

Jonah - Lesson 1

The story of Jonah is one of those biblical accounts many people know but not many people know well. Journalist Alistair Cooke said years ago that we can no longer assume people in our country have even a basic knowledge of biblical phrases or stories, yet most people have heard something about “Jonah and the Whale.”

Read Jonah 1:1-3.

1. Do you find it unusual that the Lord would send one of his prophets out of Israel to Nineveh? Why?

It could be considered unusual that the Lord would send his prophet outside the land of Israel at a time when his own people needed to be reminded of his judgment and mercy. Yet we should not consider it unusual that the Lord cared about non-Israelites, even ones as wicked as the Ninevites. He has always wanted all to be saved and to come to know the truth.

2. What do we learn about Jonah as we read that he “ran away from the LORD” and sailed for Tarshish “to flee from the LORD”?

Jonah didn't want to do the task the Lord called him to do. He tried to go as far in the other direction as possible. But there is something irrational and dangerous about trying to run away from God, as Adam and Eve first learned in the garden. How foolish to think that by hiding among the trees of the garden or sailing in the opposite direction, we can get away from God.

3. What possible reasons might Jonah have had for not wanting to go to Nineveh?

Fear of failing: His message could be rejected, and he could be in physical danger.

Fear of succeeding: If the Ninevites repented and believed in the God of Israel while Jonah's fellow Israelites did not, what would that say about the Israelites, about him, and about God? Also, Nineveh was an up-and-coming world power at the time. If the Ninevites were destroyed, it would be one less enemy Israel had to worry about.

His Word in My Life

The first thing the Lord told Jonah was about Nineveh's great wickedness, which had come to the Lord's attention. As you look at the wickedness of the world around you, does it move you to have empathy for your neighbors or to feel contempt for them?

Undoubtedly some of both. But look to Jesus: He empathized with sinners without condoning their sin or becoming entangled in it. He felt righteous anger over sin, yet he also viewed men and women as the victims of Satan and their own sinful desires. Are you able to hate the sin but love the sinner?

The surprising “religiousness” of unbelievers

Read Jonah 1:4-11.

1. Jonah never considered that his decision to run away from God would cause other people problems. What does that tell us about Jonah?

Apparently Jonah never considered how many others might be affected by his decision to run away from God. Sin made Jonah selfish, as it makes all of us.

2. Agree or disagree: The sailors aboard the ship were more religious than Jonah. Read also Acts 17:22-28.

While Jonah was hoping to run away from God, the sailors expended considerable effort trying to earn their gods' favor. Acts chapter 17 says that one of the purposes for which God made us was to reach out and find him. Yet people's efforts to find God always lead them to gods of their own design. Christianity has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

So the sailors were very religious, but according to the religion of the sinful nature. Jonah was very religious too, but his sinful nature was getting the best of him. At first, the group on the boat may have been very religious but not very godly.

3. The sailors seemed to believe that bad things that happen in life must have a specific "cause." Someone or something was always to blame. Were they correct? Read also John 9:1-3.

The soldiers were wrong to think that every catastrophe is the effect of someone's sin or that catastrophes are sent to punish sin. When Jesus' disciples felt the need to fix the blame for this man's blindness on either the man or his parents, Jesus refused to endorse such a simple cause-and-effect explanation for human suffering. We sometimes cause our own suffering by sinful or foolish choices, and God certainly controls all things in life, including our suffering. Yet Jesus shows that God's larger purpose in sending suffering is not to harm us but to reveal his work in our lives.

God had not sent a storm because of Jonah's sin but to stop his prophet from fleeing. He had a gracious plan in the works for the city of Nineveh.

4. An old saying proposes that sometimes unbelievers work harder to go to hell than Christians do to go to heaven. Have you ever been embarrassed to see the admirable behavior of some unbelievers compared to the lackadaisical outlook of some Christians? Read also Romans 2:17-24.

As Christians teach clearly that God saves us by grace alone, and as we abandon "self-chosen" good deeds as a way to earn right standing with God, we see how much effort others expend in the desperate hope that God will accept them. Yet genuine Christian faith leads to a changed life "from the inside out," and when unbelievers live obviously more moral or loving lives than their Christian neighbors, those unbelievers are tempted to curse God rather than praise him.

His Word in My Life

A Roman philosopher was reported to have said, "Fear was the mother of the gods." Will fear make people more religious?

Fear may make people work harder to get God to love them or may make them pursue religious activities more strenuously. It may also provide them with some peace of mind, but their peace of mind will also be frequently interrupted by the fear of not having done enough.

In spite of the apparent ungodliness of our society, people may show a surprising interest in questions of religion and a concern for doing what is right. We can view this as an opportunity to introduce people to Jesus.

The startling rescue by the Lord

Read Jonah 1:12-17.

1. Jonah admitted that the storm was his fault and urged the sailors to throw him into the sea. Was Jonah actually repentant, or did he just feel remorse that he was getting caught? Read also 2 Corinthians 7:10.

Judas too was “seized with remorse” when he saw Jesus condemned to die through his betrayal, but true repentance consists not only of guilt over sin but also of faith in God’s forgiveness. From what follows, it is clear that Jonah did repent.

2. What did the sailors do when they heard Jonah’s solution to the storm? Did they come to faith in the true God?

The sailors tried hard not to have to throw Jonah overboard. Note their sincere prayer to the Lord. They had come to faith in Jonah’s God. They knew it was wrong to murder and tried everything to keep from having to throw Jonah overboard. Yet in the end, they recognized that the whole thing was God’s doing and asked forgiveness for what they were about to do. Then they worshiped God and began to serve him.

3. Do you expect God to get as involved in your life as he was in Jonah’s life?

God may not provide a large fish to swallow us, but we should realize that the Lord always is actively involved in our lives—just as involved as he was in Jonah’s.

His Word in My Life

Acknowledging that God is powerful and all-knowing does not constitute saving faith. What does constitute saving faith?

Repentance over the guilt of our sins and faith in Jesus’ forgiveness constitute true faith.

Summary

Jonah distinguished himself as an unwilling missionary, trying to evade God’s call to preach to Nineveh. Yet the Lord intervened: Jonah’s life was endangered by a violent storm, then spared when he was swallowed by a giant fish. The first part of his story reinforces the truth that if God cannot get his will done through us, he will do it in spite of us.