

## Lesson 5

# Jonah 1-2: Jonah and the Great Fish

## Introduction

Without a doubt Jonah is one of the most debated books within the Minor Prophets. Should its contents be treated historically or as an allegory? Did the prophet really spend three days and nights inside the belly of a great fish? Why all the miracles within such a short book? Even with all the controversy the book has been called a masterpiece. Jonah was the son of Amittai and his name comes from the Hebrew word “dove.” His home was the small village of Gath-hepher, located a few miles northeast of Nazareth. Jonah lived and prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel (793-753 B.C.). Jeroboam II brought the nation of Israel back to a level of political and economic stability and power that had not been seen since the reign of David, almost two hundred years before. Some have suggested Jonah was the most prestigious prophet of his day. He is mentioned as prophesying for the king in 2 Kings 14:25. Fiercely patriotic of his homeland, Jonah could not understand God’s plan of saving the Ninevites if they repented.

## The world of Jonah

As mentioned above, the northern ten tribes of Israel experienced a period of great economic and political strength during the eighth century B.C. Jeroboam II’s father, Jehoash had begun a series of wars against Aram (Syria) and 2 Kings 13:14-25 says Jehoash retook several towns that Aram had taken from Israel. After Jehoash’s death, Jeroboam II continued the national expansion restoring the borders of Israel to what they were during the reign of David and Solomon. Almost all of Aram was conquered, including Damascus. Moab and Ammon were also subjected to the rule of Israel during this period. Jeroboam II launched expensive building projects around Samaria, including fortifying the city with a double wall thirty-three feet in width. These fortifications were so strong that in 722 B.C. it took the Assyrians three years to conquer the city, 2 Kings 17:5. There was a strong sense of pride in the country during this time, and along with the good economic times the importance of art and décor arose. Unger’s Bible Dictionary refers to a “blossoming of the arts in this prosperous era.” There were many great houses, and the rich found themselves in luxury with both summer and winter homes. The good and prosperous times allowed for much banqueting and indulgence, but with little regard for the poor and underprivileged. During this time, religious practice would have been more ritualistic than from the heart: a problem which would be dealt with by Amos who would come on the scene a few years after Jonah.

The Assyrians were the most powerful nation and the greatest enemy of Israel. They were ruthless warriors who inflicted great suffering on the nations they conquered. The Assyrians were so brutal that they were known to bash skulls and decapitate victims who had presumably surrendered. They were known to carry off women and children while torturing and executing the men left behind. Perhaps no nation before the Assyrian had become so ungodly, calloused, and cruel. The Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II, (883-859 B.C.) is said to have written:

I stormed the mountain peaks and took them. In the midst of the mighty mountains I slaughtered them; with their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool. With the rest of them I darkened the gullies and the precipices of the mountains. I carried off their spoil and their possessions. The heads of their warriors I cut off, and I formed them into a pillar over against their city; their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire! I built a pillar over against the city gates, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar.<sup>3</sup>

These facts should help the reader to better understand at least some of the rationale behind Jonah's initial refusal to go to Nineveh. Human nature wants quick and immediate destruction of its enemies and has a hard time understanding how God can accept the repentance of such a cruel people.

As Israel's prosperity rose, Assyria battled with internal strife, including the Armenians who lived near the Caspian Sea. During this time, the power of the king was greatly diminished, and the provincial governors wielded great influence over government. There were no large campaigns against foreign nations during this time. During the 760's B.C., Assyria found itself in the middle of a great famine, and in 765 B.C. and again in 759 B.C. great plagues spread throughout the nation. On January 15, 763 B.C., there was a total eclipse of the sun, which always gave the ancients great cause for alarm. As far back as the 790's, there had been a push for monotheism within Assyria. All or some of these factors could explain the readiness of the people to repent when Jonah came calling in chapter three of his book.

## The message of Jonah

The main theme of the book is repentance. God has always wanted all men to repent and turn to Him. His concern is for all, and he is willing that no one perish, 2 Peter 3:9. God's universal love and care is seen in the book. *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, as well as many animals?* Jonah 4:11. Some have suggested that the message of repentance should have served as a wake-up call for Israel. Imagine a heathen nation, so cruel and brutal who overwhelmingly responds to God's call for repentance. Contrast that to the absence of repentance from the nation of Israel. Israel had been constantly cared for by God, recipients of His divine favor, and had witnessed God's great miracles and works.

A sub-theme in the book is that **God reigns supreme over all nations**. All people everywhere are subject to His power, authority, and judgment. When calling Jonah to go to Nineveh, God said that *their wickedness had come up before Him*, Jonah 1:2. If the Assyrian people wanted their lives spared, they were required to humble themselves before God. Hailey points out that this book is sometimes referred to as "the forerunner of the universal gospel message which would be carried to all the heathen world."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, pp. 443, 447. Quoted by James E. Smith, *The Minor Prophets* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1994), p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> Hailey, Homer E., *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Louisville, KY: Religious Supply, 1993), p. 65.

Should we treat the contents and message of Jonah as historical or as an allegory? If we let Scripture speak for itself, this message will be seen as historical. What the Bible says happened, happened. The miracles in this book are no different from any other book in the Bible. If we deny those contained in this book, what is to stop us from explaining away the resurrection of Jesus, the miracles wrought by the apostles, and all the other signs and wonders within the pages of God's word?

## Jonah disregards God's message and flees to Tarshish

The book opens with a simple declarative statement. God came to Jonah, told him to go to Nineveh and cry out against it. This was most likely a shock for Jonah as it was unusual for prophets to go to foreign cities and pronounce God's judgment upon them. Nineveh was one of the oldest cities of civilization dating back to before 4000 B.C. The ancient city is located around 230 miles west of the Iraqi city of Baghdad on the Tigris River. During Jonah's day the walled portion of the city would have made about an eight-mile circumference. When considering the area outside the walls, the city and its surrounding suburbs could have been as many as sixty miles in circumference. It was a huge city to say the least. After receiving his commission from God, Jonah decides to flee in the opposite direction to Tarshish. Located in southern Spain, Tarshish was a small Phoenician colony on the edge of civilization. Twice in verse three we read that Jonah's purpose for the trip to Tarshish was to *flee from the presence of the Lord*. Could it be that Jonah wished to resign from his job as prophet of the Lord? He no longer wanted to be a messenger of God.

## The great storm

As soon as Jonah boards the ship headed west, he settles down in the lowest cabin of the ship and goes to sleep. After the boat gets out to sea, God causes a great storm to come up with fierce winds that rock the ship violently. The ship was battered to the point that it was about to be broken up. The ship hands begin to throw off unnecessary items and pray to their gods. As they are running through the cargo hold looking for anything to lighten the ship, they come upon Jonah sleeping. He is rebuked by the captain and is told to get up and call on his God for deliverance from the storm. As it becomes evident that the prayers to the idols are not working, the shipmen determined that there must be someone onboard responsible for the great storm. They cast lots and it fell upon Jonah. Only when the lot fell upon him, and they began to ask questions did Jonah confess.

Jonah tells the sea goers that he was a Hebrew and worshipped the Lord, the creator of all. He told them that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. *How could you do this*, the pagan men asked. What a rebuke to the prophet of the Lord who had needlessly put the lives of these innocent men in danger. While this conversation is going on, the sea is becoming increasingly boisterous. Jonah asks to be thrown overboard so that the sea will be calm, and the lives of the sailors be spared. At first, they ignore his request and row feverishly against the wind. But their efforts were in vain, and finally they pray to God asking that they not perish in the storm and that they not be held accountable for innocent blood in throwing Jonah overboard. In their prayer they also confess the right of God to do as He pleases, and it seems that they now believed in God. Verse sixteen says, *Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they*

*offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. After throwing Jonah into the sea, the sea stopped its raging, 1:15.*

## **Jonah and the great fish**

Chapter one concludes by telling the reading audience that God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah spent three days and three nights inside the fish. The miracle is not that God prepared a fish to swallow Jonah...it is that Jonah survived for three days and nights inside the great animal. There are several large fish that are capable of completely swallowing a man. Sperm whales, great white sharks, or Rhinodon sharks have been suggested as possibilities for the type of fish God could have used to carry out His purpose. But let us be careful lest we spend so much time on the episode with the great fish that we lose sight of the other important messages found within this book.

If it can be said that Jonah ran away from God in chapter one, it can easily be said that he ran toward God in chapter two. If Jonah was to be saved from this situation, help was going to have to come from God. Chapter 2:2 says that Jonah cried out from the depth of Sheol. In Hebrew, Sheol refers to the realm of the dead. Jonah probably felt as if he was as good as dead at this point—knowing his only escape would be because of the grace and mercy of God. His prayer in the opening verses of chapter two is one of thanksgiving and praise. He acknowledges that being thrown overboard and washed around in the sea was part of God's discipline on him. Yet even in his despair, he hopes to *look again toward Your [God's] holy temple, 2:4.*

Verse five gives us just a little insight into the cramped, uncomfortable conditions found inside the great fish. Water was all around him; he found himself gasping for air and had weeds wrapped around his head. Add to this the smell of decaying food the great fish had eaten, being unable to move, and knowing that all the while he is descending deeper and deeper into the ocean. As Jonah began to lose consciousness, he remembered God and prayed. He thanks God that his prayers reached heaven and that God listened to him. In verses eight and nine Jonah promises to sacrifice to God and fulfill the vows he had made.

The chapter concludes with God responding to Jonah's prayer by commanding the great fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land. Scripture is silent as to how exactly God spoke to the fish or where Jonah was deposited. How long did it take Jonah to return to Israel? Did he bypass Israel and head directly to Nineveh? These are questions without answers.

## **Applications for Today**

### ***Who can flee from the presence of God?***

This may be the most significant lesson from these two chapters. The Hebrew writer has said, *no creature is hidden from him, but all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account, Hebrews 4:13.* Running from Him is fruitless. There is nowhere we can go to escape His presence. Even in the depths of the sea, buried in the belly of the great fish, God heard and answered the prayer of Jonah. Each man will stand before God and give an account for the deeds done in the body, 2 Corinthians 5:9-10. *...It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes the judgment, Hebrews 9:27.* See also Psalm 139:7-10.

### ***The submission of the heathen sailors to God stands in great contrast to Jonah's prideful refusal to yield to God's will***

As you read through Jonah 1 with the entire episode of the storm, there is a great contrast between the humble attitudes of the sailors and Jonah's stubborn refusal to submit to God. In fact, their fear is transformed from just fearing a storm to fearing the Almighty God. Note verse five: *the soldiers became afraid....* In verse ten the intensity is much greater: *the men became extremely frightened....* This is after they realize which deity Jonah served. Jonah served the Lord. As they are fighting against the wind, trying desperately to steer the ship back to land, their prayers are now directed to the Lord, 1:14. And by verse sixteen we are told *the men feared the LORD greatly....* Contrast this to Jonah's sleeping in the cargo hold of the ship during the midst of the storm. His mind is not on God. The captain of the ship rebukes Jonah, *...How is it that you are sleeping?* Later, when the shipmen realize which God Jonah served, they ask, how could you do this? This is another sharp rebuke of the prophet.

### ***Everyone needs to hear God's message of repentance and deliverance***

Jonah was extremely nationalistic. The last thing he wanted to do was to go to the capitol city of Israel's greatest enemy and inform them of an opportunity to repent. Such a cruel and violent people only deserved the judgment of God, he must have thought. Yet, his responsibility was simply to relay the message. So is ours. If those who hear God's teaching repent, we need to praise God. If they do not, we need to pray for their repentance—because eternity in hell is not desirous for any person.

### ***Sometimes people must go to the lowest depths to realize their dependence upon God.***

Jonah literally went to the lowest depths before he realized his need for God. It took his being driven to the point of physical death before his will was broken. The prayer from inside the fish is one of repentance. It is one where he vows to fulfill the will of God. The prodigal son in Luke 15 had to reach the same point before he came to his senses. A person does not have to go to this level if he will only soften his heart. How soft and pliable is your heart?

## **For discussion**

1. Where did Jonah call home? In what time did he live?
  
2. Describe the social, political, and economic times of Jonah.
  
3. Talk about the state of the Assyrian nation during the eighth century B.C.

4. Would you describe Assyria as kind and compassionate or as a brutal and cruel nation? Why?
  
5. What are the two main messages from Jonah?
  
6. What was Jonah's purpose in fleeing to Tarshish? Where is Tarshish?
  
7. Read Chapter 1. There are three miracles within the text. Find them and list them below.
  
8. Would you describe Jonah's prayer as a prayer of thanksgiving or repentance or both?
  
9. Describe Jonah's experience inside the great fish.
  
10. How can we become more aware that we can never escape being in the presence of God?
  
11. Describe the progression of the faith of the sailors as you go throughout chapter one.
  
12. How are Jonah and the prodigal son alike?