

The Amazing Jonah - Part 2: Asleep at the Wheel

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, Exploring My Strange Bible. I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last 20 years' worth of lectures and sermons where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith—and I hope this can all be helpful for you too. I also helped start this thing called the Bible Project. We make animated videos, podcasts, and classes about all kinds of topics in the Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at BibleProject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

Alright, we are continuing in this series. We're exploring the book of the ancient prophet Jonah. Again, this was a teaching series I did at Door of Hope Church, back in 2013. And in the second message, we're exploring the central part of chapter one: how Jonah is set up as God's own prophet, yet the only person in the book who refuses to really listen to God. But everything else in creation, both human and non-human, is very aware and listening to God in this story.

This second message explores how Jonah is a figure who is “asleep at the wheel”. Namely, he is deaf to God and to every means God uses to communicate with him. I think the story invites us to reflect on our own lack of perception and awareness of how God might be trying to get through to us. It's a very challenging story. I was really challenged, both in preparing for and in realizing what was going on in the story, and then in giving this message. So I hope it can open up the story of Jonah for you. Let's dive in and explore.

We're continuing this series in the book of Jonah. And you remember, I kind of pitched this whole thing as a rescue effort. We were battling, I guess, what I call the “VeggieTales factor” with this book. And so, the “VeggieTales factor” is the strange thing children's media has done to the Bible in our culture, making the stories very familiar to us. At the same time, they have watered them all down and turned them into bland, moral lessons about how to be a nice person, or something like that. And so, this is a rescue effort. We're clearing the vegetation away that's covered over the book in our culture, and we're discovering what a disturbing and challenging book this is.

To recap, last week, I kind of helped us see that this story is quite surprising in how it's told and that it's even in the Bible. It's the only book in the Bible that tells the story of a prophet. It's not a book of the prophet's words; it's a story about a really horrible person, actually. And that story offers a profound message to God's people. It's a unique kind of story that I characterize as “comic” or “comic satire.” It's an ancient comic book/Saturday Night Live skit bundled up into one.

And Jonah is this representative character. He represents the covenant people of God, and he's a horrible, horrible, hypocritical, hateful person. That's what Jonah is. The storyteller just rakes him over the coals in front of our eyes. Especially in chapter one, I mean, we're going to get a

kick out of it. It's really quite funny how ridiculous he is. And everything's upside down in this book, and everything's crazy and extreme. And the bad guys are actually the good guys, and the good guy is actually the bad guy. No one behaves according to their stereotype. And all of it is aimed at critiquing the worst tendencies that form in the hearts and minds of God's people—of judgmentalism or pride, or as we're going to see this week—spiritual apathy, spiritual slumber. This chapter is all about either being asleep or being awake, essentially.

So remember I said, Surgeon General's Warning: punch in the gut number two. This book packs a wallop, so get ready for the pain. To kind of orient us in chapter one, part of it is that, for some of us, these stories become so familiar that it's difficult to read them as if it's the first time and to see them with new eyes or from a different perspective. So let me give us an entry point with the story, and then I'll help us frame what we'll focus on in chapter one. Let me show you a picture of Google Maps. This has nothing to do with Jonah, but everything to do with Jonah at the same time.

So what this is, you can see “B” maybe over here on the left, a little green dot? That is where you're sitting right now. This is Southeast Portland. So we're at “B.” And “A” is where I live. And in between—the blue line there—is my daily bike commute. And so one of my dreams, one of the things I wanted to do when we moved back here to Portland and became part of Door of Hope about a year and a half ago, was to embrace the culture of bike commuting because I just love it. I don't know. I love that Portland celebrates bike commuting. I think it's wonderful. Sometimes I cross the Hawthorne Bridge on Wednesdays to go meet someone, every Wednesday, and like 8:45, and I'm like the 1500th bicyclist across the bridge—at 8:45. And I'm like, “I love this city. This is the best city on the planet.”

Anyway, so this is part of living the dream, so to speak. I live off 51st and Division, so there goes my daily bike commute. I make this at least once a day, there and back again. It's 2.3 miles, as you can see here. 12 minutes is pretty accurate. So the longest stretch—you can see it right there, kind of at the beginning —is along Lincoln Street. It's one of these bike highways. Do you guys know about the bike highways in Portland? Wonderful. They're so great. So what the city's done is actually great: these bike highways run parallel to main arteries through the city, but they're off the main drag, so it's safer for bikes. So they put in the speed bumps that drivers hate, so cars don't really like to go there. And they put huge pictures, painted with big bicycles on the street, so you can't mistake where you are: you're on a bike highway. They've rigged all the stop signs so that they face all the side streets. So you can just cruise. I mean, you can just go and never have to stop, except when you come to the main arteries like 39th, Caesar Chavez, or something else. And so, it's great! These are totally wonderful. What's also interesting, though, is... So basically, you know, once I hit Lincoln, like, that's it. I have to make one stop, and it's kind of a long stretch, and then I zigzag in across Hawthorne and over.

Now, why am I showing this to you? Because something strange has started to happen.

I've been doing this back and forth once a day, sometimes twice a day, if we have something going on here in the evening. And something has started to happen. I thought I'd share it because I'm pretty sure this is a very common experience. So maybe I might cross 39th, or I start zigzagging over towards Hawthorne. And, somewhere along the way, I might come to—I have to cross Hawthorne, so there's often traffic in the mornings or something. So I have to be aware. It's like I “come to” somewhere around 30th or something, and I'm just like, “I have no memory of the last five minutes. What just happened? I passed downtown already. I guess I did. I don't remember that, but I guess”—do you guys know what I'm talking about here? Have you ever done this?

So maybe for you, this might be driving. You're driving your daily commute, your daily routine, your route. And you're just like, I have no memory of the last three minutes. It's like, what just happened? I just drove five miles, and I don't even know what happened. It's this weird experience. The human body and psyche are so amazing because we can do really sophisticated, physical operations, but can also be completely mentally checked out. I think it's really amazing. It's also scary at the same time because you're operating a motor vehicle, for goodness' sake. And I'm riding a bike. This is the most dangerous thing I do in a day, and you do too, and we're checked out for half of the drive. And so, of course, if a squirrel, a cat, or a person came, you know, you would stop and be alert, I would hope. But it's bizarre. You're awake, but you're not awake.

Because how many of you know exactly what I'm talking about here? This happens to us, especially in parts of our lives that become routine. They become kind of dull or uninteresting to us. And so we just, for all intents and purposes, we just kind of check out. And it's not just when operating any kind of vehicle. It happens around the house, too. This has also happened, but it's kind of a shameful story to tell; but I'm trying to work on it. So, laundry is a very big part of my life right now. Two tiny little boys, cloth diapers; it's a lot of diapers to wash, you know. Our laundry unit is actually out the back of our apartment, and they have to go to a separate entrance to a little storage area down below. I make that trip a lot, just a lot. And sometimes I will, like, come back. I'm like coming in the back door, and, once again, you “come to,” and you're like, “What just happened? Like, did I turn the machine on? Did I turn the washing machine on? Did I put the clothes in? Did I just go down there? I think I did, I think I just went down there.” And so I'll go down, and like the soap dispenser will be open, and I didn't put any soap in, but I put the clothes in and turned it on, or something. It's not funny to my wife at all, but it's funny to me because it'll be like, “What's up with the laundry?” And I'll go down an hour later and no progress or whatever. So they've been wet, but there's no soap on them.

So this happens to us. You guys know what I'm talking about? Am I alone here? Not alone. Okay. So this is not just how some of us live, drive, or whatever. This goes much deeper, and it's precisely the kind of dynamic I think that Jonah chapter one is exposing for us. Some of us live perpetually in the state of disengagement, right? It's like 80% of your life, you know, and you're like, where did the last three months go? I don't know, whatever. And you keep on going. And that's how some of us feel about our lives. That's how many of us are in our spiritual lives, too. Maybe you've been a Christian for a while, and maybe at one point you had kind of a sense of

alertness, a wakefulness to your life and your connection with Jesus. And you know, you felt like the Scripture spoke to you, or prayer was a meaningful practice for you. But at some point, that just kind of fizzled, and you're just kind of cruising, and totally say, "I'm a Christian," but the love's gone or whatever. And you're like, "Why did it happen? I don't know why that happened."

There are lots of reasons for it. Sometimes it's seasons of life.

You know, Eugene Peterson has this great line: the journey of following Jesus is a long obedience in the same direction. There are a couple of book clubs around here reading that book this summer.

That's exactly what it's like. Not all of life is thrilling and exciting. And yes, of course, we get that. But there is something real that's been lost when I don't sense any kind of vitality in my connection with Jesus.

Maybe some of you have never had that experience before. We might get there through seasons of life. We might also end up in that place because of decisions that we've made. There may be small decisions. Maybe they're bad, unwise decisions. Maybe they're bad moral decisions. We know they're compromises, but you know how we justify these kinds of things. And then we find ourselves three months later down this road of decisions. And we're like, "How did I get here? What's happened over the last three months? And like, how am I doing this? How did this happen?" —It's not rocket science. There's a slow process of decisions that landed you at a place of spiritual apathy, of being asleep at the wheel. All of a sudden, things that you never thought you would be thinking or doing, all of a sudden, are part of your life.—Now, how did I get here?—You're asleep at the wheel.

This is an experience we all have.

Jonah chapter one, really, it's like a portrait of spiritual apathy. It's a portrait exploring why and how, and what's happening to us when we're spiritually asleep at the wheel, and the tragedy that really is. It's not uplifting, necessarily, but it's good for us to hear. It's like eating your vegetables. So, it's Jonah chapter one. You guys with me with this image here? Sleep is the big image in Jonah chapter one. So let's dive in. We'll watch Jonah fall asleep at the wheel here. So, back in the first sentence, we'll kind of cruise our way through.

"So the word of the LORD that came to Jonah, son of Amittai." Two things: Remember when you see "LORD," in all capital letters in the Old Testament, that's the English translators reminding you that, in Hebrew, what's there is not just the generic word "God," but the divine name, personal name, "Yahweh," covenant God of Israel. It's going to be important as the story goes on.

"So the word of Yahweh that came to Jonah, son of Amittai." Jonah means "dove, son of faithfulness." You're supposed to laugh because he's not an innocent dove, and he's the least faithful character in this entire story.

“The word of Yahweh came to [Dove, son of faithfulness], ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me.’” So God is surveying His world. He sees these horrible acts of oppression and injustice and violence arising out of the capital city of the Assyrian Empire.—We’ll explore more of that here in a couple of weeks, when he actually goes to Nineveh, chapter three.—God wants to send His messenger to confront and name the injustice that’s happening. And what does God’s messenger do? What does “innocent dove” do? He runs away from Yahweh, headed for Tarshish. “He went down to Joppa. He found a ship bound for that port after paying the fare. He went aboard, and he sailed for Tarshish, to flee from Yahweh.” We explored this last week.

Now, just to kind of put a map up here, just to remind you of what’s happening here. As he flees to Tarshish, so he’s supposed to go east to Nineveh. Instead, he goes as far west as was humanly possible in the ancient world, right? Tarshish was on the edge of the known world, before you get to the Atlantic. So, you’re supposed to chuckle. He’s going as far as you could possibly go from Nineveh at that time. The first step he has to take is to go south. Israel is in the northern hill country of Israel. He has to go south to Joppa. It’s a little detail that’s important. We’ll see it in a second. So he goes south to Joppa, hops on a boat to flee. Verse four, let’s pick it up.

So then, “Yahweh sent a great wind on the sea. Such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.” This is another little comic image here. The word “threatened” or some of you have “the ship was about to break up.” In Hebrew, the ship is animated. It’s like a character in the story. So, literally it’s: “and the ship pondered breaking up into pieces.” Like, the ship is actually thinking, “Should I stay together? Should I stay apart? I don’t know. The storm’s pretty intense.” That’s the idea here; you’re supposed to chuckle. Our English translations kind of cover it up a little bit, but that’s the ship; it actually has a brain in this line.

So the ship was pondering breaking into pieces, and all the sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his own god. They even threw the cargo into the sea so they could lighten the ship.” So Yahweh pursues His man with a severe mercy. So we might think, “Oh, here’s the Old Testament God again. Throwing lightning bolts at people or whatever.” No. Remember the bigger picture. God wants to send Jonah to speak to the Ninevites so they can repent and find forgiveness and life. It’s God’s mission to reach people and rescue them that’s pursuing Jonah. This is a severe love. This is like the love of a parent chasing after their child who’s going to bring their own ruin if someone doesn’t intervene. That’s the image here. This is not the volatile—that’s a different God. It’s not the God of the Bible—the volatile, perpetually ticked off God who’s just waiting to squash you. It’s a different God. It’s not the God of the Scriptures. And so, this is the God of a fierce love who pursues His disobedient prophet.

So the sailors, look at what the sailors are doing. I mean, are the sailors asleep? No. Oh, they’re wide awake, right? So they’re yelling, or you can just imagine, they’re throwing their own livelihood over the side. They’re throwing the cargo. That’s a lost mission now. They’ve lost all their money, because this is what they were carrying. Notice they’re awake and alert to what’s

happening here. What are they doing? They're afraid. They're throwing cargo, but what else are they doing? They're praying, aren't they? To whom are they praying? All kinds of different gods; each to his own God.

So first of all, they are alert enough to recognize that this isn't a typical storm and that divine powers are at work here. Now, within their polytheistic worldview, they believed in the existence of hundreds, thousands of gods across all the different realms of life. So they do the shotgun approach to prayer, which is what you do if you're a polytheist. You shout out prayers to as many gods as you can. You know, you take that one, you take that one. "Hey, Jimmy—that one; Johnny—that one," you know? Hopefully, we'll hit the right one, right? Because we don't know which one is angry with us, and that is the perpetual state you live in a polytheistic worldview. You could offend any of the gods at any moment, and you don't know. They might throw a lightning bolt at you. That's very much a part of a polytheist worldview. And so they're like, "Well, okay, let's just call on all the gods and just see what happens then."

But what's Jonah doing? So all this frenetic activity: calling, praying, cargo overboard. All afraid, yelling, and so on. And the contrast, the prophet, man of God, what's he doing? He's asleep.

"Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep." Now, there's a wordplay that's kind of a little red thread through this first part of the chapter here, that's all about this language of Jonah going down, down. Now, where did he go to get to Joppa? What did it say? "He went down." He went south here. And, actually, you can just trace the language here in verse three: "He went down to Joppa." And then, some of our translations have, "he went aboard the ship." Literally, in Hebrew, it says, "he went down to Joppa. He went down into the ship." Verse five, "he went below the deck into the depths of the ship. And there he went down, lay down in a deep..." So here's this image of the prophet, man of God. The pagan sailors are very alert to the fact that there is a divine mysterious power at work, and where's the religious man of God? He's slowly descending into a state of literal and spiritual slumber.

And this is a very powerful portrait that the author develops here with this repetition of down, down, down. He's depicting Jonah's sin here as something that has led him to this kind of numb, deadened, unaware state. Asleep at the wheel. And so, last week, remember what Jonah's basic failure is here with his sin? Sin is that God has given him a call to go participate in God's story of His grace, reaching more and more kinds of people, confronting humans in their oppression and injustice and wickedness, and offering mercy and grace. And Jonah ran from that. Why did he run? Remember, he's not afraid. He hates Ninevites. That's why. And he knows that somehow Yahweh is going to find a way to bring them to repentance so that they will be forgiven. And Jonah thinks the world is a much better place with the Ninevites, who are not forgiven and who get annihilated, or something like that. Jonah thinks he knows better than God, and he acts accordingly. So that's his failure, his sin. What this choice does is, all of a sudden, make him descend into this stupor. It's like his sin becomes like a sleep drug. It makes him less; it's a growing separation between him and God. And all of a sudden, he's in this scenario where there's havoc and threats of danger and death or whatever. He's just blissfully

unaware of what's going on in his own life. This is a huge image here. It's ridiculous to us. We're like, who would fall asleep on a ship at sea?

All I can think of—We have a month-and-a-half-old son, and when he does sleep, he really crashes. I mean, you could put a jackhammer next to his head, and he is out, you know? And so, yes, I suppose, you know, Jonah could fall asleep, and it's stormy at sea, but there's much more going on. This is an image of his sin and what's happening to him on the inside, spiritually.

Who suffers as a result of Jonah's spiritual apathy? How's Jonah doing? He's great. He's sleeping like a baby. You know what I mean? Who's suffering as a result of his bad decisions? Everyone around him—the sailors. This is very insightful. I say, in other words, his sin is selfishness. He knows better than God and everyone else. And he acts accordingly. This has led him to a state where he's totally unaware of the people around him, even though he's bringing ruin to them. Jonah has become a relational wrecking ball in the lives of the people around him. He's so unaware and dulled by his apathy. He's totally unaware that this is what's taking place.

This is such a profound image, I think, of the nature of sin and its consequences in our lives. This is only one story, one passage among many in the scriptures that highlight this. And we hear this as Westerners, and we're like, it's kind of weird. And it's because our view of morality is very individual-centered. You know, we were raised in this culture that essentially says, “Your moral decisions and your moral compass, it's kind of a choose-your-own-adventure. But as long as you don't hurt anybody and everybody's consenting, then whatever, it's morally permissible.” Jiminy Cricket, “Let your conscience be your guide.”

That's kind of the way our culture operates here. And so, what happens in Las Vegas? It stays there. What do you mean? It's just your private decision. You know, it doesn't involve anybody else. No one else can say that's wrong for you, because it's what you want to do. Nobody's hurt, and so on. We have this very privatized, individualized moral worldview, where, if it's right for you, it's right for you. What the Scriptures do, and you don't even have to be religious to agree with this... What the Scriptures do is, in Jonah 1, just expose that: it's just utterly naive and simplistic.

The Bible's account of human decisions—our moral decisions, and how they affect other people— is profound and sophisticated. So you have to respond to our Western culture and say: You're telling me that every moral decision that I make, just like every moral decision Jonah's making in this story, is one small brick in a huge wall, and that wall is forming who you are as a person, and your character. And you're telling me that a thousand little moral decisions aren't eventually going to form you into the kind of person who, after making a thousand bad moral decisions or small moral compromises, eventually you will come to the thousand-and-first decision that finally spills over the banks of your own life and ruin somebody else's? Are you with me?

It's just utterly naive to think that my own moral decisions just affect me. That's so ridiculous. Our lives are so much more interconnected than that. You can see this, I think, through the humor and the irony of when sex scandals break the news. So, of course, you know, Portland government, we just had another one break the news. Did you guys follow this over the last few weeks? American culture is so silly about this because we're bathed in sexual imagery and media more than any culture on the face of the planet. But we're also really prudish at the same time because when our leaders have these affairs or sex scandals, we're like, "Oh, I can't believe they would behave that way." And they get totally lampooned in the public media.

Are you actually surprised that someone makes these kinds of choices? Are we really surprised? Are you kidding me? How is everyone not making these decisions based on how we all grew up? You know what I'm saying?

So what Jonah 1 is trying to tell us is that Jonah's decisions are not just his own decisions. And how does a person become a wrecking ball in other people's lives? It's a thousand small compromises. What was at first just a private decision between Jonah and his God, all of a sudden wreaks havoc in the lives of other people, and he's so checked out. He's so self-absorbed. He's not even aware that he's a force of ruin in other people's stories. It's the tragedy of falling asleep at the wheel, spiritually and morally.

It only gets more intense. Look at verse six.

So, who has to go wake him up? The captain of this ship. This is a great moment in the story. "So the captain went to him and said, 'How can you sleep? Get up, call on your God. I mean, maybe your God will take notice of us, so that we will not perish.'" Maybe Jonah's God will notice them. Do you get it?

Does Jonah's God notice them? Very much so. In fact, the whole reason they're in this mess is because Jonah's God already notices them, right? This is ironic in so many ways because he's a prophet. He has received and spoken the very word of Yahweh before. And yet, he has to be reminded to do something as simple as pray. By whom? By this pagan, polytheistic sailor, you know? Who doesn't know Yahweh from anybody else? He was like, "Well, call on your God. We didn't shotgun yours. So let's try your God," you know? And so, that's the sailor's rebuke to the prophet man of God.

Let's keep going.

Verse seven: "So then the sailors said to each other, 'Okay, prayer is not working. Lightening the cargo's not working. This guy's sleeping, and that didn't work.' So they said to each other, 'Let's cast lots to find out who's responsible for this calamity.'" So casting, it's like ancient dice-rolling. In many cultures, and still today, even in ancient Israelite culture, it was the way to discern the will of the gods. So they're like, "We prayed and threw the cargo overboard. What do we do? I guess roll the dice, right? Maybe there's an unknown god, and he'll reveal his ways to us." And ironically, it works, doesn't it? Because they cast the lots, and who wins the lottery? Wouldn't

you know it! Wouldn't you know it! It fell on Jonah. You won the lottery or lost. It depends on your point of view.

So they asked him. They said, "Okay, well, tell us—who's responsible for making all this trouble for us? I mean, what kind of work do you do?" It has always struck me as funny that they ask him what kind of work he does. Like, what does that have to do with anything? "What do you do for a living?" They're so worked up here.

Again, this contrast, you could almost picture him yawning, sleepy, like, "What, what is? Sorry? What's that? What?" They're so aware and alert to what's happening. "Who's responsible for this? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? Where's your country from? What people are you?"

He gives a dry, one-line answer. He says, "I'm a Hebrew." So he gives his ethnic identity. He answers one of their questions, and he says next, "I'm a Hebrew, and I worship Yahweh. You know, the God of heaven. He's the one who made the sea and the dry land. I worship Yahweh, the God of heaven. He's the God who has power over the sea and who I'm running from on a boat." Come on, come on! It's a good one. It's a good one, isn't it? That's pretty good. That's pretty good.

There are a few other things. Some of your English translations don't have "I worship Yahweh." What do they read? "I fear Yahweh." This is the Hebrew phrase. It's familiar from the book of Proverbs, or wisdom literature, "the fear of Yahweh." So it's about this deep reverence and awe, but also a really healthy fear of someone you're accountable to. Not because you think they're a jerk, but because you really, really respect them.

My dad was a graphic designer and a car painter here in Southeast, and he had a huge cabinet of Krylon spray paint for all my years growing up. I had a very healthy fear, especially when I was 14, skateboarding, graffiti art, that whole thing was very popular. But I knew that my dad counted his Krylon cans, and I had a very healthy fear. Even though there was a whole world of graffiti art to be had from all of that. No, I didn't touch it because I had a fear. Not because I thought he was a jerk, but because I knew he loved me and was very aware of my behavior. I was accountable to him.

So get this. Jonah says, "I'm a Hebrew, you know, one of the covenant people of God. And I fear Yahweh, the God of heaven, the one who made the sea and the dry land." And you, the reader, are thinking, "No, you don't. No, you don't. You don't fear Yahweh. What is this? This religious, babble, bullshine." That's what this is. Really? This is the height of religious hypocrisy. We're supposed to be, I think we're supposed to be scandalized that he would even say something like this. "What are you talking about? You don't fear Yahweh at all." And we can just see it right here. We can see that his words and his religious confession of faith are in deep contradiction to the choices that he's been making. And the author just leaves us with this. It's rich, isn't it?

The whole story up to this point, the storyteller is just feeding us this horribly hateful, hypocritical man, you know, and we're just taking it in. We're like, this is great. What a great story. I can't believe this guy. I can't believe anybody would actually behave this way. I'm sure I wouldn't. Oh, oh, dang it. Right? And there you go. You fell into the trap. The very fact that you start to feel a little superior to Jonah means you're falling right into his trap. Because what he's doing with the story is just holding a mirror right up to your face, and you say, "Oh, really?" Yeah, you've never had a contradiction between what you say you believe and how you actually live? Really, really? Are you really superior to Jonah? Congratulations. You must be asleep at the wheel if you really believe that about yourself.

The sailors can see the contradiction. Holy cow! Look at verse 10. It gets even better. This is funny. He says, "I'm a Hebrew, and I fear Yahweh." And we're like, "No, you don't." And what's the sailors' response when he says, "I fear Yahweh." They were terrified. They're deeply afraid. They asked, "What have you done?" And then the storyteller whispers in our ears: "They knew he was running away from Yahweh, because he had already told them that." What? What does that even mean? He's transporting us back—it's the little Wayne's world. He's transporting him back to the port where he boarded the ship in the first place. And this is really sophisticated, what he's getting at here. So there's a little scene on the port, and you can just imagine if you've been through customs, immigration, that kind of thing, like: "Reasons for travel, where are you headed?" "Oh, to Tarshish." "Where are you going?" You know, "Business or pleasure?" "Well, neither, really, you know, I guess...I'm running from Yahweh, my God." You know, and whatever, you know—sanctified imagination., "I've never heard that one, but welcome aboard. All right. You paid your fare. So come on, come on aboard." They're polytheists. They're like "Yahweh, I guess, is his personal God or something. I don't know. He's got an issue with his God, whatever. He paid the fare. So get him aboard."

But now they realize, "You're, wait, you told us you're running from your God, and Yahweh is the God who has power over the sea, and you're running from him on our boat. What do you think you're doing? What do you think you're doing?!" You guys, this is one of the most tragic ironies at this part of the story. This happens multiple times in the Bible, because it's often people who are entirely outside the people of God who can see on full display the deep contradiction between what God's people say they believe and how they actually behave.

Here's what's actually even more fascinating, of course, as you're going to see throughout the story, is Jonah an imperfect witness to the God he says he believes in? Is he imperfect? Very imperfect. He does a very bad job of pointing to his God. Is God limited to how successful Jonah is as a perfect witness to God? Is God limited to using Jonah and bringing people to Himself? Just tuck that away back there.

So he goes on this: "What do you think that you're doing?" So the sea gets rougher and rougher, verse 11. And they asked him, "Well, what should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?" "Uh, pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "It'll become calm. I know that it's

my fault that this great storm has come upon you.” This is brilliant. There are two ways you could take his words, and no one saw this coming. So what should we do? “Kill me. Throw me over. Kill me.” Whoa. That’s an interesting response. So, how are we supposed to take that? Well, it could be that he’s had a real change of heart. This is the first awareness of others. Like, “Oh my gosh, what have I done to other people? Oh, no. Like what? Okay, I made my choice. I got to get what’s coming to me. Time to pay the piper.” That could be what he means by that.

If you read commentaries, people are back and forth on this. He could also have actually been running even further from God. What would be the surest way that he could escape from having to go to Nineveh? Die. And this would not be out of character because he’s going to request to die again in chapter four, because he’d rather die than live with and obey a God like Yahweh. Could it be that he’s actually further hardening his heart? He would rather die than obey God and acknowledge what’s really going on here? The storyteller doesn’t make it clear. He just kind of leaves it there. I think this is actually intentional on the storyteller’s part because it gets you to really look deep into human motives and why we do the things that we do. Even when we confess and are aware of the wrong that we’ve done, are we really fully aware of how screwed up we are?

I don’t even understand the motives of my own heart sometimes, much less somebody else’s. So he’s bringing us into this here. We know what the sailors think about it. They think this is a horrible idea. Look at verse 13. The men are like, “No way.” So they did their best to row back to land. But they couldn’t because the sea grew even more wild than before.

This is my opinion: If Jonah really was having a change of heart here, why didn’t he just say, “Okay, I give up God, I’ll just go back to Nineveh now”? He says, “Toss me over.” And they’re like, “Bad idea. No, that’s bad.” But they can’t go back. So something’s happening with Jonah that’s making it impossible for them to go back. Verse 14, then the sailors cried out to whom? Verse 5, when the storm first hit, who are they crying out to? All the different gods. Now they’ve had this experience, and they have come to a place, as we’re going to see, where they recognize that there is only one God who has power over sea and land, the most powerful God. Who’s the only God who can rescue us now? It’s Yahweh. Something has changed inside these sailors. Now they are recognizing Yahweh, and this is ironic.

This is the first prayer offered to Yahweh in the chapter. And who does it not come from? Jonah. Who does it come from? These pagan sailors, and they’re cluing into what’s going on here. So they cried out to Yahweh, “Please Yahweh, don’t let us die for taking this man’s life. We don’t want to. It’s his idea. Don’t hold us accountable for killing this innocent man. He hasn’t done anything wrong against us. You, Lord, you’ve done as you please.” I mean, you can just see it. They’re just like, “We don’t know. Yahweh, you’re powerful, and you can save us. So I guess we’re going to do this, even though we don’t want to.”
“They took Jonah, threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this, the men greatly feared”—whom?

Who only says he fears Yahweh? Jonah. Who actually fears Yahweh? The pagan sailors, right?

“And they offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows to him.” This is astounding because if you're burning up like two whole goats or a cow, this requires a very large fire. Yes? So you need a big altar and a big, huge fire. Are you going to make a fire that size on the deck of your wooden ship? No, so implied here: They get back to land, they find a Yahweh temple, and everything's dedicated to Yahweh here. They offer sacrifices. They make vows to him. They become dedicated followers of Yahweh from now on. And so, despite the very imperfect, hypocritical behavior of God's people in the story, something has happened within these sailors: God is still capable of bringing people to himself. But is that license for us to behave like Jonah? That would be the most idiotic thing you could get from the story, you know what I'm saying? So, because not only will it go badly, it's going to go badly for you. Like it's just not going to go well for you, much less for other people, as you become a wrecking ball in their lives because you're so tuned out.

Here's the greatest tragedy, I think, of Jonah chapter one. You have God's own prophet, his own covenant man, and he's so tuned out and apathetic and asleep because of his sin. He's not even aware that all these other people around him are totally alert and alive, and that God's doing amazing things right around him. He can't even see it. He's so turned in on himself, in his own little deal, so he misses being a part of this conversion of the sailors around him because all he's thinking about is himself; totally tuned out.

I can't think of a more accurate depiction of what spiritual apathy and spiritual slumber look like for us. It's the basic idea. Somehow, American Christianity has fostered this system where, you know, you've got the grace card, and so you're covered there for the thing that happens after you die. So that's done. Cool. And so, whatever, kind of grin-and-bear-it, try and keep your nose clean. But you can always play the grace card and so on. Have a good weekend, and then come back to church again or something, you know, like that. It's fostered this kind of thing. What you end up with is a whole culture full of people like Jonah. And they can tell you all sorts of theology. Oh, I fear Yahweh. Do you know he made the land and the sea? Do you know he's the God of heaven? Oh, yes, absolutely. But there's this deep contradiction between what he says, what he actually lives, and the choices he makes, and everybody can see it. But him.

It's this tragedy because, not only does he miss out on how God wants to use him in the lives of these other people, but he's withering as a human being, totally drawn in on himself. It begs the question: Where's the resolution here? Is Jonah going to wake up? Look at the next line.

“Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow up Jonah.” If Jonah were a one-chapter book and it ended right there, is this a happy ending? No, this would be a tragedy, wouldn't it? This would be like a Greek tragedy play or something. You have the protagonist, and he's a horrible, like goes-down-in-flames-and-dies, tragedy—and maybe some other people have goodness happen in their lives or whatever—utter tragedy.

You're not supposed to read this line, “The Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah,” and go, “Hooray!” Like, it's not a good thing when you get swallowed by a huge fish. You die. That's

what happens. So we're thinking, Jonah and the belly of the fish, three days, three nights, slow digestion, just like the sarlacc pit in *Return of the Jedi*. Slow digestion over thousands of years, right? That's good. That's a good geek line for you. But that's the idea. We're supposed to go like, "No, no, no, no!"

But then all of a sudden the surprise, what—from inside of the fish, we'll get to next week—Jonah all of a sudden is very awake and very alive and alert to Yahweh after this experience. You're like, what?

He's composing intricate Hebrew poetry from the oxygen-less environment of the fish's stomach. We'll talk about that next week. But I want you just to see the image here: Jonah can't go any further down, literally. He'll depict himself as going to the roots of the mountains in the sea. A huge fish gobbles him up, and you think it's over; wiped off the face of the earth. And that may be true if we were dealing with any other god but Yahweh, the maker of the sea and the dry land.

In this story—and just think about the arc of the story right now. Jonah is blind, asleep; a wrecking ball. Can't even own up to it. All the way to the very end, he hits bottom, and Yahweh provides this instrument of what seems like death to swallow him up. Right there in this moment of just "hands up," can't go any deeper—he's utterly powerless— that moment of death becomes the moment of his new birth. And the moment where God actually, strangely, uses this instrument of death as this bizarre vehicle of grace to give him life and a second chance. You smell the Gospel here. You smell it.

Can you see now why Jesus appealed to just this moment in the story to describe Himself in Matthew chapter twelve? The Jewish leaders come up to Him like, "Who do you think you are? You think you're the Messiah? Give us a sign." And Jesus says, "I'm not going to give you any sign except the sign of Jonah." You're like, what? So weird. Why does He say that? And then He says, "Just like Jonah, swallowed up by the fish, you know, three days, three nights, so I will be in the grave for three days. I'm going to die."

What? It's weird.

Jesus sees this moment of God enveloping His covenant people in death because of their sin and rebellion. The moment they can't go any further into rebellion, He meets them right there in their brokenness, and as we're going to see next week, repentance. And all of a sudden, this moment of death becomes new life. A chance at a new life. Jesus says, "That's like what I'm going to do."

Jesus lives as the anti-type. He is the very opposite of Jonah. He is utterly and completely other-centered, self-giving, and aware of other people and their well-being perpetually, twenty-four seven. He's just on. He's God become human, the kind of human you and I could only dream of becoming.

And what do we do with him? We murder him; collectively, as a human race, we are all responsible for why this world is the way that it is, and Jesus died for this world because it is the way that it is.

Jesus absorbs into Himself all of our sin, our apathy, and the ruin it causes in our world. And He actually takes the hit for us, but somehow, strangely, the death of Jesus becomes—something gets turned upside-down into this vehicle of life. And in His love, God conquers our sin. He conquers death itself. And in Jesus's resurrection from the grave, as we grab onto Him in faith, we actually can experience a second chance of being human beings, a new and different kind of life.

And the life that's given to Jonah after this experience—He's on borrowed life now. It's not his life to live anymore. He's living on pure grace from this point out.

How do you wake up spiritually? I don't know.

I could write a book: Three Steps to Wake Up Spiritually, you know. I could have got on Oprah or something like that, but there are a hundred of those books out there, and some of you bought those books, and they don't work. They don't work because what do you have to do to wake yourself up spiritually? Like, slap yourself awake? Something? How do you do that? What does Jonah do to wake up spiritually? You see, that's the wrong question.

Jonah doesn't do anything. Something is done to him. All he does is sit at the bottom of his character, the thousand decisions that have made him this hypocritical, hateful man. And he just throws up his hands and is like, "Uncle, I give up." And right at this moment, where he feels like he's meeting his own death, that becomes the place where God meets him with His grace and gives him a second chance at life. This is good news for people like us. Amen?

Jonah doesn't do anything to wake up. God's grace happens to him, and he becomes awake to it for the very first time.

I'm not in the business of trying to get you to be good religious people or something, right? I would have a much nicer suit and much taller hair if I were trying to do that. Right? I mean, that's not what this is about. We're a community of people that's—I don't even feel authorized to give this message because, I mean, I was deeply convicted studying Jonah 1 this week. I'm a total hypocrite. I don't have any right to give this message to anybody else. But here's the thing, neither do you.

So, what are we going to do? Somebody's got to read Jonah 1 aloud. So, here I am. We are a community of people who are trying to wake up to the fact that God has done something for us.

I don't know how to wake you up. I don't know how to wake myself up except to wake up to the fact that I'm helpless. That's all I have to do. And that we can work with.

This is precisely where Jonah lands. He just throws his hands up. I don't know where you're at tonight. I imagine many of us are seeing ourselves in different moments of the story —the contradiction between what we say and what we actually do; the way we—we may be aware of it or not—wreck the lives of the people around us. We may be totally ignorant of that fact. I bet your best friends aren't ignorant of that fact, but you might be.

So this is what it means: It's just coming to Jesus and saying, "I'm asleep. I'm drowsy. I don't know what to do, but I know I'm screwed up," and we can work with that. Jesus can work with that.

Hey, thanks for listening to the Exploring My Strange Bible podcast. If you like this podcast, you could really help me out by going to the iTunes page or whatever service you're using and submitting a review and just telling other people what you think. And that may be something really nice that you say, might be some disagreement that you have, whatever. I would like to hear from you, and it would also help others know about it. So again, thanks for listening, and we'll have the next episode up very soon, exploring the strange poem that Jonah utters from the belly of this fish. See you next time.