

Jonah

A tale of a Whale . . . and So Much More!

I. Introduction to Jonah

Jonah is the thirty-second book in the Bible and 5th and most famous of the Minor Prophets. Jonah is the shortest book in the Old Testament containing four chapters and a mere 28 verses. Although it can be read through in a few minutes, it has an important message.

Jonah is most remembered for his encounter with the fish, although that is a relatively minor part of the story, taking place in Chapter 2. Actually, Jonah only mentions the fish three times.

Jonah is perhaps one of the most well-known, yet misunderstood stories in the Bible. We often reduce the message of Jonah to that of God redirecting a disobedient prophet. The message is in fact, much bigger than that. It has to do with the way God feels toward the unbelieving world.

Although Jonah is referred to as a prophet four times in Scripture, this book contains only eight words of prophesy. "And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4) This prophesy was a warning. Because it was heeded, it did not come to pass.

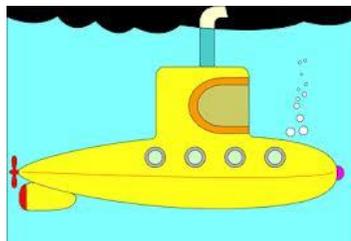
The book is more the personal story of Jonah, designed to reveal the ways of God. Jonah's, name means "dove." He was a prophet from the north of Israel and lived in Gath-Hepher, a short walk from Nazareth. Jonah is among the 8th Century B.C. prophets who ministered in Jerusalem during the prosperous reign of Jeroboam II (793 – 753 B.C.). Much of Israel's success during this time is attributed to the ministry of Jonah. 2Kings 14:25 records Jeroboam II's achievements, credited to Jonah, "He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hepher".

Jonah has been one of the major targets of Bible critics, predominately because of the fish. Chapter 2 tells of Jonah being thrown overboard and swallowed by a fish where he remained imprisoned for three days. When his heart softened, he cried out to God and was released.

The skeptic claims this is impossible and uses this story to cast an array of arguments against the truthfulness of the Bible. That leaves us to determine if the story is true.

Is the story? Is it possible?

- The Bible claims God prepared a fish, "Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights". (Jonah 1:17) is it conceivable that a vessel could be created with the capacity to safely house an individual under water for multiple days?



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If man can prepare such a vessel, why do we find it do difficult to believe God could.

•It is not even the most amazing miracle. On our journey from Genesis to Jonah, we read of God:

- Parting the sea
- Giving Manna from heaven
- Healing lepers
- Making a donkey talk
- Walls falling down at trumpet blasts

•It is not the most amazing miracle in Jonah. We will soon read of a city of close to one million people turning from sin to God.

•Secular history records examples of sailors being swallowed by large fish and surviving. Just recently, on a T.V. program, a tiger shark swallowed a whole, very large turkey, and spit it back out, untouched.

•Jonah was included in the Old Testament canon because the rabbis considered it to be a true and historical account of an actual event. Nothing in the book suggests it should be taken as mythological or allegorical. Predominately figures in history have believed Jonah

•Excavations from the early church period, in the catacombs of Rome, no biblical representation is found more often than Jonah. His story provided hope of the future resurrection.

•Predominately figures in history have believed Jonah, like Luther, Calvin, Jerome, and Augustine.

•Most importantly, Jesus, Himself, believes in the authenticity of Jonah and used his experience within the fish as a picture of His own resurrection. “But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth’”.
Matthew 12:39-40

If you take the story of Jonah to be an actual historical event, you are in God’s company. However, if you disregard Jonah because of the fish story, you must, in turn, disregard the miraculous aspects of the Bible all together.

II. Outline of Jonah

God instructs Jonah to preach a message of warning to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. Jonah refuses and sets out in the opposite direction in hopes of fleeing from the Lord. God uses a series of situations to get Jonah’s attention: a storm, a swim, and a swallow.

After three days of darkness within the belly of the great fish, Jonah repents and is released to go to Nineveh. Upon his arrival and preaching, the entire city turns to the Lord. Instead of rejoicing in the work of God, Jonah sulks.

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Jonah contains four chapters that naturally divide the book.

Section 1	Chapter 1	The Storm	A lesson on fleeing.
Section 2	Chapter 2	The fish	A lesson on praying,
Section 3	Chapter 3	The city	A Lesson on preaching.
Section 4	Chapter 4	the Lord	A lesson on loving.

Section 1 Chapter 1 The Storm A lesson on fleeing.

“He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hepher.”

Jonah was a prophet to Israel. God wants him to be Israel’s first foreign missionary, but Jonah fled. Jonah wanted nothing to do with what God was calling him to. Instead he seeks to flee from God. Notice the use of the word “down”:

- Down to Joppa
- Down in the ship
- Later, down in the belly of the great fish
- Fleeing from God always takes us down.

God sent a storm. This shows that we can never flee from God. Our disobedience will wreak havoc in the lives of others.

Section 2 Chapter 2 The Fish A lesson on praying,

After three days and nights Jonah was broken, and he surrenders. In Jonah 2:2 he speaks of his affliction. “. . . I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction. . .” He speaks of his condition in Jonah 2:5 “The waters surrounded me, even to my soul; the deep closed around me; weeds were wrapped around my head.”

What happened in those three days to change Jonah’s heart; the work of the Word. At least five Psalms and 1 Kings are referred to by Jonah. In his distress and affliction he cries Psalm 120:1) “In my distress I cried to the LORD, And He heard me.” (Psalm 120:1) This shows the value of investing time in the Word. It will come back to help in times of trials.

Jonah first speaks to the Lord. “In my distress, O Lord, I called to you, and you answered me. From deep in the world of the dead I cried for help, and you heard me. You threw me down into the depths, to the very bottom of the sea, where the waters were all around me, and all your mighty waves rolled over me. I thought I had been banished from your presence and would never see your holy Temple again. The water came over me and choked me; the sea covered me completely, and seaweed wrapped around my head. I went down to the very roots of the mountains, into the land whose gates lock shut forever. But you, O Lord my God, brought me back from the depths alive. When I felt my life slipping away, then, O Lord, I prayed to you, and in your holy Temple you heard me.” (Jonah 2:2-7). The Jonah receives forgiveness and restoration from the Lord.

Even though this took place hundreds of years ago, there is application for us. The Word says, “Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy.” Jonah 2:8. A worthless idol is anything we place above the Lord. Jonah learned what happens when we neglect God for our own desire.

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Section 3 Chapter 3 The city A Lesson on preaching.

After the “great fish experience”, Jonah hears the same message. The message consisted of only eight words of warning, and revival breaks out.

Three characteristics of revival:

Belief They trusted the Word of God

Repentance They turned from sin

Evangelism They spread the Word

Section 4 Chapter 4 the Lord A lesson on loving.

The book of Jonah should be finished at this point, but Jonah had much to learn. Instead of celebrating the salvation of the people of Nineveh, he is angry they are saved.

Jonah went to a deserted area to sulk. God provided a plant for shade. When the plant died, he was saddened. Jonah was more concerned with ecology than with the salvation of souls.

III. Why Study Jonah

There are many valuable lessons tucked away in this short book, but the primary lesson has to do with salvation of souls. We might say the key verse of the whole book is found in Jonah 2:9, “Salvation is of the Lord.” In Chapter 1 the sailors are saved, and in Chapter 3 Nineveh is saved.

We often reduce the message of Jonah to that of God redirecting a disobedient prophet. While that is true, the main message is much bigger than that. It has to do with how God views the lost in contrast with how Jonah viewed them.

“Their wickedness has come up before me.” Jonah 1:2 What was their wickedness?

Nahum described it this way.

Nahum 3:1 a bloody city

Nahum 3:4 harlotry and sorcery

Jonah added

Jonah 3:8 evil ways and violence

History records the Assyrians were a cruel people who:

Buried people alive

Skinned them alive

Even impaled men and left them on poles

According to the Holman Bible handbook,

Their brutality and cruelty was legendary. They were known to impale their enemies on stakes in front of their towns and hang their heads from trees in the king’s gardens. They also tortured their captives—men, women, or children—by hacking off noses, ears, or fingers, gouging out their eyes, or tearing off their lips and hands. They reportedly covered the city wall with the skins of their victims. Rebellious subjects would be massacred by the hundreds, sometimes burned at the stake; their skulls would be placed in great piles by the roadside as a warning to others.

This citation from the annals of Ashur-nasirpal II is typical.

I stormed the mountain peaks and took them. In the midst of the mighty mountains I slaughtered them; with their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool. With the rest of them I darkened the

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gullies and precipices of the mountains. I carried off their spoil and their possessions. The heads of their warriors I cut off and I formed them into a pillar over against their city; their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire! ... I built a pillar over against the city gates, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar.

(J. Smith Survey of The Minor Prophets)

The phrase, "Their wickedness has come up before me. . . " closely resembles what was said of Sodom in Genesis 18:20-21

"And the LORD said, 'Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, "I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me; and if not, I will know." Nineveh was second only to Sodom in wickedness.

We are told Nineveh is a great city in Jonah 1:2, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city. . ." It was great in influence; later became the capital. It was great in size being the largest Assyrian city, it was a three day journey to walk through the city and surrounding districts, and its population may have exceeded one million people with 120,00 being little children

The wickedness of Nineveh disgusted Jonah and caused him to conclude that God hated them as well. Jonah did not want to preach to Nineveh because the people frightened and repulsed him. He had forgotten that God's people were to be lights, leading people to salvation.

The book of Jonah is designed to convict us of selfishness and bigotry that would keep us from declaring the Gospel to everyone. It is critical that every child of God develop the heart of God for the lost.

1 Timothy 2:3-4 "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

2 Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

The main message of Jonah is God's love for souls. So important is this message to God, he wrapped it in a story that would catch the attention of children, adults, and even unbelievers and skeptics.

Who are the unreachable people groups today?

Obviously, much of the East and Middle East has yet to hear the Gospel. Will you go?

What about within our borders? Which two groups seem to be neglected out of fears or disgust? Muslim and homosexuals.

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What the message of God ***WAS NOT!***

God ***did not*** send Jonah to tell Nineveh everything was okay. He sent him with a warning. TURN! Jonah 3:8 "But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands."

Peter had to learn the same lesson. Jesus sent His disciples to the whole world, but they remained in Israel sharing the Gospel only with those who they had the most in common with – the Jews. In Acts 10 Peter had a vision that reminded him that God wants to save all mankind. In Acts 10 he arrives at the home of a Gentile with a simple message:

Acts 10:34 "Then Peter opened his mouth and said: 'In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality,'"

Acts 10:28 "Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean".

Acts 10:43 "To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."

Simply put, the message of Jonah is that God makes an offer to all mankind that salvation is of the Lord. Whoever will confess Christ and turn from sin will be saved.

We cannot let anything deter us from taking the message of Christ to the lost. We need the message of Jonah in the church today!

IV. Type of Christ

Jesus believed the story

Jesus loved the lost.

Jonah is a picture of the resurrection (Matthew 12:39 – 41)

"But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.'"