

## **The Anger of Jonah** **Jonah 1:1-4:11**

### **Introduction**

The message in the book of Jonah is multi-faceted. It is a stern warning against the capital city of the most ruthless and barbaric empire of the world, but it is also a record of the interaction between an angry prophet and God.

Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. After the tower of Babel, Egypt had emerged as the first denominating empire of the world but it ultimately declined, and Assyria took its place through bloody tactics and disregard for human life. Assyria controlled Babylon, Persia, Mede, India, Syria, and at times, portions of Egypt. Jonah's message to Nineveh occurred when Amaziah was the king of the Southern Kingdom and Jeroboam II was the king in the Northern Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Jonah's home was in Gath-hepher in the Northern Kingdom about five miles from Nazareth. Amaziah was an evil king, yet because of Jonah's previous encounter with Nineveh recorded in the Book of Jonah, he was able to lead Amaziah to reclaim the land taken by the Assyrian Empire as far north as the Sea of Arabah. His ministry to the Northern Kingdom ran from 780 BC to 750 BC.

Jonah's prophecy was directed to the capital city of Assyria, not Israel. When the Lord directed Jonah to deliver His message to Nineveh, Jonah's anger and rebellion immediately appeared.

### **Jonah Runs**

Jonah 1:1-3

**Jonah 1:**<sup>1</sup> The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." <sup>3</sup> But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

Jonah was well aware of Nineveh's wickedness since the Northern Kingdom had felt her fury many times by this point in history. His fear of Nineveh compelled him to run from the presence of the Lord. Where could he run? From his hometown of Gath-hepher, Jonah headed in the opposite direction to the seaport of Joppa where he boarded a ship headed for Tarshish located on the Mediterranean side of the Spanish peninsula, 1,700 miles away by sea. Nineveh was 600 miles northwest of Joppa in the opposite direction.

### **Great Storm Arises**

Jonah 1:4-6

**Jonah 1:**<sup>4</sup> The Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. <sup>5</sup> Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten *it* for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Kings 14:23-27

down and fallen sound asleep. <sup>6</sup> So the captain approached him and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps *your* god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish."

Settling down in the hull of the ship, Jonah prepared for a long cruise that would take more than three months. The Bible does not tell how long they were at sea before the great storm arose, but the general history of storms in the Mediterranean Sea can shed light on that point. It is common for cyclonic winds to form and rush southward down the Adriatic Sea between Italy and Macedonia and make land fall on the African/Egyptian coast. On Paul's trip to Rome in AD 60, one such storm blew his ship off course to the south and then drove it quickly to the west when the eye of the storm passed over it. Like the sailors on Paul's ship, the seamen of Jonah's vessel began casting the valuable cargo overboard in a desperate attempt to save their lives. Everyone was praying to his gods during the storm and the captain woke Jonah up from his sleep to have him join in the prayers, but not because the captain believed Jonah's God ranked any higher than the sailors' gods; he wanted everyone to pray to every god in the hope that one of those gods would save his ship.

### **Lots are Cast**

Jonah 1:7-16

**Jonah 1:**<sup>7</sup> Each man said to his mate, "Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity *has struck* us." So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup> Then they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account *has* this calamity *struck* us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" <sup>9</sup> He said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land." <sup>10</sup> Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. <sup>11</sup> So they said to him, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?"—for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy. <sup>12</sup> He said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm *has come* upon you." <sup>13</sup> However, the men rowed *desperately* to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming *even* stormier against them. <sup>14</sup> Then they called on the Lord and said, "We earnestly pray, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for You, O Lord, have done as You have pleased." <sup>15</sup> So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. <sup>16</sup> Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

The casting of lots to find the will of the gods has always been a part of human existence. Straws are drawn, coins are flipped or dice are thrown to determine by fate the guilty person. Jonah drew the short straw and rightly so. In God's providence and permissive plan, He set a series of events in place to force Jonah to comply with His instruction. In the midst of the storm, Jonah was cast into the raging sea, an obedient act that was met with an immediate calm. Jonah was not a sacrifice to the storm; he was a testimony to the power of the One true God. The calm of the violent storm was all that was needed to change the hearts of the seaman to the true God. Their gods had not answered, but Jonah's God had.

## Great Fish Appears

Jonah 1:17

**Jonah 1:**<sup>17</sup> And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.

The great fish awaited Jonah's arrival in the sea. The journey back to land took three days and three nights, the only indication of how far the ship had taken Jonah. If the fish averaged eight miles an hour, the ship would have been near the island of Crete when the storm occurred, the same general location where Paul's journey to Rome became dangerous.

It is impossible to know how Jonah survived the underwater journey. Some believe Jonah died and was resurrected when he was vomited up on dry land but there is little to support that supposition. At the same time, it is difficult to comprehend Jonah's ability to live and breathe in the depths of the sea. With no other information, we can only conclude that whether he was alive in the belly of the fish or dead, God, in His supreme ability, made a way for Jonah when there seemed to be no way. Somehow, Jonah was miraculously able to communicate with God from the belly of that great fish.

## Jonah Prays

Jonah 2:1-10

**Jonah 2:**<sup>1</sup> Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the stomach of the fish, <sup>2</sup> and he said, "I called out of my distress to the Lord, And He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice. <sup>3</sup> "For You had cast me into the deep, Into the heart of the seas, And the current engulfed me. All Your breakers and billows passed over me. <sup>4</sup> "So I said, 'I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple.' <sup>5</sup> "Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, Weeds were wrapped around my head. <sup>6</sup> "I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars was around me forever, But You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God. <sup>7</sup> "While I was fainting away, I remembered the Lord, And my prayer came to You, Into Your holy temple. <sup>8</sup> "Those who regard vain idols Forsake their faithfulness, <sup>9</sup> But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the Lord." <sup>10</sup> Then the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.

At some point in our lives, God traps us so that we have no place to turn but to the Lord. For the person who does not belong to Him, it is often a point of transformation by the Lord's saving grace, but it can also be the first point of eternal rejection of His gracious gift. For believers, as it was with Jonah who had already effectively worked in the labor of the Lord, it is a point of chastisement to transform us for a greater work. Such was the case with Jonah. While Jonah was in the belly of the fish at the point of death at the bottom of the sea, covered in seaweed and about to faint, the Lord heard Jonah's prayer as he promised to serve Him. It was not a salvation experience; it was a discipline experience because Jonah already belonged to the Lord and his salvation was fixed for all eternity.

In Jonah 1:3, Jonah is seen trying to flee from the presence of the Lord twice. It is evident that it is impossible to run from the Lord, whether on the highest mountain or at the bottom of the sea – the Lord is there. When He sees a change of heart - He will respond. Jonah

was ready to serve the Lord on a new level and the Lord gave the order, "Vomit him up on dry land."

### **Jonah Goes to Nineveh**

Jonah 3:1-4

**Jonah 3:**<sup>1</sup> Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you." <sup>3</sup> So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three days' walk. <sup>4</sup> Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

The Lord had a purpose for Jonah and he could not run far enough away to keep him from completing the task assigned. "Go to Nineveh and proclaim what I will tell you," the Lord said. Where did the fish vomit Jonah out of his belly? The Bible does not give any indication of the location. Supposing that Jonah was delivered to the seashore nearest to Nineveh, he was still about 450 miles away from the city. If he traveled 20 miles per day, it still took him 23 days to arrive at the western edge of the city gate.

At that time, Nineveh was between 45 and 60 miles across.<sup>2</sup> From the gate, Jonah cried out, "Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." He repeated the same message as he walked the entire first day into the heart of the city. It was a dangerous mission but Jonah was without fear. He had been swallowed by the fish and had been at the point of death within the last month, so anything Nineveh could throw at him paled in significance to what the Lord could do to him.

### **Nineveh Believes**

Jonah 3:5-10

**Jonah 3:**<sup>5</sup> Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. <sup>6</sup> When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. <sup>7</sup> He issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. <sup>8</sup> "But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. <sup>9</sup> "Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish." <sup>10</sup> When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do *it*.

It seemed impossible, but Jonah's one-line message which translates into eight English words, cut to the heart of the people and the king of Nineveh. We can only assume that Jonah continued to deliver the message the next two days as he walked through the city, but there is no proof that he did so even though there is no reason to believe that he did not repeat the command of the Lord throughout the entire city.

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<sup>2</sup> A three-day journey.

The seven gods of the Assyrians were Succoth-benoth, Nergal, Ashima, Nibhaz, Tartak, Adrammelech and Anammelech.<sup>3</sup> The worship of each of these gods had its unique aspects; however, they all incorporated fasting, the wearing of sackcloth and the throwing of dust on their heads as part of their worship as do the majority of false religions. The beautiful thing about the Lord is that He could see the intent of the deeds deep in their hearts and He knew that Nineveh had turned from its wicked ways. They knew no theology, no doctrine, no verses from the Mosaic Law and no promises from God's Word. They only knew how to weep and repent as they would before their gods that they made from wood and stone, covered with silver or gold or hammered out of bronze. In those three days, the entire city of Nineveh repented the only way it knew how – and the Lord heard and saw their intentions and accepted their worship. It was no later than 750 BC and this change of heart postponed Nineveh's destruction for at least 148 years.<sup>4</sup>

### **Jonah's Anger Revealed**

Jonah 4:1-4

**Jonah 4:**<sup>1</sup> But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the Lord and said, "Please Lord, was not this what I said while I was still in my *own* country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. <sup>3</sup> "Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." <sup>4</sup> The Lord said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?"

Before Jonah completed his task in the city, the word had spread and God had postponed His punishment on Nineveh. God's action made Jonah angry. In the prayer Jonah revealed for the first time that he had expected the Ninevites to repent and he believed that God would forgive them even before he ran to Joppa and boarded the ship. Jonah did not want the ruthless Assyrians to experience the merciful grace of God. He was so angry with God that He had rather die than live. How did God respond to Jonah? He asked Jonah if he really had a good reason to be angry.

### **Jonah's Self-Centeredness Is Seen**

Jonah 4:5-8

**Jonah 4:**<sup>5</sup> Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city. <sup>6</sup> So the Lord God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant. <sup>7</sup> But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. <sup>8</sup> When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with *all* his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."

Anger almost always leads to self-centeredness and Jonah's reaction to God's compassion and pleasure is a perfect example of this human phenomenon. Anger at others explodes from deep within a person's heart and it usually centers on fairness. Jonah put his life at risk to deliver God's message of doom and God delivered compassion instead. In his heart, Jonah sensed unfairness from God toward him and his nation. Assyria had brutally killed

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Kings 17:29-33

<sup>4</sup> Nineveh is destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 612 BC.

many Israelites by that time and Jonah wanted God to destroy them, but no, God forgave them. In anger, Jonah walked away from the city to the east and sat on the hill for a self-absorbed pity-party.

How long was Jonah out on the hill? His message to the Assyrians was "Forty days and you will be overthrown," so it could have taken that long for God to respond. God often lets an angry, self-centered person stew in his own juices for an extended period of time. He is never in a hurry because He controls every circumstance to prove His point. He often waits until the person is sick of himself and ready for a change.

On the mountain east of the city, Jonah made a shelter for shade from the heat. How hot could it have become for Jonah in those days? A ship generally did not leave Joppa to journey across the Mediterranean Sea after October and very few ships attempted long excursions during the winter months; therefore, Jonah's run from the Lord probably occurred soon after the ships transporting grains after the first harvest began to sail. We know that Jonah was in the extreme heat of the summer months with nightly lows in the high 80's and daily highs in the 100's by determining the time of the grain harvesting, adding the time it took Jonah to travel to Nineveh and then adding 40 days. Shelter from the day's heat was an absolute necessity. The vine had time to grow up to add shade to Jonah's temporary shelter, but vines can grow rapidly and this one grew overnight. The Lord sent it as a little blessing but Jonah evidently failed to see it was God's provision and thank Him for it. To get Jonah's attention, the worm ate through the vine low enough to allow the sun's scorching heat to dry out the entire plant. Jonah was once again self-centered and angered by the loss of the shade. Where was God when he needed Him? Why was He not helping him bear the burdens of the scorching elements? Why hadn't He shown up? "Hello – God – where are you?" "You-hoo, don't You care about me?" "If you are not going to help I might as well die," Jonah might have said. But He had been there all along providing his shade and controlling the circumstances to get him where He wanted him to be.

### **God Asks Jonah for a Good Reason**

Jonah 4:9-11

**Jonah 4:**<sup>9</sup> Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."<sup>10</sup> Then the Lord said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and *which* you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight."<sup>11</sup> "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

Jonah was angry with the plant. Perhaps he should have been angry with the worm instead, but anger is often misplaced. God had sent the vine and the worm to make a point with Jonah. "Do you have good reason?" the Lord asked Jonah who mistakenly thought he did. God sent the plant to provide for Jonah's need and He sent Jonah to provide for Nineveh's need. Jonah should have known better as the Lord's prophet that Nineveh, with more than 120,000 people, could never have known the compassion of the Lord without a direct word from above. All those Ninevites were changed by the ultimate obedience of one prophet, a one-sentence message and an act by the One and only compassionate God.