 Samuel 12:21, Psalm 42:4, Hebrews 13:15, Jonah 2:10

*Savior Jesus, I believe in You alone and want to follow only You. Help me today!*

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## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 16 March 2021 Today's topic: Get You Up in the Morning

*And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. Jonah 2:10 (NIV).*

I couldn't agree more with the meme that says "the quickest way to get someone out of bed is for them to hear the sound of a cat about to throw up."

Right on, right on. Imagine what it would have sounded like for some giant fish to swim up close to the shore and start horking. Imagine what you would think if you had been standing on the beach, and you saw all this happen. Shocked? Amazed? Sickened? Imagine the horror of people who saw or smelled him.

Imagine how Jonah must have felt. He had prayed and suddenly realized that his prayer was being answered. The fish was spitting him out; would it be on land or in the water? Where would he be? What would happen now? All Jonah could do was be in the moment, then be puked out of the fish. THAT would have been, um, 'unusual.' Nothing like it had ever happened before; nothing like it has happened since.

Yet don't lose sight of a few things. God commanded the fish and the fish obeyed. God isn't some fantastic Dr. Doolittle. He's God, who can not only communicate with nature but command it...and nature obeys. It had always been this way; it was this way with the giant fish. Later in Jonah's story, God's command over nature would teach Jonah another lesson.

And God had not only been with Jonah the entire time, hearing his prayers and keeping him alive. But God then provided for Jonah by ensuring the fish spit him out onto dry land, where Jonah could find what he needed to live. That is, perhaps, the most miraculous aspect in this entire book of miracles. God provided all along. Even when Jonah had rebelled; even when the pagan men on the boat hadn't really believed; even when Jonah was in a seemingly hopeless place, God still provided.

Just like He does today.

Vectoring back to my wife's Bible study, it was brought up that Jonah would have stunk. He would have been covered in that sticky, white film that covers your skin when you clean out a fish. Jonah would have been covered in that from head to toe. Maybe he cleaned off after, but as we'll soon see, that also may not be the case. One thing was clear: though his outside may have been covered in fantastic slime, Jonah's heart had been cleaned. He had been made ready by the Master's hand to do the Master's work. God would use that spread his message...just like He does today.

THAT ought to get us out of bed every morning.

For further reading: Jonah 3:1

*Lord Jesus, You saved Jonah and prepared him for Your good work. Thank You for providing for him and for us.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 17 March 2021 Today's topic: A New Mission

*Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah 3:1-2 (NIV).*

We're in chapter three now. Jonah is out of the fish and has stopped running. God humbled him and prepared the soil in him to receive the seed of a new message.

These first two verses echo (but don't reiterate) Jonah's mission from chapter one, where it said, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." Notice the differences? With Jonah being humbled, God commands Jonah to PROCLAIM TO Nineveh a message instead of preaching against it.

In a way, the mission God gave to Jonah after the fish is tougher than the original one. In chapter one, God told Jonah to do a specific thing for a specific reason. That command scared Jonah enough to make him run away and stay-cation with Charlie the Tuna. Now, God simply tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach a message to it, reasoning to the people instead of calling them out. The new message is open-ended. The verses don't say what the message will be, but Jonah would likely have assumed it would be condemnation of Nineveh's actions. No wonder Jonah beat feet.

Yet look at these two verses closer, and you may just find some familiar hope. God has spent three days making it clear to Jonah that he isn't alone, that God protects His people. Though God's new mission is open-ended, here He also makes a commitment to Jonah that He hadn't spelled out the first time. "The message I give you" is a promise to inspire Jonah to say and do what God wanted him to do. That would only happen because God would be with him, would abide with him. Jonah would be the microphone, but God's voice, God's words, would be spoken through him.

There's great comfort in that. Just like God does with us today, He would work through Jonah to bring about something wonderful. God didn't send Jonah into anyplace where he wouldn't be blessed. Jonah wouldn't be alone, and that would bless and comfort him as he worked to bless others. Given the fearsome reputation of the great, wicked city of Nineveh, it must have been great comfort indeed.

What would Jonah do about that? What would you or I do about it? Perhaps God calls us to be Jonah where we are today. Perhaps there is some thing, some place you need to go to carry out God's mission. Will you be alone, or will you simply think you are? Just like Jonah, we're never alone. Let's hope it doesn't take a fish to prove it.

For further reading: Jonah 1:1, Jonah 3:3

*Lord, You are always with me. Thank You.*

## **Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 18 March 2021 Today's topic: If You're Going to San Francisco**

*Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah 3:3 (NIV).*

"If you're going to San Francisco..." You're probably hearing that old hippie song right now, in your head."

Jonah walked to the San Francisco of his time. Now, I've spent a lot of time in San Francisco, working there for a large health plan. I often walked to work while staying at Fisherman's Wharf but working downtown on Market Street. That's a two-mile walk, uphill both ways (yes, it really is) going through North Beach and the Financial District. You could walk a whole day in San Francisco, never entering the same neighborhood twice, and still not reach the middle of the city. New York, London, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Hong Kong are the same; I imagine any megalopolis is. So, I understand that it's plausible when today's verse says that it would take three days to walk through a city, especially if you walked through small alleys and backstreets.

While there, was Jonah like the man who wears a breadboard and screams, "REPENT OR DIE?" We don't know, but that isn't how I picture him. Instead, I picture him walking up to strangers and softly but confidently proclaiming God's message, not ranting it. "Hello, I'm Jonah. What's your name? Our God sent me here to tell you that He is with you, that He loves you, and wants to bless you." It was a message the Ninevites would not have previously known but would have made them want to know more. An in-your-face-you-dirty-sinner tactic wouldn't have worked out too well.

When you think about it: it doesn't work in our world, either. If you went to San Francisco and told people there that God was judging them and they were toast if they didn't repent, you might not make it out alive. But if you were honest, and earnestly talked with people about God's qualities and Him in your life, it would make it easier to then say, "and, by the way, He sent me with a message that's going to be tough to hear." They might just listen.

Especially since Jonah would have walked far to get there. The verse doesn't say if he stopped to clean up, so he may very well have still been covered in dry fish slime. Maybe that added to the shock factor; "do I have your attention yet?" And when the fishy-smelling stranger talked about the miracles he had endured, and about how God had protected him, the people of Ninevah would likely have been willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Imagine hearing THAT tune in San Francisco today.

For further reading: Jonah 3:4

*Forgiving God, thank You for Your love, for Jonah's message, and for opportunities to share Your hope.*

**Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 22 March 2021 Today's topic: I Wonder If I'll Make It Out of Here Alive**

*Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Jonah 3:4 (NIV).*

God is patient with us. He didn't go into Ninevah and immediately slam them. No, He sent a messenger to tell the people, "come back to me or in a little while it'll be too late." He has ALWAYS done this. From Sodom and Gomorrah all the way to San Francisco of today, God has always appealed to us in this way.

God sent Jonah a day's walk into Ninevah, and there he began to witness. I imagine Jonah along the road into Ninevah, talking with people along the way. Maybe he introduced himself, told a little about why he was there. "Come to the middle of Ninevah tomorrow! God has a message for you." I imagine he must have been nice to people along the way. If not nice, he was at least quiet, unnoticed.

But noticed, loud, or otherwise, Jonah walked along, patiently bearing God's word, patiently awaiting the right time and place to proclaim it. He was doing it through the strength that the Lord put in his body, put in his soul. And it took courage. Jonah thought the message serious enough to run away from God at first, and look at all that happened because of that. So, he must have walked along thinking to himself, "I wonder if I'll make it out of here alive."

Imagine going into inner city Portland today and announcing, "what's going on here is against the law." Or going down to Skid Row in LA to yell, "drugs, sex, and crime will kill you!" You or I would probably have the same kinds of thoughts Jonah would likely have thought: "I wonder if I'll make it out of here alive."

Here's the news: you won't. I wouldn't. Every one of us is going to die someday. Yet, to live beyond that, along our life-paths, we are here to learn of His salvation, to love God fully, as if we're walking along knowing that today or tomorrow could be our last day. We are supposed to live our lives in ways that store up treasure in heaven, sharing God's peace, kindness, and love however we can. And, when He gives us tough words to speak, we are to do so relying on His strength because God is patient. We get to let His voice speak through us in love and that patience.

Like Jonah did.

Like Jonah did because he understood how patient God had been with him. Perhaps he was walking to his death, but Jonah did it anyway. Or, just perhaps, another miracle of mercy might occur.

For further reading: Jeremiah 18:7-10, Jonah 3:5

*Patient Lord Jesus, have mercy on us. All praise to You for Your wisdom, patience, and love.*



## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 23 March 2021 Today's topic: This Wasn't Supposed to Happen

*The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. Jonah 3:5 (NIV).*

This wasn't supposed to happen. Jonah was supposed to go to Ninevah, proclaim God's message, and be murdered for it. That's the biggest reason why Jonah ran in the first place. In Jonah's mind, this was the biggest hurdle God had to cross in proving that He was mightier than Jonah's fears. The Ninevites were supposed to be ticked off, royally ticked off to the point that God would send two angels to destroy the place the way He did with Sodom and Gomorrah.

Instead, the Ninevites believed God. Stop here and re-read those first four words of today's verse. The Ninevites believed God. In a book full of miracles, perhaps this actually is the greatest of all. Just like the pagan men on the boat, the people of Ninevah stopped what they were doing and took Jonah's bold message to heart.

We know that's what they did because, in the days of the Bible, if you wanted to show that you were repenting of your sins, you fasted and put on sackcloth. You dressed in the most humble clothing possible, and you gave up what your body required to satisfy its most basic needs. People did this to humble themselves before God and show each other that they were in earnest.

Last time, we speculated how Jonah might have thought, "I wonder if I'll make it out of here alive." Seeing Ninevah repent, I wonder what Jonah thought about that. We won't skip ahead to the next chapter; save that for later. Instead, focus on the verse right now. Do you think Jonah would have been shocked? Sure, he understood the power of God; his whole journey had been a doctoral thesis in the power of God. But I think he still would have been shocked to have actually seen the people of this most wicked city truly start to change their ways.

Perhaps he also felt skeptical. "Is it genuine? Are they for real?" Anyone, even Jonah, could be forgiven for the natural thought that Ninevah would rage against the words of this stranger, this foreign interloper telling them they had only until next month to change. But that didn't happen. Instead, the Ninevites immediately listened and began to change. Maybe they were tired of their sins; obviously, they compared God to themselves and chose God. They didn't want to die, and they understood this God was God. According to Jonah's thinking, none of this was supposed to happen.

Now, if the people of Ninevah could change on a dime, what's stopping us?

For further reading: Daniel 9:3, Matthew 11:21, Matthew 12:41, Luke 11:32, Jonah 3:6

*Merciful Lord, forgive me of my sins as You convict me of them. Have mercy on us.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 24 March 2021 Today's topic: The Sopranos in Ninevah

*When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Jonah 3:6 (NIV).*

If you've ever read the book of Job, today's verse sounds very Job-like. Going further back in the Bible, it's what Mordecai did (in the book of Esther). Sackcloth and ashes. We talked about that last time, how putting on sackcloth and sitting in ashes was a way to humble one's self before God. It was debasing, humiliating; the ultimate symbol of public repentance. Here's the kicker: God didn't need it. We did.

We still do. Yesterday, I started watching "The Soprano's" again. You know the show: late 90s, early 2000s show about a New Jersey mobster and his struggles. Tony Soprano is an anti-hero, a criminal we despise but love to watch. I watched the show when it was on, and I've decided to binge it again.

In the first episode, Tony is in his therapist's office. His doctor has prescribed therapy which, especially for a mafia don, is both difficult and vocationally dangerous, which is why he does it. Eventually, he makes a connection with what is making him miserable, resolving to meditate on the issue in hopes of being a better man. At one point, he even visits a church built by his grandfather, marveling at the work and life of faith such a man had.

It would have been a great time for him to put on sackcloth and sprinkle ashes on his head. Because the show is about the Mafia, of course that didn't happen.

But, if you think about it, the king of Ninevah was Tony Soprano. He ruled the most wicked city in the world, and he had been personally accused of that wickedness by God's personal messenger. Bad dude; he had the power to whack whoever he wanted. Did he go Tony Soprano and miss the moment? You decide: the unknown king of Ninevah repented. He put on sackcloth and sat in ashes and mourned the things he had done, the life he had led. He submitted to God and begged for God's mercy.

Our world is wicked, too. We're the king of Ninevah; I'm Tony Soprano, and so are you. Maybe we don't have men killed for money, but we each cherish our own little evils. We are sinful through and through. You and me, we should wear sackcloth for awhile and pray in ash for mercy. The beautiful thing is that Jesus wore the sackcloth on our behalf and fired our sins to ash. Jesus went all Job before he took on north Jersey. We need that more than ever.

For further reading: Esther 4:1-3, Job 2:8 & 13, Ezekiel 27:30-31, Jonah 3:7

*Lord God, I clothe my heart in sackcloth because I've sinned against You. Forgive me.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 25 March 2021 Today's topic: Unexpected Miracles

*This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." Jonah 3:7-9 (NIV).*

Imagine what could happen in our world if Joe Biden stood up at a podium and announced a proclamation like this. Imagine the real, meaningful changes that might take place if he, or any leader, actually made a statement like the king of Ninevah did. Sadly, we'll have to imagine it because it isn't likely to happen. Let's be real: we shouldn't expect that kind of thing from our leaders.

But that's the beauty of this proclamation, you see. Jonah didn't expect it of the king either. The nobles who served the king didn't expect it. Neither did his subjects. Neither did the high priests of whatever pagan religion prevailed in Ninevah. Neither did the king's allies or enemies. Nobody would have expected the leader of the most wicked city in the world to announce citywide repentance for their wickedness, throwing themselves on the mercy of God.

Read up on your Bible and you'll find God does unexpected things like this all through history. Sure, that's a clichéd term, a hackneyed idea that God does miraculous things through sinful people. That God uses the unexpected things in our world to do miracles. But it is true and you know it to be true. Stuttering Moses led Israel out of slavery. Fleeing Elijah went back to confront Ahab. Ancient and barren Sarah gave birth to a son. Balaam's donkey was the only one who spoke peace to him. Five loaves and two fishes fed thousands. Jesus was murdered on the cross but came back to life just like He said He would.

Nobody expected those things to happen; we don't often expect miracles. Yet worldly miracles occur everyday courtesy of God's grace despite what we think. And the most amazing ones of all are the tiny, usually unnoticed miracles that occur when we humble ourselves before Him and repent. When we change from the inside out because He's changing us. Without Jesus' salvation, life is a spiritual death trip. With Jesus, it is a parade of unending miracles. The king of Ninevah looked at the life he'd led, then he looked at what God had said, and he humbled himself so the miracle could follow.

If the sinful leader can change, so can we. Even Joe Biden.

For further reading: Jonah 3:10

*Lord Jesus, I'm sorry for my sins. Forgive me. Only You can forgive and save me.*

## **Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 29 March 2021 Today's topic: Pretty Amazing**

*When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. Jonah 3:10 (NIV).*

Pretty amazing, don't you think? Ninevah deserves to be smacked down for all the flavors of evil it cherished, but they become repentant so God relents. All throughout the Old Testament that happened, from the Israelites in the desert to Amos' prophecies about Israel in exile, God called on His people to repent, and He relents when they repent.

Notice that God didn't change His mind. God forgave. God had compassion. God backed away from His righteous anger. But also don't overlook the fact that God didn't change His mind. Sin is still sin and still needs atonement. God called it out.

Yet He seeks healing. Sin is a breach of the relationship God made for us to enjoy with Him. He's holy, eternal, supernatural, and all love and justice. He doesn't want to keep that all to Himself, so He made mankind to share it with Him. To increase His glory by spreading His love around. Yet we chose sin. Adam chose it and every mortal who's followed chose the same, including me and you. No excuses: everyone has; everyone does.

Everyone except Jesus. Jesus, who is the only salvation for mankind, who is the only one to repair the breach, heal the relationship, save us from the spiritual damnation that is separation from God. Jesus Christ: the same Son of God who was God when Ninevah repented and its king declared the city would follow a better way. God didn't tolerate sin, then or now. But He did something bigger: He forgave it. He made the necessary atonement.

Sin is sin. It's not that God seeks vengeance. If you draw that conclusion from the Bible, I urge you to take another, more informed look. God doesn't seek revenge, but sin still needs to be accounted for; the spiritual books need to be reconciled. The books were squared at Calvary; the breach was healed on Easter.

With Ninevah, God relented from His anger and patiently, mercifully, used another day to get to the time when Jesus would make all things new. Thousands of years after that, it's still the case. The sacrifice Jesus made of Himself still atoned for all sins after, including ours. Ninevah repented and God suspended His promise to destroy them. The same is true for us. Our sins are ours and Jesus has already taken the punishment for them. Whether we accept that or not is the choice every person since His time has had to make. Pretty amazing, eh? No excuses now; will we repent?

For further reading: Exodus 32:14, Jeremiah 18:8, Amos 7:6, Jonah 4:1

*Dear Lord, what's amazing is Your forgiveness, Your patience, Your mercy. All praise to You for them.*

## **Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 30 March 2021 Today's topic: Leave a Mark**

*But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. Jonah 4:1 (NIV).*

Get ready, my friend, because this one is going to leave a mark. Jonah became angry at God because God didn't smack down the Ninevites. He got torqued off because God didn't rain down fire and brimstone at supremely wicked Ninevites. You know: the Ninevites who didn't kill Jonah as soon as he walked into the city and told them they were damned. The Ninevites who had a genuine change of heart and heartfully expressed it. You know the God: the one who drowned the Egyptians, crushed the prophets of Baal, and destroyed the temple of Dagon.

That God: He didn't punish Ninevah the way He said He would because Ninevah genuinely said "we're sorry." And that really pissed off Jonah.

Guess what? Take a look in the mirror, my friend, and you'll see Jonah there. He stares back at me, too.

It's nothing new, our pettiness and craven idolatry. That's what we're displaying when, like Jonah, we get ticked off when 'the other guy' doesn't get his comeuppance. It's God's fault; we blame God. When we do that, we're being petty and placing our opinions & our ideas above God's. It's like we're actually saying, "screw you, Jesus. I know better."

I'm guilty of it. You're guilty of it. It's the same guilt that plagued Adam and Eve because they were guilty of the same thing. To us, it's wrong when God doesn't do what we expect. And it seems extra wrong when God doesn't take out His anger on people who do wrong in our eyes. It's what Jonah thought.

But who am I to judge God? Who are you? Who was Jonah, or Adam or Eve? Let's, instead, put ourselves in the shoes (or sackcloth) of the Ninevites and praise God that He has deep mercy that we, as His humanity, have cast aside. Mind you, God didn't change His mind about Ninevah's sins (or ours). Sin is still sin. But God is also still God and shows His very good creation, mankind, far more love and mercy than mankind shows each other. If it had been left up to Jonah, Ninevah would have been struck down hard. Thank God that He's God and we aren't.

Face it: we're like the older brother of the prodigal, who got angry that their happy father threw a party when the wayward brother returned. We're like the vineyard workers who got angry with the vintner for paying the same wages to people who worked eleven hours less than they had. Face it: fish and all, we're Jonah. That one will leave a mark.

For further reading: Matthew 20:11, Luke 15:28, Jonah 4:2

*Lord Jesus, all praise to You for Your perfect mercy and love. Forgive me when I waste the love You give me.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 31 March 2021 Today's topic: Going My Way

*He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." Jonah 4:2-3 (NIV).*

This prayer takes some chutzpah. It really does. Jonah runs away from God because he's afraid, but then God gives him a second chance. So, Jonah does what God tells him to do, and the unexpected happens: all of Ninevah repents. And, now, Jonah is angry that God didn't smite Ninevah?

We hate it when bad things don't happen to good people, don't we?

Wait a minute! Isn't that supposed to be "when bad things (do) happen to good people? Sure. But Jonah hated it that something terrible didn't happen to Ninevah. He was counting on God favoring Israel, favoring Jonah, favoring the fact that He'd said He would wipe out this wicked city.

Chutzpah. Foolhardiness. Bold stupidity. Call it what you want: Jonah's blamed God for being kind.

Fast forward to now. I won't speak for you, but I've done this. I've held grudges. I've sought God's mercy and then been angry when other people who hurt me didn't get hurt later. I've held on to hate for people and judged others even when they didn't deserve it. I know better than God! I've been angry at God for not making things go my way.

Going my way, eh? How ironic that a great Bing Crosby movie (about a priest) is also the center of selfishness that made Jonah angry. That angers you and I today. It's no coincidence that "idolatry" starts with the letter, "i." Idolatry is nothing more than us putting ourselves in God's place. Worship me; pay attention to me; give me what I want.

Wipe out the Ninevites. Going my way, eh?

How quickly we and Jonah forget that, in addition to being the judge of all, God is a loving God of mercy and forgiveness. We want those things for ourselves, and when things don't go our way, we focus on ourselves. When things aren't going my way, I get angry. When that happens, it's time to stop, drop, and roll. Put out the fire that actually is going my way because I'm the one who started it. It's a fire of pride and jealousy and should have no home in a place where the peace of Christ has come to take up residence.

Jonah forgot that. In going our ways today, let's not do the same.

For further reading: Numbers 14:18, Job 7:15, Psalm 103:8, Jeremiah 20:7-8, Jonah 4:4

*Lord please forgive my stupid self. Forgive my idolatry and jealousy and selfishness.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 1 April 2021 Today's topic: Maundy Thursday Anger

*But the Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah 4:4 (NIV).*

Today is Maundy Thursday. If you aren't familiar with the events of today in Holy Week, today is the day when Jesus told His disciples to go talk to a man about a room. It's the day Judas made his final arrangements to betray Jesus. Thursday is the day of the Last Supper, when Jesus taught humanity about Holy Communion, doing this in remembrance of Him. And it's the day when Jesus led His disciples out to Gethsemane, to keep watch while He prayed: something they (naturally) ignored (by falling asleep). Today marks Jesus' last full day on earth as a man. It's a solemn day to remember.

Let me ask you this: knowing this now about the significance of today, is it right for you to be angry? Read the verse above and remember that it's a question God asked of Jonah, after Jonah got bent out of shape that God didn't go his way; that God didn't destroy Ninevah as Jonah thought God should. Did Jonah have a right to be angry? Any reasonable person would have to conclude "no."

But notice what God asked. God didn't ask "do you have a right to be angry?" No, God asked, "IS IT RIGHT for you to be angry?" The subtle play on words changes the whole question, don't you think? Instead of saying, "puny man, who are you to question God," God uses the phrase to have a teachable moment with Jonah. "Hey Jonah, is what you're thinking right? Is what you're wanting Godly? Are you sure you really want to act this way?"

Flash forward to here and now. Whatever is bugging you today, is it right for you to let it bug you? Is it right to hold a grudge? Is it right to judge the other guy's politics, or her words? Is it right to get frustrated at other people when you don't get your way? We aren't talking about any righteous reaction here: we're talking about our petty, sinful anger.

What do you think any reasonable person would conclude about that?

We know what God would conclude. When He had every reason to knock Jonah down a few notches, God opted to show love, to give mercy, to teach and reason with His very good creation. Think about your own life. Has God shown you great mercy? Today especially, when remembering the last day in the human story of Jesus Christ, perhaps God is asking you as well.

For further reading: Jonah 4:5

*Lord Jesus, it's wrong when I get angry and dwell on it. It's wrong of me to abuse righteous anger, to hold grudges, to hurt others. Have mercy on me, and teach me Your better ways.*

## **Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 5 April 2021 Today's topic: So, Now What?**

*Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. Jonah 4:5-6 (NIV).*

It's the day after Easter. In our family, yesterday was full of celebration, egg hunts, great food, and strong emotion. Church was celebratory and inviting, and fun. We should look forward to church, enjoy being there, right? It's not that Sunday worship is supposed to be fun and games, but who in their right mind actually thinks it should be a dirge, either? Especially on the day when we celebrate Jesus walking out of His tomb, alive and kicking. What's the point of Easter if we don't celebrate in joy?

Then, last night, we watched the season premiere of "The Chosen." If you haven't watched this show, go do it soon. It's the story of Jesus, told in a fresh way that resonates right now. It's an interpretation of the Gospels that is true to them without being preachy or boring. And, it is a new take on Jesus as God and man together that I wish more of our churches could grasp and present. Joy with gravity; serious topics with love and peace; something very old but very new as well.

Indeed, going forward from this Easter, perhaps Jesus is calling us to present Him in our lives in a new way. Part of the meaning of Easter is that we aren't supposed sulk like Jonah, even though it seems we do just that. We blame God when we don't get our way; we hold onto anger. Jesus put all that behind us when He walked out of that tomb. He's given us a new day and a fresh chance, an unwritten opportunity to do better in how we live for Him. Not unto us but because of Him.

God gives us good shelter; in fact, He gives us everything. Jonah was thankful for the shelter, even while he sat under it all pissed off at God. He was celebrating what he didn't deserve, and Jesus hadn't even been born yet. So, now what? How about thanking Jesus for what He gives us by using it for His work today. How about some joy? I'm so thankful for a restful, fun Easter, and for enriching entertainment, and for this place to share His words on my heart. And for shelter. And for you. Now, let's get moving. We've sat in the shade long enough, and there's joyous work to be done.

For further reading: Jonah 4:7

*Risen Savior, thank You for all You give, for shelter, for holidays, for resurrection.*



## **Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 6 April 2021 Today's topic: How Quickly Things Change**

*But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. Jonah 4:7 (NIV).*

I'm growing tomatoes in a container garden at my house. I don't want to plant a permanent garden in the house where I live, but I still want to grow some vegetables. So, a few months ago, I started tomatoes and several kinds of peppers from seed, and the tomatoes are big enough to put outside. They've been outside since late last week, but now one of them has wilt and what looks to be some kind of blight on them. How quickly things change.

That's just like the time when I was on a project in Wisconsin. It was a tough place to work, with lots of political infighting and poor leadership at the top. Yet I led a small team that brought a project from behind to on-schedule and under budget in just a little over six weeks. One Monday morning (the day after Easter, in fact) I woke up and was unable to stand. True confession: I'd had a LOT to drink the day before and thought it could just be a hangover. But it didn't get better as the day wore on, and I was unable to travel to Wisconsin that week. In fact, I could barely walk because my something was wrong with my equilibrium. That was the start of troubles for me on the project. A few weeks later, I was replaced by a CIO who had been gunning for me anyway. Flash forward a year and I learned that there was a brain tumor pressing on my auditory nerve. Nobody could have known it was even happening. But how quickly things change.

That's like when Jonah was upset at God for not smiting Ninevah. Jonah walked out of the city and found a cool place to pout (and hopefully watch Ninevah be destroyed by fire and brimstone). A vine soon grew up to cover Jonah's shelter, and he got to cool down in the shade. But now we learn that a worm started munching on the vine and the cooling vine began to wither, depriving Jonah of his shade. Everybody say it with me: "awwww." Poor, poor, pitiful Jonah. And, how quickly things change.

Know what doesn't change? God. In fact, God sent the worm to teach Jonah a lesson. You could actually look at the worm as a messenger of mercy. God could have smacked Jonah, but, instead, He used the vine and the worm for a teachable moment. Tell me friend, have things quickly changed and what did you learn? Where have the worms eaten your shelter to teach you a lesson or two? How quickly are things changing?

For further reading: Joel 1:12, Jonah 4:8

*Merciful God, thank You for the moments and ways in which You teach me!*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 7 April 2021 Today's topic: Need a Snickers

*When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead." Jonah 4:8-9 (NIV).*

So, it turns out, this was another miracle. Earlier, I speculated that Jonah could have been outside Ninevah for several weeks, allowing for natural growth of a vine to shade him. But I was wrong. The vine grew and withered in the space of a day. Perhaps it was like kudzu, which literally grows inches or even feet in a week. Or acacia, a tree found in the area around Ninevah, which can grow 30 feet in a year. But for it to happen in a day? That's a miracle. To me, though, the far bigger miracle is God's patience and mercy with Jonah.

In these verses, Jonah acts like a petulant child, or an American journalist. He's angry about his situation and God's apparent indifference to his emotions. He's angry that his shade-plant died. He's angry that he's still alive, 'suffering' through all this. And he's angry that God won't make his wish come true.

Like the TV commercial says, Jonah needs a Snickers bar.

He's being a jerk of (literally) Biblical proportions. He's throwing a tantrum so severe that it's recorded for all posterity. And he's personally interacting with the God of Genesis and has the temerity enough to challenge Him.

What is God's reaction? He offers Jonah the Snickers. He continues to reason with him, tries to teach him instead of bringing down the punishment Jonah deserves.

Reality check: it's not even 7 AM here on the fruited plain and I'm already guilty of trying God's patience. My sins aren't many yet this morning, but they're there; I've done them even if only in my mind. I've rebelled against God in my thoughts, and I've put myself in His place when I had no right to...just like Jonah. Just like you.

Ok, we need a whole box of Snickers.

Tasty as that would be, however, there's a better way. It's the one God was working to convince Jonah to take. Stop. Pray. Repent. Advance. Let go and let God, and trust that He knows what He's doing even if it isn't what we'd do. That way, when we have the candy bar, it's a treat and not a reality check. That way, we don't overlook the patient and true miracles God puts in our lives every day.

For further reading: Jonah 4:10

*Lord God, thank You for Your holy patience with me. I don't deserve it on my own, but You give to me anyway.*

## Practical Proverbial, from Jonah, 8 April 2021 Today's topic: God's Q&A

*But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" Jonah 4:10-11 (NIV).*

Here ends the book of Jonah on 'an evaluator note,' which is an old Air Force reference. It means that we have sufficient information, that we know enough to make an informed decision. The book of Jonah ends suddenly, with God questioning Jonah about things Jonah should already know. It's God giving Jonah the reality check, the Snickers bar, the second chance of second chances. "You're concerned about a simple plant, Jonah, so shouldn't I be concerned about people?"

That's not surprising.

Go read the book of Job, chapters 38 through 41. You'll find God reasoning with someone there as well. After Job's friends have beaten him down for being the unwitting victim in a devil's game, Job demands an answer from God. God's answer? "Not so fast, Mr. Big Stuff?" Instead of punishing Job for overstepping his bounds, God questions him, lets Job come to the best conclusion for his insubordination.

That isn't the only time it happens. Go read up about Moses on Sinai. Or Elijah in the cleft of the rock. Go read up on how God went to Cain when sin was clouding the firstborn's heart, before he murdered his brother. When man seems desperate, he questions God, even insults God. But God knows man inside and out, so God is willing to get to the nub of an issue to help heal instead of hurt. It's what love does.

In today's verses, God is questioning Jonah to reason with him, to give him yet another chance. If Jonah is concerned about one insignificant plant, then shouldn't God be concerned with the lives of 120,000 people? If Jonah is petulant over losing something free that he valued, shouldn't God be more concerned about the spiritual destiny of thousands of His very good creations in Ninevah?

The most amazing part of it is that the ultimate answer to God's own questions is delivered centuries later, on the cross, when Jesus says, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Three days after Easter and here at the end of Jonah, THAT is the thing God was trying to get Jonah to understand.

It's a thing I hope you and I understand today. You have enough information. Next time, we'll meet one of the major prophets.

For further reading: Genesis 4:6-7, 1 Kings 19, Job 38-41, Daniel 1:1

*Lord God, thank You for the account of Jonah, for Your teaching and Your mercy. Teach me to share them today.*