

God's Call, Our Dreams

A Study of the Book of Jonah

For Devotions:

◇ Read Jonah 4.2 and use it as the basis for your opening prayer: “You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

For Openers:

- ◇ Tell about the biggest fish you ever caught.
- ◇ Tell about the worst place you have ever visited.
- ◇ The hardest person for me to forgive would be...

For Your Information:

Background Information

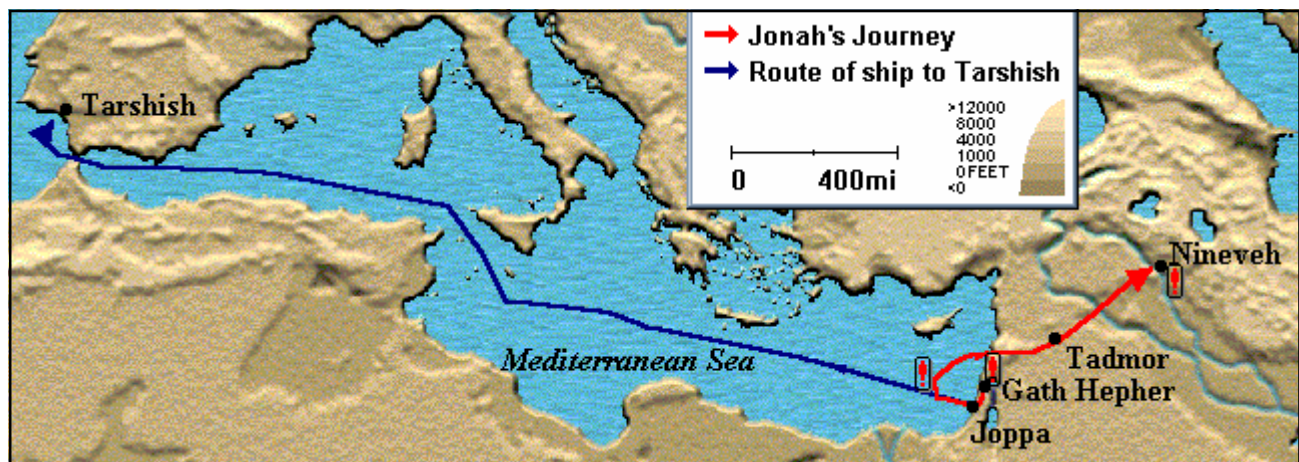
Jonah is described in 2 Kings 14.23-27 as a prophet from the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the time of Jeroboam II (786-746 BCE). Though some people read it as a factual, historical account, there are a number of difficulties in reading it this way (the “large fish,” the size of Nineveh, lack of any other corroboration of Nineveh’s conversion, etc.). Others, therefore, read it as an allegorical account (Jonah = Israel, sailors = nations, etc.). Most scholars, however, believe the book of Jonah to have been written sometime during or after the Babylonian exile in the sixth or fifth century when there was a greater concern to define Israel’s relationship with other nations and reflect on God’s sovereignty over all people. If this understanding is correct, then Jonah is something of an extended parable, a pointed story intended to engage the listeners on both a rational and emotional level.

An Outline of the Book of Jonah

- 1.1-17: God Sends Jonah to Nineveh; Jonah Flees to Tarshish
- 2.1-10: Jonah’s Prayer from the Fish
- 3.1-10: Jonah’s Preaching in Nineveh
- 4.1-11: Jonah’s Anger; God’s Mercy

Textual Notes

- ◇ 1.2: *Nineveh*: ancient city mentioned in Genesis 10.11; capital of the Assyrian empire from 705 to 612 BCE; situated in what is now Iraq.
- ◇ 1.3: *Tarshish*: probably refers to a port town in Spain on the westernmost edge of the then known world
- ◇ 1.5: How low can you go? Jonah goes down into the hold of the ship, from there into the belly of the fish, the experience of which he describes as being in the “belly of Sheol,” “in the heart of the seas”
- ◇ 1.7: Using lots to make determinations is also described in Joshua 7.16-18, 1 Samuel 14.40-42, Acts 1.24-25
- ◇ 1.5, 14-16: The sailors had feared the storm and cried to their gods; at the end they fear and cry to God.



- ◇ 1.17: The Hebrew word translate here as “swallowed up” is *bāla’*. Its definition is: “to make away with (specifically by swallowing); generally to destroy:—cover, destroy, devour, eat up, be at end, spend up, swallow down (up).” Compare its use in Exodus 15.12 and Numbers 16.30-34.
 - ◇ 2.8: “True loyalty” is the Hebrew word *chesed* which is more often translated as “steadfast love.” This word is used again to describe God in 4.2.
 - ◇ 3.4: “Overthrown” is from the Hebrew *hāphak* which can mean “overturned” in a negative sense (Genesis 19.21) but also has the positive of sense of being “turned around, converted, transformed.”
 - ◇ 3.6-8: Putting on sackcloth (a loose garment of coarse cloth) and sitting in ashes were traditional actions of mourning (Genesis 37.34; Esther 4.1, Amos 8.10) and repentance (Job 42.6; Daniel 9.3).
 - ◇ 4.2: “A gracious God and merciful...”: This is God’s self-description given to Moses in Exodus 34.6-7.
 - ◇ 4.10: “Perish”: The use of the word here draws attention to the captain’s concern that his crew not perish (1.6,10) and the king of Nineveh’s concern that his people not perish (3.9).
-

For Your Consideration:

- 1) It is mentioned twice in 1.3 that Jonah is trying to get away “from the presence of the Lord.” Is such a thing possible? Why go to Tarshish? What does Jonah’s statement about God in 1.9 imply?
 - 2) 1.12: Though the story has not yet identified why Jonah is trying to flee the Lord’s presence, he seems to be willing to accept a death penalty for his disobedience. Does the punishment fit the crime?
 - 3) Note 1.14-16. Have the sailors become God-fearing folk? What was Jonah’s message that caused their conversion?
 - 4) 1.17: God sends a large fish to swallow Jonah. Was this an act of judgment or of deliverance? How have judgment and deliverance been related in your own life?
 - 5) Carefully read Jonah’s prayer in chapter 2. Does he ever repent or ask forgiveness for his disobedience? He expresses concern about getting back to the temple in Jerusalem and worshipping God (vv. 4, 9), but where is he supposed to be going? In verse 8, he condemns “those who worship vain idols,” but whom in the story have we already met like this? (1.5-6) What did they end up doing (1.16) that Jonah promises he will do once he is delivered? (2.9) With these questions in mind, how do you read Jonah’s prayer now? True gratitude? A sincere plea for help so he can complete his mission? A calculated false piety just to save his skin? How does this prayer consider the difference between Jonah’s plans and God’s plans?
 - 6) 3.1-5: It took Jonah three days in the fish to get ‘turned around.’ In Nineveh, a “three day” city, Jonah only spends one day, and they do get ‘turned around.’ What does this say about Jonah? About Nineveh?
 - 7) 3.1-9: What caused the people of Nineveh to repent? What causes anyone to repent?
 - 8) 3.10: “God changed his mind...” Is this an encouraging thought or a disturbing one to you? What was it to Jonah?
 - 9) 4.1-3: Why was Jonah displeased? In theological terms, we might say that Jonah was hoping to see God’s justice but saw God’s mercy instead. Has God shown Jonah himself justice or mercy? Would you prefer a world ordered by justice or one characterized by mercy?
 - 10) Who are the ‘good guys’ in this story? Who are the ‘bad guys’? To put it another way, how do you think an ancient Israelite heard and reacted to this story? How does a modern Gentile like us hear and react to it?
 - 11) After God speaks in 4.10-11, what do you think Jonah will do? What do you do?
-

For Later:

- ◇ As you read the newspaper or watch TV, evaluate events in terms of how God’s justice or mercy are being expressed.
- ◇ Evaluate your own actions and opinions in terms of how you are expressing justice or mercy.