The Book of

Jonah

A Cornerstone Bible Study
Welcome to the study of the Book of Jonah!

This Old Testament book describes at least part of the ministry of a prophet called “Jonah,” the only prophet who attempted to run away from God. Jonah, whose name means “dove,” lived in Gath-hepher, located just north of Nazareth, during the reign of Jeroboam II in the eighth century B.C., when Hosea and Amos were also prophesying.

Elijah and Elisha were Jonah’s predecessors, and like Jonah, were called to minister not only to Israel, but also to Gentiles in surrounding countries. The purpose of the Book of Jonah was to encourage all God’s people to extend mercy to the nations of the world, something they were not at all inclined to do.

Some of the key truths to emerge from this book are that

- God calls His people to seek the repentance of the nations.
- God delights in showing mercy to repentant Gentiles.
- God’s people will suffer His displeasure if they fail to extend His mercy to the nations.

As you prepare to study, take a moment to thank God for His mercy to you and to ask Him for courage to proclaim His mercy and love to a world sorely in need of repentance and reconciliation to Him.
Overview

1. There are several types of Old Testament literature. To learn more about them, refer to a dictionary or other resource to define the following:

   A. Allegory

   B. Midrash

   C. Parable

   D. Historical narrative


   A. Which of the definitions best describes the Book of Jonah? Why?
B. List and briefly describe the main characters in the story.

C. List some of the main themes or principles you noticed from your reading of this book.
Jonah Flees from the Lord


   A. What comes to Jonah, son of Amittai (whose name means “my true one”)?

   B. State the mandate.

   C. Why is this order given?

   D. What is Jonah’s response to the command? Where does he decide to go?

   E. Consult a resource to locate Tarshish and Nineveh. What do the locations of these two places suggest about Jonah’s intentions?
F. Nineveh was the capital city of a powerful neighboring Gentile nation. Why do you think Jonah may be loath to go there?

4. Read Jonah 1:4-7.

   A. What does God do in response to Jonah’s attempt to run away?

   B. What is the sailors’ emotional reaction?

   C. What two things do the sailors do to try to survive the tempest?

   D. In contrast to the sailors, what does Jonah do?

   E. How does the ship’s captain react to Jonah’s behavior? What, if anything, do you find positive in the captain’s conduct? Please explain.

A. From Jonah 1:7, what method do the sailors use to identify the party responsible for the calamity enveloping them?

B. What do Proverbs 16:33 and 18:18 reveal about this method?

C. Who is identified as responsible for the misfortune?

D. From Jonah 1:8, what questions do the sailors ask Jonah to help them understand the reason for their predicament?

E. How does Jonah answer their questioning?

F. Why does Jonah’s response (1:9) terrify the crew?
G. From Jonah 1:10

(1) What else do the sailors ask Jonah?

(2) What has Jonah already told them that clearly reveals his defiance of the Lord?

The Beginning of Repentance

6. Read Jonah 1:11-12.

A. Since the sea is becoming increasingly rough, what else do the sailors ask Jonah?

B. What does Jonah tell them to do?

C. How does Jonah’s reply

(1) acknowledge his responsibility for their danger?

(2) illustrate the first step of repentance?

A. What do the sailors do instead of following Jonah’s guidance?

B. From a human perspective, what is noble about their desire and actions?

C. What is the result of their best efforts?

D. The sailors realize that their attempts are futile.

   (1) What do they acknowledge and confess before the Lord (1:14)?

   (2) Is Jonah innocent? Why or why not?

E. After the sailors' admission

   (1) What do they do?
(2) What happens to the raging sea? What does this illustrate about the nature of God?

(3) What effect does this have upon the sailors? What do they do?

F. From Jonah 1:17:

(1) What does the Lord do?

(2) Is the Lord finished with Jonah? Why or why not?

(3) Do you think it’s possible to survive in a great fish for three days and nights? Why or why not?
G. By way of application:

(1) List some ways that people today try to “run away from God.”

(2) Have you ever tried to escape God’s call or explicit command?

(3) If so, describe the circumstances and results of your attempt.

(4) If you have tried to escape God’s call or command, what have you learned from this experience? What wisdom and/or principles of redemption would you offer to others?

A. What does the psalmist David express about the presence of the Lord?

B. How does this truth comfort and/or challenge you? Why?

C. Read Romans 8:38-39. How can this truth encourage those who are having trouble, even when the hardship is the result of their own disobedience?
Historical Evidence for Jonah

The following information was taken from a webpage compiled by historian Dr. Richard Riss. The webpage is no longer online.

Many people believe that the account of Jonah given in the Bible is legendary, since even if there were a fish big enough to swallow a man, certainly no man would be able to survive three days in its digestive tract and then escape to the outside world. However, Jesus referred to this as an historical event, and even pointed to it as a foreshadowing of his own death and resurrection.

There are several documented accounts of people who have been swallowed by whales and large fish and have lived to tell about it, even after several days. One species of fish, the "Sea Dog" (Carcharodon carcharias), is found in all warm seas, and can reach a length of 40 feet. In 1758, a sailor fell overboard from a boat in the Mediterranean and was swallowed by a sea dog. The captain of the vessel ordered a cannon on the deck to be fired at the fish, which vomited up the sailor alive and unharmed after it was struck.¹

Sperm whales can swallow lumps of food eight feet in diameter. Entire skeletons of sharks up to sixteen feet in length have been found in them. In February of 1891, James Bartley, a sailor aboard the whaling ship "Star of the East," was swallowed by a whale near the Falkland Islands. He was within the whale for more than forty-eight hours, and after he was found inside the whale, which had been harpooned and brought aboard the whaling ship, it took him two weeks to recover from the ordeal. Sir Francis Fox wrote about this as follows:

Bartley affirms that he would probably have lived inside his house of flesh until he starved, for he lost his senses through fright and not from lack of air. He remembers the sensation of being thrown out of the boat into the sea.... He was then encompassed by a great darkness and he felt he was slipping along a smooth passage of some sort that seemed to move and carry him forward.
The sensation lasted but a brief time and then he realized he had more room. He felt about him and his hands met a slimy substance that seemed to shrink from his touch. It finally dawned upon him that he had been swallowed by the whale.... He could easily breathe; but the heat was terrible. It was not of a scorching, stifling nature, but it seemed to open the pores of his skin and draw out his vitality.... His skin where it was exposed to the gastric juice—face, neck and hands—was bleached to a deadly whiteness and took on the appearance of parchment...and never recovered its natural appearance...though otherwise, his health did not seem affected by his terrible experience.²

Another individual, Marshall Jenkins, was swallowed by a Sperm Whale in the South Seas. The Boston Post Boy, October 14, 1771, reported that an Edgartown whaling vessel struck a whale, and that after the whale had bitten one of the boats in two, it took Jenkins in its mouth and went under the water with him. After returning to the surface, the whale vomited him on to the wreckage of the broken boat much bruised but not seriously injured.

There is, of course, a great deal of historical and archaeological evidence for the ministry of Jonah in Nineveh. Prominent among the divinities of ancient Assyria was Dagan, a creature part man and part fish. This was sometimes represented as an upright figure, with the head of a fish above the head of a man, the open mouth of the fish forming a miter as the man’s sacred headdress, and the feet of a man extending below the tail of the fish. In other cases, the body of a man was at right angles to the conjoined body of a fish. Images of this fish-god were found guarding the entrance to the palace and temple in the ruins of Nineveh, and they appear on ancient Babylonian seals in a variety of forms.

Berosus, a Babylonian historian, writing in the fourth century B.C., recorded the early traditions concerning the origin of the worship of this fish-man. According to the earliest tradition, the very beginning of civilization in Chaldea and Babylonia was under the direction of a person,
part man and part fish, who came up out of the sea. During Jonah's time, the people of Nineveh believed in a divinity who sent messages to them by a person who rose out of the sea, as part fish and part man, and they would undoubtedly have been very receptive to Jonah's ministry if he had been vomited out of a fish. H. Clay Trumbull wrote of this as follows:

What better heralding, as a divinely sent messenger to Nineveh, could Jonah have had, than to be thrown up out of the mouth of a great fish, in the presence of witnesses, say, on the coast of Phoenicia, where the fish-god was a favorite object of worship?

The recorded sudden and profound alarm of the people of an entire city at his warning was most natural, because of the coincidence of this miracle with their religious beliefs and expectations.³

Berosis gives the name of the Assyrian fish-god as "Oannes," while he mentions the name "Odacon" as that of one of the avatars of Oannes. Since the name Dagan appears frequently in the Assyrian records from earlier dates, and no trace has been found in them of the name "Oannes," it is possible that this name is a reference to Jonah, as the supposed manifestation of the fish-god himself. The name Oannes for Jonah appears in the Septuagint and in the New Testament with the addition of "I" before it (Ioannes). However, according to Dr. Herman V. Hilprecht, the eminent Assyriologist, in the Assyrian inscriptions the "J" of foreign words becomes "I," or disappears altogether. Hence Joannes as the Greek representation of Jonah would appear in Assyrian either as Ioannes or as Oannes. Therefore, in his opinion, Oannes would be a regular Greco-Babylonian writing for Jonah.⁴

The preservation of the name "Yunas" or "Jonah" at the ruins of Nineveh also confirms the historicity of the Jonah story. As soon as modern discoverers unearthed the mound that had been known for centuries by the name of "Neby Yunas," they found beneath it the ruined palaces of the kings of Nineveh.

2 Ibid., p. 636.


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Lesson 2

The reluctant Jonah is the only prophet in the Old Testament to attempt to run away from the presence of the Lord rather than obey His command. Instead of heading northeast to preach against the great city of Nineveh, as God told him to do, Jonah travels to the coast and boards a ship sailing in the opposite direction for Tarshish. What a foolish thing to do!

His ship encounters a divinely orchestrated tempest, and there is nothing the crew can do to save themselves and Jonah from a watery grave. At least not until Jonah confesses his responsibility for their predicament. Jonah tells them that the sea will become calm if they throw him overboard, something they diligently strive to avoid. With no other option, they finally toss Jonah into the raging water and become more terrified than ever when it becomes calm. As a result, the sailors make vows to Jonah’s God and offer Him a sacrifice.

The opening scenes of this story assure us that trying to run from God can be perilous and is, in the end, impossible. Instead of fleeing from God, may we turn to Him in repentance, acknowledging our resistance and seeking His mercy.

As you prepare to study, take a moment to thank God for His mercy to you and to ask Him for humility to repent when you disobey, and courage to believe that He never stops seeking your return.
Jonah’s Revolt

1. Review Jonah 1:1-4 and 8-16.

A. In which ways is Jonah disobedient?

B. What are the consequences of Jonah’s rebellion for himself and everyone on board the ship?

C. What are some of the consequences beyond personal ruin that result from our disobedience?

D. Consider Genesis 6:5-13; Joshua 7:1 and 8-12; and 2 Samuel 12:5-14. Describe the rippling effects of sin upon Noah’s society, Israel’s battles, and David’s reign.
E. Read 1 John 1:8-9.

(1) What does this passage say about claiming to be without sin?

(2) Equally important, what does it say about confessing our sins to God?

(3) What could Jonah have done first, instead of running away from God and his assignment?

(4) Instead of continuing his foolish flight, what might Jonah have done sooner to relieve his distress and the danger to the ship’s crew?

(5) Use a dictionary to define “repent.”

(6) Why is it sometimes so difficult to repent?

(1) What are we commanded to do for our own good?

(2) Why are we to do this?

(3) What are some of the fruits and blessings of repentance?

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**Jonah’s Deliverance**

2. Read Jonah 1:17.

A. How does the Lord demonstrate sovereignty over His creation?

B. How does this reflect His grace and provision for Jonah?
Jonah’s Prayer


A. From verses 1-5

(1) Describe in detail the physical aspects of Jonah’s distress.

(2) Describe the emotional and spiritual anguish Jonah is experiencing.

(3) Amid profound crisis, Jonah makes a wise choice and a significant confession of faith.

(a) What is Jonah’s prudent choice?

(b) What is Jonah’s confession of faith and hope (verse 4)?
B. Sometimes conditions get worse before they get better. From verses 6-9

(1) Describe in detail the depth of despair that Jonah experiences.

(2) Refer to verse 7. When everything seems hopeless

(a) What good decision does Jonah make?

(b) What positive action does he take?

C. From Jonah 2:2, 6, 9 and 10

(1) From verses 2 and 6, what are the results of Jonah’s calling out to the Lord?

(2) From whom does salvation come?

(3) From verse 10, how is salvation manifested in Jonah’s situation?
D. Use a dictionary to define “idol.”

E. List the various kinds of idols that you have observed in
   (1) your life

   (2) the lives of others.

F. Read Jonah 2:8 in several translations, particularly the NIV. What is
   the unfortunate end of everyone who holds on to (trusts in) idols?

G. Read 1 Corinthians 4:7. What evidences of God’s grace have you
   observed in your own life? In the lives of others?
H. What steps must be taken to get rid of idols?

4. Up to this point in the story, there have been at least seven supernatural events that demonstrate (1) the sovereign power of God over creation and (2) the effects of His Spirit working in the lives of people. Please list them.

A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

F.

G.
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Lesson 3

Jonah does not want to go to the wicked city of Nineveh to preach to the enemies of Israel. Instead, he decides to run away from God and the assignment God has given him, but his foolhardy plan leads to adversity and trauma for him and the ship’s crew. Only after being thrown overboard into the raging sea and then swallowed by a huge fish does Jonah come to his senses and cry out to God for deliverance. Jonah’s hard heart is finally broken and he genuinely repents.

Biblical repentance (*metanoia* in Greek), according to *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, is a fundamental change of mind that results in turning away from sin toward God. Repentance includes (1) a genuine sorrow for offending God; (2) an inward revulsion to sin followed by turning away from it; and (3) humble surrender to the desires of God. Repentance is bound up with faith in our initial turning to God and is integral to our relationship with Him thereafter. In a very real sense, repentance is God’s gift to us (Acts 5:31, 11: 18; Romans 2:4; and 2 Timothy 2:25–26).

May God, in His mercy, love and grace, continue to grant us the gift of repentance, so that we might enjoy Him, delighting to do His will and growing in His love and grace.

As you prepare to study, take a moment to thank God for His eagerness to help you repent, and ask Him to expose any idols that keep you from obeying fully and joyfully. God’s mercy and grace to you abound!
Jonah’s Obedience

1. Read Jonah 3:1-3a.

   A. What comes to Jonah a second time?

   B. What is Jonah’s response?

   C. How does this response contrast with the previous one recorded in Jonah 1:1-3?

   D. What do you think explains the striking differences between Jonah’s first and second responses to the commands of the Lord?

   E. Read Exodus 34:5-7; Psalm 86:15; Proverbs 13:18, 24; Proverbs 15:10, 32; Proverbs 29:17 and Hebrews 12:4-11.

      (1) Using a dictionary, define “discipline.”

      (2) Record the main truths, principles and promises of these verses.

A. Regarding the commands of the Lord:

(1) What does God desire from us, in both outward behavior and inward attitude?

(2) Is it better to respond to the commands and promises of God in belief and obedience or in unbelief and disobedience?

(3) Why?

B. From verse three, what is the very first thing Jonah does to demonstrate his obedience to the Lord’s command?

C. Why is this action significant? (See James 2:14, 17, 24.)
D. From Jonah 3:3 and Ezekiel 33:10-11, it is noted that Nineveh was a great city and that a visit there required three days. Why do you think these details are included? To whom was Nineveh important? Why?

E. From Jonah 3:4-5:

(1) What does Jonah proclaim?

(2) Whose proclamation is it? (Refer to verse two.)

(3) According to the Ninevites, who has sent the message?

(4) Refer to Jonah 1:7-10 and the “Historical Evidence for Jonah” at the end of the first lesson on Jonah. Why might the Ninevites, an idolatrous and violent people, receive a message from Jonah and believe that it is a warning from God?
(5) To demonstrate their belief in the message, what actions do the Ninevites take?


   A. From verse six, what does the king do when he hears the message of impending doom?

   B. Summarize the proclamation of the king (verses 7-8).

   C. From verse nine, why does the king issue this decree?

The Blessing of Obedience


   A. What does God notice about the Ninevites?
B. What is God’s response to the Ninevites’ change in behavior?

C. Refer to Matthew 12:38-41 and review Luke 15:7 and 2 Corinthians 7:10. What are the blessings of repentance for the Ninevites?
God is not only attentive to His own people; He is also concerned for the Gentiles. In this Old Testament book, the Ninevites represent the Gentiles and Jonah represents God’s own.

After experiencing severe chastisement (the Lord disciplines those He loves), Jonah finally accepts his assignment and goes to preach against the wicked city of Nineveh. The Ninevites believe Jonah’s warning of impending destruction. All of them, from the greatest to the least, repent of their violence and humble themselves by wearing sackcloth. Even the king takes off his royal robes, puts on sackcloth and sits down in the dust. Then he issues this royal proclamation:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and turn from their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from His fierce anger so that we will not perish” (Jonah 3:6-9).

Jesus referred to the Ninevites when speaking to the sceptics of His day who were asking for a sign that He was the promised Messiah. He told them that no sign would be given except that of the prophet Jonah: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40). Jesus went on to say that the Gentile Ninevites would condemn His generation at the judgment because they repented at
the preaching of Jonah, whereas His generation was not repenting at the preaching of One greater than Jonah (Matthew 12:41).

Our present generation also has need to repent of its violence and wickedness and to call upon God’s mercy. Who knows? Perhaps God may yet relent and with compassion turn from His fierce anger so that this people will not perish.

As you prepare to study, take a moment to thank God for His mercy to you and to ask Him for courage to proclaim His mercy and love to a world sorely in need of repentance and reconciliation to Him.

The Sovereignty of God and Our Free Will

In the concluding chapter of the Book of Jonah, we will touch upon the tension between the sovereignty of God and our free will. It is only possible to scratch the surface of these two theological truths, but the book of Jonah does offer some interesting insights into them.


   A. Once again, compare Jonah’s two responses to the word of God. What do these responses suggest to you regarding the free human will?
B.  Review Jonah 3:4-10.

(1) In verse four, Jonah proclaims as instructed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” The next we read is that “the Ninevites believed God.” Then they fasted and repented of their evil ways. What do these verses suggest is the interplay between God’s sovereignty and our prerogative to make decisions?

(2) From verse ten, how does God in His sovereignty respond to the Ninevites?

C. If Jonah had obeyed the Lord the first time, do you think the Ninevites would have responded in the same way they did after Jonah’s experience with the fish? Why or why not?
D. Consider the following and then comment on how you see the sovereignty of God working simultaneously with freedom of choice: God’s initial command, Jonah’s disobedience, his attempted flight from God, the storm, the sailors, the drawing of lots, the futile attempt to row back to land, Jonah’s testimony, his being thrown overboard, his being swallowed by a fish, the calming of the sea, the increased terror of the sailors, Jonah’s cry for deliverance, the fish vomiting Jonah onto dry land as the means of God’s deliverance for Jonah from certain death, Jonah’s obedience to the renewed command of God, how the Ninevites responded to God, and how God responded to them.

God’s Compassion and Jonah’s Anger


A. From Jonah 4:1-2, why is Jonah so displeased and angry?
B. From Jonah 4:3:

(1) What does Jonah request of the Lord?

(2) Does this appeal seem unusual to you?

(3) Why or why not?

C. From Jonah 4:4, what is the Lord’s answer to Jonah?

D. Considering Jonah’s own deliverance

(1) Is his anger justified?

(2) Why or why not?
3. Refer to a dictionary or Bible dictionary to define “anger.”

4. What do the following verses say about

A. God’s anger
   (1) Exodus 34:5-7
   (2) Joshua 23:16
   (3) Judges 2:10-13
   (4) Psalm 103:8-11
   (5) Hebrews 3:7-12

B. Human anger
   (1) Ecclesiastes 7:9
(2) Ephesians 4:26-27

(3) James 1:19-20

C. What are the differences between righteous and sinful anger?

D. When is it permissible for people to be angry?

5. Read Jonah 4:5-8. Jonah is grateful for his own miraculous deliverance, but he is less than sympathetic to the plight of the Ninevites.

   A. From verse five, what does Jonah decide to do?
B. From verse six, how does God demonstrate His consideration for Jonah’s comfort?

C. Read verses seven and eight and Job 1:8-22. Compare the responses of Jonah and Job to adversity.


   A. Does Jonah have just cause to be angry about the vine? Please explain.

   B. Considering Jonah’s delayed repentance, does he have good reason to be angry about the repentance of the Ninevites? Please explain.
C. Considering God’s merciful deliverance, does Jonah have a right to be angry with God for showing compassion and mercy to the Ninevites? Please explain.


   A. What might have been a righteous response from Jonah to God’s statement recorded in these verses?

   B. Refer to Isaiah 6:1-8 and Matthew 28:18-20. What is to be our response to God’s concern for the spiritually lost?

8. Read Matthew 5:43-48 and Luke 6:27-36. What is to be the response of God’s people to those who are unbelieving, ungrateful, disobedient and/or unkind?
9. Read Proverbs 3:11-16, 8:10-11, 16:16; John 3:16-17, 6:41-48, 15:12-17; Romans 8:28; and 1 John 4:9-10.

A. How do these verses provide encouragement and comfort to those who love God?

B. How do they help you understand God’s sovereignty and your decision-making responsibilities?