

**Connecting Through the Word**  
**Fathers – The Danger of Running From God**  
**Jonah**

**Jonah 1:1-6**

*1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,*

*2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me."*

*3 But Jonah arose 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 the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.*

*4 But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up.*

*5 Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep.*

*6 So the captain came to him, and said to him, "What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish."*

Those who consider the Book of Jonah an allegory or a parable should note that 2 Kings 14:25 identifies Jonah as a real person, a Jewish prophet from Gath Hopher in Zebulun who ministered in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.). They should also note that our Lord considered Jonah a historic person and pointed to him as a type of His own death, burial, and resurrection. (Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:32).

The reign of Jeroboam II was a time of great prosperity in Israel; the nation regained lost territory and expanded both its boundaries and influence. But it was a time of moral and spiritual decay as the nation rapidly moved away from God and into idolatry. Jonah's contemporaries Hosea and Amos both courageously denounced the wickedness of the rulers, priests, and people. It's worth noting that Hosea and Amos also showed

God's concern for other nations, which is one of the major themes of Jonah.

While Jonah had a ministry to Nineveh, a leading city in Assyria, he also had a ministry to Israel through this little book. He discovered God's compassion for those outside Israel, even those who were their enemies. God had called His people to be a blessing to the Gentiles (Gen. 12:1-3), but, like Jonah, the Jews refused to obey. And, like Jonah, they had to be disciplined; for Assyria would conquer Israel and Babylon would take Judah into captivity. Jonah's book magnifies the sovereignty of God as well as the love and mercy of God. Jehovah is the "God of the second chance," even for rebellious prophets.

**Patience and Pardon**

**Jonah 1-2**

Most people are so familiar with the story of Jonah that nothing in it surprises them anymore, including the fact that it begins with the word "and."

Jonah is one of fourteen Old Testament books that open with the little word "and." These books remind us of God's "continued story" of grace and mercy. Though the Bible is comprised of sixty-six different books, it tells only one story; and God keeps communicating that message to us, even though we don't always listen too attentively. How longsuffering He is toward us!

What is the Book of Jonah about? Well, it's not simply about a great fish (mentioned only four times), or a great city (named nine times), or even a disobedient prophet (mentioned eighteen times). It's about God! God is mentioned thirty-eight times in these four short chapters, and if you eliminated Him from the book, the story wouldn't make sense. The Book of Jonah is about the will of God and how we respond to it. It's also about the love of God and how we share it with others.

In these first two chapters, **Jonah has three experiences.**

### **1. Rebellion (Jonah 1:1-17)**

Jonah must have been a popular man in Israel, because his prediction had been fulfilled that the nation would regain her lost territory from her enemies (2 Kings 14:25). Those were days of peace and prosperity for Israel, but they were autumn days just before the terrible winter of judgment.

### **Jonah the prophet disobeys God's call (Jonah 1:1-3).**

### **Jonah got into trouble because his attitudes were wrong.**

### **To begin with, he had a wrong attitude toward the will of God.**

Obedying the will of God is as important to God's servant as it is to the people His servants minister to. It's in obeying the will of God that we find our spiritual nourishment (John 4:34), enlightenment (7:17), and enablement (Heb. 13:21). To Jesus, the will of God was food that satisfied Him; to Jonah, the will of God was medicine that choked him.

**Jonah's wrong attitude toward God's will stemmed from a feeling that the Lord was asking him to do an impossible thing.** God commanded the prophet to go to Israel's enemy, Assyria, and give the city of Nineveh opportunity to repent, and Jonah would much rather see the city destroyed. The Assyrians were a cruel people who had often abused Israel and Jonah's narrow patriotism took precedence over his theology. Jonah forgot that the will of God is the expression of the love of God (Ps. 33:11), and that God called him to Nineveh because He loved both Jonah and the Ninevites.

### **Jonah also had a wrong attitude toward the Word of God.**

When the Word of the Lord came to him, Jonah thought he could "take it or leave it." However, when God's Word commands us, we must listen and obey. Disobedience isn't an option. "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46).

Jonah forgot that it was a great privilege to be a prophet, to hear God's Word, and know God's will. That's why he resigned his prophetic office and fled in the opposite direction from Nineveh. Jonah knew that he couldn't run away from God's presence (Ps. 139:7-12), but he felt he had the right to turn in his resignation. He forgot that "God's gifts and His call are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29, niv). At one time or another during their ministries, Moses, Elijah, and Jeremiah felt like giving up, but God wouldn't let them. Jonah needed Nineveh as much as Nineveh needed Jonah. It's in doing the will of God that we grow in grace and become more like Christ.

### **Jonah had a wrong attitude toward circumstances; he thought they were working for him when they were really working against him.**

He fled to Joppa and found just the right ship waiting for him! He had enough money to pay the fare for his long trip, and he was even able to go down into the ship and fall into a sleep so deep that the storm didn't wake him up. It's possible to be out of the will of God and still have circumstances appear to be working on your behalf. You can be rebelling against God and still have a false sense of security that includes a good night's sleep. God in His providence was preparing Jonah for a great fall.

### **Finally, Jonah had a wrong attitude toward the Gentiles.**

Instead of wanting to help them find the true and living God, he wanted to abandon them to their darkness and spiritual death. He not only hated their sins—and the Assyrians were ruthless enemies—but he hated the sinners who committed the sins. Better that Nineveh should be destroyed than that the Assyrians live and attack Israel.

### **Jonah The Jew Becomes A Curse Instead Of A Blessing (Jonah 1:4-10).**

God called the Jews to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3), but whenever the Jews were out of the will of God, they brought trouble instead of blessing. Twice Abraham brought trouble to people because he lied (vv. 10-20; 20:1-18); Achan brought trouble to Israel's army because he robbed God (Josh. 7);

and Jonah brought trouble to a boatload of pagan sailors because he fled.

**Consider all that Jonah lost because he wasn't a blessing to others.**

#### **Jonah Lost The Voice Of God (Jonah 1:4).**

We don't read that "the word of the Lord came to Jonah," but that a great storm broke loose over the waters. God was no longer speaking to Jonah through His word; He was speaking to him through His works: the sea, the wind, the rain, the thunder, and even the great fish. Everything in nature obeyed God except His servant! God even spoke to Jonah through the heathen sailors (vv. 6, 8, 10) who didn't know Jehovah. It's a sad thing when a servant of God is rebuked by pagans.

#### **Jonah Also Lost His Spiritual Energy (v. 5b).**

He went to sleep during a fierce storm and was totally unconcerned about the safety of others. The sailors were throwing the ship's wares and cargo overboard, and Jonah was about to lose everything, but he still slept on. "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man" (Prov. 24:33).

#### **Jonah Lost His Power In Prayer (Jonah 1:5a, 6).**

The heathen sailors were calling on their gods for help while Jonah slept through the prayer meeting, the one man on board who knew the true God and could pray to Him. Of course, Jonah would first have had to confess his sins and determine to obey God, something he wasn't willing to do. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Ps. 66:18). If Jonah did pray, his prayer wasn't answered. Loss of power in prayer is one of the first indications that we're far from the Lord and need to get right with Him.

#### **Jonah Lost His Testimony (Jonah 1:7-10).**

He certainly wasn't living up to his name, for Jonah means "dove," and the dove is a symbol of peace. Jonah's father's name was Ammitai, which means "faithful, truthful," something that Jonah

was not. We've already seen that he wasn't living up to his high calling as a Jew, - for he had brought everybody trouble instead of blessing, nor was he living up to his calling as a prophet, for he had no message for them from God. When the lot pointed to Jonah as the culprit, he could no longer avoid making a decision. Jonah had already told the crew that he was running away from God, but now he told them he was God's prophet, the God who created the heaven, the earth, and the sea. This announcement made the sailors even more frightened. The God who created the sea was punishing His servant and that's why they were in danger!

#### **Jonah the rebel suffers for his sins (Jonah 1:11-17).**

Charles Spurgeon said that God never allows His children to sin successfully, and Jonah is proof of the truth of that statement. "For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:6).

We must not make the mistake of calling Jonah a martyr, for the title would be undeserved. Martyrs die for the glory of God, but Jonah offered to die because selfishly he would rather die than obey the will of God! He shouldn't be classified with people like Moses (Ex. 32:30-35), Esther (Est. 4:13-17), and Paul (Rom. 9:1-3) who were willing to give their lives to God in order to rescue others. Jonah is to be commended for telling the truth but not for taking his life in his own hands. He should have surrendered his life to the Lord and let Him give the orders. Had he fallen to his knees and confessed his sins to God, Jonah might have seen the storm cease and the door open to a great opportunity for witness on the ship.

It's significant that the heathen sailors at first rejected Jonah's offer and began to work harder to save the ship. They did more for Jonah than Jonah had been willing to do for them. When they saw that the cause was hopeless, they asked Jonah's God for His forgiveness for throwing Jonah into the stormy sea. Sometimes unsaved people put believers to shame by their honesty, sympathy, and sacrifice.

However, these pagan sailors knew some basic theology: the existence of Jonah's God, His judgment of sin, their own guilt before Him, and His sovereignty over creation. They confessed, "For you, O Lord, have done as You pleased" (Jonah 1:14). However, there's no evidence that they abandoned their old gods; they merely added Jehovah to their "god shelf." They threw themselves on God's mercy and then threw Jonah into the raging sea, and God stopped the storm.

When the storm ceased, the men feared God even more and made vows to Him. How they could offer an animal sacrifice to God on board ship is a puzzle to us, especially since the cargo had been jettisoned, but then we don't know what the sacrifice was or how it was offered. Perhaps the sense of verse 16 is that they offered the animal to Jehovah and vowed to sacrifice it to Him once they were safe on shore.

The seventeenth-century English preacher Jeremy Taylor said, "God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy." He was referring, of course, to being happy with God's will for our lives. For us to rebel against God's will, as Jonah did, is to invite the chastening hand of God. That's why the Westminster Catechism states that "the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." We glorify God by enjoying His will and doing it from our hearts (Eph. 6:6), and that's where Jonah failed.

Jonah could say with the psalmist, "The Lord has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death" (Ps. 118:18). God prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah and protect his life for three days and three nights. We'll consider the significance of this later in this study.

## **2. Repentance (Jonah 2:1-9)**

From an experience of rebellion and discipline, Jonah turns to an experience of repentance and dedication, and God graciously gives him a new beginning. Jonah no doubt expected to die in the waters of the sea, but when he woke up inside the fish, he realized that God had graciously spared him. As with the Prodigal Son, whom Jonah in his rebellion greatly resembles (Luke 15:11-

24), it was the goodness of God that brought him to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

**Notice the stages in Jonah's spiritual experience as described in his prayer.**

**He prayed for God's help (Jonah 2:1-2).**

"Then Jonah prayed" (2:1) suggests that it was at the end of the three days and three nights when Jonah turned to the Lord for help, but we probably shouldn't press the word "then" too far. The Hebrew text simply reads, "And Jonah prayed." Surely Jonah prayed as he went down into the depths of the sea, certain that he would drown. That would be the normal thing for any person to do, and that's the picture we get from verses 5 and 7.

His prayer was born out of affliction, not affection. He cried out to God because he was in danger, not because he delighted in the Lord. But better that he should pray compelled by any motive than not to pray at all. It's doubtful whether any believer always prays with pure and holy motives, for our desires and God's directions sometimes conflict.

However, in spite of the fact that he prayed, Jonah still wasn't happy with the will of God. In chapter 1, he was afraid of the will of God and rebelled against it, but now he wants God's will simply because it's the only way out of his dangerous plight. Like too many people today, Jonah saw the will of God as something to turn to in an emergency, not something to live by every day of one's life.

Jonah was now experiencing what the sailors experienced during the storm: he felt he was perishing (1:6, 14). It's good for God's people, and especially preachers, to remember what it's like to be lost and without hope. How easy it is for us to grow hardened toward sinners and lose our compassion for the lost. As He dropped Jonah into the depths, God was reminding him of what the people of Nineveh were going through in their sinful condition: they were helpless and hopeless.

God heard Jonah's cries for help. Prayer is one of the constant miracles of the Christian life. To think that our God is so great He

can hear the cries of millions of people at the same time and deal with their needs personally! A parent with two or three children often finds it impossible to meet all their needs all the time, but God is able to provide for all His children, no matter where they are or what their needs may be.

"He who has learned to pray," said William Law, "has learned the greatest secret of a holy and happy life."

### **He Accepted God's Discipline (Jonah 2:3).**

The sailors didn't cast Jonah into the stormy sea; God did. "You hurled me into the deep... all your waves and breakers swept over me" (v.3). When Jonah said those words, he was acknowledging that God was disciplining him and that he deserved it.

**How we respond to discipline determines how much benefit we receive from it.** According to Hebrews 12:5-11, we have several options: we can despise God's discipline and fight (v. 5); we can be discouraged and faint (v. 5); we can resist discipline and invite stronger discipline, possibly even death (v. 9) ; or we can submit to the Father and mature in faith and love (v. 7).

Discipline is to the believer what exercise and training are to the athlete (v. 11); it enables us to run the race with endurance and reach the assigned goal (vv. 1-2).

The fact that God chastened His servant is proof that Jonah was truly a child of God, for God disciplines only His own children. "But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons" (v. 8). And the father chastens us in love so that "afterward" we might enjoy "the peaceable fruit of righteousness" (v.11).

### **He Trusted God's Promises (Jonah 2:4-7).**

Jonah was going in one direction only—down. In fact, he had been going in that direction since the hour he rebelled against God's plan for his life. He went "down to Joppa" and "down into the sides of the ship" (1:3, 5). Now he was going "down to the bottoms of the mountains" (2:6); and at some point, the great fish met him, and he went down into the fish's belly (1:17). When you turn your back on God, the only direction you can go is down.

**What saved Jonah?** His faith in God's promise. Which promise? The promise that involves "looking toward God's holy temple" (2:4, 7). When King Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, he asked God for this special favor (1 Kings 8:38-40):

*Whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know... that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land which You gave to our fathers.*

Jonah claimed that promise. By faith, he looked toward God's temple (the only way to look was up!) and asked God to deliver him; and God kept His promise and answered his call. "I remembered [the] Lord" (Jonah 2:7) means, "I acted on the basis of His commitment to me." Jonah knew God's covenant promises and he claimed them.

### **He Yielded To God's Will (Jonah 2:8-9).**

Now Jonah admits that there were idols in his life that robbed him of the blessing of God. An idol is anything that takes away from God the affection and obedience that rightfully belongs only to Him. One such idol was Jonah's intense patriotism. He was so concerned for the safety and prosperity of his own nation that he refused to be God's messenger to their enemies the Assyrians. We shall learn from chapter 4 that Jonah was also protecting his own reputation (4:2), for if God spared Nineveh, then Jonah would be branded a false prophet whose words of warning weren't fulfilled. For somebody who was famous for his prophecies (2 Kings 14:25), this would be devastating.

Jonah closes his prayer by uttering some solemn vows to the Lord, vows that he really intended to keep. Like the psalmist, he said: *"I will go into Your house with burnt offerings; I will pay You my vows, which my lips have uttered and my mouth has spoken when I was in trouble"* (Ps. 66:13-14).

Jonah promised to worship God in the temple with sacrifices and songs of thanksgiving. He doesn't tell us what other promises he made to the Lord, but one of them surely was, "I will go to

Nineveh and declare Your message if You give me another chance."

Jonah couldn't save himself, and nobody on earth could save him, but the Lord could do it, for "salvation is of the Lord!" (Jonah 2:9b) This is a quotation from Psalms 3:8 and 37:39 and it is the central declaration in the book. It is also the central theme of the Bible. How wise of Jonah to memorize the Word of God; because being able to quote the Scriptures, especially the Book of Psalms, gave him light in the darkness and hope in his seemingly hopeless situation.

### 3. Redemption (Jonah 2:10)

"And [the fish] vomited out Jonah upon the dry land." What an ignominious way for a distinguished prophet to arrive on shore! In chapter 1, the sailors treated Jonah like dangerous cargo to be thrown overboard, and now he's treated like a foreign substance to be disgorged from the fish's body. But when Jonah ceased to be an obedient prophet, he cheapened himself, so he's the one to blame. We can be sure that he was duly humbled as he once again stood on dry land.

**The Miracle.** Few miracles in Scripture have been attacked as much as this one, and Christian scholars have gathered various kinds of evidence to prove that it could happen. Since the Bible doesn't tell us what kind of fish swallowed Jonah, we don't have to measure sharks and whales or comb history for similar incidents. It was a "prepared" fish (1:17), designed by God for the occasion, and therefore it was adequate for the task. Jesus didn't question the historicity of the miracle, so why should we?

**The Sign (Matt. 12:39; 16:4; Luke 11:29).** The "sign of Jonah" is seen in his experience of "death," burial, and resurrection on the third day, and it was the only sign Jesus gave to the nation of Israel. At Pentecost, Peter preached the Resurrection (Acts 2:22-26) and so did Paul when he preached to the Jews in other nations (13:26-37). In fact, the emphasis in the Book of Acts is on the resurrection of Jesus Christ; for the apostles were "witnesses of the Resurrection" (2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39).

Some students are troubled by the phrase "three days and three nights," especially since both Scripture and tradition indicate that Jesus was crucified on Friday. In order to protect the integrity of the Scripture, some have suggested that the Crucifixion be moved back to Thursday or even Wednesday. But to the Jews, a part of a day was treated as a whole day, and we need not interpret "three days and three nights" to mean seventy-two hours to the very second. For that matter, we can't prove that Jonah was in the fish exactly seventy-two hours. The important thing is that centuries after the event, Jonah became a "sign" to the Jewish people and pointed them to Jesus Christ.

Jonah was now free to obey the Lord and take God's message to Nineveh, but he still had lessons to learn.

### Preaching and Pouting Jonah 3-4

The question is usually asked in Old Testament survey classes, "Was the great fish more relieved to be rid of Jonah than Jonah was to get out of the great fish?" Maybe their sense of relief was mutual. At any rate, we hope that Jonah gave thanks to God for the divinely provided creature that rescued him from certain death.

In these two chapters, we are confronted with four marvels that we dare not take for granted:

#### 1. The Marvel of an Undeserved Commission (Jonah 3:1-2)

Did anybody see Jonah emerge when the great fish disgorged him on the dry land? If so, the story must have spread rapidly and perhaps even preceded him to Nineveh, and that may help explain the reception the city gave him. Had Jonah been bleached by the fish's gastric juices? Did he look so peculiar that nobody could doubt who he was and what had happened to him? Since Jonah was a "sign" to the Ninevites (Matt. 12:38-41), perhaps this included the way he looked.

What the people saw or thought really wasn't important. The important thing was what God thought and what He would do next to His repentant prophet. "The life of Jonah cannot be written without God," said Charles Spurgeon; "take God out of the prophet's history, and there is no history to write."

### **God Met Jonah.**

We don't know where the great fish deposited Jonah, but we do know that wherever Jonah was, the Lord was there. Remember, God is more concerned about His workers than He is about their work, for if the workers are what they ought to be, the work will be what it ought to be. Throughout Jonah's time of rebellion, God was displeased with His servant, but He never once deserted him. It was God who controlled the storm, prepared the great fish, and rescued Jonah from the deep. His promise is, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5; see Josh 1:5). "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (Isa. 43:2).

### **God Spoke To Jonah.**

After the way Jonah had stubbornly refused to obey God's voice, it's a marvel that the Lord spoke to him at all. Jonah had turned his back on God's word, so the Lord had been forced to speak to him through thunder and rain and a stormy sea. But now that Jonah had confessed his sins and turned back to the Lord, God could once again speak to him through His word. One of the tests of our relationship to God is, "Does God speak to me as I read and ponder His Word?" If we don't hear God speaking to us in our hearts, perhaps we have some unfinished business that needs to be settled with Him.

### **God Commissioned Jonah.**

"The victorious Christian life," said George H. Morrison, "is a series of new beginnings." When we fall, the enemy wants us to believe that our ministry is ended and there's no hope for recovery, but our God is the God of the second chance. "Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time" (Jonah 3:1). "Do not rejoice over me, my enemy; when I fall, I will arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a Light to me" (Micah 7:8).

You don't have to read very far in your Bible to discover that God forgives His servants and restores them to ministry. Abraham fled to Egypt, where he lied about his wife, but God gave him another chance (Gen. 12:10-13:4). Jacob lied to his father Isaac, but God restored him and used him to build the nation of Israel. Moses killed a man (probably in self-defense) and fled from Egypt, but God called him to be the leader of His people. Peter denied the Lord three times, but Jesus forgave him and said, "Follow Me" (John 21:19).

However encouraging these examples of restoration may be, they must never be used as excuses for sin. The person who says, "I can go ahead and sin, because I know the Lord will forgive me" has no understanding of the awfulness of sin or the holiness of God. "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (Ps. 130:4). God in His grace forgives our sins, but God in His government determines that we shall reap what we sow, and the harvest can be very costly. Jonah paid dearly for rebelling against the Lord.

### **God challenged Jonah.**

Four times in this book, Nineveh is called a "great city" (1:2; 3:2-3; 4:11), and archaeologists tell us that the adjective is well-deserved. It was great in history, having been founded in ancient times by Noah's great-grandson Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-10). It was also great in size. The circumference of the city and its suburbs was sixty miles, and from the Lord's statement in Jonah 4:11, we could infer that there were probably over 600,000 people living there. One wall of the city had a circumference of eight miles and boasted 1,500 towers.

The city was great in splendor and influence, being one of the leading cities of the powerful Assyrian Empire. It was built near the Tigris River and had the Khoser River running through it. (This fact will prove to be important when we study the Book of Nahum.) Its merchants traveled the empire and brought great wealth into the city, and Assyria's armies were feared everywhere.

Nineveh was great in sin, for the Assyrians were known far and wide for their violence, showing no mercy to their enemies. They impaled live victims on sharp poles, leaving them to roast to death in the desert sun; they beheaded people by the thousands and stacked their skulls up in piles by the city gates; and they even skinned people alive. They respected neither age nor sex and followed a policy of killing babies and young children so they wouldn't have to care for them (Nahum 3:10).

It was to the wicked people of this great city that God sent His servant Jonah, assuring him that He would give him the message to speak. After making the necessary preparations, it would take Jonah at least a month to travel from his own land to the city of Nineveh, and during that trip, he had a lot of time available to meditate on what the Lord had taught him.

The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God can't keep you and the power of God can't use you. "And who is sufficient for these things?... Our sufficiency is of God" (2 Cor. 2:16 and 3:5).

## **2. The Marvel of an Unparalleled Awakening (Jonah 3:3-10)**

From a human perspective, this entire enterprise appears ridiculous. How could one man, claiming to be God's prophet, confront thousands of people with this strange message, especially a message of judgment? How could a Jew, who worshiped the true God, ever get these idolatrous Gentiles to believe what he had to say? For all he knew, Jonah might end up impaled on a pole or skinned alive! But, in obedience to the Lord, Jonah went to Nineveh.

### **Jonah's Message To Nineveh (Jonah 3:3-4).**

"Three days' journey" means either that it would take three days to get through the city and its suburbs or three days to go around them. The NIV translation of verse 3 suggests that it would take three days to visit all of the area. According to Genesis 10:11-12, four cities were involved in the "Nineveh metroplex": Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah, and Resen. However you interpret the "three days," one thing is clear: Nineveh was no insignificant place.

When Jonah was one day into the city, he began to declare his message: "Yet **forty days**, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Throughout Scripture, the number forty seems to be identified with testing or judgment. During the time of Noah, it rained forty days and forty nights (Gen. 7:4, 12, 17). The Jewish spies explored Canaan forty days (Num. 14:34), and the nation of Israel was tested in the wilderness forty years (Deut. 2:7). The giant Goliath taunted the army of Israel forty days (1 Sam. 17:16), and the Lord gave the people of Nineveh forty days to repent and turn from their wickedness.

At this point, we must confess that we wish we knew more about Jonah's ministry to Nineveh. Was this the only message he proclaimed? Surely he spent time telling the people about the true and living God, for we're told, "The people of Nineveh believed God" (Jonah 3:5). They would have to know something about this God of Israel in order to exercise sincere faith (see Acts 17:22ff). Did Jonah expose the folly of their idolatry? Did he recount his own personal history to show them that his God was powerful and sovereign? We simply don't know. The important thing is that Jonah obeyed God, went to Nineveh, and declared the message God gave him. God did the rest.

### **Nineveh's Message To God (Jonah 3:5-9).**

In the Hebrew text, there are only five words in Jonah's message; yet God used those five words to stir the entire population, from the king on the throne to the lowest peasant in the field. God gave the people forty days of grace, but they didn't need that long. We get the impression that from the very first time they saw Jonah and heard his warning, they paid attention to his message. Word spread quickly throughout the entire district and the people humbled themselves by fasting and wearing sackcloth.

When the message got to the king, he too put on sackcloth and sat in the dust. He also made the fast official by issuing an edict and ordering the people to humble themselves, cry out to God, and turn from their evil ways. Even the animals were included in the activities by wearing sackcloth and abstaining from food and drink. The people were to cry "mightily" ("urgently,") to God, for this was a matter of life and death.

When Jonah was in dire straits, he recalled the promise concerning Solomon's temple (Jonah 2:4, 7; 1 Kings 8:38-39; 2 Chron. 6:36-39), looking toward the temple, and called out for help. Included in Solomon's temple prayer was a promise for people outside the nation of Israel, and that would include the Ninevites. "As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel... when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, Your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You" (2 Chron. 6:32-33). Jonah certainly knew this promise, and perhaps it was the basis for the whole awakening.

Like the sailors in the storm, the Ninevites didn't want to perish (Jonah 3:9; 1:6, 14). That's what witnessing is all about, "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Their fasting and praying, and their humbling of themselves before God, sent a message to heaven, but the people of Nineveh had no assurance that they would be saved. They hoped that God's great compassion would move Him to change His plan and spare the city. Once again, how did they know that the God of the Hebrews was a merciful and compassionate God? No doubt Jonah told them, for this was a doctrine he himself believed (Jonah 4:2).

### **God's Message (Jonah 3:10).**

At some point, God spoke to Jonah and told Him that He had accepted the people's repentance and would not destroy the city. The phrase "God repented" might better be translated "God relented," that is, changed His course. From the human point of view, it looked like repentance, but from the divine perspective, it was simply God's response to man's change of heart. God is utterly consistent with Himself; it only appears that he is changing His mind. The Bible uses human analogies to reveal the divine character of God (Jer. 18:1-10).

How deep was the spiritual experience of the people of Nineveh? If repentance and faith are the basic conditions of salvation (Acts 20:21), then we have reason to believe that they were accepted by God; for the people of Nineveh repented and had faith in God

(Jonah 3:5). The fact that Jesus used the Ninevites to shame the unbelieving Jews of His day is further evidence that their response to Jonah's ministry was sincere (Matt. 12:38-41).

### **3. The Marvel of an Unhappy Servant (Jonah 4:1-11)**

If this book had ended at the last verse of chapter 3, history would have portrayed Jonah as the greatest of the prophets. After all, preaching one message that motivated thousands of people to repent and turn to God was no mean accomplishment. But the Lord doesn't look on the outward things; He looks at the heart (1 Sam. 16:7) and weighs the motives (1 Cor. 4:5). That's why Chapter 4 was included in the book, for it reveals "the thoughts and intents" of Johah's heart and exposes his sins.

If in chapter 1 Jonah is like the Prodigal Son, insisting on doing his own thing and going his own way (Luke 15:11-32); then in chapter 4, he's like the Prodigal's Elder Brother—critical, selfish, sullen, angry, and unhappy with what was going on. It isn't enough for God's servants simply to do their Master's will; they must do "the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:6). The heart of every problem is the problem in the heart, and that's where Jonah's problems were to be found. "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry" (Jonah 4:1).

The remarkable thing is that God tenderly dealt with His sulking servant and sought to bring him back to the place of joy and fellowship.

### **God Listened to Jonah (Jonah 4:1-4).**

For the second time in this account, Jonah prays, but his second prayer was much different in content and intent. He prayed his best prayer in the worst place, the fish's belly, and he prayed his worst prayer in the best place, at Nineveh where God was working. His first prayer came from a broken heart, but his second prayer came from an angry heart. In his first prayer, he asked God to save him, but in his second prayer, he asked God to take his life! Once again, Jonah would rather die than not have his own way.

This petulant prayer lets us in on the secret of why Jonah tried to run away in the first place. Being a good theologian, Jonah knew the attributes of God, that He was "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (v. 2, niv). Knowing this, Jonah was sure that if he announced judgment to the Ninevites and they repented, God would forgive them and not send His judgment, and then Jonah would be branded as a false prophet! Remember, Jonah's message merely announced the impending judgment; it didn't offer conditions for salvation.

Jonah was concerned about his reputation, not only before the Ninevites, but also before the Jews back home. His Jewish friends would want to see all of the Assyrians destroyed, not just the people of Nineveh. When Jonah's friends found out that he had been the means of saving Nineveh from God's wrath, they could have considered him a traitor to official Jewish foreign policy. Jonah was a narrow-minded patriot who saw Assyria only as a dangerous enemy to destroy, not as a company of repentant sinners to be brought to the Lord.

When reputation is more important than character, and pleasing ourselves and our friends is more important than pleasing God, then we're in danger of becoming like Jonah and living to defend our prejudices instead of fulfilling our spiritual responsibilities. Jonah certainly had good theology, but it stayed in his head and never got to his heart, and he was so distraught that he wanted to die! God's tender response was to ask Jonah to examine his heart and see why he really was angry.

### **God Comforted Jonah (Jonah 4:5-8).**

For the second time in this book, Jonah abandoned his place of ministry, left the city, and sat down in a place east of the city where he could see what would happen. Like the Elder Brother in the parable, he wouldn't go in and enjoy the feast (Luke 15:28). He could have taught the Ninevites so much about the true God of Israel, but he preferred to have his own way. What a tragedy it is when God's servants are a means of blessing to others but miss the blessing themselves!

God knew that Jonah was very uncomfortable sitting in that booth, so He graciously caused a vine (gourd) to grow whose large leaves would protect Jonah from the hot sun. This made Jonah happy, but the next morning, when God prepared a worm to kill the vine, Jonah was unhappy. The combination of the hot sun and the smothering desert wind made him want to die even more. As He had done in the depths of the sea, God was reminding Jonah of what it was like to be lost: helpless, hopeless, miserable. Jonah was experiencing a taste of hell as he sat and watched the city.

A simple test of character is to ask, "What makes me happy? What makes me angry? What makes me want to give up? Jonah was "a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8). One minute he's preaching God's Word, but the next minute he's disobeying it and fleeing his post of duty. While inside the great fish, he prayed to be delivered, but now he asks the Lord to kill him. He called the city to repentance, but he wouldn't repent himself! He was more concerned about creature comforts than he was about winning the lost. The Ninevites, the vine, the worm, and the wind have all obeyed God, but Jonah still refuses to obey, and he has the most to gain.

### **God Instructed Jonah (Jonah 4:9-11).**

God is still speaking to Jonah and Jonah is still listening and answering, even though he's not giving the right answers. Unrighteous anger feeds the ego and produces the poison of selfishness in the heart. Jonah still had a problem with the will of God. In chapter 1, his mind understood God's will, but he refused to obey it and took his body in the opposite direction. In chapter 2, he cried out for help, God rescued him, and he gave his body back to the Lord. In chapter 3, he yielded his will to the Lord and went to Nineveh to preach, but his heart was not yet surrendered to the Lord. Jonah did the will of God, but not from his heart.

Jonah had one more lesson to learn, perhaps the most important one of all.

**In chapter 1, he learned the lesson of God's providence and patience,** that you can't run away from God.

**In chapter 2, he learned the lesson of God's pardon,** that God forgives those who call upon Him.

**In chapter 3, he learned the lesson of God's power** as he saw a whole city humble itself before the Lord.

**In chapter 4, he learned the lesson of God's pity**, that God has compassion for lost sinners like the Ninevites; and his servants must also have compassion. It seems incredible, but Jonah brought a whole city to faith in the Lord and yet he didn't love the people he was preaching to!

The people who could not "discern between their right hand and their left hand" (4:11) were immature little children (Deut. 1:39), and if there were 120,000 of them in Nineveh and its suburbs, the population was not small. God certainly has a special concern for the children (Mark 10:13-16); but whether children or adults, the Assyrians all needed to know the Lord. Jonah had pity on the vine that perished, but he didn't have compassion for the people who would perish and live eternally apart from God.

Jeremiah and Jesus looked on the city of Jerusalem and wept over it (Jer. 9:1, 10; 23:9; Luke 19:41), and Paul beheld the city of Athens and "was greatly distressed" (Acts 17:16, niv), but Jonah looked on the city of Nineveh and seethed with anger. He needed to learn the lesson of God's pity and have a heart of compassion for lost souls.

#### **4. The Marvel of an Unanswered Question (Jonah 4:11)**

Jonah and Nahum are the only books in the Bible that end with questions, and both books have to do with the city of Nineveh. Nahum ends with a question about God's punishment of Nineveh (Nahum 3:19), while Jonah ends with a question about God's pity for Nineveh.

This is a strange way to end such a dramatic book as the Book of Jonah. God has the first word (Jonah 1:1-2) and God has the last word (4:11), and that's as it should be, but we aren't told how Jonah answered God's final question.

We sincerely hope that Jonah yielded to God's loving entreaty and followed the example of the Ninevites by repenting and seeking the face of God. The famous Scottish preacher Alexander

Whyte believed that Jonah did experience a change of heart. He wrote, "But Jonah came to himself again during those five-and-twenty days or so, from the east gate of Nineveh back to Gath Hopher, his father's house." Spurgeon said, "Let us hope that, during the rest of his life, he so lived as to rejoice in the sparing mercy of God." After all, hadn't Jonah himself been spared because of God's mercy?

God was willing to spare Nineveh, but in order to do that, He could not spare His own Son. Somebody had to die for their sins or they would die in their sins. "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

Jesus used Jonah's ministry to Nineveh to show the Jews how guilty they were in rejecting His witness. *"The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it; because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here"* (Matt. 12:41).

How is Jesus greater than Jonah?

**Jesus is greater than Jonah in His person**, for though both were Jews and both were prophets, Jesus is the very Son of God. **Jesus is greater in His message**, for Jonah preached a message of judgment, but Jesus preached a message of grace and salvation (John 3:16-17). Jonah almost died for his own sins, but Jesus willingly died for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2).

**Jesus is greater in His ministry.** Jonah's ministry was to but one city, but Jesus is "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14). Jonah's obedience was not from the heart, but Jesus always did whatever pleased His father (John 8:29). Jonah didn't love the people he came to save, but Jesus had compassion for sinners and proved His love by dying for them on the cross (Rom. 5:6-8). On the cross, outside the city, Jesus asked God to forgive those who killed Him (Luke 23:34), but Jonah waited outside the city to see if God would kill those he would not forgive.

Yes, Jesus is greater than Jonah, and because He is, we must give greater heed to what He says to us. Those who reject Him

will face greater judgment because the greater the light, the greater the responsibility.

But the real issue isn't how Jonah answered God's question; the real issue is how you and I today are answering God's question.

Do we agree with God that people without Christ are lost?

Like God, do we have compassion for those who are lost?

How do we show this compassion?

Do we have a concern for those in our great cities where there is so much sin and so little witness?

Do we pray that the Gospel will go to people in every part of the world, and are we helping to send it there?

Do we rejoice when sinners repent and trust the Savior?

All of those questions and more are wrapped up in what God asked Jonah.

We can't answer for him, but we can answer for ourselves.

Let's give God the right answer.