

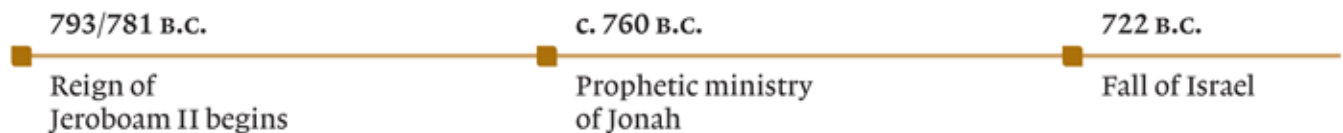
# INTRODUCTION TO JONAH

The story of Jonah has captured imaginations for generations. It's a bedtime favorite, with its dramatic account of a prophet swallowed up by a great fish as he flees God's call for him to proclaim God's message to the wicked city of Nineveh. But as we'll learn, this story is about so much more than a great fish and a rogue prophet.

Packed away into this short book of the Bible we are given a glimpse into God's heart for the nations, His plan of redemption through the gospel of grace. We will learn how this story serves as a microcosm of the great narrative of Scripture, setting the stage and preparing the world for the coming of the Messiah. We will be forced to not only wrestle with the glorious truths of God's character and calling, but our response to it; learning that knowing and even experiencing the depths of God's grace does not mean we fully understand it.

God's grace and the call of repentance are not only for those who don't yet know the Lord, but even for those who have walked with Him and experienced it first hand. This is a book, not about a man and a fish, but about the God of second chances.

## Timeline



## Author and Date

Jonah prophesied during the peaceful and prosperous time of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–28), who ruled in Israel (the northern kingdom) from 782 to 753 B.C. This was a time when Assyria was not a threat to Israel.

## Overview

The Lord called Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to pronounce judgment on it. Jonah attempted to escape the Lord's calling by sailing from the seaport of Joppa to Tarshish, which was probably on the shores of the western Mediterranean. Eventually he obeyed the Lord and traveled overland to Nineveh.

## Theme

The primary theme in Jonah is that God's compassion is boundless, not limited just to "us" (Jonah and the Israelites) but also available for "them" (the pagan sailors and the Ninevites).

## Key Themes

- I. God is in sovereign control over all events on the earth.
- II. God is determined to get his message to the nations.
- III. People need to repent from sin in general, and from self-centeredness and hypocrisy in particular.
- IV. God promises that he will forgive when people repent.

## Outline

The story of Jonah includes seven episodes, with the first three paralleled by the second three. The final episode stands alone as the climax of the story:

- A. Jonah's commissioning and flight (1:1–3)
- B. Jonah and the pagan sailors (1:4–16)
- C. Jonah's grateful prayer (1:17–2:10)
- D. Jonah's recommissioning and compliance (3:1–3a)
- E. Jonah and the pagan Ninevites (3:3b–10)
- F. Jonah's angry prayer (4:1–4)
- G. Jonah's lesson about compassion (4:5–11)

## The Setting of Jonah

c. 760 B.C.

Jonah prophesied during the prosperous time of King Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:23–28). During this time the Assyrians were occupied with matters elsewhere in the empire, allowing Jeroboam II to capture much of Syria for Israel. The Lord called Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to pronounce judgment upon it. Jonah attempted to escape the Lord's calling by sailing to Tarshish, which was probably in the western Mediterranean. Eventually he obeyed the Lord and went to Nineveh, at the heart of the Assyrian Empire.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/introduction-to-jonah/>



A lot of times it feels easier to do it myself. Whether it's teaching my kids how to help with chores, showing someone how to use a new tool, or delegating a project at work, sometimes it feels like involving others doesn't help, but makes things slower and messier.

I often find myself thinking how remarkable it is that God doesn't take that approach with us. If I feel that way with my own kids and other people in my own life, surely God must feel that way too, right? Of all people, He could accomplish His plans all on His own, far more efficiently and perfectly. Yet in His wisdom, He chooses to send and use us to proclaim His message and minister to people. We aren't the best representatives and at least for me, I feel like I get it wrong more than I get it right. We stumble over words and make decisions that are less than perfect. And other times, we are just flat out rebellious!

As we look at God's command for Jonah and Jonah's response, it can be easy to point out his shortcomings and failures. But I think we'll come to see that we are an awful lot more like this reluctant prophet than we'd probably like to admit.

## ICEBREAKER

**If you had to spend a week in a city you'd least want to visit, where would it be and why?**

## READ IT

**Read Jonah 1:1-3**

## GET IT

1. Where did God tell Jonah to go?
2. What was Jonah to do when he got there?
3. How did Jonah respond to the word of the LORD?
4. Where did Jonah go instead?

## LIVE IT

“It is one thing to know the doctrine of salvation by grace, and quite another to know the grace of the doctrine of salvation. This is the lesson of Jonah, the prophet who knew God’s grace but was challenged by God inwardly to embrace it. Sinclair Ferguson has expressed Jonah’s story in these terms: “It is really a book about . . . how one man came, through painful experience, to discover the true character of the God whom he had already served in the earlier years of his life. He was to find the doctrine about God (with which he had long been familiar) come alive in his experience.”

When most people think of Jonah, they think only of the famous fish that swallowed him. Their first question is, Did this really happen? Or, What kind of fish was it? But these questions are incidental to the book. Far more importantly, Jonah brings us face to face with such important issues as God’s grace for the wicked, God’s sovereignty over his servants, and the intense human struggle involved with forgiveness and repentance.”<sup>2</sup>

5. How would you describe the meaning behind the statement, “It is one thing to know the doctrine of salvation by grace, and quite another to know the grace of the doctrine of salvation”?

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<sup>2</sup> Phillips, Richard D.. Jonah & Micah (Reformed Expository Commentary) (pp. 3-4). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

6. Can you think of a time when a truth you'd known for years (like God's love, sovereignty, or forgiveness) suddenly became real through life experience?

When the word of the LORD came to Jonah, it wasn't vague or confusing. God told him exactly what to do: "*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it.*" God's Word is like that. It's specific, it's clear, and it carries the expectation of obedience.

While God may not send us to Nineveh, He still speaks with clarity. He's given us His Word in Scripture, which tells us who He is, what He desires, and how we are to live. He also gives us His Spirit, who helps us understand and apply His Word. **The challenge is often not that we don't know what God wants, but that we don't want to do what He says.**

7. What do you think it means that God speaks to us with clarity? Are there any ways that you feel God has not communicated clearly with us?

8. Why do you think it's often easier to claim "I don't know what God wants" than to admit "I don't want to do it"?

“Thus, by Jonah 1, the prophet has had some ministry success with the Lord and has walked with the Lord for a good portion of his life. He already knows the kindness of the Lord; he already knows His power to save, comfort, heal, and judge. He already understands that the Lord is Israel’s protector and strong tower, her King of Glory who is worthy to be praised.

Therefore, when the word of the Lord comes to Jonah, he is less like someone who does not want to answer the call to stand behind the pulpit and more like someone who does not want to talk to people in this evil generation about the goodness of our God. He is not the pastor only a few of us can identify with; he is the person who has experienced the grace of God but fails to tell others about it. All of us can—and must—relate to him. He is a rebel against the Lord’s word, which calls everyone to tell others about a great and loving King.”<sup>3</sup>

**9. What is something you’ve learned through your own experience with God that has solidified your confidence in who He is?**

**10. How can we guard our hearts so that our experience with God deepens our trust in Him rather than becoming an excuse to dismiss His commands?**

The first mention of Nineveh is in the Table of Nations, which describes the many cities Nimrod built in Assyria including “Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah—which is the great city” (Genesis 10:11–12). Nineveh was known for its great wealth, power, and prestige. The Assyrians were notorious for their cruelty and idolatry (Nahum 3:19). Their capital, Nineveh, contained many temples, including one to Ishtar, the Assyrian goddess that some scholars believe was the namesake of Nineveh.<sup>4</sup>

**11. Why do you think God cared about the evil being done in Nineveh?**

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<sup>3</sup> Redmond, Eric; Curtis, William; Fentress, Ken. Exalting Jesus in Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (pp. 26–27). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/Nineveh-in-the-Bible.html>

12. Are there people or groups you find yourself reluctant to share your faith with, not because you think they wouldn't listen, but because deep down you don't want them to experience God's mercy?

Rather than embracing God's commission to go to Nineveh, Jonah sought to escape it. We're told in the text that Jonah "rose to flee... from the presence of the LORD".

We know the Psalmist declares in Psalm 139:7-10,

*Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me.*

13. Why do you think someone would try to flee from the presence of God?

14. Without just saying “sin”, what might cause you to run from something God is calling you to in your own life at are some personal skills and passions you feel God has given you and how have you seen those gifts affirmed by others in your life?

15. In what ways might we try to “run” from God today (not geographically, but spiritually or emotionally)?

16. What do you see Jonah 1:1–3 reveal about God, about Jonah, and about us?