



# THE BOOK OF JONAH

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# INTRODUCTION

Jonah is the author of the book, and his name means ‘dove’, which is a name that God called Ephraim, Hosea 7:11, who are viewed as being easily deceived and senseless.

Jonah’s father was Amittai, who was a prophet from Gath Hepher, 2 Kings 14:25 / Joshua 19:10 / Joshua 19:13. It was Nathanael who asked Philip, Can anything good come out of Nazareth? It’s very possible that this is the region Jonah came from.

He was the first prophet after the death of Elisha to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and he was successful in his mission of telling the people of the Northern Kingdom how the territory would expand and would become prosperous under Jeroboam.

He worked in the early reign of Jeroboam II., and was contemporary with Hosea and Amos, but it’s possible he came before them. As with most of the Old Testament prophets, all we know about him and his personal life comes from the book itself.

We know that he was sent on a mission trip by God to Nineveh, and he was from Gath-Hepher, Joshua 19:10-13. There’s no doubt that Jonah loved his people, his fellow Israelites, but he does appear to have a problem with loving other nations, Exodus 19:5-6 / Isaiah 49:6.

## THE BOOK ITSELF

The book of Jonah is probably one of the most attacked books in the Bible, concerning its authenticity. Some see the book as a myth, some see it as an allegorical story, and some see it as a fable, but if people took the time to read outside the book itself, they would find sufficient proof that Jonah was a real person and that what happened to him really happened.

2 Kings 14:25 tells us that Jonah was around and was a prophet of that time. Jesus Himself refers to Jonah; He uses what happened to Jonah as a sign for the Pharisees.

He also speaks of the people of Nineveh condemning others in judgment. He speaks of how they repented, and how they would stand as a condemnation to all those who didn’t, Matthew 12:39-49 / Matthew 16:4 / Luke 11:28-32.

## THEME

The theme of the book is simply God’s dealings with the Assyrians.

## OUTLINE

Jonah tries to run from God. Jonah 1  
 Jonah’s prayer. Jonah 2  
 Nineveh’s repentance. Jonah 3  
 Jonah isn’t happy. Jonah 4

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Alexander, in his commentary, says the following, concerning ‘the word of the Lord,’ [Jonah 1:1](#).

‘The expression ‘The word of the LORD came to’ occurs over 100 times in the Old Testament. The writer did not record how Jonah received the following message from the Lord.’

Constable, in his commentary, says the following concerning ‘Amittai,’ [Jonah 1:1](#).

‘We do not have any knowledge of Amittai (‘truthful’) other than that he was Jonah’s father. The recording of the name of an important person’s father was common in Jewish writings, and the presence of Amittai’s name in the text argues for the historical reality of Jonah.’

Although Jonah served as a prophet for many years doing various other things, [2 Kings 14:25](#), his book specifically zooms in on one of his missions from God, ‘go to the great city of Nineveh and command them to repent’, [Jonah 1:2](#). The word ‘great’ appears many times through this book, [Jonah 1:2](#) / [Jonah 1:4](#) / [Jonah 1:12](#) / [Jonah 1:16-17](#) / [Jonah 3:2](#) / [Jonah 4:1](#) / [Jonah 4:6](#) / [Jonah 4:11](#). The great city of Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, which was heavily fortified, had enormous temples within, and the city itself was greatly occupied by many people, [Genesis 10:8-12](#). The Ninevites were notorious for their wickedness, and the way they treated their enemies, they impaled people on walls and trees, they led prisoners in chains and hooks through their noses and other parts of the body, and so, we can understand why Jonah himself was hesitant in going there in the first place, [Nahum 1-3](#).

Because Jonah was a prophet from Israel, we can understand why he saw Nineveh as a real threat to him and his people. We’re not told at this point in time why Jonah ran away and headed west for Tarshish, [Jonah 1:3](#) / [1 Kings 10:22](#) / [1 Kings 22:48](#) / [2 Chronicles 9:21](#) / [2 Chronicles 20:36-37](#) / [Isaiah 2:16](#) / [Isaiah 23:1-12](#) / [Ezekiel 27:12](#) / [Ezekiel 27:25](#) / [Jeremiah 10:9](#) / [Psalms 72:10](#).

We do know it was in the opposite direction from which God told him to go, but later in [Jonah 4:2](#), we’re told the reason why he was afraid that Nineveh would actually repent at the Lord’s command.

It’s doubtful if Jonah was aware that the Assyrians would eventually capture Israel, [2 Kings 17:6](#), but if he was aware of what they were going to do in the future, this would also explain why he didn’t want to go to Nineveh and give them the chance to repent and be saved in the first place.

When Jonah fled from the Lord, [Jonah 1:3](#), I don’t think we’re to understand that Jonah actually believed He could escape God’s presence, [Psalm 139:7-10](#), maybe we’re supposed to understand how he was actually feeling. Just like Paul was afraid and didn’t want to stay at Corinth because of all the sinfulness of the city, [Acts 18:9](#), Jonah’s fear was possibly taking over him.

Constable, in his commentary, says the following concerning Tarshish, [Jonah 1:3](#).

‘Tarshish was the name of a great-grandson of Noah through Noah’s son Japheth and Japheth’s son Javan, [Genesis 10:1-4](#). From then on in the Old Testament, the name describes both the descendants of this man and the territory where they settled, [1 Kings 10:22](#) / [1 Kings 22:48](#) / [1 Chronicles 7:10](#). The territory was evidently a long distance from Israel and on the Atlantic coast of southwest Spain, [Jonah 4:2](#) / [Isaiah 66:19](#).’

Instead of fearing God, [Ecclesiastes 12:13-14](#), he feared the Ninevites more, [Matthew 10:28](#). It was fear that caused him to run away, it was fear which caused him to go to Joppa, it was fear which caused him to find a ship, pay for his ticket and sail off. His fear led him to try to hide from God, [Genesis 3:8](#).

‘Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, ‘How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.’ Then the sailors said to each other, ‘Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.’ They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. So, they asked him, ‘Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?’ He answered, ‘I am a Hebrew, and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.’ [Jonah 1:4-9](#)

As we go through the book we can’t help but notice that God is the great provider, here God sends a great wind, [Jonah 1:4](#), in [Jonah 1:17](#), He provides a huge fish, in [Jonah 4:6](#), God provides Jonah with shelter, in [Jonah 4:7](#), we see God providing a worm to eat the shelter, in [Jonah 4:8](#), we see God providing a scorching east wind. There’s no doubt that these sailors had experienced violent storms before on their travels, but the one God provides seems to be stronger than anything they’ve experienced before because they’re afraid that the ship is about to break up, [Jonah 1:4](#).

Sailors, even today, are notorious for being very superstitious. Here, these sailors begin to cry out to their own gods for help, [Jonah 1:5](#). They decide the best thing to do at this point is lighten the load of the ship by throwing some of the cargo overboard, [Jonah 1:5](#) / [Acts 27:18-20](#).

Constable, in his commentary, says the following.

‘The sailors were of mixed religious convictions. Some of them were probably Phoenicians, since Phoenicians were commonly seafaring traders. Phoenicia was a centre of Baal worship then. The sailors’ willingness to throw their cargo into the sea illustrates the extreme danger they faced, [Acts 27:18-20](#).’

Notice what Jonah is doing whilst all this chaos is happening, he’s sleeping, [Jonah 1:5](#), he’s in a deep sleep, totally oblivious as to what is happening all around him.

He seems to have preferred death to facing God alive. It appears that Jonah not only wanted to flee to Tarshish, but he also fled to the innermost part of the ship, [Amos 6:10](#).

The sailors, like the disciples, were afraid, and they did what the disciples did with Jesus, when He was asleep amidst the storm in a boat; they woke him up, [Jonah 1:5](#) / [Mark 4:38-40](#).

When the sailors ask Jonah to call upon his ‘god’, [Jonah 1:6](#), they didn’t know the God of Israel; to them, God was one of many gods who existed in their own minds.

Feinberg, in his commentary, says the following.

‘It is well known how often sin brings insensibility with it also. What a shame that the prophet of God had to be called to pray by a heathen.’

The sailors knew that there was something totally different about this storm; this is the reason why they cast lots, [Jonah 1:7](#) / [Numbers 26:55](#) / [1 Samuel 10:20-21](#) / [Acts 1:26](#), but we shouldn’t miss the fact that God is making the choice here. We see this because the lot fell on Jonah, [Jonah 1:7](#) / [Proverbs 16:33](#).

When they ask Jonah five questions, [Jonah 1:8](#), but he never really answers the question. Instead, he declares he is a Hebrew, [1 Samuel 4:6](#) / [1 Samuel 4:9](#) / [1 Samuel 14:11](#), and admits who God is.

He is the God of heaven, [Jonah 1:9](#) / [Ezra 1:2](#) / [Ezra 7:12](#) / [Nehemiah 1:4](#) / [Daniel 2:18-19](#) / [Daniel 2:37](#) / [Daniel 2:44](#) / [Daniel 5:21](#) / [Daniel 5:23](#). He is the creator of all things, including the sea and the land, [Jonah 1:9](#) / [Psalm 8:1-4](#) / [Psalm 65:5-7](#) / [Psalm 107:23-32](#). It’s possible that Jonah now understands he’s doing wrong and needs to repent and go where God wants him to go. He knows who caused the storm.

In the next few verses, we see that he knows how to stop the storm, and we must give him credit for being open and honest about what’s happening, and he’s willing to take any punishment which will come his way because of his disobedience towards God.

‘This terrified them, and they asked, ‘What have you done?’ (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.) The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So, they asked him, ‘What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?’ ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea,’ he replied, ‘and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.’ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried out to the LORD, ‘Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased.’ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.’ [Jonah 1:10-](#)

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The sailors have become terrified as they conclude that Jonah’s God was the cause of this great storm, which was getting worse, and so, they conclude that God Himself must be feared.

Gaebelein, in his commentary, says the following.

‘Before, the mariners had feared the storm, but now they feared the Lord, recognising the Creator above the creation.’

They appear to be puzzled as to what Jonah has done to offend His God, even though Jonah explained it to them earlier, [Jonah 1:10](#). When did Jonah tell them he was running away from the Lord?

The text doesn’t tell us, but it’s possible he told them when they asked their questions, and he answered them, [Jonah 1:8-9](#). It’s also possible he told them before he got on board the ship, [Jonah 1:3](#). Because the sea and the storm got rougher, they ask Jonah what they need to do, [Jonah 1:11](#). Jonah tells them to throw him overboard, [Jonah 1:12](#).

If they didn’t understand why the sea would calm down after throwing him overboard, Jonah certainly did, he knew it was all his fault, he knew he couldn’t run away from God, [Jonah 1:12](#).

Constable, in his commentary, says the following.

‘Why did Jonah not end his own life by jumping overboard? I suspect that he did not have the courage to do so.

Obviously, it took considerable courage to advise the sailors to throw him into the sea where he must have expected to drown, but suicide takes even more courage.’

It appears the sailors weren’t convinced by what Jonah said, possibly because of superstition, [Psalms 74:13-14](#) / [Psalms 104:25-26](#), and so they decided to try and save Jonah’s life by rowing to the nearest shore; unfortunately, they didn’t make it because the storm got stronger, [Jonah 1:13](#).

Notice that the sailors now ‘cry out to the Lord’, [Jonah 1:14](#). It appears as though God used the storm not only to get Jonah back on track but also to convert the sailors into believing in the One true God.

They didn’t want to be held accountable to God for Jonah’s life, this innocent man’s life, [Matthew 27:24](#), if he died in the sea, and they didn’t want to go against God’s will, [Jonah 1:14](#).

If this tells us anything, it tells us that these once superstitious sailors came to the conclusion that no one can flee from the Lord, [Psalm 139:7-10](#). Although they didn’t want to throw Jonah overboard, they soon realised that if they wanted to live, they would have to do as Jonah asked.

After throwing Jonah overboard, the sailors must have known they did the right thing because not only did the storm calm, [Jonah 1:15](#), but they greatly feared the Lord and offered sacrifices and made vows to Him, [Jonah 1:16](#). It appears these pagan sailors feared God more than Jonah did.

Notice that the sailor’s response was similar to the disciple’s response when Jesus calmed the storm, [Matthew 14:22-33](#); they recognised that God had full control over the seas.

## THE GREAT FISH

“Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.’ Jonah 1:17

As Jonah is in the sea, the Lord provides a huge fish to swallow Jonah. A lot of people know this part of the story really well, but sadly, they are taught that this great fish was actually a whale because some translations use the word whale in Matthew 12:40.

However, they forget to realise that a whale actually isn’t a fish but a mammal. Although there are many theories about what kind of fish this was, be it a whale or some other kind of fish, we mustn’t miss the point. The point is simply this: this is a miracle because it was provided by God.

After all, He created all things, so why couldn’t God create this fish for this very purpose! The purpose of which was to keep Jonah alive until he came to his senses and fully accepted his mission from God.

Jonah was swallowed by this great fish, and Jonah was inside of it for three days and nights. Remember that Jesus Himself spoke about this very event, Matthew 12:40.

The four Gospels reveal that, repeatedly, the Lord Himself declared in unequivocal terms that He would be put to death and would rise from the dead ‘on the third day’.

He first predicted His resurrection early as John 2:19, in a statement which John admits His disciples only later understood, but later He began to speak about it openly, after Peter had declared Him to be ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’, in Matthew 16:16.

Similar statements are recorded in the Gospels, Matthew 17:23 / Matthew 20:19 / Mark 9:31 / Mark 10:34 / Luke 9:22 / Luke 13:32 / Luke 18:33 / Luke 24:7 / Luke 24:21 / Luke 24:46.

The very fact that Jesus referred to Jonah and his experience in the fish tells us that this experience of Jonah really did happen. When it comes to Christ’s reference about Jonah, we must remember He spoke of and used it to prove that just as Jonah was in the fish for three days and nights, then He Himself would be buried and rise on the third day, Matthew 12:39-49 / Matthew 16:4 / Luke 11:28-32.

## CHAPTER 2

## INTRODUCTION

‘From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. He said: ‘In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead, I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, ‘I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.’ The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the mountains

I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit. ‘When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. ‘Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God’s love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed, I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation comes from the LORD.’ Jonah 2:1-9

We often forget that at this point, Jonah didn’t know what was going to happen next. He must have thought when he was thrown overboard that he was going to die.

It appears the only thing that will bring Jonah to his senses is by praying from inside this great fish, **Jonah 2:1**. Jonah was clearly in distress, hence why he now calls on the Lord for help, **Jonah 2:2 / Psalm 3:4 / Psalm 120:1**. We see that he was lamenting in prayer, **Psalm 88:3-12 / Psalm 120:1 / Psalm 142:1 / Lamentations 3:55-58**.

He compares being inside the fish to being in the realm of the dead, **Jonah 2:2 / Psalm 18:4-5 / Psalm 30:3**. The word 'Sheol', **Jonah 2:2**, is often found in the Old Testament, but it doesn't mean 'hell'; it simply means 'the realm of the dead', the grave.

We're told that 'the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing', **Ecclesiastes 9:5**, and according to **Psalm 115:17**, 'It is not the dead who praise the LORD, those who go down to the place of silence'.

De Haan, in his commentary, says the following concerning **Jonah 2:2**.

'Jonah actually died, basing it upon the contrast between the belly of the fish and the belly of Sheol, in which different words were used by the Holy Spirit.'

Myer's, in his commentary, says the following, concerning **Jonah 2:2**.

'It may very well be that Jonah meant, 'that the Lord had snatched him from the Jaws of death, delivering him before the gates of Sheol closed upon him.'

Many people believe that Jonah quotes from several Psalms in his prayer, which would imply that he knew the Scriptures well. However, there are no quotations from the Psalms, but only the usage of certain words, phrases, etc., known to all faithful Hebrews.

Wycliffe, Bible Encyclopaedia, says the following.

'The words (in Jonah's prayer) fit none (of the Psalms) well enough to conclude that they are specific quotations. More likely, many Psalms were in mind and freely paraphrased to fit the particular situation and in a manner which expressed Jonah's appropriate emotions.'

Jonah now understands that everything He was going through was God's doing, **Jonah 2:3 / Psalm 88:6-7 / Jonah 1:9 / Psalm 42:7**. He now understands that it was God who was bringing him to a state of repentance in order for him to submit to God's will and go to Nineveh.

He understood that he had been banished from God's sight because of his disobedience towards God's command, **Jonah 2:4**. It's understandable that Jonah felt like God had turned his back on him, **Jonah 2:4 / Leviticus 21:7 / Psalm 31:22**. This is a perfectly human response when we feel vulnerable.

Jesus, being human, experienced this same emotion. He felt that God had turned His back on Him, **Matthew 27:46**, but the reality was that God never did turn His back on Him, **Psalm 22**. Despite Jonah feeling that God had turned away from him, he still sought God in prayer, looking towards His holy temple, **Jonah 2:4 / Psalm 5:7**.

Notice he says, 'I will look again', **Jonah 2:4**. This is what repentance is all about, it's about looking again at your situation. He obviously believes that if God delivers him from his current situation, he would go on to obey God's command to go to Nineveh.

It's here he confesses his sins and promises that he will be obedient to God. Whilst being entangled in seaweed, He thanks God for saving him from dying in the sea, **Jonah 1:5 / Psalm 69:1-2**.

Notice Jonah felt like he had sunk to the root of the mountains, and he felt like he was imprisoned, **Jonah 1:6**. The good news is, God delivered him, He brought him back to life, He brought him back from the pit, **Jonah 1:6 / Psalm 49:15 / Psalm 56:13 / Psalm 103:4**.

Wiersbe, in his commentary, says the following.

'When you turn your back on God, the only direction you can go is down.'

When Jonah ‘remembered the Lord’, **Jonah 2:7**, he didn’t think God was being unfair, even though he was inside the belly of a fish. He confessed his own sinfulness because he knew it was his own selfish actions which got him into the mess he now finds himself in, **Hosea 4:6**.

If there’s ever been a prayer of repentance, this is it; he now knows that his life means nothing unless he obeys the will of God. Jonah thought his life was coming to an end, and so he turned to God, **Jonah 2:7 / Psalm 107:5-6 / Psalm 142:3 / Psalm 142:5-7**. Despite feeling the way he was, he still turned to God in prayer; his prayer rose up to God, who was in His holy temple, **Jonah 2:7**.

He knows that idols are worthless and he knows that idolatry turns people away from the love of God, **Jonah 2:8 / Deuteronomy 32:21**. He thanked God because he now knows it was God who actually saved him, by providing this great fish, **Jonah 2:9**. Because he made a vow to ‘make good’, **Jonah 2:9 / Psalm 50:14 / Psalm 69:30 / Psalm 107:22**.

He was determined not to go against God’s word, as he did earlier, and he now believes that God will deliver him from the belly of the fish and get on with the task of preaching repentance to the Ninevites.

Jonah was desperate and in a desperate situation, and he turned to the only person who could help him, and that’s God Himself. He had three days to reflect upon his actions, repent of his actions and then trust God to take care of him.

“And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.’ **Jonah 2:10**

Notice God ‘commanded the fish’, **Jonah 2:10**, to vomit Jonah out, and notice where he landed, on ‘dry land’, **Jonah 2:10**. Exactly where this is, is unknown, but it’s close enough for Jonah to walk to that great city of Nineveh.

Banks, in his commentary, says the following.

‘Jonah’s deliverance is the only pleasant usage of the word vomit in the whole Bible.’

## DID JONAH DIE OR LIVE WHILE IN THE FISH?

There are many people who believe that Jonah actually died in the stomach of the fish, and many people who believe that he didn’t. The truth is, we simply don’t know, despite there being many arguments for and against it. I guess in the grand scheme of things, it may not be all that important.

When we read this chapter, we see that the text appears to read in the past tense, and so the question becomes, if Jonah died, when did he die? In the sea or in the fish?

I believe if God wanted to keep Jonah alive, He could do so very easily, after all, He was the One who provided this fish in the first place, **Jonah 1:17**. I also believe that if Jonah died, it would have been no problem for God to bring him back to life.

I’ve personally changed my mind on this question a few times over the years, as I read and hear other people’s arguments for and against and no doubt I may change my mind again.

Notice, however, that nowhere in the Bible does it say that Jonah actually ‘lived’ in the belly of the fish for three days and nights. This leads to the question, where does it actually say that he ‘died’ in the fish?

The Bible does say that Jonah prayed ‘whilst inside the fish’, **Jonah 1:1**, but then he cried out ‘from deep in the realm of the dead’, **Jonah 2:2**. We know that people are still very much alive and conscious after death, **Luke 16:19-31**, but how else would Jonah be able to pray if he wasn’t alive and conscious in the afterlife?



In **Matthew 12:38-40**, Jesus said Jonah, in the great fish's belly, was a picture of His own physical death. Just as Jonah spent three days and three nights in the great fish, so Jesus spent three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

If Jonah died in the sea before the fish swallowed him, but whilst in the fish, he was raised back to life, this makes Jesus' statement in **Matthew 12:38-40** more powerful.

This leads me to conclude that Jonah did physically die at some point, just as Jesus was going to be physically dead in the tomb. Jesus was raised to life while He was in the grave and rose from the grave three days later, just as Jonah was raised to life within the whale, but three days later was vomited out of the fish.

Like I mentioned earlier, I wouldn't stake my mortgage on this, because no one knows if he literally died or not, but if Jonah did die, this would correspond exactly to what Jesus was teaching the Pharisees about His own death and resurrection, **Matthew 12:38-40**. When God resurrected Jonah from the grave, **Jonah 2:6**, He was showing us that Jesus Christ would be resurrected from the grave.

## CHAPTER 3

### INTRODUCTION

‘Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.’ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.’ **Jonah 3:1-3**

After being vomited out of the mouth of the great fish and landing on dry land, **Jonah 2:10**, God once again commands Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh, **Jonah 3:1-2 / Jonah 1:2**. And so, after his prayer of repentance and thanksgiving, **Jonah 2**, Jonah obeys God's commands, **Jonah 3:3**.

Wiersbe, in his commentary, says the following.

‘The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God can't keep you and the power of God can't use you.’

Nineveh was about five hundred and fifty miles northeast of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. I'm sure that as Jonah arrived at the city, he would have been overwhelmed by the size of the place.

The huge fortified walls, the imposing temple within and a great many people who lived there. Archaeologists tell us that the city would have been around 46 miles in circumference. This was a huge city, which took three days on foot to get from one side to the other, **Jonah 3:3 / Jonah 4:11**.

‘Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.’ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and, with compassion, turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.’ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.’ **Jonah 3:4-10**

We can't begin to imagine how this one man named Jonah was feeling as he began to walk through this huge city, **Jonah 3:4**. Jonah's message is simply this: Nineveh needs to repent, or they will cease to exist as a nation in forty days' time.

Constable, in his commentary, says the following.

'The essence of his proclamation was that Nineveh would be overthrown in only 40 days. Periods of testing in Scripture were often 40 days long, **Genesis 7:17 / Exodus 24:18 / 1 Kings 19:8 / Matthew 4:2**.'

Butler, in his commentary, says the following concerning the word 'overthrown,' **Jonah 3:4**.

'The word 'overthrown' here literally means, 'Destroyed from the very foundation and is the same word used in speaking of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.'

Notice the text says 'the Ninevites believed God,' **Jonah 3:5**. It's clear that the people understood Jonah's message as a message which came directly from God Himself.

Barnes, in his commentary, says the following.

'To believe God means to believe what God says, to be the truth; to believe in God expresses not belief only, but that belief resting and trusting in God; it combines hope and trust with faith and love, since without love there cannot be trust.'

God was speaking through Jonah, and the people repented because of Jonah's preaching, **Jonah 3:5 / Matthew 12:41**.

Repentance isn't just about feeling sorry for the sins you've committed; it's more than that.

Repentance involves a complete turnaround from your former sinful practices, which leads to following God and His ways, **2 Corinthians 7:10**. The inhabitants of Nineveh did this very thing; after hearing Jonah's message, they repented of their sinfulness, **Jonah 3:5**.

It appears that the Ninevites were shocked into action by God's threat to overthrow the city, and so everyone fasted, and everyone wore sackcloth, **Jonah 3:5**, which was basically a rough garment made of goat hair, usually associated with mourning, **1 Kings 20:31 / Isaiah 15:3 / Jeremiah 49:3 / Ezekiel 27:31**. Sitting down in the dust, demonstrates deep mourning, when someone is at their lowest, emotionally speaking.

Remember, Jonah is surrounded by thousands of foreigners, whose sins include drunkenness, idolatry, sexual immorality, and a whole host of other sinful behaviour.

There's a possibility that the Assyrians had heard of Jonah and knew he was God's prophet. It's also possible that they heard about what happened with the great fish.

This makes sense because he doesn't appear to get any resistance. The Ninevites were full of evil, violence and wickedness, but they repented, even the king recognised their sinfulness and understood God's warning, and he joined in. He takes off his royal robes, covers himself with sackcloth and sits down in the dust, **Jonah 3:6 / Job 2:8 / Ezekiel 27:30**.

The king himself makes a decree and declares a national act of repentance, **Jonah 3:7-8**. The people and the animals weren't permitted to taste anything; they weren't permitted to eat or drink, **Jonah 3:7**.

Coffman, in his commentary, says the following concerning the animals, **Jonah 3:7**.

'The involvement of animals in the general mourning was not due to any notion that the animals had sinned; it was merely an Oriental custom.'

Constable, in his commentary, says the following concerning **Jonah 3:7**.

'This verse further describes how seriously the king and his nobles regarded their situation and to what extent they went to encourage citywide contrition. They did not regard their animals as needing to humble themselves but viewed them as expressing the spirit of their owners.'

The king commands all the animals and the people to be covered with sackcloth, and he commands that everyone in the city should call urgently on God, **Jonah 3:8**.

The king knew that he and the Ninevites needed to give up their evil ways and their violence, **Genesis 6:11 / Genesis 6:13**, if they wanted God to spare them, **Jonah 3:9**.

Coffman, in his commentary, says the following.

‘The marvel of this repentance of the Ninevites is nowhere more evident than in this.

1. They repented with no invitation to repent.
2. They repented without promise that it would do any good if they did repent.
3. They repented without any wish or hope on the part of the preacher that they would repent.
4. They repented even in the face of Jonah’s anger at their doing so.
5. They repented en masse, from the greatest of them to the least of them.
6. They backed up their repentance by turning away from their violence and wickedness. Such repentance was rewarded by the blessing of God!’

Jonah had fully obeyed the Lord’s command to preach repentance to the nation, and the people listened and obeyed. The good news is that because Nineveh repented, God relented from destroying them. What a merciful God we serve! **Jonah 3:10**.

Ellison, in his commentary, says the following.

‘We may know the character of God only from what he does and the words he uses to explain his actions. When he does not do what he said he would, we as finite men can say only that he has changed his mind or repented, even though we should recognise, as Jonah did, **Jonah 4:2**, that he had intended or desired this all along.’

## CONCLUSION

When you think about it, Jonah is able to get this whole city to repent after only one day of preaching, **Jonah 3:4**, but he couldn’t get his own people, God’s people, the Israelites, to repent!

The Northern Kingdom of Israel had become so hard-hearted that they were actually worse than the Ninevites because it appears that the Ninevites were more open to God’s Word than God’s own people were.

That’s why Jesus says that ‘the demonstration of the Ninevites’ repentance, would rise up in judgment against anyone who refuses to repent,’ **Matthew 12:38-41 / Luke 11:29-32**.

Constable, in his commentary, says the following.

‘Jonah was a sign in a two-fold sense. His three days and nights in the fish foreshadowed Jesus’ three days and nights in the grave, **Matthew 12:40**, and his ministry as a visiting prophet delivering a call for repentance to an evil people under God’s judgment previewed Jesus’ ministry, **Matthew 12:41 / Luke 11:30 / Luke 11:32**.’

The bad news for Nineveh is that over time, they would slip back into their evil ways, and because they refused to repent, God would eventually destroy them as a nation.

God would use the Babylonians to destroy them in 612 B.C., just as God promised through the preaching of Nahum, **Nahum 1-3**, and Zephaniah, **Zephaniah 2:13-15**.

It would be wonderful if Jonah's story ended here on a high, but sadly, we know there's another chapter to be told in his life. We must remember that Jonah wasn't aware of God's plans for the future.

God isn't only working on what's happening here and now, but He's also working on His future plans for His people. Jonah wasn't aware of God's future plans, and he certainly wasn't aware that he himself was actually preparing the way for God's future plans for His people.

Because the Ninevites repented here, what God was doing was preparing them to take God's people, the Northern Kingdom of Israel, into captivity in the future, around 722 B.C. Remember later, when God eventually took the Southern Kingdom of Judah into Babylonian captivity, because of their idolatry and unfaithfulness.

He prepared the way for this to happen by sending Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, **Daniel 1:6**, into captivity, and He sent Ezekiel into captivity, **Ezekiel 1:1-2**, before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C.

## CHAPTER 4

### INTRODUCTION

‘But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD, ‘Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.’ **Jonah 4:1-3**

Oh, if only there were just three chapters to this book, what an encouraging message this would have left us with. As we mentioned at the end of **Jonah 3**, Jonah doesn't understand God's ways. He doesn't understand or see what God's future plans are for the Ninevites and His own people.

Maybe Jonah has heard the preaching of Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, maybe he's heard them say that ‘a nation from the north’ was going to bring an end to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Maybe he looked at the Assyrians and said, ‘yep, this is the nation they've been speaking about’, **Hosea 9:3 / Hosea 11:5 / Hosea 11:11 / Amos 5:27 / Isaiah 10:5**.

Maybe this explains why he didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place. Why should he preach repentance to a people who are eventually going to take the Northern Kingdom, his own people, into captivity!

It appears that his hatred for the Assyrians was getting in the way of trusting God and His plans. To him, it didn't make any sense; it was so wrong, and so he became angry with God, and it appears he's been spiritually battling with God's ways concerning Assyria for a long time, **Jonah 4:1**.

Stuart, in his commentary, says the following.

‘Though Jonah hardly comes across as a hero anywhere in the book, he appears especially selfish, petty, temperamental, and even downright foolish in **Jonah 4**.’

The good news is that he took the time to pray to God about the way he was feeling, **Jonah 4:2**. This is a lesson we all must learn, even when we don't understand God and His ways, **Isaiah 55:8-9**.

Jonah must have heard those words, ‘you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity,’ **Jonah 4:2**, over and over again from his childhood, **Exodus 34:6-7 / Numbers 14:18 / Nehemiah 9:17 / Psalms 86:15 / Psalms 103:8 / Psalms 145:8 / Joel 2:13 / Nahum 1:3**, the problem here is that he didn't want to accept them.

Baldwin, in his commentary, says the following.

‘Jonah sees the deferment of judgment on Nineveh as a weakness on God’s part and disapproves strongly of sharing the Lord’s compassion with the unlovely.’

Jonah’s attitude reminds us of Simon, when a sinful woman walks into his house, **Luke 7:36-50**. Simon’s view of righteousness demanded that you keep yourself away from sinners like her.

Simon’s conclusion was that Jesus’ offer of grace to the woman was disgraceful; he thought it was disgraceful that Jesus would be in the company of that kind of woman.

Remember in **Matthew 20**, the story of the vineyard workers? Some worked all day; some only worked a few hours, and they were all paid the same amount, but those who worked all day complained that it was unfair, the owner had been too gracious, and he said, ‘Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Or do you resent my generosity towards others?’ **Matthew 20:15**.

That’s exactly how the older brother felt in the parable of the Prodigal Son, **Luke 15:11-32**. He thought it was disgraceful that his father was giving grace to his sinful brother, who had squandered money on women and booze. The older brother was absolutely fizzing with anger, and he was bitter about the grace his father had given to his younger brother.

This is what’s happening with Jonah: he disobeyed God’s command to go to Nineveh to get the people to repent because he was afraid that God would forgive those people, **Jonah 4:2**. And so, Jonah accused God of being irresponsible to people who didn’t deserve it.

He’s telling God that grace is too good for some people. As Christians today, we are going to encounter people that we may not like, but if Jesus has accepted them into the fold, who are we to disagree with God’s decision?

Notice Jonah wanted to die, **Jonah 4:3**. Jonah’s wanting to die could be for a couple of reasons; maybe he thinks he would rather die than accept God’s decisions about saving these sinful people.

Or possibly he thinks he would rather die than go back to his people and tell them that Nineveh has repented, which meant everything that Hosea, Amos and Isaiah had been predicting, concerning the Assyrians coming to punish the Northern Kingdom of Israel for their sins by taking them into captivity, **Hosea 9:3 / Hosea 11:5 / Hosea 11:11 / Amos 5:27 / Isaiah 10:5**.

‘But the LORD replied, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’ Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. But at dawn the next day, God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, ‘It would be better for me to die than to live.’ But God said to Jonah, ‘Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?’ ‘It is,’ he said. ‘And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.’ **Jonah 4:4-9**

For every person who disagrees with God about how He dispenses grace, He has one question: ‘What right do you have to be angry?’ **Jonah 4:4**. Do we today have any right to be angry at God for how God forgives people? God clearly isn’t happy with Jonah’s attitude, hence why He asked him this question. God needed to show Jonah how childish he was being; it was time for him to grow up. He made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited, **Jonah 4:5**.

Constable, in his commentary, says the following.

‘The same Hebrew word for shelter (sukka) describes the leafy structures that the Israelites made for themselves for the feast of Tabernacles, **Leviticus 23:40-42 / Nehemiah 8:14-18 / Mark 9:5**.’

Jonah was waiting to see what happened next, but why is he waiting? There are examples in God's dealings with Israel in which severe punishment was inflicted even after repentance, 2 Samuel 12:10-14. This is possibly why Jonah is waiting; maybe Nineveh will still be destroyed, Jonah 4:5.

God provided a leafy plant and made it grow in order to shelter Jonah, Jonah 4:6, but once again, Jonah isn't happy about it.

Constable, in his commentary, says the following concerning the words, LORD God, Jonah 4:6.

'Notice the shift in the name of God again from Yahweh to Elohim in this verse. This is one of the rare appearances of the compound name 'LORD God' in Scripture, Genesis 2 / Genesis 3. Its use here may help make a transition. God dealt with Jonah as He deals with all humanity in what follows.'

Notice that although God provided a worm, Jonah 4:7 / Deuteronomy 28:39, to eat the plant which He provided for Jonah's shelter, God then goes on to provide a 'scorching east wind', Jonah 4:8. Jonah once again isn't happy that God removed the worm and the heat is too much for him, so he says, he would rather die, Jonah 4:8 / Philippians 1:23-24.

It's clear that Jonah is very confused at this point, and like many Christians today, they find it difficult to love the sinner but hate the sin, Revelation 2:6 / Revelation 2:16.

Jonah should have hated the sin of the Assyrians but not the Assyrians themselves. It appears that the leafy plant wasn't the problem but the worm, Jonah 4:9; hence, God loved the Assyrians but hated their wicked behaviour.

Stuart, in his commentary, says the following.

'The double question in Jonah 4:4 and Jonah 4:9 is unmistakably the key to the book's central message. The climax of the story comes here, not with the repentance of the Ninevites in Jonah 3, or at any other point, when God challenges Jonah to recognise how wrong he has been in his bitter nationalism, and how right God has been to show compassion toward the plight of the Assyrians in Nineveh.'

Coffman, in his commentary, says the following concerning some of the questions God has asked His people.

'But God said to Jonah, Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?' Jonah 4:9. 'But the LORD God called to the man, 'Where are you?' Genesis 3:9. 'Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' Genesis 4:9. 'Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 1 Kings 19:13.'

'Jesus asked him, 'Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?' 'Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' John 21:15. 'When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, 'Do you want to get well?' John 5:6. 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' Acts 22:7.'

Coffman goes on to point out the different words in Hebrew used for God in these verses.

'Yahweh', meaning God the Creator, is used. Jonah 4:4. 'Yahweh', 'Elohim', the compound name of God found in the Book of Genesis. Jonah 4:6. 'Elohim', the personal God, sends the worm, Jonah 4:8. 'Elohim', the Ruler of Nature, sends the east wind, Jonah 4:9.'

Despite God providing a great wind, Jonah 1:4, a huge fish, Jonah 1:17, a leafy plant, Jonah 4:6, a worm, Jonah 4:7, and a scorching east wind, Jonah 4:8, Jonah appears to be more concerned about his own life and the plant's life, Jonah 4:9, rather than the lives of others, Mark 8:36.

'But the LORD said, 'You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?'  
Jonah 4:10-11

God's object lesson with the leafy plant was to help Jonah understand and look at himself and see his own destruction. Jonah is way more concerned about the leafy plant which withered than he is about all the wickedness

that was happening in Nineveh, **Jonah 4:10**. Notice that God asks the question to Jonah, but Jonah didn't answer it, **Jonah 4:11**, that's because Jonah should know the answer himself.

Constable, in his commentary, says the following.

‘God had invested much work in Nineveh and had been responsible for its growth. This is why it was legitimate at the most elementary level for God to feel compassion for its people. Jonah's compassion extended only to a plant but not to people.’

Jonah should know that God would never condemn a nation, especially after they have repented of their sins after the preaching of Jonah himself. Jonah should know that God was right and being just in His decision not to destroy Nineveh, **2 Peter 3:9**. This is a lesson Jonah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel were eventually going to learn. God's decision is just because the Assyrians repented, but His decision to later use them to take Israel into captivity is also just because His own people refused to repent of their sinfulness.

## CONCLUSION

If we learn anything from Jonah, surely it is that God loves and cares for all people, not just a select few, **Acts 10-11 / Romans 3:29**, even the people we think aren't worthy of receiving His grace.

When we struggle to see God's ways or understand them, then we too should pray to God to help us understand His ways, whilst accepting His will for us, **Isaiah 55:8-9**.

Many Christians run away from their responsibilities within the Lord's church, whether that be using the gifts He has given to edify each other, **Romans 12:3-8**, or not obeying the great commission to take the message of God's love to the world, **Matthew 28:19-20**.

The church needs good, solid food to chew on, so they can grow up in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus, **2 Peter 3:18**, but we also need to reach out to the lost, **Romans 10:14-15**, and let them know that they need to repent in order to be saved, **2 Peter 3:8-9**.