

Jonah

By Dr. Alan Cobb

Author: Jonah, son of Amittai. He was a prophet from Gath Hepher who lived around the time Jeroboam II became King of Israel in 828 BC. (2 Kings 14:25) The town of Gath Hepher was part of the land given to the tribe of Zebulun around 1444 BC. (Joshua 19:10-16)

Date: Between 828 BC and 790 BC.

Background: Most prophets spoke to the people or the nation's leaders (priests / king) to give them God's message about what they were doing wrong and how they should change and return to obedience. At this time, the southern kingdom of Judah was being led by King Amaziah who was not as disobedient as some of the kings were, but he did not obey as well as King David because he allowed the people to continue offering sacrifices at pagan high places. His son, Azariah who became king in 812 BC, followed Amaziah's ways but also did not have the high places removed. The northern kingdom of Israel had Jeroboam II as their new king in 828 BC. He died in 788 BC but sometime during his reign, he restored the boundaries of the kingdom in accordance with God's word spoken through Jonah, but he did all the evil that his forefathers had done. We know nothing of what Jonah spoke to Jeroboam II. We know from this story that the Ninevites to whom Jonah preached, turned from their pagan gods, believed in the one true God, and obeyed him during that generation. But by 722 BC they had again become a fierce, evil people who conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and ravaged the people and the land.

Overview: This is not a message from God specifically to the people or the leaders about what they are doing wrong. It is more about showing them and future generations that God will save any nation (and person) who puts their trust in him whether they are part of the descendants of Jacob (Israel). In that respect, it is an encouragement for both the northern and southern kingdoms to return to obeying God. If God will stop the destruction of the Ninevite people because they believe and follow God, then he surely will save his chosen people if they will trust and obey him. It is also a message to those God calls to speak for him to obey when he tells them what to say or do.

Story:

Chapter 1.

God calls.

God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against it because of their wickedness.

Jonah runs.

Instead of going east to Nineveh, Jonah goes to Joppa, finds a boat heading to Tarshish which is west, across the Mediterranean Sea. During the voyage, God sends a violent storm that threatened to break up the ship. The sailors are afraid and each pray to his own god, but to no avail. They throw their cargo into the sea to lighten the ship and make it easier to handle. While the storm is raging, Jonah is asleep below deck. He is awakened by the ship's captain and told also to pray to his god so that perhaps they won't die. Then the sailors cast lots (throw the dice) in an effort to determine by spiritual means who is responsible for what is happening. Their lot fell on Jonah so they ask him who he is and where he is from. He tells them he is a Hebrew and worships the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land. So the sailors ask him what he has done and what they should do to him to make the sea calm down.

Jonah recognizes his wrong.

Jonah says to throw him into the sea and it will become calm because it is his fault that the storm has come upon them. The sailors don't want to throw him overboard so they try to row back to land, but the sea grows even wilder. So they cry out to God not to kill them for taking Jonah's life. When they throw him overboard, the sea becomes calm.

The sailors fear and worship God.

The sailors greatly fear (are in awe of) God because of his power over the sea so they offer a sacrifice to him and made vows to him. This does not mean the sailors rejected their pagan gods and became believers and followers of the one true God. They simply recognized his power over the sea and wanted to be in his good favor.

God protects Jonah.

God provides a big fish to swallow Jonah and keep him from drowning. The fish also provides transportation to get Jonah back to the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea so God could again send him to the Ninevites. The travel time also gave Jonah time to think about his situation and his relationship with God.

Chapter 2.

Jonah calls out to God.

Jonah prays to God and repents of what he has done and vows to obey. Then the fish vomited Jonah onto dry ground.

Chapter 3.

Jonah goes to Nineveh and preaches.

Jonah obeys God, goes to Nineveh, and preaches to the people that the city will be destroyed in 40 days. The Ninevites believe God and fast in repentance. When the message reaches the ears of the king, he issues a decree that every person and all animals should fast and be covered in sackcloth and give up their evil ways. Then perhaps God would have compassion on them so they would not perish.

God accepts their repentance.

God has compassion on the Ninevites because they had believed him and repented.

Chapter 4.

Jonah is angry at God.

When the Ninevites repent, Jonah goes outside the city and pouts in anger at God. He says he knew God this would happen and that's why he ran to Tarshish to begin with. So now he wants God to just take his life.

God replies to Jonah.

God asks Jonah why he has any right to be angry and he makes a vine to grow to provide shade for Jonah. Jonah is happy about the vine until God provides a worm to chew on it so that it dies. Then Jonah is angry that the vine died and wants God to take his life. God asks why Jonah has any right to be angry about the vine and tells him: "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

God would ask us if he shouldn't also be concerned for the people of our community. Our reply should be: "Yes, Lord, please be concerned about the people and use me to reach them as you used Jonah to reach the Ninevites."