

# ABIDE

## DISCOVERING YOUR OLD TESTAMENT



### A PROPHET ON THE RUN

#### *JONAH*

Jonah is one of the most fun, exciting, sorrowful, and convicting stories in all of the Bible. People of all ages are fascinated with the story of Jonah and the great fish. If you talk to a child who has grown up in church, they love to hear the story of Jonah being swallowed up by a great fish. If you talk to an adult skeptic, they love to hear whether or not you believe in the story of Jonah and the great fish.

And sadly, that is usually where the message of Jonah stays— in the realm of children or in the realm of skeptics because many Christians simply do not know what to do with it. Are we to take this book as literal or figurative? Is it history or allegory? These are the questions that roll around in the minds of well-intending Bible students, but because they don't know how to answer, sometimes these questions are ignored and never answered.

However, if it is the authenticity of the book that we need, we should look no further than the confirming message of the Bible itself. In 2 Kings 14:25 says, "He restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, which was of Gathhepher." And if we look to the book of Jonah itself, in the first verse of chapter 1 we read, "Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai..."

Further, if we dive into the book of Jonah itself, we find that there is absolutely nothing in this message which would indicate to us that it is anything other than historical narrative.

Although, the greatest evidence that exists for the confirmation of the book rests in the words of Christ, Himself. If we make our way to Matthew 12:39-40, we read the words, "But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas; For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." We also find a passage in Luke that records the same thing (Luke 11:30).

For Christians to be ashamed of this message because of the use of the supernatural is really quite a shame. If we can believe that God spoke creation into existence, then we can believe also that He could prepare fish that could house a man for three days and three nights.

Additionally, we miss the point of Jonah's message when we make it only about a man versus a great fish. The story is not about a great fish that swallowed a man. It is about a great God who saved a nation.

The name Jonah means “Dove” which is bird symbolizing peace, but it has been said that Jonah acted more like a buzzard most of the time.

From the time we are really introduced to Jonah, we notice a few little character flaws as we track this narrative message that bears his name. Let’s see how this book works.

### ***How to Think About Jonah***

The book of Jonah really is an interesting read. It is easily broken up into four different sections that can be identified by each of the four chapters provided in the book.

**Jonah on the Run (Chapter 1):** Here is where you find the initial call of Jonah to go preach to the people of Nineveh because of their wickedness. Now, when we see these words about the wickedness of the people of Nineveh, that is exactly what God means. It has been said that these people were known for ripping off the lips and the hands of those people whom they conquered. It has been said that these people were known to bury their victims alive in the hot sands of the desert. It has been said that the people of Nineveh were known for skinning and impaling people. These people were not the friendliest people you would ever come against. And hearing God’s message that He would bring judgment against them was music to Jonah’s ears.

**I’ll Skip Town (Jonah 1:3a):** Jonah decides to go the complete opposite direction into a place called Tarshish. Now, if you are simply reading this quickly, you’ll miss out on the fact that if you want to run away from God, Satan would be more than happy to help you do it.

**I’ll Go As Far As I Can (Jonah 1:3b):** It was an easy decision for Jonah, he would cash in his finances and make the journey. Once again, there is more here than meets the eye. When we read that Jonah was headed to Tarshish, we’re reading the account of Jonah trying to get as far away from Nineveh as he possibly could. Tarshish was the furthest place on the map that hosted civilization of any kind. What we are reading is Jonah trying to get to the edges of the earth so that there would be no way he could be compelled to go to a nation and a people whom he hated.

**I’ll Commit Suicide (Jonah 4-17):** The worst position you can find yourself as a child of God, is to be on the run because you have become a fugitive from God. God hurled a storm in the way of the ship that was so terrible, that the experienced seamen started to get real religious all of the sudden. They all were quite sure that they were going to die at sea and so that attempted to try any means possible to save themselves. So, in desperation, they come to Jonah, and astonishingly, they find him asleep during this behemoth of a storm.

As the narrative moves along, Jonah is finally outed as the reason the ship and its occupants were in so much danger. And in a cowardice and hard-hearted move, Jonah tells them to just cast him over-board. Understand that there was nothing noble about what Jonah was trying to accomplish. He still was attempting to be completely defiant to God’s will; and if he needed to kill himself to escape what God wanted him to do so that the people of Nineveh received the justice they deserved, then so be it.

Eventually, this is exactly what happened. The sailors threw Jonah overboard and Jonah was going to end it all right then and there. However, what Jonah did not anticipate was a God who was relentless in using Jonah as a herald of grace. God had prepared a great fish for Jonah who swallowed him whole like a bitter pill.

**Jonah in the Fish (2:1-10):** Here, for all of the wrong we are able to observe in the life of Jonah, in this chapter what good spills over that we can readily see from his life is the fact that this man was one who knew and understood how to apply Scripture. No less than six times we see Jonah using portions of Scripture to pray and cry out to God after he is captured and

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confined to the inside of a massive fish.

**Jonah's Realization (2:1-9):** There was something Jonah immediately noticed as he rested inside the fish— he was not being consumed. He had his thoughts, and if his thoughts, he had his life. And what does he decide to do with this time? Well, in the darkness, jostling about with every quick jerk of this mighty sea creature, he prays. You can listen that he is obviously afraid, confused, and humbled by this situation. We have to understand that Jonah didn't know what God would do with him. As far as he knew, this is where he would meet his end. And what Jonah chooses to do is pray one of the most beautiful prayers in all of Scripture.

**Jonah's Deliverance (2:10):** Most likely, to Jonah's surprise, God delivers Jonah from the fish and suddenly, he finds himself on dry land.

**Jonah on the Road (3:1-10):** In these verses receives the same instruction as he did before, and this time, Jonah only did one thing— he did exactly what God wanted him to do— he preached.

**Jonah's Message (3:1-4):** Jonah's message was a simple one— Repent! The message was that these people had forty days to repent, or they would simply be destroyed.

**Nineveh's Response (3:5-9):** What happens with Jonah's preaching is what every preacher dreams about— there is a full-blown, nationwide revival. It started with the king, and worked its way down to the animals.

**God's Relief (3:10):** When this verse tells us that God repeated, it has confused many people. They ask, "From what did God repent? Did He make a mistake in desiring this nation to be destroyed?" The word repent here has to do with a 'sigh.' In essence, it was a sigh of relief that Nineveh decided to listen to God's message.

**Jonah in the Sun (4:1-11):** To close out this message, it ends with Jonah in an extremely bad mood. He leaves the city. You would think that he would stay for a bit and help disciple some of these people and establish them in the faith, but instead he moves out to the East side of the city and just waits to see if God will come to His senses and destroy the people regardless.

**Jonah's Anger (4:1-4):** Jonah was seething with anger all because of witnessing the salvation of this nation. There are many emotions that can result from seeing a life redeemed, but anger should never be one of them.

**Jonah's Hope (4:5):** Jonah builds a little shelter and just begins watching and hoping that God would rain down fire on the city despite their repentance. Obviously Jonah did not feel like the sins of these people were forgivable.

**Jonah's Broken Heart (4:6-8):** God teaches Jonah a lesson by way of a large plant that provided shelter from the sun, while he awaited Nineveh's deserved destruction. What was sad is that Jonah fell in love with this plant. But to show Jonah his misplaced affection, God prepared a worm to eat the plant, and then prepared an east wind to oppress Jonah along with the plant. And heart-broken about the plant, Jonah desires for God to kill him.

**Jonah's Silence (4:10-11):** God brings out the fact that it was ridiculous for Jonah to develop a relationship with a plant that was raised and destroyed in a 24 hour period, but that he did not care for the eternal souls of an entire people group. In this story, God has the last word and ends with a question. We never get to hear Jonah's response. And this really is the point. It was left for consideration. Are we lifting up our righteousness over against others, and have we grown in inordinate affection toward things that really do not matter at all?

### *What to Look for in Jonah*

**Unique Characteristics:** Because this book is written in narrative format, we are given the unique opportunity to analyze the different characteristics of those listed in the plot line.

**The Characteristics of Man:** From Jonah we learn that we can become self-righteous and hard-hearted toward other people or nations. Even if we are serving God, going to church, and any other combination of religious things to go along with it, we can still be completely off base with God in other areas of our lives.

When we look at the people of Nineveh, we find just what humankind is capable of in regard to spiritual decline. An entire nation had God's wrath hovering over them because of the deplorable acts that began to characterize them as a people.

**The Characteristics of God:** In complete contrast to man, there is God. When His prophet tried to run, God was relentless in His pursuit to not only cause Jonah to deliver the message God desired Jonah preach, but to teach Jonah a lesson about mercy.

On the side of Nineveh, we find that despite their wickedness, God was willing to give them a message of warning in order to see them saved. God is not required to give this kind of mercy, but that's is just the kind of God He is.

We may identify Jonah's story as 'Jonah and the Whale' but make no mistake, it is God who is on the center stage the entire time.

### ***What to Gain from Jonah***

**God is the God of the Second Chance:** A well used phrase, but an awesome truth. Jonah ran and God pursued. And when Jonah came to a place of repentance and thanksgiving, God delivered him from the fish and in chapter 3:1 we read, "And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time..." We should be so incredibly thankful that God deals with us in this way. Failure is the only action we can truly count on as far as consistency is concerned. But God on the other hand, He consistently forgives and restores. Another try is given— another opportunity to serve Him.

**God Wants to Give Mercy:** As discussed previously, when Nineveh repented, God sighed and sigh of relief that He no longer would need to judge this kingdom for their sin. There are many who have a false view of God thinking that God is just ready to strike them at any moment, but here we learn that this is not the case whatsoever. God will judge sin and bring punishment, but He yearns for us to make the right decision and just repent. There is a sense where we can see God saying, "Please don't make me do this!" And when a change is made, God feels relief when judgment is no longer on the table.

**God Pursues His Own:** Jonah was able to experience first hand just how far God would go in order to have him back in relationship. The entire time in this narrative you see the phrase "God prepared..." and it has reference to all the things God prepared for Jonah in order to teach him a lesson. God prepared a storm, a fish, a gourd, a worm, and a vehement east wind all for Jonah so that he would come to a place of repentance and greater fellowship with God. And we should absolutely love this about our Lord— He pursues His own!



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