

# Two Ships that Pass in the Night



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**T**wo people who cross paths, perhaps even becoming close for a moment or two in time, but eventually separate and part ways are idiomatically spoken of as “two ships that pass in the night.”

The idiom is traced to American poet, educator and author Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882). In his poem “The Theologian’s Tale,” part of the larger work, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, published in 1863, Longfellow writes:

*“Ships that pass in the night, and speak to each other in passing, only a signal shown, and a distant voice in the darkness; So on the ocean of life, we pass and speak to one another, only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.”*

Even those only vaguely familiar with the Bible have heard of Jonah. The story is known as the man who was swallowed by a big fish and lived to tell the tale.

Most assign at least two simplistic lessons to what they see as the morality tale of Jonah: 1) God gets upset when we don’t follow his orders and 2) when we’re in a deep pit, if we repent God will hear our prayers and cause the “big fish” that swallowed us

(and whose gastric juices are now digesting us) to vomit us up.

## A Deep Story

Let’s go deeper into the story—even deeper even than the “big fish” went in the ocean with Jonah. Jonah is yet another biblical example of how humans can completely misunderstand God. We can use the name of God, we can pray to him, we may think we know him, but it may well be we’re just briefly passing by him without ever really getting to know him. *We can be, with God, like two ships that pass in the night.*

The book of Jonah begins with God telling Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire. Nineveh was a notoriously evil city. God charged Jonah with the job of telling the people of Nineveh to change their ways.

Jonah didn’t like the assignment. His ship and God’s were like two ships passing in the night. Why didn’t Jonah want to go to Nineveh? It may well be Jonah didn’t want to give the people of Nineveh a chance to change. Jonah’s attitude was “why bother?” It becomes clear as we read the book of Jonah that Jonah felt Nineveh deserved to be

destroyed. Jonah seemed to feel that God should just destroy Nineveh and let others learn a lesson.

*In terms of mercy and compassion, Jonah and God were like two ships that pass in the night.* Jonah was fine as long as mercy and compassion were experienced by people he “liked” and were “like” him. But the people of Nineveh and the nation of Assyria were enemies of God’s people. They were perverted and wicked and evil. As Jonah perceived it, they didn’t deserve any mercy.

So Jonah decided to run away from God. Jonah caught a ship heading to Tarshish—paradoxically, another evil place, in terms of people who didn’t obey the laws of God as Jonah understood them.

After the ship sailed it, encountered a huge storm, and the sailors on the ship decided Jonah’s god was upset and needed to be appeased. Jonah volunteered to be thrown overboard so that everyone else could be saved.

It worked (or at least if one were predisposed to perceive God as a god who can be placated and appeased)—Jonah’s punishment saved the others. The storm stopped, the ship and its crew were saved. What happened to Jonah? Ironically,



while he was on his way to another evil place, he was swallowed by a great fish that, it turns out, was on its way to Nineveh.

## A “Funny” Thing Happened... as Jonah Ran From God

There’s a lot of humor in the book of Jonah. The idea of trying to run away from God is preposterous, of course. And then when Jonah does try to run away from him, God, using the unconventional vehicle of a great fish, makes sure that Jonah winds up right where God wants him to go.

The entire book of Jonah is one big satire—a humorous spoof of the many ways people misunderstand God, including God’s own prophet Jonah. The great fish spits Jonah out on the beach where God wanted Jonah to go in the first place. Jonah is happy, initially. He has been saved from certain, slow death. Once Jonah has cleaned himself up from all the gastric juices and other slimy things that must have been sticking to his skin after he was unceremoniously disgorged on the beach, God asked him to do what he asked him to do the first time.

Perhaps Jonah just sighed, and like a teenager might say to their parent, “whatever.” Jonah did what God wanted him to do. He told the city of Nineveh to repent of its sinful ways. Another “funny” thing (unexpected at least) happened.

Nineveh actually changed. Jonah couldn’t believe it! They actually listened to his warnings, to his doom-and-gloom preaching and they responded, and God decided to have compassion on the citizens of Nineveh and not destroy them.

You’d have thought Jonah would have been delighted. At the very least one would think he would have been happy that someone listened to his preaching—after all, it’s high praise for a preacher when people actually respond.

*But Jonah was upset and angry. He didn’t mind God’s grace and forgiveness for himself or his friends and his nation, but not so much for others.*

Jonah was like a lot of people when they hear

preaching and teaching about God’s grace—about God’s no-matter-what, absolutely unconditional love. Some say, “This grace stuff is just a lot of mush. God is upset, angry and he wants payback. He is going to kick some serious you-know-what. ‘Love-love-love, grace-grace-grace’ is weak, lame, wishy-washy stuff. God will give people what they deserve.”

Like so many religious people today, Jonah wanted an angry God of wrath, not what he felt was a weak and spineless God of grace and compassion.

*Jonah and God were like two ships passing in the night. Jonah was more concerned with religion than he was with grace.*

Jonah was angry because he was more like an Old West gunslinger who saw his success by the number of notches he had carved on the grip of his prophetic six-shooter. But Jonah didn’t get to gun down the bad guys in the town of Nineveh. He had to ride out of town without killing anyone. Utter humiliation for a gun-slinging prophet!

Jonah figured he might be a laughingstock back home—the prophet who couldn’t deliver on his threats of hellfire and brimstone. Jonah wasn’t even close to being on God’s wavelength. He was a religious gunslinger. He was a prophet who wanted people to get what they deserved. He lived to see people “get theirs”—and when they did, maybe other people would hear and fear.

## Jonah: A Book of Compassion

The people of Nineveh whom Jonah thought were so deserving of absolute destruction received the very opposite—an outpouring of God’s grace. Jonah wanted his religion vindicated—he wanted people who didn’t do all the “right” things to suffer. Jonah wanted people to hear-and-fear what happened to Nineveh after Jonah came into town, bringing a message of blood-and-guts.

Jonah wanted the story of Nineveh to be a testimony to the power of... Jonah. But the story of Nineveh is a tale of God’s amazing grace. God is all about grace. God is all about compassion. God wants relationship, not religion. Religion and grace—they’re heading in the opposite directions. They just barely cross paths, ever so briefly, *like two ships that pass in the night.*

Jonah was a bit like the older son in the parable of the prodigal son. The older son was not happy to see his younger brother receive grace. The older son and his father (the father filled with extravagant compassion and grace) were also *like two ships passing in the night.*

The older son in the parable of the Prodigal Son said, in effect, to his father, “How can you show grace like that? You need to do the hard thing—punish my younger brother. Don’t let him get away with that kind of behavior!”

But that’s why grace is amazing. It’s undeserved. Jesus said to pray for our enemies, not to pray that they get theirs. Jesus wants the best for all his children—even for the people who crucified him, for whom he prayed, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.” □

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