

Jonah

The book of Jonah takes place around 755 B.C. Jonah was not an unknown man God called for a single mission. He first appears in 2 Kings. God was punishing Israel for their idolatry (2 Kings 13:1-3). After battling the Arameans, the Israelite army suffered great losses (2 Kings 13:7). God had mercy on Israel, however, & sent word through Jonah that He would restore the captured towns of Israel (2 Kings 14:23-27).

Jonah has been interpreted by some to be a symbol of Israel's attitude & behavior. The Israelites were supposed to be a Kingdom of priests for God (Exo 19:5-6). However, they chose to turn away from God & tried to be like the other nations all around them. This is symbolized by Jonah, whose name means "dove", flying/fleeing from God's calling. However, God sends a great storm & Jonah is swallowed by the large fish. This corresponds to the Israelites being sent into exile (Jer 51:34). After turning back to God, Jonah is spat back out, just as the Israelites were returned from exile. Even after undergoing this experience, the Israelites, & Jonah, still did not want to minister to gentiles.

The book of Jonah is a bit unique in that its focus varies from other books of prophecy. Rather than focusing on the word of God, it focuses on the story of the prophet.

About a 3
week trip
↓

In the first two verses, God commands Jonah to minister to Nineveh. Nineveh was well known to the Israelites as it was the capital of Assyria, the nation the Israelites paid tribute to. Nineveh was about 500 miles northeast of Gath-Hepher, Jonah's hometown. Being the capital of Assyria, God was telling Jonah to not only minister to Gentiles, but to the very nation oppressing the Israelites.

In verse 3, rather than trying to bring mercy to his oppressors, Jonah chooses to flee. This is interesting for 2 reasons. First, he could have chosen to simply stay home & pretend he had not heard God. Instead, he takes action. Perhaps staying home would have been "lukewarm" as opposed to "hot" or "cold". Second, Jonah seems to believe he can actually run away from the presence of God (Psalm 139:7-12). His first step is to get outside of Israel, so he travels to Joppa, which was a Philistine territory, about 50 miles away from his home. From Joppa he got on a ship headed to Tarshish, still trying to flee from God.

Even though Jonah was trying to disobey God, we know God can work through our mistakes for His glory (Gen 50:20) (Rom 8:28). So while Jonah is on the ship, God sends a great wind causing a violent storm. The sailors become afraid & call out to their own gods to no avail. A conversation with Jonah reveals he is running away from the Lord &, after making every attempt not to, they end up throwing him off the ship. (Jon 1:11-16). The sailors even speak similar to the Psalms (Psalm 135:6-7). Therefore, God used Jonah's disobedience to bring others to Himself.

At this point, God causes a large fish to swallow Jonah. Wisely, Jonah uses this time to turn back to God. Now that Jonah is back on board with God's plan, God has the fish spit Jonah back out.

In chapter 3, God again commands Jonah to go minister to Nineveh (Jon 3:1-10). The Ninevites are spared not just for mourning, but because they have a change of heart to give up their wickedness.

Jonah becomes angry in chapter 4 (Jon 4:1-3). The qualities of God that he enjoys for himself are the very things he is complaining about. He did not believe the Assyrians deserved the goodness of God. God is asking Jonah to reflect on why he is angry. Does he deserve the love & mercy of God more than the Ninevites?

Jonah is still so bitter, he goes outside the city to watch, hoping it will still be destroyed as he feels it deserves. (Jon 4:5-9). Jonah is expecting justice from God, an eye for an eye. The Ninevites were violently evil & therefore deserved to be destroyed. God, however, is using this opportunity to display His grace that He wants to extend to all nations (Jon 4:10).