

Timeline / Overview

Jonah is unique among the prophetic books of the Old Testament. These books usually contain God's words spoken through a prophet; however Jonah is about the prophet himself.

Jonah appears one other time in the Old Testament during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 BC), one of Israel's worst kings. Jonah prophesied in his favor, promising he would win a battle and regain lost territory on Israel's northern border (**2 Kings 14:23-25**). Amos also confronted Jeroboam II, and through him God reversed Jonah's prophecy, promising that Jeroboam would lose all of those territories because he was a terrible king (**Amos 6:12-14**).

Jonah and the Sailors (Chapter 1)

Jonah 1:2 (ESV) - *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."*

God addresses Jonah and commissions him to go and preach against evil and injustice in Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire. Instead of going east to Nineveh, Jonah goes in the opposite direction, finding a ship going far west to Tarshish (1:3). **Why Does Jonah Run?** Is he afraid? Does he not like the Ninevites? We're not told....yet.

Jonah tries to run from God, and he boards a ship full of pagan sailors. He goes down into the ship and falls asleep (1:6). God sends a huge storm and the sailors discern that there is a divine power at work here. They all begin to call out to their gods and implore Jonah to do the same (1:5-6). They throw dice and determine that Jonah is the culprit (1:7). They ask Jonah to explain himself (1:8), but what he says doesn't make a lot of sense given the context:

Jonah 1:9 (ESV) - *And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*

If Jonah really believed this, then why did he run from God by getting on a boat? When the sailors asked Jonah what they should do (**1:11**), he said to throw him overboard (**1:12**) which may seem noble at first but is actually quite selfish. He wants to avoid going to Nineveh and put his blood on these innocent sailors hands by trying to force them to kill him. They are reluctant (**1:13**) and they repent to God even as they toss him over.

Jonah 1:14 (ESV) - *Therefore they called out to the LORD, "O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you."*

The storm subsides and they end up fearing the God of Israel and worship Him:

Jonah 1:16 (ESV) - *Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.*

God foils Jonah's plans to escape Nineveh. As Johan is sinking, God provides a strange watery tomb for him in the stomach of a large fish (for 3 days and 3 nights **1:17**). Jonah's submarine death becomes his passage back to life.

Jonah's 1st Prayer – of Repentance...sort of (Chapter 2)

Jonah utters a prayer where he never technically says that he is sorry but does thank God for hearing him (2:2-9a). He promises that he will obey God from this point forward (2:9b). God's response is that the fish vomits Jonah back onto dry land (2:10).

Jonah and the Ninevites (Chapter 3)

Once again, God commissions Jonah to go and preach in Nineveh (3:2), and Jonah complies (3:3). We're told that Nineveh was a gigantic city, and it would take three days to walk across it (3:3). Jonah gets one day in and here is his message (3:4):

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4)

This is five words in Hebrew, and is a short, odd sermon. There is no mention of the Nineveh's sin, how they should respond, or who might overturn them. There is also no mention of God. It is almost like Jonah is trying to sabotage his own message to ensure the destruction of Nineveh.

Nevertheless...his plan doesn't work. No sooner does he deliver this five-word-sermon than the king of Nineveh and the entire city repents in sorrow (3:5-9). So for the second time these evil pagans show themselves to be more responsive than God's own prophet. God forgives the people of Nineveh, and He does not bring destruction on the city (3:10).

The last word of Jonah's sermon "overthrown" can refer to a city being destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:21) or can be used of something being transformed or changed into its opposite (1 Sam 10:6). So, Jonah's words actually came true, but not in the way he intended or expected. Nineveh does get turned over as Jonah's enemies repent and find God's mercy.

Jonah's 2nd Prayer – A Criticism of God's Mercy (Chapter 4)

Jonah is fuming mad (4:1) and utters his second prayer (4:2). Here's why he ran...not because he was afraid, but because he knew God was so merciful. Jonah actually quotes God's own description of himself from Exodus 34:6 and throws it back in God's face as an insult. Jonah cuts off the conversation and prays that God will kill him on the spot (4:3). Fortunately for Jonah, God doesn't comply with this request, and asks if Jonah's anger is even justified (4:4).

Jonah ignores the question and goes outside the city to camp on a nearby hill waiting to see what might happen (4:5). God provides a plant / vine to shade Jonah from the sun, and that makes him quite happy (4:6). Then God sends a worm to eat up the plant and Jonah loses his shade (4:7). There in the heat of the sun, Jonah asks again for God to let him die (4:8). God again asks if Jonah's anger is justified. Jonah answers yes, just let me die (4:9). These are Jonah's last words in the story. God's final words conclude the book. He says that this whole plant incident was an attempt to get through to Jonah. Jonah got all concerned and emotional over the vine, which he only enjoyed for a day (4:10). Aren't humans a bit more valuable than vines. Shouldn't God be concerned about the great city of Nineveh? This is how the book ends, with God asking Jonah for permission to show mercy to his enemies (4:11).

So, what is the purpose of this strange story about a prophet who is swallowed by a fish?

Teacher's Notes

Handout notes are adapted from The Bible Project

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLlabZc0O4c>

Text

Jonah 1 (ESV)

¹ Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” ³ But Jonah rose 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, away from the presence of the LORD.

⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶ So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.”

⁷ And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹ And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰ Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

¹¹ Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” ¹³ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴ Therefore they called out to the LORD, “O LORD, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.” ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

¹⁷ And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

Jonah 2 (ESV)

¹ Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ² saying,

“I called out to the LORD, out of my distress,

and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.
³ For you cast me into the deep,
into the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounded me;
all your waves and your billows
passed over me.
⁴ Then I said, 'I am driven away
from your sight;
yet I shall again look
upon your holy temple.'
⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life;
the deep surrounded me;
weeds were wrapped about my head
⁶ at the roots of the mountains.
I went down to the land
whose bars closed upon me forever;
yet you brought up my life from the pit,
O LORD my God.
⁷ When my life was fainting away,
I remembered the LORD,
and my prayer came to you,
into your holy temple.
⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols
forsake their hope of steadfast love.
⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving
will sacrifice to you;
what I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation belongs to the LORD!"

¹⁰ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

Jonah 3 (ESV)

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. ⁴ Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

⁶ The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷ And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸ but let man and beast be covered with

sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Jonah 4 (ESV)

¹ But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ² And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. ³ Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴ And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?”

⁵ Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. ⁶ Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” ⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” ¹⁰ And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

Characters

This book features characters who do the exact opposite of what you think they would do:

The Prophet – The man of God who rebels and hates his own God.

The Sailors – These are pagans, but they have soft repentant hearts and turn to God in humility.

The King – The King of the most powerful, murderous empire on the planet (Assyrians) humbles himself before God because of Jonah’s five-word-sermon.

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2 Kings 14:23–25 (ESV)

²³ In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. ²⁴ And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. ²⁵ He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.

Amos 6:12–14 (ESV)

¹² Do horses run on rocks?

Does one plow there with oxen?

But you have turned justice into poison

and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood—

¹³ you who rejoice in Lo-debar,

who say, “Have we not by our own strength
captured Karnaim for ourselves?”

¹⁴ “For behold, I will raise up against you a nation,

O house of Israel,” declares the LORD, the God of hosts;

“and they shall oppress you from Lebo-hamath
to the Brook of the Arabah.”

Jonah and the Ninevites (Chapter 3)

פָּרַק **haphak** (245b); a prim. root; *to turn, overturn*:—become(1), came(1), change(1), changed(6), changes(1), come(1), drained(1), give(1), had a change(1), inundate(1), overthrew(5), overthrow(5), overthrown(3), overthrows(1), overturned(1), overturns(2), perverted(2), reined about*(1), restore(1), retraced(1), shifted(1), tumbling(1), turn(6), turned(44), turned aside(1), turned back(1), turned over(1), turning(1), turning around(1).¹

Genesis 19:21 (ESV)

²¹ He said to him, “Behold, I grant you this favor also, that I will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken.

¹ Thomas, R. L. (1998). [New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries : updated edition](#). Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc.

1 Samuel 10:6 (ESV)

⁶ Then the Spirit of the LORD will rush upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man.

Jonah's 2nd Prayer – A Criticism of God's Mercy (Chapter 4)

Exodus 34:6 (ESV)

⁶ The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

Overall

What is the purpose of this strange story about a prophet who is swallowed by a fish? Think of this in terms of God's questions being addressed to you, the reader. Are YOU ok with the fact that God loves YOUR enemies? This book holds a mirror up to the one who reads it. We see the worst parts of our own character magnified. It should generate humility and gratitude that God would love His enemies and put up with the Jonah in all of us. This strange story is actually a message of good news about the wideness of God's mercy.