

JONAH & NINEVEH

“An Awesome Story of Mercy and Revival”

Why read this book?

Ever thought that some people are beyond hope and so evil that they are incapable of change? Ever wished that all your enemies would be destroyed? In this book God shows that He extends his grace and mercy to the worst of people and desires that all people would come to him and be saved (2 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; Titus 2:11; John 3:16). It challenges us to reach out to all people, even those that we despise.

This book tells the story of God’s concern even for the enemies of His people. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, which were sworn enemies of the Jewish people. The Ninevites were wicked and were the terrorists of their day.

The book also shows how God used a reluctant prophet as a vehicle of His grace.

Date written

Probably written between 785 and 750 B.C., during the reign of Jeroboam II, the king of Israel (see 2 Kings 14:25).

SOME DETAIL NOTES FROM WALK THROUGH THE BIBLE:

Introduction and Title – Nineveh is northeast; Tarshish is west. When God calls Jonah to preach repentance to the wicked Ninevites, the prophet knows that God’s mercy may follow. He turns down the assignment and heads for Tarshish instead. But once God has dampened his spirits (by tossing him out of the boat and into the water) and has demonstrated His protection (by moving him out of the water and into the fish), Jonah realizes God is serious about His command. Nineveh must hear the word of the Lord; therefore Jonah goes. Although the preaching is a success, the preacher comes away angry and discouraged, and must learn firsthand of God’s compassion for sinful men.

Author – The first verse introduces Jonah as “the son of Amittai.” Nothing more would be known about him were it not for another reference to him in Second Kings 14:25 as a prophet in the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel. Under Jeroboam, the borders of Israel were expanded “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.” Gath Hepher was three miles north of Nazareth in lower Galilee, making Jonah a prophet of the northern kingdom. The Pharisees were wrong when they said, “Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee” (John 7:52), because Jonah was a Galilean. One Jewish tradition says that Jonah was the son of a widow of Zarephath whom Elijah raised from the dead (see 1 Kin. 17:8-24).

Theme and Purpose – Jonah reveals the power of God in nature (1-2;4) and the mercy of God in human affairs (3-4). The prophet learned that “salvation is of the Lord” (2:9), and God’s gracious offer extends to all who repent and turn to Him. Jewish nationalism blinded God’s covenant people to an understanding of His concern for the Gentiles. Jonah wanted God to show no mercy to the Ninevites, but he later learned how selfish and unmerciful his position was.

Contribution to the Bible – Unlike the other prophetic books, Jonah places more emphasis on the messenger than the message. In the Hebrew, the prophetic message consists of only five words (3:4). The forty-eight verses of this biographical book provide a clear character development and a powerful portrait of human emotions. Jonah was the only prophet sent directly to the Gentiles and the only prophet who tried to conceal his message. Jonah learned a number of principles: 1) It is impossible to succeed in running away from God. 2) There is no limit to what God can use to get one’s attention. 3) Failure does not disqualify a person from God’s service. 4) Disobedience to God creates turmoil in the life of a believer. 5) Patriotism should never stand between a believer and the life plan of God.

More than any other Old Testament book, Jonah reveals the universal concern of Yahweh for all men. It is interesting that Nineveh responded better to the preaching of Jonah than Israel and Judah ever responded to any of their prophets.

Survey of Jonah – Jonah is an unusual book because of its message and messenger. Unlike other Old Testament books, it revolves exclusively around a gentile nation. God is concerned for the Gentiles as well as for His covenant people Israel. But God’s messenger is a reluctant prophet who does not want to proclaim his message for fear that the Assyrians will respond and be spared by the compassionate God of Israel. Of all the people and things mention in the book – the storm, the lots, the sailors, the fish, the Ninevites, the plant, the worm, and the east wind --only the prophet himself fails to obey God. All these were used to teach Jonah a lesson in compassion and obedience. The four chapters divide into two parts: 1) the first commission of Jonah (1-2); and 2) the second commission of Jonah (3-4).

The First Commission of Jonah (1-2): This chapter records the commission of Jonah (1:1-2), the disobedience of Jonah (1:3), and the judgement on Jonah (1:4-17). Jonah does not want to see God spare the notoriously cruel Assyrians. To preach a message of repentance to them would be like helping Israel’s enemy. In his patriotic zeal, Jonah put his country before his God and refused to represent Him in Nineveh. Instead of going five hundred miles northeast to Nineveh, Jonah attempts to go two thousand miles west to Tarshish (Spain). But the Lord uses a creative series of counter-measures to accomplish His desired result. Jonah’s efforts to thwart God’s plan are futile.

God prepares a “great fish” to preserve Jonah and deliver him on dry land. The fish and its divinely appointed rendezvous with the sinking prophet became a powerful reminder to Jonah of the sovereignty of God in every circumstance. While inside the fish (2), Jonah utters a declarative praise psalm which alludes to several psalms that were racing through his mind (Ps. 3:8; 31:22; 42:7; 69:1). In his unique “prayer closet”, Jonah offers thanksgiving for his deliverance from drowning. When he acknowledges that “salvation *is* of the Lord” (2:9), he is finally willing to obey and be used by God. After he is cast up on the shore, Jonah has a long time to reflect on his experiences during his eastward trek of five hundred miles to Nineveh.

The Second Commission of Jonah (3-4): Jonah obeys his second commission to go to Nineveh (3:1-4) when he becomes “a sign to the Ninevites” (see Luke 11:30). The prophet is a walking object lesson from God, his skin no doubt bleached from his stay in the fish. As he proceeds through the city, his one-sentence sermon brings incredible results: it is the most responsive evangelistic effort in history. Jonah’s words of coming judgement are followed by a proclamation by the king of the city to fast and repent. Because of His great mercy, God “relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them” (3:10).

In the final chapter, God’s love and grace are contrasted with Jonah’s anger and lack of compassion. He is unhappy with the good results of his message because he knows God will now spare Nineveh. God uses a plant, a worm, and a wind to teach Jonah a lesson in compassion. Jonah’s emotions shift from fierce anger (4:1), to despondency (4:3), then to great joy (4:6), and finally to despair (4:8). In a humorous but meaningful account, Jonah is forced to see that he has more concern for a plant than for hundreds and thousands of people (if 120,000 children are in mind in chapter 4, verse 11, the population of the area may have been 600,000). Jonah’s lack of a divine perspective makes his repentance a greater problem than the repentance of Nineveh.

Outline of Jonah

I. The First Commission of Jonah.....1:1-2:10

A. The Disobedience to the First Call.....1:1-3
 B. The Judgment on Jonah Is Exacted.....1:4-17
 1. The Great Storm.....1:4-16
 2. The Great Salvation of Jonah by the Fish.....1:17
 C. The Prayer of Jonah.....2:1-9
 D. The Deliverance of Jonah.....2:10

II. The Second Commission of Jonah.....3:1-4:11

A. The Obedience to the Second Call.....3:1-4
 B. The Judgment of Nineveh Averted.....3:5-10
 1. The Great Fast.....3:5-9
 2. The Great Salvation of Nineveh by God.....3:10
 C. The Prayer of Jonah.....4:1-3
 D. The Rebuke of Jonah by God.....4:4-11

KEY PRINCIPLES FROM EACH OF THE FOUR CHAPTERS:

Chapter One:

- **God has specific plans for each of us**
- **Nationalism and racism should never stand between us and God’s plans**
- **God desires all to be saved, even the “wicked”**
- **Impossible to run away from God**
- **No limit to what God can use to get our attention**
- **Our disobedience to God can create turmoil in the lives of others, including unbelievers**
- **God will often take care of us even when we don’t deserve it**
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Chapter Two:

- **Tough times can help us gain eternal perspective**
- **Salvation comes from the Lord**
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Chapter Three:

- **Past failure does not disqualify a person from future service to God**
- **God often gives us second chances**
- **Repentance provokes God's compassion**
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Chapter Four:

- **God is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love**
- **God can use many things to teach us lessons, including his earthly creations**
- **God loves all people – Jews and Gentiles**
- **We should have concern for our enemies and seek their salvation**

- **God cares about animals**

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THE REST OF THE STORY (160 or so years later): Read the book of Nahum

See also Matthew 12:39-41