

JONAH -- A WHALE OF A TALE

Some have tried to suggest that the book of Jonah is either an allegory or a parable and that we are not meant to understand it as a report of actual historical events. But Jonah was an actual historical figure. He is mentioned by name in 2 Kings 14:25 as having lived in or before the days of Jeroboam II of Israel.

Jonah is a book about God. Everyone and everything that God touches obeys...

- ☐ The Storm
- ☐ The Sailors
- ☐ The Fish
- ☐ Nineveh
- ☐ The Plant
- ☐ The Worm
- ☐ The East Wind

“The Jonah narrative is given in the form of a comedy. We are meant to laugh at Jonah. Because of this playfulness, it is a story that disarms us. It flies under the radar of our personal defenses and it drops its thought-provoking bomb upon us when we least expect it.” – TJ Campo

Everyone obeyed except for the preacher. Have you ever told God, “No”? Perhaps you didn’t do it on the outside, but if you were honest, you were saying, “No” on the inside.

JONAH 1 -- THE PROPHET WHO RAN FROM GOD

*The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, 2
“Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness
has come up before Me.” (Jonah 1:1).*

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians lived along the banks of the Tigris River as it flowed down from Upper Mesopotamia in the land that today is known as Iraq. Theirs was an ancient empire. But the Assyrians had not remained within the borders of their homeland. They were an aggressive, warrior race and they had often conducted raids southward to the very borders of Israel.

God’s calling is a quest in the Tolkein sense of the word. It catches you and it changes your life forever. -- TJ Campo

Jonah’s mission was like a modern Jew being sent to Adolph Hitler or to Saddam Hussein. The Assyrians were the Nazis of the ancient world. They were known for their terror-tactics. They could conquer a city and gouge out eyes and cut off arms and legs and then they would get down to serious torture.

The Assyrians were a bad people. Even God said that. He said that *“their wickedness has come up before Me.”*

This was the people to whom Jonah was sent. He was to speak to them about the Lord. This is a book with a missionary theme. It tells us that God has a heart for missions. He had one Son and He was a missionary. Jesus was the most cross-cultural missionary of all time. He crossed from heaven to earth.

The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (Jonah 1:1-3).

Jonah was told to go. He went, but he went in the wrong direction. Instead of heading to Nineveh, he got on a boat heading for Tarshish. He was told to get up and go and instead he got up to flee.

Jonah knew God’s will. But he did not obey it. There is a lesson here. It is that knowing God’s will is not enough. Having the correct theology is not enough. Knowing requires doing.

Here is the principle. Obey the obvious; trust the Lord for the obscure.

Notice the repetition in verse 3 of the phrase, “The Presence of the Lord.” It will be seen again in verse 10. The Hebrew way of speaking is more concrete than this. It literally speaks of being “before the face of the Lord.”

Jonah tries to run from the face of God. He is contrasted with Jesus who, rather than fleeing from the face of God, had the face of God flee from Him when He was on the cross.

Jonah does the opposite. He goes down to Joppa and gets on a ship going to Tarshish. We aren’t exactly sure where Tarshish was, but we do know that it was in the opposite direction. The Jews were landlubbers. For a Jew to get on a ship for ANY reason was serious business. There was only one people who avoided the ocean more than the Jews. It was the Assyrians. The Assyrian Empire crossed mountains and deserts, but they never crossed an ocean.

And the LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. ⁵ Then the sailors became afraid, and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down, and fallen sound asleep. ⁶ So the captain approached him and said, “How is it that you are sleeping? Get up,

call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.” (Jonah 1:4-6).

The severity of the storm is seen in the actions of the sailors, not only crying out to their various gods, but in throwing the cargo overboard. The cargo was the reason for the trip. Without the cargo, there would be no profit. That did not matter to them because they valued their lives more highly than the cargo. The stuff of life is not so important when life is on the line. There is something about a storm that helps us to realign our priorities.

Did you ever notice how pagans get spiritual when they face troubled times? These sailors did that. They recognized that this storm was not normal. It had come about as a direct result of Noah’s sin.

Here is a pagan telling a Christian to pray.
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There is a lesson here. It is that sin affects more than merely the sinner. A believer who is in sin brings grief to others. These sailors were in the midst of a storm only because of their association with a sinning believer named Jonah. This was illustrated in the case of Joshua and the Israelites at Ai. They suffered a great defeat because of the sin of one man.

And each man said to his mate, “Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us.” So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. (Jonah 1:7).

Proverb 16:33 tells us that *the lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD*. This is not to say that God always honors such a method, but He did in this case.

Then they said to him, “Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.”

Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, “How could you do this?” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. (Jonah 1:8-10).

Notice that the men knew of the fact that Jonah was *fleeing from the presence of the LORD*. Didn’t he know about God’s omnipresence? Did he not know that it was impossible to escape from the presence of God? I think he did. But he was in a state of rebellion against God.

So they said to him, “What should we do to you that the sea may

become calm for us?”-- for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.

And he said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you.” (Jonah 1:11-12).

It is doubtful that Jonah knew how to swim. He was planning to drown. He was prepared to die so that these men in the boat could live. In this, he is a picture of Christ who died in our place. And as Jonah was three days and three nights in the fish, so also Christ was three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Jonah	Jesus
The prophet who was sent to Nineveh	The one who is greater than Jonah was sent to the world
He attempted to flee from the face of God	When He was on the cross, the face of God fled from Him
He served as a substitute for the sailors	He served as a substitute for the nations
The wrath of the storm was sent because of his sin	He took upon Himself the wrath of God on our behalf

The Bible teaches us of a cosmic storm. It was caused by sin. The good news of the gospel is that God offers Himself to be given to the storm so that we might find peace.

And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1:17).

Some have found this fish story a bit hard to swallow. But the God of the universe is able to do things much more difficult than that. Which is harder?

Deliver Jonah from
the belly of a fish

or

Deliver Jesus
from the grave

We should make note that the Hebrew term used here to describe the “great fish” is simply that -- דג גדול -- a big fish. It is translated in the Greek Septuagint with the term -- κηται μεγαλω -- a “big sea creature.” What kind of marine life was this? The passage is not that specific. Such ambiguity is not too surprising when we remember that the Hebrews were not an ocean going people. The descriptions that we have of various forms of ocean life are very basic.

JONAH 2 -- IN THE BELLY OF THE FISH

The entire first chapter pictures Jonah going down. He goes down to Joppa (1:3), then he goes down into the ship (1:3), then he went down into the hold to go to sleep (1:5) and finally we find himself in the depths of Sheol (2:2), into the heart of the seas (2:3) and down to the bottoms of the mountains (2:6). It is from here that he begins to look up as he prays.

The prayer of Jonah was not original. Most of it is taken from the Psalms. This tells me something about Jonah. He had learned the Psalms in the past. Now he learns to experience the Psalms. There are some lessons that we can learn from this prayer.

1. What you learn in the light will be valuable in the darkness. Jonah did not start reading these Psalms while in the belly of the fish. He didn't have any copies of the Scriptures with him and certainly no reading lamp was available. Jonah remembered the prayers from the Scriptures and he put them to good use.
2. You can pray anywhere. God was able to hear the prayer of Jonah, even from the belly of a great fish.
3. This is not a prayer of deliverance, but a prayer of thanksgiving and of worship. Jonah thanks the Lord for his salvation. He knows that he has tried to escape the presence of God and, in so doing, has been expelled from that presence, but that does not stop him from looking to the Lord in thankfulness.

The psalm presented in this chapter is one of the most humorous in the Scriptures. The humor comes from the fact that the standardized (even cliché) language of Hebrew psalmody is now given a literal meaning.

- In 2:1 where Jonah says, "*I cried for help from the depth of Sheol,*" the phrase is literally "belly of sheol" and recalls that he is actually in something's belly.
- Jonah 2:4 has him complaining that he is driven from God's sight (*I have been expelled from Thy sight*), which is exactly what he had tried--and failed--to do. When he finally is expelled, it will be as he is vomited onto dry land by the fish.

There is a sense in which Jonah is not only a type of Christ, but also a type of Israel. Like Israel, he had been sent by God on a very particular mission. He was to represent God and His message to the world. Like Israel, Jonah's reaction was one of rebellion. He sought to run away from the Lord. As a result, Jonah went into a watery captivity and this

was followed by a restoration in which he was given a second chance to fulfill the command of the Lord.

Throughout the prophets, we see this same theme of a coming captivity because of Israel's rebellion. In each case, there follows a promise of eventual restoration, but that is not the end of the story. The question that is put to Israel is whether or not she will utilize this restoration to follow the Lord.

JONAH 3 -- THE REPENTANCE OF NINEVEH

The second half of the Book of Jonah starts very much like the first half. God comes and gives direction for Jonah to go to Nineveh. This second call will help us to see the outline of the book and how this second half parallels the first half:

Jonah commissioned to go to Nineveh (1:1-3) ○ Jonah arose to flee		Jonah commissioned to go to Nineveh (3:1-3) ○ Jonah arose and went	
Jonah and the pagan sailors (1:4-16)	○ Yahweh threatens judgment ○ Sailors respond immediately ○ Sailors cry out to God for mercy ○ Captain participates in effort ○ The Lord spares their lives	Jonah and the pagan Ninevites (3:3-10)	○ Yahweh threatens judgment ○ Ninevites respond immediately ○ People cry out to God for mercy ○ King participates in effort ○ The Lord spares their lives
Jonah's prayer of repentance (1:17-2:10)	○ Speaks of the Lord's love ○ Thanks God that his life and soul have been spared	Jonah's prayer of complaint (4:1-5)	○ Complains of the Lord's love ○ Resentful and wishes that his life and soul would be taken
The Lord's Lesson for Jonah (4:5-11)			

1. The God of Second Chances: *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." (Jonah 3:1-2).*

This is grace. God comes again to this rebellious and reluctant prophet and gives him another chance.

Winston Churchill was being interviewed by a reporter and Churchill mentioned that he had been twice through the tenth grade. “You failed the tenth grade?” asked the incredulous reporter. “No,” replied Churchill, “I had a second opportunity to do well.”

The grace of God is such that we are given an opportunity to return and to obey the Lord.

2. Nineveh: *Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. (Jonah 3:3).*

This literally reads: “Nineveh was a great city to Elohim from a walk of three days.” It was suggested many years ago that the “walk of three days” was an indication of how long it took to walk around the city.

...when the book of Jonah speaks of Nineveh as a city of three days' journey, or when Ctesias in Diodorus ii. 3 describes its circuit as 480 stadia, it is plain that these conceptions imply an extension of the name to the whole group of cities between the Tigris and the Zab (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1902).

More recently, Dr. Donald Wiseman suggested that it is a reference to the time usually taken for an official delegation to visit an important city. Likewise, the reference to *Elohim* is not referring to its relationship with God, but rather to the fact that it was “titan” in its strength.

For this reason, the NIV has translated this passage: *...Nineveh was a very important city - a visit required three days.*

Jonah 3:3	Nineveh was a city of three days
Jonah 3:4	Jonah went into the city one day's walk
Jonah 3:4	“In 40 days Nineveh will be overthrown”

3. The Preaching of Jonah: *Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” (Jonah 3:4).*

Can you imagine the scene? The morning sun breaks over the Zagros Mountains to the east and casts its firey light on the hundreds of great towers that line the city walls of Nineveh. The city gates are open to the morning traffic as soldiers and

war chariots parade the streets that are already alive with merchants proclaiming the worth of their wares.

Amid the hustle and bustle, a stranger arrives, passing between the colossal winged bulls whose graven images impose a symbolic guard over the city gates. His clothes are worn and faded from the sea and from the land. Perhaps his hair and his beard and his skin bear the bleached marks of untold travel. He raises his voice and begins to call out a warning:

“Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

4. The Response of Repentance: *Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them (Jonah 3:5).*

I cannot help but to wonder whether Jonah related to them the account of how he had witnessed the power of God in the storm and his experiences in the belly of the fish. Perhaps it is a mere coincidence that the name “Nineveh” is a transliteration of the Assyrian name *Ninua*, the Assyrian version of the goddess Ishtar whose name was written with the cuneiform sign of a fish within an enclosure.

The people of Nineveh call for a fast and outward actions to demonstrate their inward attitude of repentance.

5. The Edict of the King: *When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes. ⁷ And he issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. ⁸ But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?” (Jonah 3:6-9).*

This was the greatest mass-conversion in history. Never before or after do we read of an entire city turning to the Lord in fasting and prayer. How did it start? It has started with the repentance of a rebellious prophet. It was only when God’s prophet repented that the people to whom he was to preach also repented.

There is an interesting chain of events presented in this chapter.



The Biblical account does not tell us which king this was. Archaeology may give us some interesting hints. The Assyrian Empire was in a state of decline at the end of the 9th century. Her foreign possessions were slipping from her grasp and revolt was in the air.

The reign of Adad-Nirari III (810-782 B.C.) is noted for the introduction of monotheism into Assyrian religion. It is notable that this king went on to attack the surrounding enemies of Israel (Damascus and Philistia).

“Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?” (Jonah 3:9).

The phrase translated "burning anger" (*Meharon Apu*) is literally, “the snorting of his nostrils.” God is pictured with all of the anger of a snorting bull which paws the ground and prepares to vent its wrath. One of our problems is that we tend to lose sight of the holy anger of God against sin.

JONAH 4 -- THE COMPASSION OF GOD

In the last chapter, Jonah had just seen the biggest revival in history. You would think that he would be ecstatic. But his experience is another reaction entirely.

But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry. (Jonah 4:1).

Jonah was displeased. He wasn't merely displeased, he was GREATLY displeased. Why? Because he wanted to see the judgment of God upon the city. The last thing he wanted to see was salvation in Nineveh.

But it greatly displeased Jonah, and he became angry. ² And he prayed to the LORD and said, “Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore, in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. ³ Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.”

And the LORD said, “Do you have good reason to be angry?” (Jonah 4:1-4).

Now we see the real reason that Jonah ran away to Tarshish. It wasn't that he was afraid

of the Assyrians or of hardship or of failure on the missionfield. It was to short-circuit the mercy of God from being offered to Nineveh.

Jonah was prejudiced. He was afraid of success. He was afraid that the Assyrians would repent and become a part of God's people. He wanted the judgment of God to fall upon the Assyrians. His attitude was representative of all of Israel. This is why this book was written. It is to show that God is *a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity* (4:2).

In verse 4, the Lord asks, "*Do you have good reason to be angry?*" (Jonah 4:1-4). The Lord is going to ask this same question of Jonah in verse 9.

Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city. 6 So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. 7 But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day, and it attacked the plant and it withered. (Jonah 4:5-7).

God gives Jonah an object lesson. You may have gotten some of those from the Lord. They are the circumstances that are given to you to teach something.

We read in verse 6 that God appointed this plant. We see that three times in verses 6-8 the Lord appointed various things.

- God appointed a plant (4:6).
- God appointed a worm (4:7).
- God appointed the east wind (4:8).

It is noteworthy that the vine is sometimes used in the Bible as a symbol for Israel. The nation of Israel would eventually be eaten up by the worm of Assyria.

On the other hand, the One who described Himself as the true vine, the One who was greater than Jonah, was Himself scorched and put to death for us.

There is a lesson here. It is that God appoints the good things and He also appoints those things that seem to be anything but good. Why? In order to teach you a lesson. In this case, the lesson that God was teaching Jonah was one of COMPASSION.

Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work, and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. 11 And should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?" (Jonah 4:10-11).

The book of Jonah ends with a question. Why does the book end the way it does? It is because God asks you the same question that He asks of Jonah. Have you identified with the compassion of God? What is your attitude toward people who are not like you?

- ☐ Who have a different theology
- ☐ Who have a different color
- ☐ Who have a different social status

The story doesn't end with Jonah. It ends with Jesus. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so also Jesus was three days and three nights in the earth. The reason was the same -- it was a sign of the compassion of God.

LESSONS FROM JONAH

1. God is the first cause of all things. He is the one who brought the storm, the fish, the plant, the worm and the east wind. He is the Sovereign Lord of this earth.
2. God is a Saving God. He is seen in this book as the Savior...
 - ☐ Of the sailors
 - ☐ Of Jonah
 - ☐ Of Nineveh.
3. God wants repentance. He looked for repentance in the city of Nineveh and He looked for repentance in the life of Jonah.
4. God is a God of compassion and His compassion extends both to pagan cities as well as to stubborn prophets.