

JONAH: THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

Jonah 1 - 4

STRUCTURE

Key-person: Jonah

Key-location: Nineveh

Key-repetitions:

- People turned to God: the sailors (1:14-16); Jonah inside the fish (2:2-7) the people of Nineveh (3:5); the king of Nineveh (3:6).
- Things/people that obeyed God: the storm (1:4); the sailors (1:11-16); the fish (1:17; 2:10); the residents of Nineveh (3:5-9); the plant (4:6); the worm (4:7); the east wind (4:8).
- Jonah speaking with God (2:1-9; 4:1-4, 8-9).
- God speaking/sending (1:1, 4, 17; 2:10; 3:1; 4:4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10).
- Fear: the sailors (1:5-10); Jonah (2:2-7); the people of Nineveh (3:5-9).

Key-attitudes:

- Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh.
- The sailors' fear of the storm.
- The helplessness of Jonah when he was thrown overboard.
- Jonah's prejudice and hatred of Nineveh.
- Jonah's anger with God.
- The people of Nineveh were afraid of God's

punishment.

- The awe of God felt by the sailors and the Ninevites.
- God's mercy and compassion for both Jonah and Nineveh.

Initial-situation:

From 2 Kings 14:25, we learn that Jonah was a prophet in the Kingdom of Israel when Jeroboam II was king. After King Solomon's death, there was civil war among the Israelites. Ten tribes rejected Rehoboam, Solomon's son, as king. They chose Jeroboam as their king and formed a new kingdom, called Israel. Jeroboam led Israel to idol worship.

Jeroboam II was the thirteenth (13th) king of Israel. His kingship was a time of prosperity and strong feelings of nationalism.

Assyria, Israel's great enemy, was notorious for their cruelty toward conquered nations. The capital city of Assyria was Nineveh.

Initial-problem:

The Lord told Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it.

Final-situation:

God expressed his concern for Nineveh to Jonah.

BIBLE STORY

Jonah: the Disobedient Servant of God

The Lord told Jonah, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it. Its wickedness has caught my attention" (1:1-2). Nineveh was the capital city of the enemies of the nation of Israel.

But Jonah headed for Tarshish, running away from the Lord. He went down to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship bound for Tarshish. He paid his fare, went aboard and sailed for Tarshish. He wanted to get as far away from the Lord as possible (1:3).

However, the Lord sent a great wind that created a violent storm with gigantic waves. The ship was in danger of breaking apart. The sailors were terrified. In desperation, each sailor cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship.

Meanwhile, Jonah had gone below deck into the hold of the ship to lie down. He fell into a deep sleep. The captain came to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and pray to your god! Maybe your god will notice our desperate situation and rescue us."

The sailors said to one another, "Let us draw straws to find out who is the culprit on the ship

responsible for this calamity." They drew straws and Jonah got the short straw.

So they interrogated him, "Confess! Why are you responsible for our disaster? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? Who are your people?"

Jonah confessed that he was running away from the Lord and told them, "I am a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made sea and land."

Jonah's confession increased their terror! The raging storm became more turbulent. The sailors demanded, "What have you done? What should we do to you to get rid of this storm?"

Jonah replied, "Throw me overboard into the sea, then it will become calm. I know that I am the cause of the storm. Get rid of me and you will get rid of the storm."

Instead, the men tried to row back to land. The sea grew even wilder than before. The sailors cried to the Lord, "O Lord, please don't let us die because of this man. Don't blame us for killing an innocent man. You caused all this to happen." They took Jonah and threw him overboard. Immediately the raging sea grew calm. At this the men were no longer terrified by the sea, but they were in awe of the Lord. They offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him (1:4-16).

The Lord provided a large fish to swallow Jonah, and he was inside the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights (1:17).

Jonah was in the stomach of the fish. He prayed to the Lord his God, "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the mouth of the grave I cried, 'Help!' You heard my cry. You cast me into the ocean's depths. I went down into the heart of the sea. Currents swirled about me; ocean waves crashed over me. I said, 'I have been cast out from your sight; I will never again see your holy Temple.' Sea waters closed over me. Undercurrents pulled me to the depths of the ocean; seaweed wrapped itself around my head. I sank down to the valley between sea mountains; I hit bottom! The gates of death were closing in on me. But you pulled me up alive from the grave, O Lord my God. When my life was slipping away, I remembered you Lord. I prayed to you, Lord, and you heard me in your holy Temple. People who worship worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I will worship you with a song of thanksgiving; I will sacrifice to you. I will do what I promised to do. Salvation comes from the Lord!" (2:1-9).

The Lord spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah out of its stomach onto dry land (2:10).

Jonah: the Reluctant Servant of God

The Lord spoke to Jonah a second time, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to them the message I give you" (3:1-2).

This time, Jonah went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh, the capital of Assyria was a very large city; it took a person three days to walk across it. The first day that Jonah entered into the city, he proclaimed, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed!"

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a citywide fast; everyone of them, from the greatest to the least put on sackcloth (3:3-5).

When the message reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robes, dressed himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dirt. Then he issued a public proclamation, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not drink one drop of water. Do not eat one bite of food. This is an order for all men, women and animals. Every person and every animal must be clothed with sackcloth. Let everyone cry out to God. Everyone must turn around, stop doing evil and stop doing violence. Maybe God will change his mind and show compassion. Maybe he will stop being angry and let us live" (3:6-9).

God saw that they turned from their evil ways. So God changed his mind about destroying them. He showed compassion by not bringing upon them the threatened destruction (3:10).

Jonah was furious and he yelled at God, "O Lord, this is what I said would happen when I was back home! That is why I ran off to Tarshish. I knew that you are a kind God who shows mercy. You are not easily angered. You are rich in love. You would rather change your plans for calamity into a program of forgiveness! Lord, if you won't kill them, kill me! I'm better off dead!"

But the Lord replied, "Do you have the right to be angry?" (4:1-4).

Jonah went east, out of the city, and sat down on a hill. There he made himself a shelter of leafy branches and sat in its shade waiting to see what would happen to the city. Then the Lord God provided a broad-leaf vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head. This made a cool place for him to sit. Jonah was happy with the vine and enjoyed its shade. Then the Lord sent a worm. By dawn of the next day the worm had chewed the vine and it withered. The sun rose and the Lord sent a scorching east wind. The sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he grew light-headed. Jonah prayed to die, "It would be better for me to die than to live!"

But God asked, "Jonah, do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

Jonah replied, "I do. It is right for me to be angry enough to die."

But the Lord said, "You showed concern for this vine. You did nothing for the vine, you neither planted it nor cultivated it. It sprang up one night and died the next night. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand childlike people who cannot tell their right hand from their left. There are also many animals in the city. Should I not be concerned about this great city?" (4:5-11).

GENERIC DIALOGUE QUESTIONS

1. What catches your attention in the story?
2. Is there anything in the story that is hard to understand?
3. Who are the main characters in the story?
4. What problems did the characters face?
5. How did the characters face their problems?
6. How have you faced similar problems?
7. Is there someone in the story who is similar to you or who is different from you?
8. What does the story tell about God?

SPECIFIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did the sailors suffer as a result of Jonah's running from God?
2. How did God get Jonah to obey him and go to Nineveh?
3. How did the people of Nineveh react when they heard Jonah's message?
4. Why was Jonah angry at God?
5. Who would suffer if you were to run from God?

LIFE-LESSONS

1. God speaks to people. The book of Jonah begins and finishes with the Lord speaking to Jonah. God used Jonah to communicate his Word to Nineveh. God wanted to save the wicked city of Nineveh. He acted to liberate Nineveh from destruction:
 - He saw the city (1:2; 3:10);
 - He sent his prophet to the city (1:2);
 - He gave his prophet a message to proclaim to the city (3:2);
2. There is hope for a people group who deserves divine punishment when God acts in their favor.

- He disciplined the indisposed prophet in order to get him to Nineveh (1:4-2:10);
 - When the people turned from their evil ways, God saved the city from destruction (3:10).
3. God's salvation plans include everyone. Everyone in Nineveh, from the greatest to the least put on sackcloth (3:3-5). The king of Nineveh called for everyone in the city to cry out to God, to turn around, to stop doing evil and stop doing violence (3:6-9).
 4. God is omnipotent and is in charge of the whole world: the sky, the sea, the earth, animals, plants and human beings. He ordered the storm, he calmed the sea (1:15), he prepared a large fish to swallow Jonah (1:17), he made a vine grow (4:6), he sent a worm to attack the plant (4:7) and he sent a scorching east wind (4:8).
 5. God offers salvation from destruction to everyone; however, only those who hear the offer, believe in God and repent from their sins are liberated from divine punishment. Nineveh's residents heard God's message (3:4); they believed in God (3:5); they repented of their wicked behavior (3:5) and they turned away from an evil life and violence (3:8).
 6. The one who proclaims God's message should expect the lives of his listeners to be transformed. When Jonah announced God's Word, lives were changed: people believed in God and turned away from evil and violence (3:1-9).