

Jonah

WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT? How a reluctant prophet learned to follow orders—and learned a lesson about God's grace.

WHO WROTE IT? Tradition says it was Jonah himself, but it could have been written by someone in the group of prophets who also collected information about Elijah and Elisha.

WHEN DID IT HAPPEN? The events in Jonah probably took place in the 700s B.C.

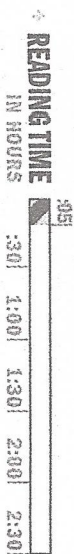
WHERE DOES THIS BOOK FIT? During the time of the divided kingdom.

THE BREAKDOWN

- Chapter 1: Jonah runs from God by sea and is swallowed by a fish
- Chapter 2: Jonah prays inside the fish and is vomited onto dry land
- Chapter 3: Jonah preaches to Nineveh, and the whole city repents
- Chapter 4: Jonah sulks because God forgave his enemies

KEY CONCEPTS

"Is it right for you to be angry?"



Jonah's Psalm and the Book of Psalms

Jonah	Psalms	Jonah	Psalms
2:2a	3:4; 120:1	2:6b	49:15
2:2b	18:4-5; 30:3	2:7a	18:6
2:3a	88:6-7	2:8a	31:6
2:3b	31:22	2:9a	50:14
2:4a	5:7	2:9c	3:8
2:5a	69:1-2		

WORTH MEMORIZING

- 2:2 "I cried out to the Lord in my great trouble, and he answered me. I called to you from the land of the dead, and Lord, you heard me!"

THE MASCULINE PERSPECTIVE

- **GOD'S LOVE.** If anger and hatred are our main motivations, if we get our identity from what we're against, trouble lies ahead. God loves even the people we hate—and that can be hard to swallow.

WHAT'S THE POINT OF
Jonah?

+++
It's not
smart to
dodge God's
directive.

1:1-3 God's ways are not always our ways. God gave Jonah a message that he didn't want to hear, much less obey. It appears here that Jonah was afraid to confront this godless people with the truth about their sin. Later on, however, we are given another reason for Jonah's reticence (4:1-2). Jonah was afraid that the Ninevites would repent and that God would spare them. The prophet was bitter against this bloodthirsty nation and wanted them to be destroyed. God desires that everyone should repent and receive his forgiveness and restoration (2 Peter 3:9), and we should desire the same.

1:4-17 God created a great storm, putting the sailors in a dangerous position over which they had no control. Jonah, who was responsible for their plight, was asleep in the hold of the boat. Often our irresponsible actions put the lives of others in jeopardy. Our refusal to obey God brings pain, and sometimes long-term consequences, into the lives of family members and friends. We, like Jonah, need to wake up from our sleep and take responsibility for our failures. Then we must do what we can to make restitution to those we have hurt.

Timeline

- 793 B.C. + JEROBOAM II BECOMES KING OF ISRAEL; JONAH BECOMES A PROPHET
- 792 + UZZIAH BECOMES KING OF JUDAH
- 783 + SHALMANESER IV BECOMES KING OF ASSYRIA
- 772 + ASHUR-DAN III BECOMES KING OF ASSYRIA
- 760 + AMOS BECOMES A PROPHET
- 759? + JONAH PREACHES TO NINEVEH
- 754 + ASHUR-NIRARI V BECOMES KING OF ASSYRIA
- 753 + JONAH'S MINISTRY ENDS
- 722 + ISRAEL FALLS TO ASSYRIA



Maybe you've heard of Roy Riegels, better known as "Wrong Way Roy." In the 1929 Rose Bowl, he got mixed up and ran sixty-nine yards in the wrong direction. It's been called the worst blunder in college football history. Well, he reminds me of "Wrong Way Jonah," who ran off toward Tarshish when God told him to go to Nineveh. Had Jonah obeyed—taking a message of repentance immediately to the Gentile nation of Assyria—the book that bears his name might read more like those of the other Minor Prophets. Instead, the record of his ministry is an intensely personal story of God's grace to a rebellious prophet, not just to a wicked pagan nation.

Jonah did finally end up going to Nineveh, but he resisted the entire way. And when the Ninevites repented and avoided judgment, Jonah was undone. The book ends with a pouring prophet more concerned for his own comfort than for the multitudes of Assyria.

As God probed Jonah with questions about his values, priorities, and actions, we should answer those questions too. We all arrive at a similar crossroads at some point. When the book of Jonah ends, we see the procrastinating prophet who had still not made up his mind. But his moment of hesitation becomes a moment for each of us: God's call is on our lives right now, and He has a mission for us today. Will we go the wrong way? Or will we go with Him all the way?

KEY THOUGHT:

We must never run away from God's devotion to evangelism, His compassion for souls, or His direction in taking the Gospel to the nations.

KEY VERSE:

"I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction, and He answered me.
Out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and You heard my voice."
Jonah 2:2

KEY ACTION:

Go wherever the Lord sends you without hesitation or vacillation.

KEY PRAYER:

Lord, when my soul faints,
I will remember You and Your
perfect will for my life.

A Prophet Fearful of Grace

WHEN WE THINK of the Old Testament prophets, images of judgment and doom come to mind. We envision bony fingers pointed accusingly at angry faces. We conjure up images of locusts and pestilence and marauding armies. And we imagine an angry God behind it all.

The prophet Jonah knew better. In fact, it was his preference for doom and judgment, combined with his knowledge of a loving and gracious God, that prompted him to flee what he saw as a loathsome assignment.

Jonah ministered after the time of Elisha and just before the prophets Amos and Hosea. He lived during an era of economic prosperity coupled with spiritual poverty.

**Jonah wanted
thunderbolts
and earth-
quakes and
locusts and
rivers flowing
with Assyrian
blood.**

When the dominant military force in the ancient world was Assyria. When God called Jonah to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, Jonah rebelled. It wasn't that he was afraid of the citizens of that evil city. Rather, he knew ahead of time what would happen if the people repented—and he decided to take steps to prevent God's mercy.

Instead of heading northeast toward Nineveh, Jonah booked passage on a ship going west. When a terrific storm threatened to sink the ship, he instructed its sailors to toss him overboard. He wound up in the belly of a "great fish" for three days and nights. When he finally came to his senses at the bottom of the sea, he agreed to follow God's directions.

He made his way to Nineveh, where, just as Jonah had feared, his preaching led to a great revival.

God spared the city when its people repented . . . and Jonah sulked. This was exactly what he hadn't wanted.

When God asked Jonah to explain his deep funk, the prophet replied, "Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, LORD? That is why I ran away to Tarsish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people" (Jonah 4:2).

Jonah wanted an angry God. He wanted thunderbolts and earthquakes and locusts and rivers flowing with Assyrian blood. What he didn't want was a God who loved to show mercy and grace to the most undeserving sinners the moment they repented of their evil ways.

Some people might scoff at the story of Jonah and call it religious myth. But Jesus Christ himself, on multiple occasions, endorsed it (Matthew 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:32). His testimony about Jonah and his ministry shows that while the Bible never downplays the holiness and judgment of God, it loves to highlight his mercy and grace. It also reveals that, from the very beginning, God intended to shower his favor not only on the sons of Abraham, but on anyone—Assyrian, unspecified seaman, or others—who would acknowledge him as Lord and trust him for their future.

That remains the main story today.

THE POINT: God is just and holy, but he is also merciful and will forgive sin in response to repentance.

Jonah

Someone you would know.

BASIC SURVEY

JONAH

AUTHOR: Unclear; the story is Jonah's, but written in the third person.

DATE: Approximately 760 BC. Jonah prophesied during the reign of Israel's King Jeroboam II (see 2 Kings 14:23-25), who ruled from about 793 to 753 BC.

IN TEN WORDS OR LESS

Reluctant prophet, running from God, is swallowed by giant fish.

DETAILS, PLEASE

God tells Jonah to preach repentance in Nineveh, capital of the brutal Assyrian Empire. Jonah disobeys, sailing in the opposite direction—toward a rendezvous with literary immortality. A storm rocks the ship, and Jonah spends three days in a giant fish's belly before deciding to obey God after all. When Jonah preaches, Nineveh repents—and God spares the city from the destruction Héd threatened. But the prejudiced Jonah pouts. The story ends with God proclaiming His concern even for vicious pagans.

QUOTABLE

- > "I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD" (2:9 NKJV).
- > "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?" (4:11 NASB).

UNIQUE AND UNUSUAL

Jonah's prophecy wasn't fulfilled—because of Nineveh's repentance.

SO WHAT?

God loves *everyone*—even the enemies of His chosen people. As Romans 5:8 (NLT) says, "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."

READ JONAH 1 AND PSALM 9.

- One-Month Course: your next reading is on page 157. →
- Three-Month Course: your next reading is on page 157. →
- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 154. →

CLOSER LOOK

JONAH—PROPHET OF ISRAEL

Jonah, son of Amittai, was from the town of Gath Hepher in Israel. This town was in Zebulun, in northern Israel, west of the Sea of Galilee (Joshua 19:10, 13). The prophet Elisha frequently passed near it as he walked the road from Mount Carmel to Shunem (2 Kings 4:8–9, 25). In fact, it is possible that Jonah was influenced by the



Jonah refused to obey God's order to go to Nineveh. He appears in the artwork by Michelangelo (1475–1564) in the Sistine Chapel.

group of prophets that followed Elisha and learned from him (2 Kings 6:1), since Jonah began his ministry around 775 BC, only twenty years after Elisha died in 795 BC.

Jonah is most famous for refusing to go to Nineveh to warn them about God's impending judgment, but he is also known to have made an amazing prophecy that was fulfilled by King Jeroboam II of Israel. "He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher" (2 Kings 14:25 NIV).

In Jonah's day, the Arameans were weak, and Israel had reconquered much territory to the north that had once been part of Solomon's empire. Israel was powerful and prosperous, and was becoming rich through international trade. There was an international sea port in Joppa, where Phoenician ships carried Israelite produce as far west as Tarshish, in southern Spain. When Jonah attempted to flee from the Lord, he boarded one of these great merchant ships and set sail for the western edge of the known world.

READ JONAH 2 AND 2 KINGS 14.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 155. →

CLOSER LOOK

JONAH AND THE GREAT FISH

In Jonah's day, a mighty warring empire to the north was an imminent threat. The Assyrians were the cruelest, most violent empire the world had ever seen, and Jonah knew this. So at first he was delighted when God told him to go to Nineveh and preach, "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!" (Jonah 3:4 NIV). Then Jonah got the inescapable feeling that the Assyrians would repent if they heard this warning—and then God would have mercy and *not* destroy them (John 4:2). So Jonah took a ship to Tarshish, to make *sure* Nineveh was destroyed.

However, God sent a great storm, and the sailors hurried Jonah overboard to placate God. But "the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (Jonah 1:17 KJV). Now, the Hebrew word in Jonah 1:17 and the Greek word in Matthew 12:40 both mean "great aquatic animal"—so this "fish" could have been a sperm whale or a whale shark, which can grow fifty feet long. Both of these have swallowed animals as big as humans. As long as the animal or person inside the whale's stomach is alive, the digestive juices don't start flowing.

Another thing, the expression "three days and three nights" can also refer to one whole day and *parts* of two other days. So Jonah didn't necessarily spend a full seventy-two hours in the sea creature's belly. He could have spent forty hours and had plenty of oxygen to survive until the sea creature vomited him up.

READ JONAH 3–4.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 157. →

HIDDEN TREASURE

THE SHIPS OF TARSHISH

About 775 BC Jonah went to the Israelite port of Joppa, where he found a number of international seafaring vessels, and boarded a ship bound for distant Tarshish (Jonah 1:3). Now, Tarshish was Tartessus in southwest Spain, a kingdom rich in metals, on the river Tartessus west of modern Gibraltar. The Phoenicians had a mining colony there named Gadir. When the Bible speaks of "you ships of Tarshish" (Isaiah 23:1, 14 NIV), it refers to Phoenician ships that sailed to the western end of the known world. The Greeks believed that the paradisiacal Garden of the Hesperides (where golden apples giving immortality grew) was in Tartessus. They thought that the sunset in the west resulted from the sun reflecting off the golden apples.

READ PSALMS 10-11 AND ISAIAH 23.

HIDDEN TREASURES

THE CHILDREN OF PAGANS

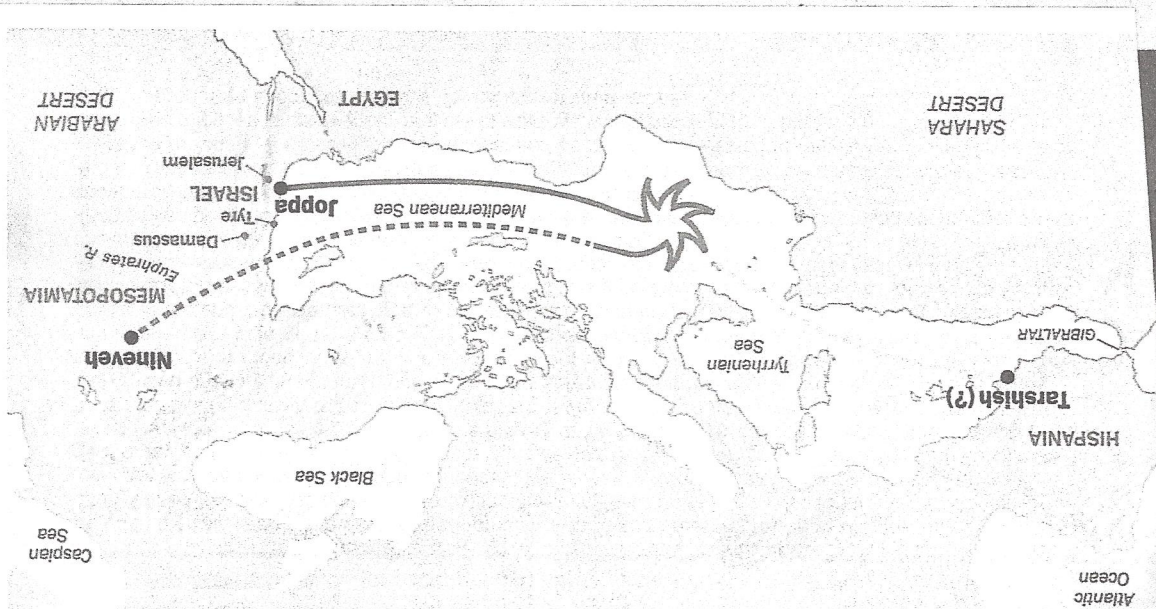
It's widely believed that God doesn't hold children responsible for sin until they reach "the age of accountability," the age at which they know the difference between good and evil. In Deuteronomy 1:39 (NKJV), God speaks of "your little ones... who today have no knowledge of good and evil" and speaks of a time "before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good" (Isaiah 7:16 KJV). God asked Jonah, "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?" (Jonah 4:11 NKJV). He was talking about the young children. While the scriptures aren't conclusive, it appears that all very young children go to heaven.

READ MATTHEW 18:1-35 AND 19:13-30.



Many people believe that young children will go to heaven because they do not yet understand the difference between good and evil.

BASIC SURVEY



After God's command to go to Nineveh, Jonah instead boarded a ship headed to Tarshish. But he couldn't hide from God! Eventually, God straightened Jonah out, and Jonah ultimately wound up where God had wanted him in the first place.

SPOTLIGHT

WRONG WAY, PAL

Jonah

If you attended Sunday school as a child or were given a Bible storybook designed for young kids, you are sure to have heard the story of Jonah. Along with other Bible stories popular among kids, such as that of Noah's ark, the story of the prophet who was swallowed by a big fish is taught to most of us early on.

But is that all it is—a story? Come on, *swallowed by a fish?*

You can certainly find a lot of Bible scholars who see this book as a fictional short story with a religious point to make. For them, not only is the fish thing hard to swallow, but the idea of an entire Assyrian city repenting because of the preaching of a Jewish prophet also seems far-fetched.

Okay, fair enough. But there are some arguments on the other side as well. Consider these:

- Jonah is introduced in the book like any other prophet (1:1) and is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible as a real historical figure. In fact, Jesus referred to this story as if it were a real event (Mt 12:39-41).
- There is a good historical reason why a Jewish prophet wouldn't want to go to Assyria, namely because the Assyrians were incredibly cruel to the Jews and other peoples.
- The "hero" of the book is hardly cast in a positive light—he runs away from God and gets ticked off when his enemies repent.
- The repentance of the Ninevites (which obviously didn't turn Assyria into a God-fearing nation permanently) is believable as an attempt by a polytheistic society to avoid offending a deity.

Being swallowed by a fish certainly had to have been an extremely rare event, but for a God who does amazing things like create the entire universe, it's not impossible to imagine.

Whether or not you believe the book of Jonah is historically factual, it certainly offers up a message that rings as true today as it did when

the book was written: God loves people—people *we* might not necessarily love. God extends His forgiveness to anyone who will repent and follow Him. If we don't like His forgiving those we don't like, that's *our* problem.

Who are your "Ninevites"? Are they people who have been mean to you at school? People from an ethnic background you've always looked down on? People who dress differently from you? Who talk differently? Who have different values, tastes, or morals?

Here's some good advice: If God is asking you to tell these people about Jesus, then why not just go and do it. Of course you can try boarding a ship bound for Tarshish if you want, but in that case you just might have an appointment with God's Giant Fish Delivery Service.

The truth is, we've all got some catching up to do when it comes to loving others as much as God does. If God can forgive them, why can't we?

Author: Jonah

Date: During the reign of Jeroboam II (around 793–753 B.C.), he could have gone to Nineveh at any point during Jeroboam's reign or shortly after the king died

What in the world is going on?

- 793 B.C. Jonah is called to be a prophet to Israel and to Nineveh
- 792–740 B.C. Uzziah (Azariah) rules in Judah (overlap with Amaziah from 792–767 B.C.)
- 782–753 B.C. Jeroboam II rules in Israel
- 776 B.C. First Olympic games held in Greece
- 775–750 B.C. The first Greek colony in Italy is founded
- 770–476 B.C. The Spring and Autumn period of China gets its name from the title of book about the era (*Chunqiu*)
- 765 B.C. Amos, a herdsman from Tekoa (in Judah), becomes a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel
- 754–746 B.C. Ashur-nirari V is king of the Assyrians
- 753 B.C. Zechariah reigns in Israel
- ca 753 B.C. A group of villages merge to become the city of Rome
- 752 B.C. Shaluum reigns in Israel
- 752–742 B.C. Merahem reigns in Israel
- 752–732 B.C. Pekah reigns in Israel (overlapping with Pekahiah for 12 years)
- ca 750 B.C. Homer writes the epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*
- ca 750 B.C. Hosea becomes a prophet to Israel
- 750 B.C. Micah is called to be a prophet to Judah

3 Ways to Pray for Our Enemies

Read: *Jonah 4* | Habit: Prayer

If you've ever wondered why many people refused to follow Jesus during his earthly ministry, you have to look no further than his command to love and pray for our enemies (see Mt 5:43). For the entirety of their existence, the people of Israel had to fend off enemies—from their slavery in Egypt to their occupation by the Roman Empire. Expecting them to love and pray for their enemies was almost inconceivable. It would be akin to telling modern Christians to love and pray for the criminal and terrorist organizations that persecute them.

We can be thankful enough for the gospel that we want even our enemies to hear the good news of God's grace.

Yet when Jesus gave the command to love and pray for our enemies, he knew it would one day require praying for people who would murder his own bride, the church. He made it clear that when we think of the people who hate us and wish us harm that we can no longer even see them as enemies. As John MacArthur explains, "We are not to be enemies of those who may be enemies to us. From their perspective, we are their enemies; but from our perspective, they should be our neighbors."¹

But how do we do that? How do we pray for these neighbors who hate us? Such a task is difficult, but here are three specific ways to ease the process:

1. *Pray for their transformation*—Like Jonah, we want those who have done evil to receive their just desserts, not mercy and forgiveness. Consider all the Christians who dutifully prayed for the Nazis in World War II. How would they have felt if they discovered that Hitler, prior to his death, had truly repented of his sins and was forgiven by God? Many would have felt cheated, as if it was unfair of God to forgive such horrific crimes. They would likely want to complain, as Jonah did when God spared the Ninevites, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jnh 4:2). But it is precisely because he is a gracious and compassionate God that we pray for our enemies to change their ways. How could we do anything less than ask God to show them the same grace he has shown to us?
2. *Pray the evil they do is restrained*—There is no dichotomy in praying for the good of our enemy and praying that their evil actions be restrained. It is to their benefit, too, that they be prevented from committing evil. For those who have hardened their hearts against God, it would be better that their lives are shortened than for them to continue to persecute his children.
To protect the innocent from slaughter, it might even be necessary for human governments to take military action to restrain evil. But we should remember that while force might be the only effective way to restrain their actions, we should not rejoice in their suffering or death (see Pr 24:17).
3. *Pray they will receive divine justice*—Just as we seek justice on earth from duly established governmental authorities, we can seek out the divine justice of our holy God. Yet when asking that such justice be meted out, we have to be careful to guard

our motives to ensure we aren't trying to circumvent our duty to love our enemy. In the order of our prayers, this request is a "last resort" option, a plea for doing what is necessary for those who will neither turn to God nor turn away from doing evil.

As former enemies of God ourselves, we should be gracious and grateful we are even allowed to pray for our current enemies, secure in the knowledge that Jesus will hear us. We can be thankful enough for the gospel that we want even our enemies to hear the good news of God's grace. But if they refuse and harden their hearts against the One who would spare them, then we can ask that they receive the divine retribution that is due to us all.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY: Our obligation to pray for our enemies requires we seek their ultimate good, not overlook their current evil.

How Not to Lose Jonah

Read: *Jonah 1* | Habit: Engaging Scripture

A young man was going off to seminary, and his father was afraid that the school—which had a reputation for being skeptical of Scripture—would cause him to lose his confidence in the Bible. Being aware of scholarly debates about the authenticity of the book of Jonah, the father told his son many times, "Don't lose Jonah." After each admission, the son would reply, "Don't worry, Dad, I won't lose Jonah." This exchange went on over several months until the exasperated son said, "Dad, you'll lose Jonah before I will." The dad scoffed and replied that was absurd.

So the son went off to seminary and returned a few years later. After welcoming his son back home, the father asked, "Did you lose Jonah?" The son replied, "No, Dad, but you did." The father, once again, said such a claim was absurd. The son then went over to the shelf that held his father's Bible and opened it to where the book of Jonah should have been. But the book of Jonah was missing—the son had cut those pages from his father's Bible. The young theologian admitted he had removed the pages years ago, before he went off to seminary. His father had to admit his son was right: he had lost Jonah because he never bothered to read it.

Too often Bible-believing Christians become offended by the claims of Bible skeptics about Old Testament books when we ourselves have not read them.

Too often Bible-believing Christians become offended by the claims of Bible skeptics about Old Testament books when we ourselves have not read them. It's not enough to merely know that Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of a fish; we need to know the full story and how it points to Christ.

To keep from losing Jonah, try reading the book several times in a row. The entire book is composed of a mere 48 verses. Within an hour, even a slow reader can read the entire four chapters several times. On your final reading, meditate on the book's primary theme: God's compassion for everyone in the story, from Jonah to the pagan sailors to the Ninevites.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAY: The smallest books of the Bible often contain some of the biggest lessons for us to remember.

It's the story of Jonah being swallowed by a big fish real history or just a fish story? Jonah is often treated like a story so full of exaggeration and imagination that you can't tell how much truth is left in it. The people who see Jonah like this think the story is an allegory or a parable—a story used to illustrate a biblical truth.

However, the reason these people reject Jonah as real history isn't because the book appears to be allegory, parable, or commentary. The reason is that they don't believe miracles can happen. They reject all supernatural claims. So when they note the fact that surviving three days after being swallowed by a fish isn't something that can naturally happen, they feel justified in thinking that the story of Jonah is a made-up story.

The first problem with this is that miracles are not common things, so we shouldn't expect to find too many other people (if any) surviving being fish food. And just because something happens rarely or only once in history is no reason to reject that it ever happened. After all, how many times was Abraham Lincoln assassinated? Exactly as many times as we know of people being swallowed by a fish and surviving!

Another problem with rejecting Jonah's story as history is that 2 Kings 14:25, which is clearly a history book, mentions Jonah as a prophet who really existed. Since there are no reasons to think 2 Kings mixes real history with fanciful tales, we have good reason to think Jonah was a real person.

The best reason for thinking Jonah really was swallowed by a big fish is because Jesus believed it was true. In fact, Matthew 12:39-41 shows that Jesus used Jonah's entombment in the fish as a way of verifying His own authority and teaching. "For as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights" (v. 40). If Jesus' genuine bodily resurrection is to be understood in light of Jonah, then Jonah's experience must have also been genuinely historical. If Jonah's story is *not* real history, then Jesus' reference to it makes no sense. Of course, those who reject Jonah as real history also reject the bodily resurrection of Jesus for the same anti-supernatural reasons. But the evidence for Jesus' bodily resurrection powerfully supports it as real history. So for Jesus' parallel to work, Jonah's experience must also be real history.

Also, Jesus said that the man of Nineveh, who repented at Jonah's message, would stand up and judge the current generation for not repenting at Jesus' proclamation (Lk 11:32). This is an empty threat unless the people of Nineveh did in fact repent. Here again, the non-historical view falls apart.

So, we have good reasons to accept Jonah being swallowed by a big fish as real history. And we have good reasons to see the rejection of Jonah's account as the *real* fish story.

GRIEVE, FORGIVE AND LET GO

Relinquishing Prejudice

Jonah 4:1-4

Sometimes we allow our upbringing or experiences to prejudice us against a particular group of people. Prejudice often leads to hatred and a lack of compassion toward others. God's people, however, should be known as loving, accepting, compassionate people. For this reason, surrendering our lives to God involves recognizing and relinquishing our prejudices.

Jonah hated the people of Nineveh. The Ninevites had been cruel to the Israelites. Jonah would have taken great pleasure in going to Nineveh to declare God's judgment against such a wicked city. But God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and warn them of their impending destruction so that they might avert God's wrath. Jonah did not want to participate in such a mission of mercy, so Jonah tried to run away by boarding a ship and sailing in the opposite direction. God sent some very difficult circumstances to get Jonah's attention and put him back on the right track. Reluctantly Jonah went to Nineveh and preached to the people. Surprisingly, they changed their ways, and God suspended his plans for their destruction. Jonah was upset by God's mercy toward the Ninevites. But God corrected Jonah for his prejudice, pointing out that "Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11).

God practically had to force Jonah to let go of his prejudice and hatred in order to get him to share God's message of mercy with others who desperately needed to hear it. Our spiritual transformation cannot be complete until we have relinquished our prejudices toward other people. This is not an easy task. We need to ask God and those close to us to help us recognize our prejudices. Once we identify these areas, we need to confess them to God and ask him to change our hearts.

Move on to Key 6 and turn to Joshua 1.

A. JONAH REJECTS GOD'S PLAN

(1:1 – 17)

B. JONAH IS DELIVERED FROM THE CONSEQUENCES (2:1 – 10)

C. GOD SPARES THE PEOPLE OF NINEVEH (3:1 – 10)

D. THE DEBATE BETWEEN GOD AND JONAH (4:1 – 11)

THE BIG PICTURE

God wanted Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh of their sure destruction if they failed to repent of their sins. But Jonah would rather have died than obey God's command to confront the Ninevites with their sin. Jonah wanted God to destroy the wicked Ninevites; he didn't want the people of that Assyrian capital to repent and receive God's forgiveness. So Jonah boarded a ship and headed in the opposite direction.

When Jonah chose to disobey God's call, his disobedience endangered the life of everyone on the ship. God sent a great storm that threatened to swamp the ship. Terrified, the sailors sought out the guilty party, and Jonah quickly volunteered to be thrown overboard. Jonah seemed to prefer death to the prospect of preaching to the godless Ninevites.

Once bitterness has taken hold of a heart, it is difficult to reverse the process and begin to forgive. God placed Jonah inside a great fish for three days to get his attention. Jonah finally sought God and surrendered to him, begging God to preserve his life. He ultimately went to Nineveh and warned the people of their impending punishment, but Jonah was not happy with their response. The Ninevites repented, and God responded to their humility with mercy.

Even though Jonah disobeyed God, God never gave up on Jonah. Forgiving someone is never easy. God used several object lessons—a storm, a great fish, a large bush, a small worm, a scorching wind—to teach Jonah about compassion and forgiveness. And in spite of Jonah's resistance to God's call, God used him to spread the good news that God desires to save the entire human race.

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL THEMES

GOD DELIVERS THOSE WHO CALL OUT TO HIM

None of us likes to admit we need help. However, it is only when we acknowledge our need for God and his power that our spiritual renewal can begin. In the darkness inside the great fish, Jonah came to realize how desperately he needed God's help. He finally surrendered to God and agreed to follow his plan. As we recognize our sin and disobedience, we too can receive the help God offers. Only he can redeem and deliver us from overwhelming troubles. If we try to go it alone, we are headed for sure disaster.

KEEPING GOD'S PRIORITIES

Since Jonah was a prophet of God, we might have expected him to share God's priorities. But when God told him to go to Nineveh, Jonah's response reflected his cultural heritage rather than God's values. Jonah hated the people of Nineveh just as most Israelites of his day did. They were the enemy. But God had compassion on this wicked, bloodthirsty people. Jonah had to get his priorities in line with God's. God desires the salvation of all people regardless of their race, religion, nationality or apparent wickedness. We need to ask God to reveal any prejudices that might keep us from sharing his love with others.

GOD'S PATIENCE

There are many painful aspects of the spiritual growth process. We, like Jonah, are often tempted to drag our feet when God asks us to do something we are hesitant to do. We may even pout when we must face struggles in our lives. But God is patient with us, just as he was with Jonah. Instead of running away *from* God and trying to avoid the pain of spiritual growth, we need to run *toward* God who is in control of everything and worthy of our trust. He will walk with us all the way.

FORGIVENESS FOR EVERYONE

Jonah was so bitter toward the people of Nineveh that he chose to die rather than proclaim God's good news to them. Our desire for revenge can be destructive in our lives too. Bitterness destroys our peace, takes away our joy and impedes our spiritual growth. But God is merciful to our enemies, even as he has been merciful to us. It may not be natural to seek God's forgiveness for those who have hurt us, but forgiveness is God's way of restoring lives. When we experience God's forgiveness, we should respond with joy when someone else receives the same. God may even use us to be an instrument of healing to the people who have hurt us in the past.

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 he must learn firsthand of God's compassion for sinful men.

Jonah is the Hebrew word for "dove." The Septuagint hellenized this word into *Jonas*, and the Latin Vulgate used the title *Jonas*.

WATCH WORDS

- prepare (account, assign, get ready)—1:17 (also 4:6-8)
- fast (abstain from food for a period of time to seek the Lord)—3:5

Essential Facts

PURPOSE: To show that God has compassion not only for the Israelites but also for all peoples and nations.

AUTHOR: The prophet Jonah.

AUDIENCE: The people of God in Israel's northern and southern kingdoms.

DATE WRITTEN: Probably around 750 BC.

SETTING: Jonah was a prophet in Israel during the time of Jeroboam II, one of the northern kingdom's most powerful kings. He was sent to preach to the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. This same nation would conquer the northern kingdom in 722 BC.

KEY VERSE: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry" (2:2).

KEY PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS: Jonah, the ship's captain, the ship's crew and the people of Nineveh.

Jonah

Timeline	5000 BC	911-859 BC	800-750 BC	765 BC
World Events	Earliest settlement of Nineveh	Resurgence of Assyria	Jonah's prophetic ministry	Assyria's affliction with a plague
Biblical Events				

“So the Lord said, ‘You cared about the plant, which you did not labor over and did not grow. It appeared in a night and perished in a night. Should I not care about the great city of Nineveh, which has more than 120,000 people who cannot distinguish between their right and their left, as well as many animals?’” (4:10-11).

Who wrote Jonah?
The book is anonymous, though it records a narrative about Jonah, the son of Amittai from Gath-hepher near Nazareth (2Kg 14:25).

Who were the recipients?
Although the original audience is not specifically identified, the people of Nineveh were clearly the immediate recipients of Jonah's prophetic message. However, the book itself was written for the people of Israel. The book of Jonah is still read during the afternoon of Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement.

When was Jonah written?
800-750 B.C.

Where did it happen?
Second Kings 14:25 places Jonah's prophetic ministry during the reign of Jeroboam II (king of the northern kingdom of Israel). Jonah probably preached in Nineveh sometime between the death of the Assyrian ruler Adad-nirari III (783-782 B.C.) and the king-ship of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 B.C.), under whose leadership Assyria achieved military dominance of the region.

- What is Jonah about?**
- **Salvation.** The book of Jonah points to the grace given and faith required for true salvation.
 - **The sovereignty of God.** The Lord is over both the large (the storm, 1:4) and the small (the worm, 4:7).
 - **The compassion of God.** The Lord's love and mercy reaches out and seeks to bring to repentance even those who are not His people.

Why should women read Jonah?
Probably the best known of the 12 Minor Prophets, the book of Jonah is not just a story for children. Rather, Jonah reminds women that often obedience to God comes at the cost of your own comfort. In the context of the entire biblical canon, the book of Jonah challenges followers of Christ to revisit their sometimes inadequate view of God, to be radically (and willingly) obedient to Him, and to avoid the pride and hypocrisy exhibited by this

prophet, who was more concerned for his own comfort than he was for a city on the verge of destruction.

How do you read Jonah?
The recipients of Jonah's message were the people of Nineveh, located in Assyria. Although Assyria was not a substantial threat to Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II, the Assyrians' tactics of warfare would not have been easily forgotten. In the tenth and ninth centuries B.C., conquering Assyrian armies committed atrocities to demonstrate why the people living in other military targets should avoid resistance or rebellion. The Assyrians' cruelty was legendary. They promoted awareness of this reputation through word-of-mouth, official inscriptions, and artistic renderings of conquest designed to incite fear and produce submission on the part of other nations. Therefore, Jonah's reluctance to go anywhere near the Assyrian capital is understandable.

While Jonah's immediate audience was Nineveh, the book was written specifically for the Israelites. Jonah differs significantly from the other prophetic books in structure and content. Rather than being comprised of a series of messages or oracles, the only divine message reported by the prophet is the succinct sermon, warning that in 40 days Nineveh would be overthrown (3:4). Therefore, the book's message focuses not merely on the prophetic word delivered to a rebellious people but even more on the lessons God reveals about Himself through His dealings with a rebellious prophet.

The style is almost completely narrative. The book is as much about the story of the prophet as it is about what was prophesied concerning Nineveh. Only Jonah's prayer (chapter 2) is in poetic form. Many literary features allow the book of Jonah to be read as satire without denying any of its historicity. Satire is characterized by its didactic and corrective purpose, typically aimed at exposing the pervasive and destructive vices of pride and hypocrisy, satire frequently uses irony, exaggeration, and humor to elicit the audience's recognition and rejection of the vice(s) being criticized. The way Jonah's story is told in Scripture intensifies the instructive aims of the prophetic book, not only for the Israelites' narrow understanding of God but also for the Christian reader's worldview.

INTRODUCTION TO JONAH

BACKGROUND

Called by God to prophesy destruction to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians, Jonah runs away, toward Tarshish, and ends up in the belly of a great fish. Yet God's will prevails. The recalcitrant prophet goes to Nineveh and finally delivers God's message. The people of Nineveh are receptive and repent.

Traditionally, this book has been ascribed to Jonah the son of Amittai (1:1). He also appears in 2 Kings 14:25 as the one who prophesied about the restoration of the boundaries of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II.

MESSAGE

The book of Jonah is the story of God's

OUTLINE

- I. Jonah Disobeys
- II. Jonah Repents
- III. Jonah Preaches
- IV. Jonah Prays

incredible mercy and forgiveness. A resentful Jonah refuses to deliver God's message of destruction, knowing that God is merciful and will forgive. The Assyrians' well-deserved reputation for violence caused Israel to see them as a wicked people who were a political threat, even if the nation was not as powerful as it once was.

The revival that Jonah describes probably happened during the rule of Ashur-dan III (773-755 B.C.). It was short-lived, for Assyria destroyed Sarmaria, Israel, in 722 B.C. Assyria fell to Babylon in 612 B.C.

TIME

Jonah's ministry likely took place during the reign of Jeroboam II (782-753 B.C.), after Elisha.

- | | |
|---------------------|--------|
| I. Jonah Disobeys | 1:1-17 |
| II. Jonah Repents | 2:1-10 |
| III. Jonah Preaches | 3:1-10 |
| IV. Jonah Prays | 4:1-11 |

ON SCRIPTURE

Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish's belly. —Jonah 2:1

God's love desires the best for all of us, and He desires to give us the best at any cost. He will send an angel to release an apostle from prison, feed an orphanage, open a land long closed to but only because it had been His will to do it from the beginning. No one persuades Him. What the praying man does is to bring His will into line with the will of God so God can do what He has all along been willing to do. Thus prayer changes the man and enables God to change things in answer to man's prayer.

—The Price of Neglect