INTRODUCTION:
Jonah is a short book that records the famous story of a message being given to the
prophet Jonah by God, and he rebels against the idea of delivering it. His motive for
rebellion was that he despised Nineveh, and he knew that God was far more merciful than
Jonah was disposed to be. So he fled in the opposite direction, and his goal was to get a
long way in the opposite direction.

THE TEXT:
“Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see
a sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation
seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet
Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son
of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall
rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the
preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here” (Matt. 12:38–41).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:
The scribes, the ordained men, and the Pharisees, the devout laymen, demanded that
Jesus perform for them a sign. Jesus said that to hunt for a sign is an indication of an evil
and adulterous generation. So the Lord went on to refuse them, but the refusal was a
strange one. He said that no sign would be given to that evil generation except for the
sign of Jonah—no sign but the very greatest sign. Resurrection is the sign beyond all
signs. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the ketos (sea monster) so
also the Son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. After
Jonah “rose,” the men of Nineveh repented, and the contrasting implication is that the
men of Jerusalem will not repent after the resurrection of Jesus.

BACKGROUND OF THE TEXT:
We don’t know a lot about the prophet Jonah. We know that he ministered during the time
of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25), and we know—given the fact that he had to be the source
of the information recorded in the book of Jonah—that he had to have a highly developed
sense of irony. The prophet Jonah is the butt of the story told here, but we should not
forget that it this is, in some way or another, Jonah’s account of it.

THE BASIC STORY:
The book has only four chapters. In the first, Jonah is told to preach to Nineveh. He
rebels because he knows how gracious God can be. They might repent, and Jonah didn’t
want to risk that. He takes passage on a ship going the opposite direction, heading for
Tarshish. Some locate this in Spain, while the Vulgate and the Septuagint render it as Carthage. In any case, it was a long way from Nineveh, in the neighborhood of two thousand miles away. The Lord sent a tempest (Jon. 1:4), and Jonah tells the sailors to throw him overboard. They reluctantly do this, and Jonah is swallowed by a great monster of some sort (Jon. 1:17), a monster prepared by the Lord. The second chapter records Jonah’s prayer for deliverance, and concludes with the fish vomiting Jonah onto dry land. My suggestion here is that Jonah actually died—in 2:2 it says that he cried out to the Lord from the belly of Sheol, the place of the dead. When he comes back to life, he is still in the fish, and then he prays. And then in chapter 3 God suggested that “we try this again.” This time, Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, preaching a message of destruction—“Yet forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.” The message was heard with real repentance, from the king down to the livestock. Jonah was furious, and tells God that this is why he fled to Tarshish. He knew that God needed very little excuse to forgive sinners. God was just like that—incorrigibly low standards. God gave Jonah a plant to shade him from the heat, and then sent a worm to destroy the plant. When the heat struck Jonah to the point of fainting, so that he was ready to die, God compared Jonah’s greater pity for the plant than he had for the many thousands of the inhabitants of Nineveh. And there the story ends.

**THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD:**
Jonah sought to flee from “the presence of the Lord” (Jon. 1:3,10); And so this is lesson number one. It cannot be done. The Lord is as present on the way to Tarshish as He was when He first spoke to Jonah. No doctrine is more self-evident than the omnipresence of God and no doctrine is easier—when in the grip of temptation—to forget.

**ALL EXCEPT FOR JONAH:**
This is a book in which absolutely everyone and everything obeys, except for Jonah. God gives Jonah his mission, and so he heads due west (Jon. 1:3). So the Lord sent out a great wind over the sea, and the wind obeys (Jon. 1:4). The prophet tells the sailors to do a hard thing, and they do it (Jon. 1:16). The Lord prepared a great sea monster, and the sea monster was there, right on time (Jon. 1:17). Jonah preaches the Word of God, and the people of Nineveh believe God and obey (Jon. 3:5). The Lord prepared the gourd plant to shade Jonah, and it obeyed (Jon. 4:6). The Lord prepared a strong east wind to destroy the gourd plant, and it obeyed (Jon. 4:8). Everybody honors God in this book except for Jonah.

**GREATER THAN JONAH:**
The prophet Jonah slept in the boat in a storm (Jon. 1:5), and so did the prophet Jesus (Mark 4:38). In both instances, the winds and the waves were obedient. In one instance, the prophet slept the sleep of disobedience and in the other He slept the sleep of the righteous. One was supposed to go to a city that would repent, and the other to a city that would not. Both Jonah and Jesus died, and went to Sheol/Hades. Both of them were brought back, one in a type and the other in the great antitype.
And in the final contrast, the greater Jonah is delighted with our repentance, not furious. There is joy in the presence of the angels over just one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10). Who is this referring to? What is God actually like? We call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and some who want to be able to condemn somebody, call it the Parable of the Elder Brother. We really ought to call it the Parable of the Running Father, or the Father Who Jumps Fences.