

32 – Jonah: Reluctant Prophet, Repentant Enemy

- Jonah is **often criticized as a story that cannot be believed**. Many *criticize* it with ridiculous arguments. Some even *justify* it with ridiculous arguments. None have any basis in fact or scripture. Some think Jonah dreamed this incident. Some say it is a take on an old Phoenician myth of Hercules and the sea monster. Some say it was a dead fish that saved Jonah (*actually it's the other way around: the fish was alive, and Jonah was dead!*). Liberals say this book is just a fable. All of these arguments are pure fancy. The book of Jonah is the Word of God, included by Him for a distinct purpose. Jesus Himself referenced it, giving it all the authenticity it needs (Matthew 12:39-41; Luke 11:30). *If we question the historical and literal accuracy of the book of Jonah, we question the Lord Jesus.*



- Jonah is referenced also in 2 Kings 14:24-25**, an historical book, as the “son of Amittai” (*same person*).
- Jonah was a prophet, but book **does not seem to contain any prophecy**, at least on the surface. It tells of an actual event. Jesus references it however, and implies it is prophetic of His death and resurrection.
- Most scholars date this book somewhere **between 800 - 750 BC**. This is the height of the Assyrian Empire and its power base (capital), Nineveh. Nineveh and Assyria were destroyed about 606 BC by Nebuchadnezzar (Babylon). Nineveh was founded by Nimrod, an early rebel against God. The issue about Nineveh most important in this book is the fact that it was the greatest enemy (and Gentiles!) of the Jews, at this time especially the Northern Kingdom of Israel, where Jonah was from - hence, Jonah’s reluctance to go preach repentance to this enemy. He wanted God to destroy them, not save them!
- There is a striking comparison between Jonah and Paul**. Both were missionaries to the Gentiles, and both were cast overboard into stormy seas. Both witnessed to the sailors on their respective ships, and were used to deliver those sailors from death. There are also other comparisons that are interesting. In both cases, God had to go to great lengths to get the attention of both servants! (a great fish and death and resurrection for Jonah, and an appearance by Jesus and blindness for Paul).

Highlights

Chapter 1 Disobedience	Chapter 2 Submission	Chapter 3 Obedience	Chapter 4 Bad Attitude!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God orders Jonah to Nineveh (1:1-2) Jonah flees instead (1:3) God brings a storm (1:4-9) Tossed overboard (1:10-16) Swallowed! (1:17) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jonah’s prayer from belly of fish (2:1-9) Fish vomits up Jonah onto dry land (2:10) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God calls Jonah 2nd time to Nineveh (3:1-2) Jonah obeys, preaches 40 days until destruction unless they repent (3:3) All Nineveh repents (3:5-9) God relents from punishment (3:10) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jonah angry they repented, didn’t want them spared (4:1-4) God questions, “<i>Is it right for you to be angry?</i>” (4:4) Jonah leaves city, watches for their destruction (4:5) God provides shade for Jonah (4:6) God brings worm to wither shade, Jonah wants to die (4:7-8) God questions, “<i>Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?</i>” Jonah in a huff, answers “<i>Yes!</i>” God lectures Jonah about His pity on the 120,000 inhabitants of Nineveh (4:10-11)

- The fish in this story is not the hero or the villain, it is **merely a tool of God**. Many speculate about what kind of fish this was. Some assume a whale, as the biggest and most able to swallow a man. However, the Hebrew word here is “*dawg*” which is *any* fish. We are only told it was a “great fish.” The most important feature of this fish is that it was “prepared” by God. Perhaps this fish was one of a kind, prepared just for this event.

- Jonah prays earnestly to God in the belly of the fish (chapter 2). His prayer is like a Psalm, a poetic prayer of thanksgiving to God for his deliverance. As God’s prophet, Jonah knew God personally. He knew the “pit” he was in was his own fault. Now he admits that God is disciplining him, and submits himself to God. He knows the futility of any rebellion or resistance (*these alone are very important lessons for us!*) Jonah’s circumstances seemed utterly hopeless, but he was in the best place he could be...in the care and protection of a loving God. At the end of the prayer, God has the fish spit Jonah out, onto dry land.
- One of the biggest argument points in this story is **whether or not Jonah actually died** in the belly of the fish, and was raised back to life. Commentators cite meanings of the Hebrew words used, and go back and forth in their conclusions. However, the greatest argument for Jonah actually dying and being raised from the dead is in Matthew 12: ***“But Jesus replied, “Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign; but the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.”*** (12:39-40) Jesus told the Pharisees who wanted a sign that none would be given to them except the sign of the prophet Jonah. Jesus used Jonah as an illustration of His death and resurrection. For the sign to be used they must have been paralleled. If Jesus died, so did Jonah. The Jews most likely understood the book of Jonah as indicating that Jonah died in the belly of the fish and was brought back to life 3 days later. We can debate forever on whether Jonah died or not. The important point is that his time in the belly of the fish was prophetic of Jesus’ death and resurrection 3 days later.
- Jonah’s priorities were wrong. He put his people and his nation before devotion to God. He could have escaped the searing sun by going back into the city and helping those people get right before God, but he was stubborn. God had a little “chat” with him about his attitude, and also about His compassion on the 120,000 inhabitants of Nineveh that He cares for. We don’t know what Jonah did; his story ends here.
- This book is **not a “fish story.”** It is the story about a man who was likely raised from the dead, a wicked people who truly repented and were spared from God’s wrath (on this occasion), the mercy and grace of a God who cares for all people, and desires that “none should perish.” It is the story of disobedience, consequences, repentance, attitudes and obedience. There are *many* lessons in this little book.

MAIN THEMES IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

1: The resurrection of Jesus Christ	All great doctrines of our faith are found in the Old Testament. Exodus shows the <i>need</i> for redemption, in Ruth you have the <i>love side</i> of redemption. In Esther, God reveals His providence. Job presents the difficult subject of suffering, repentance and restoration. All scripture provides some strategic doctrine about Jesus. In Jonah, it is Jesus’ resurrection.
2: Salvation is not by works...	...but by faith which leads to repentance. The way to God is not by works of righteousness which we have done, but by the blood of a substitutionary sacrifice provided by the Lord. A very significant statement in the Book of Jonah is: <i>“Salvation is of the LORD”</i> (2:9).
3: God’s grace cannot be frustrated	Jonah refused to go to Nineveh, but God would still get His message there. (<i>Even if He had to do it Himself, which He does often, as He works in the hearts of man.</i>) Jonah was used as God’s spokesperson, and to make other points (<i>i.e., pointing to Jesus’ resurrection</i>), but God could just as easily have done it Himself!
4: God will not cast us aside for faithlessness	He may not use us, but He will not cast us aside. A sports player is called to play only when s/he can make a contribution to the game. If we are faithless, God may “bench us,” but we are still in uniform, and He will not cast us aside. When we want to get back in the game and do His will, He will allow it, <i>and enable us.</i>
5: God is good and gracious	Even Jonah understood this: <i>“for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm.”</i> (4:2) Jonah knew God would forgive his enemy, and he didn’t want that. The God seen in Jonah is not vengeful, but loving and gracious, even to our enemies, even to the Gentiles. God loves even those we don’t.
6: God is the God of Gentiles	God did not forget the Gentiles. If He was willing to save a brutal nation like the Assyrians, God is in the business of saving sinners. The last verses of Jonah underscore this: <i>“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. 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?”</i> (4:10)
7: Salvation comes through faith in God, by discernment of the Word	We cannot know of our salvation without the Word of God, whether preached or read and believed. Paul reminds us of this as well: <i>“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”</i> (Romans 10:17) God said the people of Nineveh had no discernment, because they did not have the Word. The same is true in the world today. Real discernment comes only from God, and a knowledge of His Word.

- As a follow-up, it should be noted that about 140 years after Jonah’s message of repentance, the Assyrians were sinning and turned away from God again, so He sent a vision and message to another prophet, Nahum. We don’t know if Nahum actually traveled to Nineveh as Jonah did. In Nahum the message is very strong and the destruction of Nineveh is depicted very graphically. The Assyrians did not repent this time and were completely destroyed precisely as the book of Nahum predicted.