

Jonah:

A giant fish eating me is a minor part of my story, but it is the part that gets the most press. My story arguably, sounds like a big fish tale, unless I give you some historical context.

Gomer Pyle. Does that name ring a bell? He was a famous television character of the 1960s. Bumbling and innocent, a very faithful friend. Everybody loved Gomer, his name became descriptive for someone who is naïve. Well, not me. I am also named Gomer, and I am anything but naïve. One very popular translation of the Bible calls me “a wife of whoredoms.”

The country of Israel reached its maximum glory under King David who conquered almost all of Israel’s surrounding countries. After the reign of his son, King Solomon, the country split into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. From that point on, the Northern Kingdom went into financial, military, and spiritual decline.

I came on the scene, preaching, about two centuries after the glory days of King David when the Northern Kingdom was just a shell of its former self. While the Northern Kingdom declined, the dominant empire of the region was to the north. The Assyrians. They were a cruel people. Showed little mercy to their enemies. It was clear to me that Israel was fast becoming their target. It was also clear to me that the Assyrians worshiped false gods and would severely punish the Israelites who worshiped the one true God.

Fear. No, trepidation. No, fear and trepidation. God commanded me to go and preach in Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. At best, I would be captured, tortured, and killed. At worst, the Ninevites would repent and God would not destroy them. I wanted them gone. Wiped out. Seemed the safest option. In my mind, anyway. Still neither option was... good. I decided to run from God. “I’ll go to a foreign country,” I thought. A country far from Assyria.

At Joppa, the main port on the coast of Israel, I boarded a ship headed for distant Tarshish. A little sea air, a cruise, if you will. Good plan. Until a squall blew in. God sent a horrendous storm to stop my ship. To appease God’s anger and avert a complete disaster, the sailors threw me overboard. God sent help. To save me from certain drowning, I was swallowed whole by a great fish. I prayed in the belly of the fish for three days and nights, and then it vomited me on the seashore. Dry land. Terre firma. The Lord commanded me to go to Nineveh again. This time...I went.

The Assyrian city of Nineveh was enormous. I walked it for a full day, and I had only covered a third of the city. I started preaching. In the name of God, I proclaimed that in forty days

Nineveh would be overthrown. All of the Ninevites believed me, believed it was God's words. They began to fast, and to pray. And so, as it happened, you know where I'm going with this, my nightmare came true. God forgave all one hundred and twenty thousand of my Assyrian enemies. He saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, and he did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.¹ Mad. No furious. No, mad and furious, *and* I pouted.

I did not know it, but God had placed me at of the great crossroads of history for a purpose. I failed my mission by pouting instead of preaching. Yes, I brought Nineveh to repentance, but I did not stay to bring them to long-term belief in God. If I had done so, they surely would have shown more mercy to the Israelites several decades later when they completely destroyed the Northern Kingdom. My attitude, my pathetic attitude and selfishness cost my fellow Israelites immense suffering and countless lives.

Instead of being known as the runaway coward swallowed by a giant fish, I could have been the example Jesus would point to in the far distant future when he would say, "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you."²

Gomer:

Amos and Hosea were prophets who preached in one of the rare times in the history of the Northern Kingdom when there was economic growth and prosperity. Under King Jeroboam the Second, the Northern Kingdom had temporarily recaptured Syria, Moab and Ammon. The Northern Kingdom was in a brief time of peace and prosperity. Seemingly, things were going well, and few people pay attention to prophets when things are going well.

Amos and Hosea were the last two prophets who preached to the Northern Kingdom. God chose for them to give their messages in distinctly different ways, though both prophesied the destruction of the Northern Kingdom if its people did not turn away from its false gods and back to the one true God.

However, as often happens in such prosperous times, social corruption and oppression of the poor and helpless were growing. Those who were economically prosperous were turning their attention to immoral entertainments and were neglecting God. In addition, the Assyrians were on the verge of expanding their empire and the Northern Kingdom was square in its sights.

As the people turned to Jeroboam and his government for their security, God sent them Amos. Amos was not a prophet by profession. He was a simple shepherd and fig farmer from the Southern Kingdom, but he preached to Northern Kingdom, and its two major cities, Samaria and Bethel.

¹ Jonah 3:10

² Matthew 5:44

Amos gave them the message that the prosperous kingdom of Jeroboam II would soon end. Amos taught that security came through trusting God, not trusting in a government. He reminded the people that God rules the affairs of mankind.

Amos told the people God wanted them to act with true moral and economic justice, not just offer up empty religious sacrifices. He reminded them that their agreement with God included righteous lives and lifestyles, not just empty religious rituals. God wanted his people to worship him, and him only. Amos also said, in no uncertain terms, that if the people of the Northern Kingdom did not repent and behave, God would react quickly and violently.

God saw that the people of the Northern Kingdom did not respond to clear and pointed messages, so he chose another way, a way very different than a preaching Amos. Symbolism. God commanded Hosea to act in symbolic ways. Every name, every action, every response in his life seemed to have symbolic meaning.

Hosea was my husband. He didn't want to be a prophet. He wasn't trained to be a prophet. But when God started speaking through him, he obeyed completely. God ordered him to marry me. Well, not me by name, just somebody like me. Hosea was commanded to marry a promiscuous woman, someone who would be adulterous. And he chose the right person. My father was overjoyed to marry off a daughter with such an awful reputation as mine.

Our marriage was to represent the fact that the people of the Northern Kingdom were engaged in flagrant whoring with false gods. [smirking] I can still see Hosea trying to explain that symbolism to his parents and his friends. They begged him not to marry me, that his life would be miserable, but Hosea obeyed God, and married me anyway. Gomer. Everybody in town knew about me. Truly, a wife of whoredoms.

God commanded Hosea to have children. They were to be named according to messages God wanted to send to the people of the Northern Kingdom. These were to be images used by God to describe Israel. We had three children. Jezreel, my first son's name. God sent the message that he was going to destroy the Northern Kingdom.

Lo-Ruhamah, "Not Loved", was my first daughter's name. This sent the message that God would no longer show love to the people of the Northern Kingdom, but he would have pity on the Southern Kingdom. God was going to show incredible mercy to the Southern Kingdom. I should have moved to the Southern Kingdom when I got that message!

My last child was Lo-Ammi, "not my people". My baby's name sent the message that God would no longer have pity on the Northern Kingdom, that he had disinherited the Northern Kingdom. God no longer wanted to be known as their God. Can you imagine God telling you that he no longer wants to be known as your God? That message took even me to my knees.

Three precious children and a fine man for a husband. Hosea. The chances of someone like me ending up with the life I had was a miracle. Really. But I wanted freedom. I wanted to feel...

alive, I had...needs. I resented all the restrictions of married life. At first, I would sneak off. Finally, I left home altogether and lived with another man. Maybe you think I didn't love Hosea, and maybe I didn't, I was just part of an experiment. And to walk out on three children...what kind of calloused heart?

That is when God used me to describe the faithlessness of the Israelites to him. The first part of Hosea Chapter Two is like a description of my life. God was through with the Northern Kingdom. He desperately wanted his people to love him, but they wouldn't have it, they wouldn't commit, they were incredibly faithless and void of all love. Like me. Trading what is priceless for that which is worthless. It's sickening. Endless love and grace, spurned.

Then, unbelievably, Hosea turned up on my doorstep. He bought me away from the man I lived with for fifteen shekels of silver and some barley. No doubt, he paid too much for somebody so worthless. He redeemed me. Not only that, he loved me again, despite my...all my...Hosea loved me! I agreed to be faithful. We agreed to be faithful to each other.

But true to the symbolism of my marriage representing the Northern Kingdom, you can guess that maybe I didn't stay faithful. The Northern Kingdom entirely ignored my husband's symbolic messages, just like it ignored the verbal prophecies he gave. They continued to ignore the one true God who loved them and instead worship false gods. God's patience finally ran out for the Northern Kingdom after two centuries of its existence.

The Assyrians were victorious over the Northern Kingdom and annexed much of its territory. After a three-year siege, the Assyrians captured the Northern Kingdom's capital city of Samaria and completed their conquest of the Northern Kingdom. They deported most of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom into many small and scattered communities throughout the Assyrian empire. Over a very short period of time, this effectively eliminated the common identity of these people. They resettled Assyrians into the lands of the Northern Kingdom. These Assyrians quickly adopted and integrated the habits and religion of the former inhabitants, and intermarried with them. Over time, many of these people became known as Samaritans.

Why did the Lord allow the Northern Kingdom to be completely destroyed? The Bible specifically says this happened because the people sinned against God.³

"He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief."⁴ Those are the words of Peter in the New Testament. But, they seem written with me in mind, and the Northern Kingdom, and, maybe...you.

God was patient. But God finally had enough. Enough of unfaithful hearts.

³ 2 Kings 17:7

⁴ 2 Peter 9-10

