



# ELMER, the Very Large Fish

By Roland Foster; illustrated by Mary Grassell

*So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea,  
and the sea ceased from its raging. ... And the Lord  
appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.  
(Jonah 1:15,17a)*

**O**NCE UPON A TIME, a very long time ago, there was a humongous big fish that lived somewhere around the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. I don't know much about this fish, but I think he was sort of an ordinary fish, perhaps, except that he was very, very old and very, very large.

(Did you know that fishes don't ever stop growing? Humans "grow up" and get as big as they ever will get, and then even though they may live a long time after that, they don't grow any more. It's the same way with lots of other creatures, too, like cats and dogs and elephants. But not fish — they keep getting bigger until they die. Isn't that strange?)



I don't know what the big fish's name was, or even if he had a name, but since we are going to talk about him a lot, why don't we make up a name for him? Let's call him Elmer.

Very well. One day, ages and ages ago, this very large fish (whom we will call Elmer) was just swimming along, minding his own business. Elmer was kind of sleepy, because even though it was daytime, the sky above the sea was very dark, and so of course it was dark down under the water where he was, too. Elmer wondered, in a sleepy way, why it was dark during the daytime, so he swam up close to the surface of the sea to find out. The water was very rough, because the wind was blowing hard and a lot of rain was falling. It was a storm.

Elmer didn't know a lot about storms, because during his long life he had never tried to stay close to the surface of the sea during a storm. To tell the truth, Elmer wasn't a very curious fish. It never occurred to him to wonder very much about things. It was very strange that he was wondering about it being dark. I wonder why he wondered. Do you know why?

As Elmer swam lazily beneath the surface of the sea, far enough down so that he was below the rough water, he saw a dark shape above him that was as big as he was, maybe even bigger. He looked at it curiously (it being a good day to be curious, I guess) and saw



that it was a ship. Elmer had seen ships lots of times. From underneath, of course. He was not afraid of the ship, because ships always stayed right on top of the water. Well, I suppose they sank once in a while, but if they sank they just went down to the bottom of the sea and stayed there. Elmer wasn't afraid of the ship.



While Elmer swam along beneath the ship and thought his sleepy thoughts, the wind got stronger and the sea got rougher and the poor ship was having to struggle to stay afloat. The people on the ship must have been very frightened, because they began to throw things into the sea. Elmer didn't know about the people, of course, but he saw the things they were throwing into the water. Some of the things sank very quickly, as if they were made of stone or metal (in fact, they were). Some things sank slowly, and Elmer looked them over, in a sleepy, weak-eyed way, and tasted their smells with his keen sense of smell as they passed him. There were a few bales and boxes of things that were too heavy to float, but nothing good to eat, he discovered. Other things, barrels and wooden boxes and bales of wool, floated on the surface of the sea, tossed up and down and sideways by the wind and the waves. Nothing tasty there either, sighed Elmer. (Well, he didn't sigh, exactly, but you get the idea.)



All of a sudden Elmer saw something quite different in the water, something that even looked like it might be good to eat. It was something alive, and it was struggling in the churning water, trying to swim and stay afloat. It had arms and legs. Remember, I said Elmer was a very large fish. The struggling creature in the water was a man, about as big as most men are, and yet to Elmer he was just about the right size for a very nice snack!

Why do you suppose the man fell into the water? Did he accidentally slip and just fall off the boat? Or did he jump in, for some reason? What do you think? Actually, the man was a prophet named Jonah. God had told Jonah to go to a city called Ninevah, to warn the king and the people there that they had better quit being so bad. But Jonah didn't want to go, so he sailed away on a ship to get away from God. Then God made the big storm, because he still wanted Jonah to do what he had told him to do. When the storm came up, Jonah knew it was because of him, so he told the men on the ship that the storm would stop if they would throw him off the ship. The sailors believed Jonah, and they were afraid they would all drown, so they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea.

Jonah was right about the storm, of course, because he was a prophet. As soon as he hit the water, the wind started to die down, and soon the sea was almost calm. Meanwhile, Elmer was watching the man in the water, checking him out to see if he would be as tasty as he looked. In Elmer's simple mind the dinner bell was ringing, and the alarm bells weren't. All systems were "GO" for a midafternoon snack.

Suddenly Elmer opened his giant jaws wide, took in a mouthful of water that included the water Jonah happened to be swimming in at the time, closed his huge mouth, and swallowed Jonah at one ... big ... gulp!



You might think that would be the end of the story, but it wasn't. There was something about Jonah that made him not a very good dinner after all. You see, God didn't want Jonah to die inside of the big fish. He still wanted Jonah to go to Ninevah and tell the people there to behave themselves. So God gave poor Elmer a case of indigestion. Do you know what that means? It means Elmer got a tummy ache!

Elmer swam and swam, then he rested and rested, but all the time his poor tummy was hurting more and more. Finally, after a couple of days, Elmer swam up close to the beach, and — guess what. He did what people sometimes do who get a bad stomach ache — he threw up! Right on the beach! Gross!





Jonah lay on the beach for a while, surprised that he was still alive, and no longer inside the fish's stomach. Then he got up and washed some slimy stuff off in the nearby water. He soon found out that the fish had delivered him right to Ninevah. Isn't that amazing? Anyway, Jonah went into Ninevah and did what God had sent him to do — warning the people of Ninevah and their king — and the people immediately apologized to God for being bad, and they began to behave themselves. Jonah was not too pleased, but God eventually convinced him that God knew best — something we all need to learn.

What about Elmer? He went back to the bottom of the sea, and after that he didn't bother waiting around for things to fall off of boats during storms, because he had learned that even the things that looked like they would be good to eat, weren't. And Elmer just kept getting bigger and bigger. Maybe he is still there today, bigger than ever.

*“The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.”  
(Matthew 12:41)*