

# ***JONAH - What Does It Say to You About God?***

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## **THE CENTRAL QUESTION:**

### **What does this book/story say to us about God?**

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
  - b. Why did He record it for our study?
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1. Do you remember hearing the story of Jonah as a kid? What did you think of it? Did you want to try it? Is it just another miracle story? Is it possible to believe that this story actually happened as it says? Would you feel more comfortable among modern scientific friends if the book of Jonah were not in the Bible? Does the story seem a little “unrealistic?” Did Jesus believe it? (Matthew 12:38-41) Is Jonah mentioned as a historical character elsewhere in the Bible? (2 Kings 14:25)

**The book of Jonah is different from the other prophetic books, because it gives only one sentence of what the prophet Jonah preached.** Instead, this book tells how Jonah disobeyed the Lord and refused to warn Nineveh that it was going to be destroyed. Jonah even wanted the city to be destroyed, because it was the capital city of Assyria, a hated enemy of Israel. But the Lord corrected Jonah; then Jonah went to Nineveh and preached the Lord’s message.

When many people think about the book of Jonah, they think only of Jonah being swallowed by a huge fish. However, the message of this book is that the Lord wants to have mercy on everyone; as Jonah says to him:

*“You are a kind and merciful God, and you are very patient. You always show love, and you don’t like to punish anyone, not even foreigners.” (Jonah 4.2b) (CEV)*

**“The book portrays God’s absolute sovereignty over his creation.** But above all it portrays God as a God of love and mercy, who would rather forgive and save even the enemies of his people, rather than punish and destroy them.” (GNB)

**The pervading theme of Jonah is God’s gracious extension of His mercy to Gentile nations through the preaching of repentance. Nevertheless, the book is unique in the number of theological truths expounded in one brief volume** (forty-eight verses). These additional themes are worthy of note: **(1)** the universal appeal of Israel’s God (cf. the mariners, Jonah 1:16; the Ninevites, Jonah 3:5); **(2)** the sovereignty of God over life, elements, and circumstances (cf. the storm, Jonah 1:4; the fish, Jonah 1:17; the plant, Jonah 4:6; and the worm, Jonah 4:7; in this connection one should observe that the preoccupation of antagonists and defenders with the great fish has detracted from the theological truths resident in the book); **(3)** a contrast between the ineffectiveness of the gods of the mariners (Jonah 1:5) and the Ninevites, and the saving competency of YAHWEH as witnessed by the mariners (Jonah 1:16), by Jonah (Jonah 2:10), and by the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:5-10); **(4)** a further contrast concerning the nationalistic pride of Israel and the failure of the nation to

comprehend the nature of her missionary task and the purpose of God to bestow His loving-kindness upon all peoples—this whole issue is made lucid in the life of the prophet himself (cf. Jonah 4:1, 2); **(5)** finally, the story of Jonah’s encounter with the fish as a typology prefiguring the Lord’s three-day sojourn in the tomb and His subsequent resurrection (cf. Matt. 12:38-41). **It is probably correct to state that the main character of the book is really God. No less than thirty-nine times is He directly referred to as YAHWEH or Elohim. In comparison, Jonah is mentioned eighteen times. The sovereign, covenant God of glorious attributes is the hero of this short prophecy.**” (*Believer’s Study Bible*)

This large city [Nineveh] was the capital of Assyria, a violent pagan nation despised by the Israelites. **Yet the Ninevites repented when they heard of God’s impending judgment, whereas the Israelites kept ignoring similar messages sent to them. Thus the book was a challenge to the self-righteous and ethnocentric attitudes of the Israelites.**

### **Nineveh:**

- A prominent Assyrian city on the east bank of the Tigris River about 280 miles north of Babylon.
- Founded by Nimrod, along with Rehoboth Ir, Calah, and Resen (Gen. 10:11-12), forming a massive urban quadrangle 60 miles across.
- Rivalled Babylon for beauty and splendor with its royal palaces, temples, broad streets, public gardens, and impressive library containing more than 26,000 clay tablets—one of the largest in the ancient world.
- Defended by an outer wall and an inner wall 100 feet high and 50 feet wide.
- Irrigated by the Khasr River, whose flow was controlled by a dam built by Sennacherib (ca. 705–681 A.D.), and also by a large aqueduct that carried water from a second dam thirty miles away.
- Target of prophecies by Zephaniah (Zeph. 2:13-15) and Nahum (Nah. 1:1; 3:1), who warned of the city’s ultimate destruction.
- Destroyed in 612 A.D. by a siege of Babylonians, Scythians, and Medes, who penetrated its defenses when sudden floods eroded the walls (compare Nah. 2:6-8).
- Quickly became a mound of ruins that was ignored until just a century ago. (*Word in Life Study Bible*)

A former drug addict, now turned preacher told of many disturbing statistics about drug abuse. He then pounded his Bible and said it was the only answer. Afterwards, a drug addict asked him if he really believed all those stories in the Bible. He said yes. Then he was asked if he believed in the story of Noah and even Jonah. Again he said yes. Then the questioner asked what he thought Jonah was thinking while in the belly of that big fish. After thinking for a moment he replied that he would just have to ask Jonah when he got to heaven. “What if Jonah doesn’t go to heaven?” asked the questioner. ‘Then you can ask him’, replied the preacher!”

A little girl was observed by her pastor standing outside the pre-school Sunday School classroom between Sunday School and worship, waiting for her parents to come and pick her up for “big church.”

The pastor noticed that she clutched a big storybook with the title, “Jonah and the Whale” under her arms.

He knelt down beside the little girl and began a conversation. “What’s that you have in your hand?” he asked.

“This is my storybook about Jonah and the Whale,” she answered.

**“Tell me something, little girl,” he continued, “do you believe that story about Jonah and that whale to be the truth?”**

**The little girl nodded, “Why of course I believe this story to be the truth!”**

**He inquired further, “You really believe that a man can be swallowed up by a big whale, stay inside him all that time, and come out of there still alive and OK? You really believe all that can be true?”**

**She declared, “Absolutely, this story is in the Bible and we studied about it in Sunday School today!”**

**Then the pastor asked, “Well, little girl, can you prove to me that this story is the truth?”**

**She thought for a moment and then said, “Well, when I get to Heaven, I’ll ask Jonah.”**

**The pastor then asked, “Well, what if Jonah’s not in Heaven?”**

**She then put her hands on her little hips and sternly declared, “Then YOU can ask him!”**

**A teacher in Idaho asked a group of children what they learned from the story of Jonah. One child responded: “Even the fish learned that you can’t keep a good man down!”**

The book of Jonah is actually one of the most historically supported minor prophets. He is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 and Jesus talks about him in the Matthew 12:38-41; 16:4; and Luke 11:29-32. Jesus spoke of the story on several occasions as being a historical fact. Do we want to doubt the truthfulness of Jesus?

## **Jonah**

Everybody knows about Jonah. People who have never read the Bible know enough about Jonah to laugh at a joke about him and the “whale.” Jonah has entered our folklore. There is a playful aspect to his story, a kind of slapstick clumsiness about Jonah as he bumbles his way along, trying, always unsuccessfully, to avoid God.

But the playfulness is not frivolous. This is deadly serious. While we are smiling or laughing at Jonah, we drop the guard with which we are trying to

keep God at a comfortable distance, and suddenly we find ourselves caught in the purposes and commands of God. All of us. No exceptions.

Stories are the most prominent biblical way of helping us see ourselves in “the God story,” which always gets around to the story of God making and saving us. Stories, in contrast to abstract statements of truth, tease us into becoming participants in what is being said. We find ourselves involved in the action. We may start out as spectators or critics, but if the story is good (and the stories are very good!), we find ourselves no longer just listening to but inhabiting the story.

One reason that the Jonah story is so enduringly important for nurturing the life of faith in us is that Jonah is not a hero too high and mighty for us to identify with—he doesn’t do anything great. Instead of being held up as an ideal to admire, we find Jonah as a companion in our ineptness. Here is someone on our level. Even when Jonah does it right (like preaching, finally, in Nineveh) he does it wrong “by getting angry at God). But the whole time, God is working within and around Jonah’s very ineptness and accomplishing his purposes in him. Most of us need a biblical friend or two like Jonah. (Introduction to Jonah - *The Message*)

2. **What picture of God did Jonah have? Was he happy and proud of how God treated him? Was he proud of how God treated the Ninevites? Does Jonah contribute anything of importance to your picture of God?**

Jonah had a great picture of God, but he was embarrassed and angered by God’s behavior! (Jonah 4:1-3) Compare Jeremiah and Paul. (Jeremiah 9:23,24; Romans 1:16,17) Why was Jonah embarrassed about his picture of God? Or was he?

**In contrast, Joshua, like Moses before him, recognized that God’s reputation was an even more important issue than the fate of Israel!** (Compare Genesis 18:25; Exodus 32:7-14; Deuteronomy 9:6-13,26-29; 32:26,27; Numbers 14:11-16; Job 42:7,8; Ezekiel 36:22,23; Daniel 9:14- 19; John 15:15; Romans 1:18; 2:17-24) God’s friends are jealous for His reputation. Real friends are always like that!

3. **How did Jonah know that throwing him into the sea would stop the storm? (Jonah 1:9-12) On what basis could he make such a statement? Well, wasn’t he a prophet? Did God actually send the storm against the ship that Jonah was in? (Jonah 1:4) Or is this just a general understanding that whatever happens, God is behind it? When Jonah said he was a worshiper of Yahweh, “the God of heaven, who made land and sea”, did the sailors think of the evil “god” of the sea, Mot, who always seemed to be angry?**

While we certainly would agree with the statement that God is over all and has the power to allow or prevent anything He chooses, in general He allows people to exercise their freedom and thus to learn, even if what they learn is the dire consequences of evil. God probably sent the storm in this story in the same sense as He killed Saul. (See 1 Chronicles 10:3-14) We have no way of knowing for sure if Jonah had some specific revelation about the cause of the storm. The sailors were certainly terrified enough (Jonah 1:10) when they learned the truth.

4. Where did Jonah think he had gone when he was swallowed by that big “fish?” He says he went down into Sheol (sometimes translated hell). It is interesting to note how different translators deal with Jonah’s comments. Did Jonah make some “foxhole” promises?

**Jonah 2:2:**

“...He doth answer me, From **the belly of sheol** I have cried, Thou hast heard my voice.”  
(YLT)

“...From **the tomb of the dead**, I called for help and you heard me.” (Clear Word)

“...From **deep in the world of the dead** I cried for help, and you heard me.” (GNB)

Notice that Sheol, Hell, Hades, my watery grave, the womb of Hades, Death, the world of the dead, the nether world, and the tomb of the dead are all translated from the same Hebrew words. This is because there is no distinction in the Hebrew. To the Hebrew mind everyone goes to the same place until the resurrection occurs. From Jonah’s perspective he had already arrived there! He had no idea that he would ever return to the solid earth!

It is interesting to note that numerous stories from both ancient and modern times attest to the fact that large “fish” or “whales” have swallowed humans and then spit them up again alive. One of the most modern examples was reported in the “*Weekly World News*” of June 16, 1987 where the headlines read: “Shark swallows fisherman—then spits him out alive!” The lucky man was named Mikado Nakamura and he gave an interview to the Newspaper from his hospital bed in Kanazawa, Japan. (See *The Anchor Bible*, “Jonah” p. 151)

For anatomical reasons it seems most unlikely that ‘fish’ is correct, but several toothed whales are recorded from the E Mediterranean, including some that are capable of swallowing a man. In the early part of this century there were one or two reasonably authenticated cases of men surviving after being swallowed (*PTR* 25, 1927, pp. 636ff.). (*The New Bible Dictionary*)

5. “Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale.” (Jonah 1:17) How long would that be? If Jesus was dead three days and three nights as we reckon time, He would need to be crucified on Wednesday in order to rise on Sunday morning? How long was Jonah inside this creature?

To the ancient Jews any part of a day counted as one day. Furthermore, when they said “days and nights” it referred to whole days. Thus “three days and three nights” could mean just a little over 24 hours if you pick the right 24 hours. Notice, by comparison that Jesus was in the grave a small part of Friday, all of Saturday, and about half of Sunday by Jewish reckoning. Their understanding and concern about the minutia of time was nothing like ours.

6. What do you think of the appeal made by the king of Nineveh (Jonah 3:6-9)? What kind of picture of God did he have? Who do you think had the biggest effect on the people—the King or Jonah?

It is quite clear that the King was used to authoritarian methods! I wonder how he could order animals to wear sackcloth! Unfortunately, the picture he had of God was not much above His own arbitrary rule! In any case the combined effect of the King’s edict and Jonah’s preaching apparently “converted” most of the city! What an incredible result! It is

too bad we can't attribute this wonderful result to a better picture of God, but people are not often moved by just that!

7. **What gave Jonah such authority? Was it his recounting of the “whale” story? Have you ever heard of an evangelist that won a whole city?**

See #6 above for a note on Jonah's effectiveness. Did he keep any “souvenirs” of his travels!? In the early years the surrounding nations did respect Yahweh, perhaps because they remembered David and Solomon! What did Jonah say to the people of Jerusalem when he came home? Do you think the peoples of Nineveh and Jerusalem believed his story? The story is certainly told in such a way in the ancient Hebrew that one is expected to believe that it is a part of an historical episode.

8. **How do we go to the world with a serious message about what's going to happen at the end of the world, and at the same time, tell them that God is infinitely gracious, patient, loving, and compassionate? Is there any way we can phrase that so it won't confuse people? Didn't God's graciousness make Jonah want to die? Was he hoping to go home with the message that with God's help he had managed to singlehandedly wipe out the Ninevites?! If on the other hand Jonah comes home and explains that he has evangelized the Ninevites so they didn't have to be destroyed as God had said they would be, would his neighbors want to stone him?**

This is a very serious question raised by the book of Jonah! It seems to suggest that there is a time in people's lives when a little “thunder” may be appropriate. Certainly children need “emergency measures” from time to time! But ultimately we need to educate people as to the full and incredible freedoms that God has actually offered us. **It would have been good if he could have been as successful in “converting” the people back in Jerusalem or Samaria! Why wasn't Jonah as successful with the Hebrews as he apparently was with the Ninevites?**

9. **What is the real message of Jonah? Why is Jonah upset by God's kindness toward the Ninevites? Look at Jonah 4. Doesn't this imply that there was a rather extended conversation between Jonah and God earlier? Can you imagine what was said during that conversation?**

There seem to be several major messages in the book of Jonah.

- 1) God takes a very personal interest in all peoples of all nations. He is not just interested only in “His own people” unless you remember that in reality we are all His children.
  - 2) Jonah somehow learned that God was incredibly gracious, loving and kind. But Jonah seemed to hope that that kindness did not extend to the Assyrians!
  - 3) God is apparently prepared to do almost anything that will result in people learning the truth about Him.
10. Look at Jonah 3:9,10. What do we mean when we say, “God repented of evil”? God seems to change His mind about destroying Nineveh.

**Jonah 3:10:**

And God seeth their works, that they have turned back from their evil way, and **God repenteth of the evil** that He spake of doing to them, and he hath not done it. *Young's Literal Translation*

God saw what they did; he saw that they had given up their wicked behavior. So **he changed his mind** and did not punish them as he had said he would. (*GNB*)

When God saw what the people had done and how determined they were to turn from their wicked ways, He had compassion on them. **He decided not to destroy the city** as He had originally planned. (*Clear Word*)

See **1 Samuel Teacher's Guide #17**. See also Genesis 6:5-7; Exodus 32:14; 1 Samuel 15:11,35; 2 Samuel 24:16; 1 Chronicles 21:15; Jeremiah 26:13,19; Ezekiel 24:14; Joel 2:13,14; Amos 7:3,6; Jonah 4:2; compare Psalms 2:12; Contrast 1 Samuel 15:29; Numbers 23:19; Malachi 3:6.

11. What about Jonah's complaint? (Jonah 4:1-3) Is it fair for God to send one of His prophets off so far to give such a message and then just make him look like a false prophet?

God seems to be delighted when even the most cruel of peoples are prepared to learn something about Him. God has even put people to death in order to say something to other people! (See story of Uzzah - **Proverbs Teacher's Guide #11**; **Leviticus Teacher's Guide #13**; **2 Samuel Teacher's Guide #5**) God is not nearly so concerned about the details or the length of our lives on this earth as He is about what happens to us in eternity. The few events of this very brief life are only a preparation time for eternity. God knows that He will resurrect us when He is ready, and He knows what the results will be at that time. So those results are not nearly so worrisome to Him as they seem to be to us! Our only important concern is to be sure that our relationship with Him is okay so He can do for us what He so much wants to do!

12. What do you think of Jonah's attitude about God? What about God's attitude toward these number one enemies of Israel? If Jonah understood that God is the kind of God that is implied in Jonah 4:2, why wouldn't he be proud of it and want to share that message?

God, as usual is very gracious even to the worst of sinners. These Assyrians were very cruel to those who were uncooperative or rebellious against their plans. It was their custom to take such people out and flay them with sticks until their entire skin was black and blue and then skin them alive!!! How could God love such people? How could Jonah even come near them? It would take quite a bit of convincing to get almost anyone to go to such a group of people! Jonah must have felt that God was able to care for him no matter what happened, and the experience with the "fish" convinced him that God was serious about this assignment!

13. **Compare the response of the Ninevites to Jonah's message and the final comment about Israel and Judah themselves given much later at the end of 2 Chronicles 36:15,16. Who seems the most "Christian" or savable?**

How can we explain the much more favorable response from the heathen Assyrians than from the "faithful" Jews? Even the Old Testament Jews responded to the discovery and reading of God's word on several occasions. (Nehemiah 8; 2 Kings 22) But how did the Jews in Jesus' day respond to appeals from the "Word"? They wanted to kill Him! They

thought they knew the Bible inside out. It had no more conversion appeal for them. This would suggest that such “appeals” will work for a while but not indefinitely.

14. Do you expect to see Jonah in the kingdom? If so, what do you think he will have to say about this whole experience? Don't you think he will look back and be able to say, “The picture of God that I was ashamed of then, I am proud of now?” Are we Adventists proud or distressed that God has waited 160 years? Are we being true friends of God and correctly representing Him?

While this is primarily a thought question, it is a very serious one. Jonah is mentioned by Jesus in the New Testament as we noted, but he is not found in Hebrews 11. Jesus makes no statement that would give a clear indication that Jonah will be in heaven. Personally, I am convinced that Jonah will be there. Do we know of any Bible writers that clearly will *not* be in heaven? Many aspects of Jonah's experience are very parallel to our experience today. We can learn many lessons from his story. May our picture of God be as good as his!

15. What did the angels learn from the stories and books of Jonah and Nahum?

It seems that God has an interest in all the peoples of planet earth and not just Hebrews. The entire book of Jonah was written for the benefit of the Assyrians and actually the peoples of Israel and Judah and the prophet Jonah look pretty bad by comparison!

**All of this was meant to jar Israel out of her self-centeredness and lead her to begin to reach out to other nations and be missionary minded. Israel was meant to be just like God with His great missionary heart. So are we, and that is the great lasting message of Jonah. *Bible Amplifier - Jonah*, p. 157,158**

The angels must have marveled that God had any interest in this very cruel nation known as Assyria. Why did God send a prophet to them? Why not to Moab, Edom, Syria, Egypt, Tyre and Sidon and Babylon? Is it possible that God saw something in Nineveh that He didn't in these other places? Do we believe that God is fair? Why did He keep working with Israel and Judah? For a few more years at least? Are we to conclude that Jonah was sent to Nineveh because God saw something there that He recognized as being responsive to His appeals that He didn't find even in Israel and Judah? Did the angels learn something about God's missionary Spirit and His willingness to reach out to other peoples, even those who didn't appear to be very ready for the gospel?

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