

## THE MESSAGE OF JONAH

The book of Jonah, written primarily in the third person, does not explicitly name the prophet as the author of his own account, but we have no reason to doubt either the inspiration or the historical veracity of the book. Identified in verse 1 as the son of Amittai, Jonah came from a town called Gath-Hepher, near Nazareth in the area that later came to be known as Galilee (2 Kings 14:25). This makes Jonah one of the few prophets who hailed from the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

During Jonah's years as a prophet, Israel stood tall among the nations, though in a political rather than a spiritual sense. The reign of Jeroboam II (793–753 BC), who was an evil king before the Lord, saw Israel's borders expand to their greatest extent since the time of Solomon. Increased prosperity resulted in a materialistic culture that thrived on injustice to the poor and oppressed, one of the key messages of Jonah's prophetic contemporary, Amos.

However, rather than direct Jonah to prophesy to his own people, God commissioned him to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. At first unwilling to make the journey northeast to deliver God's message, Jonah turned and aimed for the farthest westward point known to him—Tarshish, located in modern-day Spain. After God eventually turned Jonah in the right direction, the prophet obediently prophesied to the people of Nineveh while Ashurdan III (772–754 BC) sat on the throne of Assyria. Though Assyria had been in a politically weakened state for some time, by the time of Jonah their cruelty to captives and other undesirables was well-known in Israel, creating an obvious need for Jonah's message of repentance.

## Jonah "The Runaway Believer"

Study 1. Read Jonah 1:1-3

Questions:

1. 'The word of the Lord came to Jonah' (1:1). How might God speak to us personally or his church corporately?
2. God told Jonah to 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it.' (Jonah 1:2) How is this relevant today?
3. What would be some of the reasons Jonah resisted God's call?
4. Give examples from the bible of people who were reluctant to accept the call of God?
5. Jonah tried to get away from God's presence (verse 3). Is this possible? Psalm 139: 7-12 How as Christians do we think we can keep away from God's presence?
6. What was the result of Jonah's disobedience?
7. If you knew this story before, did you learn anything new?
8. What does these verses teach us about God?

Friends, does God sometimes call us to do something that goes against the grain of our wills? Something that seems out of character with our past assignments? As we continue our study of this story, Jonah has a lesson for all of us.

## Jonah "I want your will, Lord, but not right now."

Study 2. Read Jonah 1: 4-16

Questions:

1. What questions do you have about this passages that you'd like to share with the group?
2. How could Jonah sleep through the storm?
3. How can Christians sleep spiritually? Read Romans 13: 11-14
4. Jonah's sin affected the sailors. How is this relevant for today?
5. When the ship's crew interrogated Jonah, how did the prophet identify himself? Jonah 1: 8, 9.
6. How did those mariners finally become acquainted with the true God? Jonah 1:10–16.
7. Why do you think we are so often tempted to see the limitations of ourselves in the face of obeying the command to "make disciples?" (Matthew 28:19)
8. Ironically, Jonah was successful in turning people to God, even when he himself was doing everything possible to avoid God. How do you interpret this?

In the first chapter of Jonah we read about a wayward prophet. Jonah was told to go and preach to Nineveh because of their sins but Jonah has rejected God's call. He decides to quit being God's prophet and takes passage to Tarshish rather than going to Nineveh. Jonah's stubbornness was so great that he tells the sailors to cast him into the raging sea to preserve the crew and ship. He refuses to turn to God, refuses to pray for forgiveness, and refuses to turn back to Joppa. He would rather drown than do any of these things. This is where we leave chapter 1.

## Jonah "Calls upon the name of the Lord."

Study 3. Read Jonah 1:17-2:10

Questions:

1. What jumps out for you from reading this passage?
2. Why is it a mistake to focus our attention solely upon the huge fish?
3. After reading over Jonah's prayer, do you think he has experienced a change of heart between chapter 1 and chapter 2?
4. In moments of distress, is your first inclination to pray? Why or why not? What about when your distress is the result of personal sin and disobedience?
5. In verse 9, Jonah expresses thanksgiving to God for saving him while he was drowning in "the heart of the seas" (verse 3). As believers in Jesus Christ, we have been saved from sin and death. How can our lives demonstrate thankfulness to God for our salvation?
6. What does Jonan's prayer teach us about him?
7. What does Jonah's prayer teach us about God?
8. "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them" (Jonah 2:8). What are the implications of this?

It has been said, "People have looked so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God. "

## Jonah "Okay, I will do it, I'll Do it!"

### Study 4. Read Jonah 2:10-3:4

#### Questions:

1. What questions or insights do you have about these verses that you'd like to share with the group?
2. After Jonah's disobedience and failed escape attempt, God asked him a second time to take His message to Nineveh. Does this surprise you? What does God's willingness to use Jonah despite His initial failure to obey tell you about God's character?
3. When God commanded him a second time to go to Nineveh, Jonah did as he should. Why did he, having previously refused? What does this teach us about God and his attitude to us when we disobey him?
4. What are the reasons that God wanted Jonah to go and preach to the wicked and violent Ninevites?
5. Compare Jonah's attitude and God's attitude toward Nineveh?
6. How as Christians can we have or develop God's attitude towards the lost?
7. Should sharing the gospel today be flexible and open to change?
8. How does God make his will known to you in your life?

It is a great encouragement to realise that the best of God's servants often failed a task but were given another chance. For instance, David did some dreadful things (2 Samuel 11:1-17), but God did not desert him. Simon Peter, in a moment of fear, denied knowing Jesus three times (Matthew 26:69-75). Even so, on the day of Pentecost, God blessed Peter and about three thousand people were converted (Acts 2:38-41). It is helpful to reflect that if God can use repented people like these, He can use you and me to accomplish His purpose.

## Jonah "You mean my enemies can be saved?"

Study 5. Read Jonah 3: 4-10

Questions:

1. What questions or insights do you have about these verses that you'd like to share with the group?
2. 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned' (Jonah 3:4). Why is it necessary to tell people about what will happen?
3. Jonah's success as a prophet was immediate (Jonah 3:5). Why was he so successful?
4. Read Jonah 3:6-9. What can be learnt from what the king does?
5. Is repentance the same as remorse, or being sorry for sin? Why or why not.
6. In what way did God demonstrate his mercy towards Nineveh, and why? Jonah 3:5-10.
7. From a human perspective, Jonah's mission would appear to be impossible. What lessons are there to be learnt from this?
8. Read Matthew 28:18-20 What promises are in this passage that gives us courage to share the good news of Jesus in the face of opposition?

Jonah in these passages has learnt a great truth, that 'Salvation is of the Lord' Jonah 3:9. How did Jonah know this? Jonah knew that only a loving God would take him back after doing what he did. Jonah knew that he had nothing to do with the wind, he had nothing to do with the way he got revealed before the mariners, and he knew he had nothing to do with the fish that swallowed him up. Jonah watched in awe as God worked in the lives of the people of Nineveh's. 'Salvation is of the Lord'.

## Jonah "Okay, so I am sulking."

### Study 6. Read Jonah 3: 10-4:11

#### Questions:

1. What questions or insights do you have about these verses that you'd like to share with the group?
2. Jonah was angry with God (Jonah 4:1,4,9). How might this be explained?
3. Compare Jonah's prayer after God showed him mercy by rescuing him from drowning (2:1-9) with his prayer after God showed the Ninevites mercy by relenting of his wrath (4:2-3). What is different about Jonah's attitude and response?
4. What major theme is presented here and woven throughout the book of Jonah?
5. When God saw that they had turned from their evil ways, God didn't carry out the destruction He had threatened (Jonah 3:10). How might this affect Jonah's reputation in Nineveh and Israel?
6. God provided a leafy plant to shade Jonah from the sun and then destroyed it (Jonah 4:6-7). What do these verses teach us?
7. Both Elijah (1 Kings 19:4) and Jonah (4:3,8) reached a point in their lives where they wished to die. Why was this?
8. Jonah knew what God was like (Jonah 4:2) but he was reluctant to tell others. Could this attitude apply to Christians and churches today?

The book of Jonah ends with a question about God's pity for Nineveh (Jonah 4:11). We are not told how Jonah answered and so the story is left unfinished. The significance of this unanswered question isn't how Jonah answered; it's how we answer. Do we show concern for all those who refuse to accept the salvation Christ offers? Do we rejoice over one sinner who repents? Do we proclaim God's message to a sinful world? It is our answer, not Jonah's, that should concern us.

## **Jonah “God, how gracious and compassionate can you be?”**

Study 7. Read Jonah 4: 10-11

Questions:

1. What questions or insights do you have about these verses that you'd like to share with the group?
2. How could have Jonah exchange his anger for joy, his disappointment for Godliness?
3. How can we make sure that when going through tough times in our lives that our relationships with God and each other grow stronger rather than disintegrate?
4. What is the point of evangelism and mission?
5. Is evangelism restricted to a select few?
6. In what ways are we and our church involved in mission today?
7. The people of Nineveh could not 'tell their right hand from their left' (Jonah 4:11). How do you interpret this statement and what does it have to do with missions?
8. As we conclude our study, what major lessons have been learned from the life of Jonah?

While most of us won't board a boat to flee halfway across the world like the Old Testament prophet did, yet we can run from the call of God. Most times, we don't even realize we're running. The Good News of the gospel is that we can never outrun grace.

The purpose of Jonah is not to recount an unbelievable historical tale or expand our bible knowledge. The purpose of Jonah is heart and life transformation - this narrative should change the way we as Christians think, speak, and act.