Sermon Structure: Jonah 1:1-3

1. Locate the passage

Jonah 1:3. This is the introduction to the book of Jonah.

2. Genre

Historical Narrative. The entire book of Jonah-4 chapters and 48 verses-is an extended example

of historical narrative.

3. Determine the structure of the passage

The structure of the passage is three-fold. First, in verse 1, one finds a common prophetic formula,

“…the word of the LORD came…” Verse 2 is the second structural aspect. It addresses Jonah’s God-

given assignment: to arise, go and call out against Nineveh. Verse 3 gives the reader the third

structural element. It focuses on Jonah’s disregard for the LORD’S command and his subsequent

flight towards Tarshish.

4. Exegete the passage

Verse 1 identifies Jonah as the recipient of divine revelation. Literally, the word “was” to Jonah.

Jonah is further identified as the son of Amittai. A reference to Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25 informs

one that Jonah prophesied in the days of Jereboam II and was from the village of Gath-hepher,

located 2-3 miles from Nazareth. Later, in the New Testament, Jesus referred to the “sign” of Jonah

in Matthew 12:38-41. Jonah’s ministry may be dated in the mid-8th century B.C. (760).

Verse 2 includes three Qal imperative verb forms (arise, go and call) which underscore the specific

assignment given to Jonah with reference to Nineveh. Nineveh is referred to as a “great city,” a

designation repeated in 3:2, 3:3 and 4:11. It was the capitol city Assyria. The Assyrian empire was a

regular threat to Israel and ultimately overthrew the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. The evil of

Nineveh (see Nahum 3:1-4) is depicted as having “come up before” the LORD. The idea behind the

Hebrew phrase is that of a stench rising up from the earth to the nostrils of the Almighty enthroned

in heaven.

Verse 3 details Jonah’s lack of compliance with the clear command of the LORD. After beginning

with the adversative, “but,” the verse utilizes a number of Qal imperfect verbs to highlight Jonah’s

active efforts to avoid his assignment from the LORD. He rose (Qal imperfect) to flee (Qal infinitive

construct) towards (heh) Tarshish from the presence (literally “from the faces”) of the LORD

(Yahweh). Jonah was attempting to go as far as possible in a westerly direction. Nineveh was some

500 miles east of Palestine. The remainder of the verse informs the reader that Jonah went down

(Qal imperfect) to Joppa, the seaport nearest to him, and reached (Qal imperfect) a ship going

to Tarshish. Having paid the fare, he went down into it. Note the repetition of the word “down.”

He was intent on going to Tarshish and away from the presence of the Lord. Note also the

repetition of the phrase, “…from the presence of the LORD.”

5. Let the structure of the text drive the sermon

There are three key elements in the structure of Jonah 1:1-3

1. The reception of revelation (verse 1)

The word of the LORD came to Jonah, a prophet of God and a historical person.

2. The clear assignment (verse 2)

Jonah was to deliver a message from God denouncing the evil of Nineveh.

3. The refusal of the assignment (verse 3)

Jonah’s attempted flight away from the assigned field of service demonstrated this refusal.

Note: This passage can be used as an introductory sermon for a series of sermons on Jonah.

Of course, the motivation/rationale for Jonah’s refusal of his prophetic assignment

should be addressed. Jonah 4:2 sheds light on this issue and could be referenced in

the introductory sermon.

Sermon Structure: Jonah 1:4-16

1. Locate the passage

Jonah 1:4-16. The passage commences with an account of a great storm and concludes with sailors

sacrificing to the LORD after having thrown Jonah into the sea.

2. Genre

Historical Narrative. This account stresses the LORD’S action, the interactions between Jonah and his

fellow-passengers, and the response of fear to the great storm and the great God behind it.

3. Determine the structure of the passage

There are three key movements in the passage. The first of these focuses on the LORD’S action of

“hurling” a great wind/storm on the sea. The second movement highlights the culpability of Jonah

related to the presence of the storm. The final movement addresses the circumstances leading up to

the ultimate act of Jonah being cast into the sea as well as the actions of the sailors after

Jonah’s departure.

4. Exegete the passage

In exegeting this passage, the preacher will want to note the purposeful use of repetition. Verse

4 contains the verb translated “hurled” (cast forth). This hiphil verb form is used at least four times

In 1:4-16: verses 4, 5, 12 and 15. A second key utilization of repetition is seen in the use of the term

“afraid.” In verse 5, the mariners are afraid of the storm. In verse 10, the men are “exceedingly

afraid” (literally: “feared a great fear”) of the endangerment Jonah brought to them. In verse 16, the

men were exceedingly “afraid” of the LORD (literally: “feared the LORD with a great fear”).

In verse 4, the narrator personifies the ship in which Jonah and the mariners are traveling (literally:

“the ship thought herself to be broken up”). Such a device makes for eloquent narrative in that one

can almost hear the creaking of timber and the pounding on the ship’s hull. Verse 5 indicates the

polytheism of the mariners as each one cries out to his god. This verse also records the extreme

desperation of the mariners in hurling their cargo, which was their anticipated source of income,

into the sea. The last part of verse 5 informs the reader that Jonah is sound asleep in the inner part

of the ship. Verse 6 records the Captain’s (“chief rope-puller”) confrontation with Jonah. How can

Jonah be asleep at a time like this? Notice the similarity of the Captain’s orders and those given

to Jonah by the LORD in verse 2. In the last part of verse 6, the Captain indicates an awareness

and reverence for the LORD that is seemingly absent with Jonah. Using a hithpael verb form, he

states that perhaps Jonah’s God will “make himself take notice” so that they may not perish.

Verse 7 records the act of casting lots (see Proverbs 16:33) and that the lot was “caused to

fall” (hiphil) on Jonah. Verse 8 reveals the mariners “storming” Jonah with questions regarding

his occupation, origin and allegiance. In verse 9, Jonah confesses his identity and his allegiance

to the LORD (Yahweh), the God (Elohim) of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. In verse 10,

the men respond with great fear and the reader is informed that Jonah had told them that he was

fleeing from the presence of the LORD.

In the midst of their crisis and the intensification of the storm, the mariners seek a solution. In

Verse 12, Jonah tells them to hurl him into the sea. However, verse 13 records the efforts of the

mariners as they “rowed hard” (literally: “dug” their oars). This effort was not successful because,

as the narrator informs us with a qal participle, the sea grew more tempestuous (“was walking”).

Verses 14-16 express a subtle irony: the pagan sailors seem to give evidence of a fear/respect for

the LORD that is lacking in Jonah. In verse 14, they acknowledge the LORD’S freedom and plead

that they not be charged with Jonah’s death. In verse 15, they proceed to hurl Jonah into the sea

and the sea ceases its raging. Finally, in verse 16, the narrative closes with the mariners fearing the

LORD greatly and offering sacrifices and vows to Him.

5. Let the structure of the text drive the structure of the sermon

Because the genre is historical narrative, this passage should be preached inductively. Consider the

use of a contemporary illustration in the introduction that ties into the “then” of the text (great

storm). Then, proceed with the re-telling of the narrative according to its biblical order:

1. The LORD hurls a storm. (4-6)

2. Jonah is stormed with questions. (7-10)

3. Jonah is hurled into the sea. (11-16)

After re-telling the narrative, deliver the main idea/thesis and follow it with specific application.

Because God can preserve His people and accomplish His purposes even in a storm, we should

make obedience to Him our consuming passion. Finally, consider making the connection to Christ

from this passage by contrasting the sleeping Jonah with the sleeping Jesus (see Matt. 8:23-27).

Sermon Structure 3: Jonah 1:17-2:10 Matthew McKellar

1. Locate the passage

This passage begins with the last verse of Jonah 1 ( 2:1 in the Hebrew text) and includes all ten

verses of Jonah 2. The passage begins with Jonah being swallowed by a God-appointed fish,

proceeds with an account of the prayer of Jonah and concludes with Jonah being deposited on

dry land.

2. Genre

Historical Narrative. This passage also contains elements of Hebrew poetry.

3. Determine the structure of the passage

This passage is bracketed by emphases connected to the role of the great fish. That is, it begins

(1:17) and concludes (2:10) with information related to the actions of a God-appointed fish.

Between the brackets, the reader finds the prayer of Jonah from the belly of the fish. The first

part of the prayer (verses 2-6a) contains Jonah’s remembrance of his experience in the sea prior

to being swallowed by the great fish. The second part (verses 6b-9) moves from past to present

and conveys Jonah’s reflection and resolve while still in the belly of the fish.

4. Exegete the passage

After Jonah was hurled into the sea, verse 17 indicates that the LORD (Yahweh) had

appointed or prepared (piel imperfect) a great fish (dag gadol) to swallow up or “gulp

down” Jonah. In this way, the text stresses the arresting providence of God. Interestingly,

the text proceeds to portray the sea as turbulent and chaotic in contrast to the role of the

fish as the LORD’S vehicle for the deliverance of Jonah. The reference to “three days and

three nights” is significant in light of the comparison Jesus makes in Matthew 12:40. It may

be viewed as a sign of divine supremacy/sovereignty in that the place of death becomes the

place of deliverance.

2:1 introduces the prayer of Jonah. He prays from the belly of the fish. Literally, he

“caused himself to pray” (hithpael imperfect) to the LORD (Yahweh) his God (Elohim).

In verses 2-6a, the heart of the prophet Jonah is revealed as he records his thoughts

from a past-tense perspective. Verse 2 specifically addresses Jonah’s desperate cry of distress

and the LORD’S response (answered, heard). The God from whose presence he had sought to flee

was now his only hope for survival. Observe also in verse 2 the reference to Sheol which, in Hebrew

understanding, was the abode or place of the dead.

In verse 3, Jonah acknowledges the role of God in his circumstances. The Lord “threw” him

(hiphil imperfect) into the deep. Notice the progressive descent depicted in the text: from the

surface of the sea (verse 3), to the midst of the sea (verse 4), to the bottom of the sea (verse 5),

to a drowning-like experience in the sea (verse 6a). Additionally, the interpreter should heed the

poetic implications of Jonah’s prayer in that it echoes a number of the Psalms ( see

Psalm 18:3, 6; 86:13, 88:6 and 120:1).

Verse 6b marks the second section of Jonah’s prayer. He sees himself as the recipient of God’s

mercy. He stresses that the LORD “caused me to be brought up from the pit” (hiphil imperfect).

Verse 7 includes a second reference to the “holy temple” which points to Jonah’s sense of

estrangement from God (verse 4) and desire to return to Him (verse 7). In verses

8-9, Jonah makes a three-fold declaration. First, he asserts that those who worship empty idols

forfeit the only source of hope available to them-the steadfast love (hesed) of the LORD. In verse

9, he declares his intent to give thanks, to sacrifice and to pay vows. Finally, Jonah utters the

declaration that stands at the heart of this prophetic book: “Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

Interestingly, the Hebrew root for the word “salvation” is the same root for the name “Jesus.”

Verse 10 completes the narrative section with a return to the actions of the appointed fish. The

LORD “said the word” to the fish and it vomited Jonah out on the dry land.

5. Let the structure of the text drive the structure of the sermon

The sermon should be presented inductively. The preacher may re-tell the story with the following

structure:

1. A God-appointed fish swallows Jonah. (1:17)

2. Jonah prays from the belly of a fish. (2:1-9)

\*distressing remembrance (2-6a)

\*declaring resolve (7-9)

3. A God-informed fish vomits Jonah out on dry land. (2:10)

After re-telling the story, the preacher may proceed to deliver the main idea/thesis. The LORD

demonstrates mercy to his servants so that they might magnify it and extend it to others. Finally,

utilize the element of end-loaded application to drive home the truth of the text. Application of this

text would include emphases on God’s sovereignty in the superintendence of events and his

rescuing mercy which has its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Sermon Structure 4: Jonah 3:1-9 Matthew McKellar

1. Locate the passage

Jonah 3:1-9. This passage begins in the third of Jonah’s four chapters. It records events which

occur after his experience in the belly of a fish.

2. Genre

Historical Narrative

3. Determine the structure of the passage

The passage begins with a renewed call for Jonah to preach the LORD’S message in Nineveh. It

proceeds with the account of Jonah’s compliance. This time, he goes to Nineveh and delivers

the assigned message. The remainder of the passage records the repentance and belief of

Nineveh’s inhabitants, giving particular attention to the actions and words of the king.

4. Exegete the passage

In verse 1, notice the repetition of the prophetic formula: the word of the LORD (Yahweh)

came, or “was,” to Jonah. The verse also highlights that this is the second occurrence of such a

reception by Jonah. Verse 2 indicates that the assignment for Jonah has not changed. His orders

are the same as those initially received in Jonah 1:2. A series of qal imperatives (arise, go, call out)

form the foundation of his assignment. Verse 3 describes Jonah’s compliance and highlights its

basis with a repetition of the “word of the LORD.” That Nineveh was a large city is evidenced by

the reference that a “visit was a three days’ journey.” However, the focus of the narrator is

concerned with more than the city’s physical magnitude. The phrase, “exceedingly great city,”

may be translated “a great city to God.” Given the repetition of the word “city” (three times in

verses 1-3), the distinct impression is that the city, with its mass of people, was important to the

LORD and the object of His special concern.

According to verse 4, Jonah went a day’s journey into Nineveh and proclaimed his message from

LORD. The designation of 40 days is of significant interest in light of its occurrence elsewhere in key

historical events (flood, days of Moses, days of Elijah). In Jonah, the designation is used in the

context of warning of the impending execution of wrath upon the city in light of its evil. The LORD’S

message through Jonah is that Nineveh’s days are numbered. Apart from a turning to the LORD,

Nineveh will be “overturned.”

Verse 5 offers a general summary of the response of the people of Nineveh. They believed and

were “convinced” of the LORD’S word. The Hebrew root for the word “believed” is “amen.”

Thus, the people agreed with the divine assessment. This reality is underscored by the calling

for a fast and the putting on of sackcloth. Note also that this action was comprehensive (from

the greatest to the least of them). Biblically, fasting is associated with a heightened sense of need

for God and the recognition that there is something greater than physical need. Putting on

sackcloth is associated with mourning, sorrow over sin and repentance.

Verses 6-9 provide details related to the response of the people and, particularly, to the king’s

role in implementing a city-wide posture of repentance. In verse 6, the word from the LORD had

literally “struck” the king. In response, he exchanges his throne and robe for sackcloth and ashes.

Such action would seem to indicate genuine repentance. Furthermore, the fact that Jesus uses

the response of Nineveh to the preaching of Jonah to condemn the unbelief of skeptics in His day

(Mt. 12:41) serves as support to the reality of genuine repentance on the part of the people of

Nineveh. Verse 7 continues with the details of the king’s actions. He issues a proclamation calling

upon the populace and, even their livestock, to fast, put on sackcloth and cry out desperately to

God (Elohim). Verse 8 includes a comprehensive call for the people to turn from their evil and

violent ways. Verse 9 communicates the fervent desire of the king. Not presuming upon the LORD,

he asks, “Who ‘ knowing?’ Elohim may turn and ‘have pity’ and turn from his ‘hot’ anger so that we

may not perish.” The verb translated “relent” is nacham and refers to God’s compassion and

mercy. The LORD is not like a man who changes his mind (see 1 Sam. 15:29). However, in His

sovereign freedom He has ordained that judgment may be averted by repentance.

5. Let the structure of the text drive the structure of the sermon

This passage should be preached inductively. Begin by re-telling the story using the following

structure:

1. Jonah is called to preach to Nineveh a second time. (1-2)

2. Jonah obeys and preaches of impending judgment (3-4)

3. The people of Nineveh believe God and give evidence of repentance. (5-9)

\*summary of response (5)

\* the king’s actions and words (6-9)

After re-telling the story, deliver the main idea/thesis. Out of His great mercy and according

to His word, the LORD deploys delivered sinners as instruments to bring about the

deliverance of more sinners. Follow the main idea with appropriate end-loaded application.

Such application should emphasize God’s mercy to Jonah as well as His mercy to the masses of

people in Nineveh.

Sermon Structure 5: Jonah 3:10-4:4 Matthew McKellar

1. Locate the passage

Jonah 3:10-4:4. The passage includes the last verse of Jonah 3 and the first four verses of Jonah

4.

2. Genre

Historical Narrative

3. Determine the structure of the passage

This passage essentially has three key movements. The first movement is centered in Jonah 3:10.

The verse records God’s sparing of Nineveh after its inhabitants turned from their evil way. The

second movement is found in Jonah 4:1-3. Its focus is on Jonah’s displeasure with the sparing of

Nineveh and his subsequent prayer to the LORD. The final movement is contained in Jonah 4:4.

This verse recounts the incisive question which the LORD poses to Jonah.

4. Exegete the passage

Verse 10 describes God’s (Elohim) response to the repentant actions of the people of

Nineveh. Pay attention to the repetition of the word “turn.” It is used in the two verses

preceding verse 10 and highlights a crucial emphasis in the narrative: The people “turned”

from evil and God “turned away” from His fierce anger. Once again, the preacher should be

careful not to ascribe fickleness or uncertainty to the Almighty (see 1 Sam. 15:29). Rather, stress

should be placed on the fact that God is merciful and that, in His all-knowing providence, He is

free to extend mercy to those who cry out for it. In verse 10, one also finds a repetition of the

word “relent” (nacham), which was used previously in verse 9. It conveys the ideas of compassion

and pity. Such compassion and pity result in the averting of God’s judgment upon Nineveh.

Jonah 4:1 records the response of Jonah to the sparing of wicked Nineveh. It displeased (literally, “it

was evil to Jonah”) him and he “burned” or “was hot.” Note that the Hebrew word translated “evil”

in this verse is the same word used in 1:1 and 3:8. Jonah views God’s extension of mercy to Nineveh

as an evil act. In 4:2 Jonah “caused himself to pray” (hithpael imperfect) and impugned God for

displaying the same mercy to Nineveh which had been extended to him. Adopting an “I told you

so” mentality(Jonah literally declares, “Was this not my word…?”), Jonah even stressed that the

reason for his flight toward Tarshish was rooted in his knowledge of God’s gracious and merciful

character which, in turn, would result in the sparing of Nineveh from judgment. Pay particular

attention to the character attributes of God disclosed in verse 2: gracious (hannun),

compassionate (rahum), slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (hesed). These same

qualities are attributed to God elsewhere in the Old Testament (see Exodus 34:6-7 and Joel 2:13).

In 4:3, the second key movement in the narrative concludes with Jonah’s request for “divine

euthanasia.” He asks the LORD to take or “lay hold” of his life (nephesh). Apparently, he would

rather expire then continue living in light of the extension of mercy to Nineveh. His assertion,

“better my death than life,” sounds similar to the request of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4. However,

one should note a key distinction between the two requests. Elijah’s request was motivated by

his zeal for God’s honor. Jonah, on the other hand, was motivated by displeasure with God’s

actions related to Nineveh.

Jonah 4:5 represents the third and final movement of the narrative. It records the LORD’S

response to the displeasure of Jonah. Rather than indicting Jonah, the LORD graciously inquires

about the legitimacy of his anger. He asks, “…is it good for you to be angry (hot)?” The question is

posed in such a way as to expect a negative reply.

5. Let the structure of the text drive the structure of the sermon

Like the passages preceding it, Jonah 3:10-4:4 should be preached inductively. The preacher can

re-tell the narrative according to the following text-driven structure:

1. God shows mercy to Nineveh. (3:10)

2. Jonah vents his anger and asks for death. (4:1-4)

3. God questions Jonah’s anger.

After re-telling the story, the preacher should deliver the main idea/thesis and follow it with

specific application statements. Both thesis and application should reflect the awareness that

Jonah begrudged the showing of the same mercy to Nineveh which was the source of his own

deliverance. Rather than praising God for His mercy, Jonah offered a protest to it. Of course,

the ultimate demonstration of God’s mercy is centered in the cross of Jesus Christ. This mercy

must be treasured and transmitted to others.

Sermon Structure 6: Jonah 4:5-11 Matthew McKellar

1. Locate the passage

Jonah 4:5-11. This passage is comprised of the last seven verses of Jonah.

2. Genre

Historical Narrative. This particular passage highlights the climactic dialogue between the LORD

and Jonah the prophet.

3. Determine the structure of the passage

The passage has at least three discernible movements. In verse 5, the reader is informed

of Jonah’s immediate response to the sparing of the city. Next, verses 6-8 recount a series of

instructive appointments (plant, worm, wind) from the hand of the LORD God (Yahweh

Elohim). The final movement of the narrative encompasses verses 9-11. Here, through the

device of an inquiring dialogue with Jonah, the LORD discloses the dramatic contrast between

His view of the city and Jonah’s view of the city.

4. Exegete the passage

Note the three-fold repetition of “city” in verse 5. Jonah went out of the city and sat east of it.

“East of the city” implies distance and separation. Jonah proceeded to prepare as shelter or

“booth” for himself, presumably to provide some shade from the heat of the day. Some

commentators conjecture that perhaps Jonah was waiting to see if the LORD would destroy

the city rather than spare it. Whatever the case, Jonah was displeased because the LORD had

not acted in accordance with his expectations. As a result, he became a spectator who sat outside

the city under his self-made shelter.

Verse 6 signals a subtle shift in the narrative with the word “Now.” The story shifts its focus by

recounting a series of the LORD’S instructive “appointments.” The LORD God “intentionally

appointed” (piel imperfect) a plant to give shade to Jonah. Apparently, this plant was of the

gourd variety (qiqayon). Such plants grew rapidly and had leaves sufficient to offer significant

shade. The LORD “caused the plant to grow” (hiphil) over Jonah to “deliver” him from “his evil.”

The Hebrew word for “evil” or “discomfort” here is the same word that is used in 1:2 (evil of

Nineveh) and 3:10 (God relented of the “disaster”…). Such a connection implies that the LORD

is more committed to Jonah’s character than his comfort. The last part of verse 6 records Jonah’s

great delight in the plant. He “rejoiced with a great joy” over it. However, his joy was short-lived.

Verse 7 indicates that, at dawn on the next day, God “intentionally appointed” a worm that

“struck” the plant so that it withered or “dried up.” Then, with the rising of the sun, verse 8 informs

the reader that God “intentionally appointed” a scorching east wind. Jonah had such exposure to

wind and sun that he became faint or “weak.” Through the LORD’S instructive appointments, the

“shoe” Jonah wants Nineveh to wear (discomfort and disaster) is now resting securely on his foot!

Jonah now repeats his earlier wish for death: “Better my death than my life” (nephesh).

Verses 9-11 include a dialogue between Jonah and the LORD God. In verse 9, God asks, “Is it

good for you to be “hot” or “burn” about the plant?” The phrasing of the question expects

a negative reply. However, Jonah declares that his “burning” is appropriate, even to the

point of death. In verse 10, the LORD drives His truth home through a dramatic contrast

between His compassion for the people of Nineveh and Jonah’s compassion for a plant. Jonah

has pity or “compassion” (hus) for a plant over which he did not labor. He did not cause or enable

it to grow. Additionally, the plant did not last or endure (“son of the night it was and son of the

night it perished”). Verse 11 contains a final question which concludes the book of Jonah. Should

not the LORD pity (hus) Nineveh…? Again, Nineveh is described as a “great” city. It has 120,000

“persons” (adam). The reference to not knowing the right from the left hand is likely best

understood as moral confusion/lack of insight. The use of “adam” (man, persons) rather than

“children” would lend support to this perspective. The reference to cattle or “livestock” may point

to the reality that, not only does the LORD create and labor over people made in His image, but

also sustains them as they exercise dominion over created things.

The reader is not informed about what happened ultimately to Jonah. Instead, he is left to ponder

his own response to the merciful compassion of the LORD.

5. Let the structure of the text drive the structure of the sermon

This passage should be preached inductively. The preacher may re-tell the story with the

following text-driven structure:

1. Consider Jonah’s response to the city. (5)

2. Observe the LORD’S instructive appointments. (6-8)

3. Catch the dramatic contrast. (9-11)

After re-telling the story, the preacher should deliver the main idea/thesis. It should stress the idea

that God’s heart for the “city” (masses of people without direction) must govern our heart for the

“city.” Specific applications should be included that highlight the need to prioritize people over

“plants” (non-human, temporary and even trivial pursuits). Believers should be challenged to live

out the implications of the “wideness” of God’s mercy and His provision of that mercy in Jesus

Christ.

\*For a helpful list of resources for preaching Jonah, see “Preaching Tools: Jonah” by Dr. David Allen on the website theologicalmatters.com 08/15/14.