

JONAH

Jonah lived about three hundred years after the time of King David. He lived in the Northern Kingdom, the same kingdom that would be defeated and taken into captivity by Assyria perhaps as few as thirty years after Jonah's ministry.

But where did God send Jonah with a merciful message of repentance? Assyria. Specifically Nineveh, one of Assyria's greatest cities.

Introductory Questions

1. Jonah is probably the funniest book in the Old Testament. It's hard to catch the humor across the large barriers of history, language, and culture that separate us from Jonah's day, but try! Can you find at least two humorous (or ironic) elements in the story? [**Hint:** Start with chapter 4. Don't allow the familiarity of this story to obscure the humor!]

Any two of the following:

- Jonah was swallowed by a fish God sent (1:17).
- Jonah prayed an eloquent poem while in the belly of the fish (2:1–9).
- Jonah dutifully preached his message, with (we find out later) little to no expectation that anyone would listen, but everyone did listen—including even the king (3:4–6).
- This is not exactly the reaction you expect from someone who just preached a message: "I'm so angry! They all listened to me and did what I told them to do!" (4:1).
- Jonah basically said to God, "I told You so! I knew You were gracious, God! Now look what You've done!" (4:2).
- God cajoled Jonah instead of getting angry with Him: "Doest thou well to be angry?" (4:4).
- God once again gently cajoled Jonah, and Jonah replied like a two-year-old: "Yes, it's good for me to be angry—angry enough to die!" (4:9).
- God told Jonah He had many people in Nineveh—and lots of cattle (4:11).

Some think Jonah 1:9 is meant to be ironic because when the sailors asked Jonah who he was, this prophet running from the Lord replied: "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." It appears that Jonah had recognized through the sudden storm and the casting of the lots that God was still after him. Apparently Jonah had changed his mind and decided to submit.

2. How many times is Jonah mentioned outside of the book that bears his name? Use a computer Bible program or an exhaustive concordance to find out. Then read the verses where Jonah's name appears.

ten times in eight different verses: 2 Kings 14:25; Matt. 12:39–41; 16:4; Luke 11:29–30, 32

3. Based on the verses you just read in the Gospels, did Jesus think Jonah's story was fictional but still useful for teaching truth, like a parable?

No. He treated it as straightforward history of real events.

And, of course, we should treat it the same way Jesus did.

Jonah 1

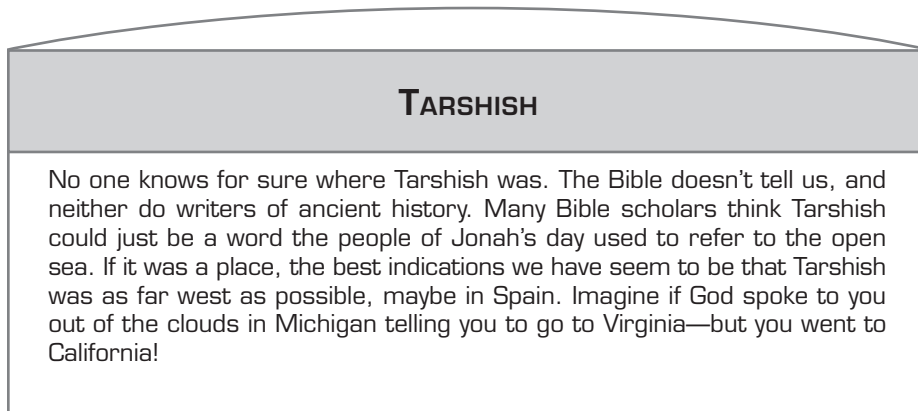
4. What was God’s response to the sin of the Ninevites, and what two things does this reveal about Him? [**Hint:** What business did Israel’s God have telling the Ninevites what to do?]

God sent a messenger to give them an opportunity to repent. God is merciful as well as sovereign—He rules over all nations.

God even made sure the messenger arrived despite his attempt to go the other direction.

5. Jonah 1:3 says Jonah “rose up to flee . . . from the face of the Lord.” Did he think he could escape the God of all the earth?

He knew God ruled all the earth; he was probably hoping that God would choose some other prophet to do the unappealing work of preaching to an enemy of Israel.



6. List five examples of God’s power and authority over all things as expressed in Jonah 1.

Any five of the following:

- God can tell both Israelites and Ninevites what to do (1:1–2).
- God hurled a great wind into the sea, creating a storm (1:4).
- The lot cast by the sailors fell on Jonah (1:7).
- The sailors couldn't row back to land against God's storm (1:13).
- God caused the pagan sailors to recognize His sovereignty (1:14, 16).
- The sea ceased from its raging immediately after Jonah was thrown into it (1:15).
- The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah (1:17).

Jonah 2

7. Was Jonah conscious in the belly of the fish? How do you know if he was or not?

Yes, because he prayed (2:1).

In poetry, no less.

8. While Jonah was inside the fish, what indication is there that he repented of running away from God?

His prayer expressed trust in God and a promise that he would fulfill his vow to God (2:9).

9. What do you think God’s point was in sparing Jonah from the death he deserved as a disobedient prophet?

God was showing His merciful character.

Jonah was glad to have God’s mercy for himself but didn’t want God to be merciful to the Ninevites.

Jonah 3

10. Read 3:1. What other verse in Jonah is this a mirror of? Why are they so similar?

It’s like 1:1. It’s like the story is starting over. Jonah gets a second chance.

11. Did the message God told Jonah to preach (3:4) mean that the Ninevites had no hope, that after forty days judgment would come no matter what? [Hint: See °Jeremiah 18:7–8 to find out what God means when He threatens judgment against a nation.]

There was still hope for Nineveh. God later revealed through Jeremiah that He is willing to turn back from destroying a nation that repents.

12. How long did it take the Ninevites to repent?

The text isn’t absolutely clear, but it seems to have taken place very quickly.

Apparently Jonah’s message spread by word of mouth before he had preached to the whole city. The text says that “word came unto the king.”

Jonah 4

13. How did Jonah feel about God’s mercy toward Nineveh?

He was very angry.

14. What do you think the reader of the story of Jonah is supposed to conclude from reading about Jonah’s anger?

Jonah was stuck in selfishness and narrow-minded nationalism. He cared only about himself and his own people, Israel. He wanted God’s mercy for himself but not for the Ninevites.

Jonah did apparently care for Israel because it must have been Assyria’s offenses against Israel that caused his hatred of Assyria.

15. What do you think the modern reader of the story of Jonah should conclude from reading about God’s mercy?

God is still merciful today, and He still has concern for all nations.

16. Read the last verse of the book of Jonah. Does God want cows to repent and be saved? Why did God add this last phrase?

It seems God was exaggerating to make a point: Jonah cared about himself and was therefore ready to curse God over the death of a little gourd plant; God cared about everyone—even the animals.

Jeremiah 18 ⁷ At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; ⁸ If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.

Follow-up Questions

17. How is Jonah like the unforgiving servant in ^oMatthew 18:23–35?

Both were glad to be rescued from their own difficult circumstances (the servant from jail, Jonah from the belly of the fish) but were supremely selfish and unwilling to see grace extended to certain others.

18. What is the point of contrast the author of this book is trying to show between Jonah on the one hand and the sailors and Ninevites on the other?

Here is a prophet of God, probably considered to be a good guy in Israel, but these pagans are quicker to repent than he is.

A few other points: while Jonah was willing to consign 120,000 people (and lots of cattle!) to judgment, the sailors didn't want to toss him overboard even to save themselves. And even when Jonah repented in chapter 2, his repentance didn't seem to last when it was really tested.

19. If Jonah was the author of this book (and who else would be more likely to know the details of events only Jonah saw?), do you think he wrote it with the same attitude he had when he preached in Nineveh?

It seems unlikely that anyone would write such negative things about himself without truly being humble over his actions.

20. What do you think the purpose of the book of Jonah was? Another way to ask that question would be: what central message was the writer of the book (and through him the Spirit of God) trying to communicate to the first people who would read his book thousands of years ago? (Select all correct answers.)

- To show that all Israelites should be willing to leave Israel to tell other nations about Yahweh (the Lord, the one true God) and summon them to repentance
- To show the mercy and authority of God
- To make Israelites afraid of the sea and therefore fearful of leaving the Promised Land
- To show the Jewish people that repentance was the proper response to the messages of judgment prophets bring
- To make a big fish story that kids would enjoy hearing in Sunday school

B and D are both acceptable.

A does not seem to be the purpose of the book of Jonah. Deuteronomy 4:5–8 shows that Israel was to obey God's laws in order to be a testimony of (God's) wisdom to other nations. And Jesus never criticizes Jews for not becoming foreign missionaries; He even limits His disciples' preaching to Israel during His ministry (before the Great Commission, which would be instituted after His death; Matt. 10:5–6).

B is correct. God's mercy is shown to Jonah and to the Ninevites (and even their cattle). His authority is shown all throughout the book, from the storm to the fish to the mere fact that He would tell a prophet from His chosen people to go express His authority over another nation.

C has no biblical basis.

Matthew 18 ²³ Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. ²⁴ And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ But forasmuch as he had not to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ The servant therefore fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. ²⁷ Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellowservants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest. ²⁹ And his fellowservant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. ³⁰ And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt. ³¹ So when his fellowservants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. ³² Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: ³³ Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee? ³⁴ And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. ³⁵ So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.

D may also be correct. The book of Jonah may have had more than one purpose! It is fairly obvious that Jonah is a foil in the story, the opposite of the Ninevites. He refuses to submit to God; the Ninevites do so quickly and completely. That Jonah is a foil doesn't mean his prayer in chapter 2 was insincere, but at the end of the book he is still displeased.

E indicates a severely limited view of Scripture.

JONAH AND THE REST OF THE BIBLE

It would be a shame for you to work through these questions and miss the major points of the book. It's easy to get wrapped up in small details, to miss out on viewing the huge forest because you're two inches from just one tree. But without looking at individual trees you won't understand the forest either. Your work in Jonah has been worthwhile. Now let's step back and take a broader look. This forest is small, so it won't be too hard!

The author of Jonah wrote his book with an original audience in mind. That audience was God's people, whether in Judah, Israel, or both. That audience did not have the New Testament, nor did they have some of the other books in what we call the Old Testament.

But God had other audiences in mind—all other audiences, in fact. Including you! For you and most of the people in history who have read Jonah, it fit in the context of the whole Bible, the Old and New Testaments. What does the rest of the Bible written after Jonah add to our understanding of Jonah? It shows that the Jews sometimes heeded its messages, but mostly they failed. Both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms eventually went into captivity because they refused to repent as the Ninevites did.

God is still merciful today toward those who will repent. Yes, He "commandeth all men every where to repent" (Acts 17:30). It's an order. But it's also a gracious invitation. God doesn't have to let anyone repent. In fact, Paul points out that God may or may not grant repentance to sinners (2 Tim 2:25). But Peter affirms that the Lord is "not willing that any should perish" (2 Pet. 3:9). Have you repented of your sins?



2 Timothy 2:25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.