



JONAH

Read Jonah 1

Jonah is a short story with a very pointed moral about responding to God's voice in our lives. The story opens with a dramatic effort by Jonah to flee God's command to him to go east to Nineveh. It turns out that the pagan sailors are more responsive to God than the appointed prophet is!

Reflect: The sailors realize what a terrible sin it is to reject God's commands, and this accusation hurled at Jonah leads him to repent of his decision to flee. He accepts the ultimate punishment of losing his life that the others might live.

Pray: Pray that we who read of Jonah's moral adventure will have the eyes and ears to see and hear God's word in our daily life, and the hearts open to respond and follow where his Spirit leads us.

Act: We need to take stock of how we make our decisions and whether we really spend much of our time avoiding obedience to some or all of God's commandments.

Jonah Tries to Run Away from God

1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ² "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." ³ But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. ⁶ The captain came and said to him, "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish."

⁷ The sailors^a said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, "Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" ⁹ "I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." ¹⁰ Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing

^a Heb They

from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so.

11 Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. 12 He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you." 13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against

them. 14 Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you." 15 So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

17^a But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Read Jonah 2

The second stage of Jonah's drama is God's rescue of his physical body by means of a great fish, which perhaps he imagines to be like a whale. The three-day period shows how far Jonah had gone to avoid the Lord's command, and his prayer shows how far he had converted, acknowledging that only God could rescue him from the power of death.

Reflect: Although in this little novel it is spoken from the belly of a fish, Jonah's prayer is really a psalm composed for those who are near death. They call out to God to rescue them from illness or danger and spare their lives, and in turn they will praise God always.

Pray: The parable of Jonah teaches us to put our lives in God's hands and to pray for divine strength and help in all of our troubles and moments of despair. We can also pray that we may place our hope only in God and not in vain and momentary solutions for our problems.

Act: We can all make Jonah's confident prayer of trust in God our own and imitate Jonah's pledge to praise God daily.

A Psalm of Thanksgiving

2 Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ² saying,

"I called to the LORD out of my distress,
and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.

3 You cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.

4 Then I said, 'I am driven away
from your sight;
how^b shall I look again
upon your holy temple?'

5 The waters closed in over me;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped around my head
6 at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
O LORD my God.

7 As my life was ebbing away,
I remembered the LORD;
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.

8 Those who worship vain idols
forsake their true loyalty.

9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.

Deliverance belongs to the LORD!"

10 Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

^a Ch 2.1 in Heb

^b Theodotion: Heb *surely*

Read Jonah 3

God calls Jonah a second time and this time the prophet responds obediently. In fact, his word touches the hearts of the pagan Assyrians so fully that the entire people convert to God and do penance. God responds to such repentance by not carrying out the disaster he had said he would send.

Reflect: Assyria, the worst of all nations in Israel's thinking, repents before God with complete sincerity, in sharp contrast to Israel itself, which failed to repent even after the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zephaniah, and Nahum warned them of the coming disaster in the exile. Once again, the lesson is drawn that sincere pagans are often more faithful than God's own people.

Pray: We ask God for a deep spirit of repentance and remorse for our sins in life. Such a constant awareness of how our sins offend God will keep us close to his protection.

Act: Each of us should develop a daily prayer of repentance in which we honestly admit the sins we have committed and ask for God's strength to be more faithful to him.

Conversion of Nineveh

3 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ² "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

⁶ When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. ⁸ Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Jonah's Anger

4 But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" ⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

⁶ The LORD God appointed a bush,^a and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

^a Heb *qiqayon*, possibly the castor bean plant

Read Jonah 4

The last chapter in the drama brings home a lesson to the stubborn prophet Jonah who will not accept the fact that God would spare people as bad as the Assyrians. It reveals a God who considers all human beings his valuable children and will extend his compassion even to pagans who do not worship him.

Reflect: The author uses a traditional wisdom lesson called a *mashal*, which means a comparison. If Jonah can care so much for a mere plant that lasts one day, should not God care for the souls of 120,000 humans made in his own image and likeness? Once again Jonah, God's prophet, seems as blind to God's ways as the pagans he so readily condemns.

Pray: Let us seek the wisdom of God's spirit to resist anger, prejudice, and dislike of others who are different from us or do not agree with us, and the grace to be generous and compassionate to everyone equally.

Act: Jonah teaches us not to presume our superiority to others, either in goodness or obedience to God's will. We might meditate on our own unworthiness and how much goodness is found in people we resent or look down on.

Jonah Is Reproved

9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." ¹⁰ Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"