

Jonah

Introduction

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Why read this book?

If you've ever thought that some people are beyond hope—so evil that they are incapable of change—the book of Jonah may upset your thinking. Consider serial killers, rapists, drug kingpins or terrorists; it's not unnatural to wish such violent, hate-filled individuals would be punished. But this book shows us that God wants to extend his grace and mercy to even the worst of people. It also challenges us to see that God may want to use us to reach out to the very people we tend to despise and see as beyond redemption.

Who wrote this book?

Most likely the prophet Jonah wrote autobiographically about what had happened to him.

When was it written?

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

What was happening at this time?

Israel's northern kingdom regained its influence and was restored by Jeroboam II. But the Assyrians, whose capital city was Nineveh, were asserting themselves in increasingly menacing ways. Why was it written? To tell the story of God's concern even for the enemies of his people. This book also shows how God used a reluctant prophet as a vehicle of his grace.

What to look for in Jonah:

God's compassion for all people, his desire for earnest repentance regardless of what someone has done, and the extraordinary lengths to which he will sometimes go to get our attention.

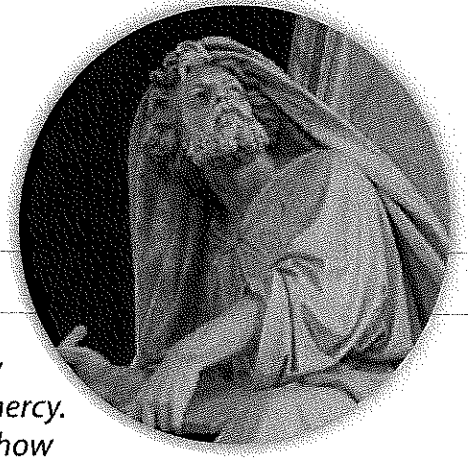
—*From the Quest Study Bible (Zondervan)*

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One man's struggle with God

The Book of Jonah is a story about the mercy of God to a people who did not deserve his mercy. It's about someone's struggle to understand how God could care for and love people who did not know him in any way. On a human level, we may want to limit God's grace to those whom we think really deserve it. But God's love is wider than that. It is universal, and even includes people we may not like.

The book also teaches us about God's sovereignty and our obedience. When we try to go in the opposite direction from God's way, then God may go to extraordinary lengths to get our attention.

Scripture: Jonah

Based On: "The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks to Us Today," by Tom Cowan

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Part 1 Identify the Issue

The Sun carried this story:

Andrew Cheatle thought his [mobile phone] had been lost at sea after it slipped from his pocket. But a week later his girlfriend's mobile rang and it was fisherman Glen Kerley saying he'd found the phone in a 25-pound fish.

Andrew, 45, said, "I was messing about with my dog and my phone must have fallen out and been swept out in the swell. I kept calling it but I gave up hope after a couple of days." He was shopping for a new phone with girlfriend Rita Smith, 33, when her mobile went off. She told him, "Your old mobile number is calling my phone."

Andrew continued: "She said some guy was going on about my phone and a cod so she handed it over to me . . . I thought he was winding me up but he assured me he had caught a cod that morning and was gutting it . . . and that my [phone] was inside it—a bit worse for wear. I didn't believe him but went to meet him and found it was my phone—a bit smelly and battered—but incredibly it still worked . . ."

Hard to believe, but replace the phone with a man, and the cod with a bigger fish, and you'll have the story of Jonah and the lengths a gracious God will go to in order to make sure his call gets through. This study looks at the strange story of Jonah, and God's grace, mercy, and sovereignty. And at how it is in our best interest to be obedient to him.

[Q] What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about the story of Jonah?

[Q] Do you struggle with the idea of a man being swallowed by a big fish? Why or why not?

[Q] Who do you or would you have trouble reaching out to because of their offenses or differences with you?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We can't run from a sovereign God.

Verses 1–3 open the story for us:

"The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah ran away

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from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.”

[Q] Using a Bible atlas (such as at Bibles.org), find out what direction Tarshish is in compared to Nineveh. What do you think made Jonah so resistant to God's instructions?

[Q] How does 4:2 help us to understand what was in Jonah's mind?

[Q] Read Matthew 12:39–41. How does Jesus use the story of Jonah in his teaching?

[Q] Does the fact that Jesus refers to this incident add any weight to its authenticity?

[Q] What does this story tell you about God?

Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To reveal any hesitation to go where God wants us to go.*

Activity: *Using a Bible atlas, make copies of a map that shows Tarshish in relation to Nineveh. Distribute one to each person in the group. Reread Jonah 1:1–3. On the maps, have each person write a list of things God is calling him or her to do. Maybe it's sharing the gospel with someone in particular. Or forgiving someone. Or speaking the truth in love. Or reaching out to someone in need. As a group, discuss each other's lists and why they might be avoiding God's call. Swap map-lists and have members pray for each other during the week.*

Teaching Point Two: Obedience to God is in our best interest.

It is important that we understand what Jonah is going through. Jonah felt like he was abandoned by God. Someone once commented that they had become so obsessed with what was happening inside the great fish that they failed to see the real turning point of the story, namely what was happening inside Jonah! Read chapter 2, Jonah's prayer.

[Q] What would you be praying and thinking inside the great fish?

[Q] How does this prayer help us to understand what was taking place inside Jonah?

[Q] Look at all that could have been avoided here! What does this chapter tell you about God? About our response to him?

[Q] Jonah comes to his senses in verse 9. What crisis have you experienced in your life that made you cry out to God?

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Teaching Point Three: God is gracious and merciful even to those we deem undeserving.

God repeats his instruction to Jonah in 3:1–2. This time, Jonah is ready to listen! This chapter is the high point of the book, because it records one of the greatest and most thorough revivals that has ever taken place. It came as a result of Jonah obeying God's call upon his life instead of running in the opposite direction. Read chapter 3.

[Q] What about the Ninevites' repentance do you find amazing?

[Q] What part did the king play in the revival?

[Q] What would be a similar situation today?

Teaching Point Four: God will change us as we help to change others.

We would think that Jonah would be delighted and ecstatic about this revival. Yet read chapter 4.

[Q] Describe Jonah's attitude. Why does he have this attitude?

One of God's ways of getting us to examine our hearts is to ask us questions. We are forced to see the state of our own hearts. Notice the three questions God asks Jonah:

"Have you any right to be angry?" (v. 4)

"Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" (v. 9)

"Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (v. 11)

[Q] What do you think God is trying to get Jonah to face in his life?

[Q] In what ways are we often like Jonah and reflect his attitude?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Notice that the Book of Jonah ends with a question: "Should I not be concerned about that great city?" There is no written answer to that. It ends with a question that has to be asked of each one of us. Are we ready to share and dispense the great mercy of God, or are we holding on to it as though we were the only people good enough to receive his blessings?



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[Q] How do you answer these questions?

[Q] What do you think is the major lesson in the Book of Jonah for us today?

Action Point: Is there a time or incident in your life when God really got your attention and turned your life in a whole new direction? Plan on sharing that with a friend and/or someone in this group in the coming week as an encouragement to respond obediently to God's call.

—*Study by Tom Cowan, with Kyle White*

