



Jonah

Get Started

Here's a great quote about the Book of Jonah:

For the past century we have been living in an age that has created a certain attitude toward the Book of Jonah. It is impossible to open the book and take a reading from it anywhere without people's thoughts centering on a fish. Men have been so busy with tape lines trying to find the dimensions of the fish's belly that they seem to have had no time to plumb the depths of the teaching of the book.

Jonah **is** a historical account. It **is** a true story; the events in it – including Jonah being swallowed and surviving – are real.

How do I know? Jesus Christ Himself referred to Jonah as a prophet and his experiences as literal. He pointed His critics to Jonah's experience three days and three nights in the fish.

Get Studying

God's compassion is the theme of the book and you see it immediately in the opening verses:

Jon 1:1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,

Jon 1:2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

On first reading you see God’s condemnation against a wicked people. But as the book progresses, you come to understand that God would rather save than destroy them. Jonah himself says, in 4:2,

Jon 4:2 ... “Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm.”

Jonah was sent to tell them they were condemned in the hope that they would respond to God’s compassion.

God’s compassion is best summarized by the apostle Peter in Second Peter 3:9 where you read,

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.

Jonah hailed from a town called Gath-hepher, situated about an hour's journey from Nazareth. There is a Jewish legend that he was the widow's son whom Elijah brought back to life. Whether that is true or not, he is assumed to have been a disciple of Elisha.

The book opens with God giving Jonah his mission. God said, "Go," and Jonah fled in the opposite direction.

Jonah understood God's compassion. Jonah did not want the Assyrians spared and saved! He attempted to flee from God's commission, but he found he could not.

Nineveh was no small town. It was one of the greatest cities of the world. Sadly, the city was as great in its wickedness as it was in its wealth and power. God had raised it up but, on account of her sin, He was calling her to account.

Jon 1:3 But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah found a ship headed to Tarshish and he booked passage. God sent him east; he set out to go west 2500 miles - just about as far as he could go in those days.

Notice that he "found a ship." He found a ship; he could afford the fare; and he could sleep in peace. Circumstances can be deceiving. You can't determine God's will for your life merely by circumstances. His will is found first and foremost in His Word. You need to live on principle, not on perception. Christians too often allow circumstances to comfort them while they are actively disobeying God.

As soon as Jonah fled, God began to act:

Jon 1:4 But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up.

The sailors recognized something supernatural was occurring. Jonah told them to cast him overboard. They hesitated - valuing his life more than he did.

Nevertheless he was cast into the sea.

Jon 1:15 So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

Jon 1:16 Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows.

These sailors are converted!

- They “feared God,” which is used as an expression of saving faith.
- They “offered a sacrifice,” which was the proper way to approach God.
- They “took vows.” If they had taken vows before the sea grew calm, I would be suspicious. Many people make promises to God while they are in trouble, only to forget them after the trouble has passed. No, they took vows afterward – indicating a true conversion.

Jon 1:17 Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow

Jon 1:18. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

I’m not going to take a great deal of time to convince you that this really happened. There are “great fish” large enough to swallow a man whole. The Bible never says it was a whale; but if it was a whale, there are whales large enough to swallow a man whole.

Most of you have heard of a particular historical account, that of James Bartlett who, in 1891, on the whale-ship Star of the East, was swallowed by a whale and lived. I want to tell you that there is now some dispute over whether or not that is a true account. It may be true; it may not be true.

It doesn't matter! There is a word in verse seventeen that settles the matter: "prepared." The Lord prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. Whether anyone else has ever been swallowed by a great fish or whale is irrelevant. Jonah was swallowed.

The rest of chapter two is regarded as Jonah's prayer. Interestingly, very little of it is him praying. You're told he prayed, and you're given snatches of his prayer. But most of the words are his description of what he experienced in the pit of the great fish. In each case what he experienced was a reminder of the spiritual privileges that belonged to him as a believer.

God gave Jonah a second opportunity to fulfill his mission.

Jon 3:1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,

Jon 3:2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you."

Let me share some interesting facts I learned about the Assyrians. One of their gods was named "Dagon." His name is from the root word meaning fish. Dagon was represented by an idol that was half-human and half-fish.

You're on the beach at the Mediterranean coast. A great fish pukes a prophet onto shore! A man comes out of a fish... You have some fear of a god who is half-fish, half-man... You are freaked!

One other minor point. This man's name is Jonah. One of the names for Dagon is *Oannes*. If you put an "I" in front of the name *Oannes*, it is Jonah in their language.

Jonah went through town announcing judgment:

Jon 3:4 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!"

Absolutely no mercy in his message. Nothing he said gave any hope that God might relent. He obeyed out of duty, not devotion.

Much to Jonah's discouragement, the common people in Nineveh repented, followed by the nobles.

Jon 4:1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry.

It's important to understand why Jonah was so displeased with the conversion of Nineveh. Prior to Jonah's ministry, God had spoken through Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah saying He would use the Assyrian Empire to discipline His people Israel for their sins. Jonah was aware of these prophecies.

Jonah also read the morning newspapers. Recently Assyria was in a state of decline and had suffered military defeats. If Assyria continued to decline, perhaps Israel would be spared. Then the call came: "Arise, go to Nineveh..." Jonah knew what might happen.

The book ends abruptly with Jonah sulking, sitting outside the city under a gourd God provided.

Jon 4:6 And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

The plant that grew over Jonah's shelter is called a "gourd" in some Bibles.

Commentators are almost universal in identifying it as the *ricinius communis*, more commonly called the castor bean or the castor plant. It has another common name – the *palma Christi*, or palm of Christ.

I don't want to get too mystical, but this is too odd to overlook.

The *palma Christi* was the gift of God. It was attacked by worms; then it withered in the heat.

Worms and heat remind you of Hell. Hell was described by Jesus as a place where "their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:46).

Jesus never suffered in Hell, but He did take upon Himself the penalty for sin that all mankind deserved. Those who trust Jesus for salvation will therefore not perish in Hell where "their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

We've already mentioned Jonah was a type of Israel. It helps to make sense of some of the odd details.

- Jonah was called to reach Gentiles; so was Israel.
- Jonah refused to obey God; so did Israel.
- Jonah was punished by being cast into the sea. The "sea" is sometimes used to refer to Gentiles. For her disobedience Israel was cast into the "sea" of Gentile nations.
- Jonah was miraculously preserved; so is Israel.

- Jonah repented, was cast out of the fish, and restored to life and service. Israel, though cast out by all the nations, has returned to her land and one day will be restored to spiritual life.
- Nineveh was brought to salvation. Israel shall bring many nations to Jesus Christ.

Get Spiritual

Both Jonah and God were camping out in the foothills overlooking Nineveh. They both saw the same people. God had pity on them; Jonah did not.

Jon 4:10 But the LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night.

Jon 4:11 And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left - and much livestock?

J. Vernon McGee makes an interesting point about pity. It doesn't depend upon, or even wait for, feelings. Jonah didn't have to love these people in order to reach them with the Gospel. He could have loved them; but he didn't, and he didn't need to.

You and I do not need to wait for feelings before we can have pity on people. In fact, often we need to repress our feelings! The truth is, we are often surrounded by people who are not even likable, let alone lovable.

We need to look upon them the way God does – as pitiable because they are perishing. He is not willing that any should perish. That should be our will, too – and we should be willing to go into any Nineveh of God's choosing.