



STORY

Jonah - Jonah 1-4

TEACHER PRAYER

Dear Lord Jesus, there are times when I do not feel like obeying Your will. There can even be reluctance as I go about my work in this blessed call to feed Your lambs. Forgive me I pray, and give to me a heart that says (as You said or prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane), "Thy will be done." Amen.

VOCABULARY

Nineveh - The capital city of the Assyrian Empire located on the east bank of the Tigris River. The city was founded by Nimrod (Genesis 10:11) and was utterly destroyed in 612 BC by an army made up of Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians. Though the walled part of the city was three miles long and a mile and a half wide, the term "Nineveh, the great city" might well have included various outlying cities (compare "the Twin Cities," which include not only Minneapolis and St. Paul, but also the many other surrounding municipalities in that area).

Joppa - An ancient city located on the Mediterranean Sea about 30 miles NW of Jerusalem. Originally a city assigned to the tribe of Dan, Joppa served as the port for Jerusalem, receiving all the timber used in the construction of Jerusalem's great buildings. From here Jonah sailed in flight from the Lord. Peter later lived in Joppa with Simon the Tanner.

Tarshish - A city located on the extreme west end of the Mediterranean Sea (probably in Southern Spain). Jonah evidently tried to get as far away from the Lord as possible. The word, *Tarshish*, comes from the ancient Akkadian language and means "*smelting plant*" or "*refinery*." The ship on which Jonah sailed was very likely one of many ships that carried refined ore from the smelting plants in Tarshish to Jerusalem (through Joppa).

tempestuous - turbulent or stormy.

Sheol- The Hebrew name for "the place of the dead."

sackcloth - A course, rough cloth made of goat or camel hair, flax, or hemp, and worn as a symbol of mourning or repentance.

OUTER AIM

Jonah is called, flees, and is swallowed by a great fish before he carries the Lord's call to repentance to the great city of Nineveh.

INNER AIM

Our omnipotent God exercises His power in love, desiring all men to repent and be saved.

BACKGROUND (*Rupprecht Volume 1, pages 371-379*)

Most Bible scholars and historians place Jonah's ministry at about 782-772 BC. This fits well with the historical fact that the Assyrian kings of that period were less ruthless and aggressive than later kings, most notably Tiglath-pileser III who came to power in 745 BC. At this time, the Assyrian Empire had spread to the very borders of Israel, and Israel's destruction must have seemed inevitable to many.

Although the book of Jonah is best known for the incident with the great fish, the Scriptures emphasize the loving compassion of our omnipotent God. It is different from the other books of the prophets in that it is made up more of the biography of the prophet himself (Jonah) rather than the messages of God which that the prophet was to proclaim. Though Jonah was an actual prophet, many believe that he is here also symbolic of the nation as a whole. Israel had wandered from her mission of calling sinners to repentance and sought instead the destruction of all her enemies.

Chapter 1

Exactly why Jonah fled (or tried to flee) from the Lord's presence is a matter of some debate. There are several possibilities: 1) he feared the legendary cruelty of the Assyrians, 2) he prejudged the lack of effectiveness his message would have on the heathen nation, 3) he prejudged that his message would have the desired effect and did not want Assyria to be saved, but destroyed, 4) he knew his message would have the desired effect on the people of Nineveh and that his prophesy of destruction would come to naught, causing him personal embarrassment in the eyes of the Assyrians. Given Jonah's words in 4:2, one of the last two possibilities seems likely.

Since the connection between Israel and Tarshish was the smelting capabilities of the latter, the cargo thrown overboard by the sailors in an attempt to save their ship probably had something to do with the refining of ore or the re-supply of the refinery outpost.

Jonah's sleep brings to mind the time Jesus slept in a boat during a storm (Mark 4:38), yet Jonah's sleep was not the sleep of faith demonstrated by Jesus since Jonah was running from the Lord.

The casting of lots was used in ancient times both for gambling and to answer certain questions. Whether the lot in this case was directed by God, the devil, or chance, it rightly fell to Jonah and he did not hesitate to tell his shipmates about his God and his plight.

The sailors were honorable men - even calling on God by his personal name, Jehovah. They tried valiantly to save the ship with Jonah intact, but they were struggling against the will of God. Reluctantly they threw Jonah overboard according to his own recommendation.

Much is made of the great fish that swallowed Jonah, though that part of this story plays a relatively minor role in the overall message. The word used here is correctly translated "fish" rather than "whale." Though Jonah's preservation is certainly miraculous by all accounts, the relatively tiny throats of known whales are too small to allow the swallowing of an entire man. (*See Rupprecht Vol. 1, page 375 for his discussion of the "great fish."*)

The word translated "prepared" is used in connection with the great fish, the shade plant, the worm that destroyed it, and the scorching east wind. All these things God "prepared." The word itself carries the picture of a military officer giving an order to a subordinate.

Chapter 2

The Lord here teaches Jonah that not even through death can a man escape from His hand. It is quite possible that Jonah imagined that once thrown into the sea his inner turmoil would cease. His misery not only continued, it was magnified many times over. We can only imagine how terrible three days and nights in the dark belly of the great fish must have been.

Finally Jonah stops running from the Lord and instead turns to Him in praise and worship. He recognizes not only the futility of running from God, but also the folly of looking to any other source for help. He said, "Those who regard worthless idols forsake their own Mercy."

As petty and wrong-hearted as Jonah appears to be before and after this event, here he demonstrates great faith in the midst of what must have been terrible suffering. He not only acknowledges that "salvation is of the Lord," he also here offers a prayer of thanksgiving.

Chapter 3

God calls to Jonah a second time, indicating that although God took no pleasure in Jonah's suffering, He did not allow His word and will to be ignored or thwarted. (See application below.) This time Jonah obeyed.

The reference to Nineveh as "that great city" might also carry with it the idea of "greater Nineveh." Though the walled part of the city was only about four and one half square miles, Jonah's three-day journey could well have taken him to the outlying communities. (*See note on Nineveh above under Vocabulary and Rupprecht's notes in Volume 1, page 372.*)

When the Bible talks of "believing God" (as did the people of Nineveh) it does not refer simply to a mental acceptance of facts. "Believing" carried with it the inclusion of action, as the believer felt appropriate. Knowing the facts and yet refusing to act in harmony with them was considered the height of foolishness, while true wisdom was the prudent exhibition of knowledge through appropriate actions.

The national repentance of the heart of the Assyrian Empire was nothing short of miraculous. It is a testament to the power of God's Word and the need to preach law and gospel without prejudging what effect God's Word will have.

History and archeology bear out the assumption that violence and barbaric cruelty were among Nineveh's greatest sins. This is borne out in the King's command that every citizen "turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands." Assyrian pottery and relief carvings depict unimaginable cruelty, including the gouging out of eyes, severing of tongues, flaying of live captives, and the impaling of prisoners upon sharpened poles.

It is important to recognize God's complete consistency, not fickle inconsistency. His consistent desire is that sinners everywhere repent and turn to Him. His desire is to bless us. Whenever man repents, God is always merciful, always forgiving.

Chapter 4

It is difficult to understand Jonah's displeasure at the Lord's mercy toward Nineveh. It could have been motivated by hatred of Assyria for which Jonah wanted destruction, not pardon. Perhaps in pride he felt that his warning of calamity would not be fulfilled. We do not know if Jonah asked to die out of a sense of humiliation, pride, or stubborn hatred of the gentiles. What is remarkable is that God demonstrates the same patient love toward Jonah that he displayed toward Nineveh.

Jonah went and sat on the east side of the city to see what would happen because Nineveh was protected on the west and south by the Tigris River. Any attack would have to come from the east or north.

God prepared and destroyed the shade plant as an object lesson for Jonah. Through the rise and destruction of the plant (for which Jonah greatly cared) God demonstrated His own loving concern for the 120,000 souls he had created in Nineveh.

The statement that Nineveh's inhabitants "cannot discern between their right hand and their left" refers to their natural spiritual ignorance apart from the Lord and His Word.

STUDENT PRAYER

Lord God, Heavenly Father, I confess that like Jonah, I have often thought that my way of doing things was better than Your way. I pray that You would move me to humbly submit to Your will. Increase my faith that, although I cannot see everything that You can, I will be able to trust that You know best. Forgive me also for being cold and loveless toward my neighbor. Help me to speak Your words of law and gospel from a loving heart—a heart that desires all men to be saved. Amen.

PRESENTATION

This Bible account could possibly be read in class, but it would be best to again assign its reading the week before it is presented. You could then retell or summarize the story for your students in your own words.

APPLICATION

1. We can neither run from God nor hide from him. Use Jonah's initial flight to demonstrate how foolish it is to try to hide from an all-powerful, all-knowing God. Then apply this fact to the life of a child. (God knows when we are lying; God sees when we take money from Mom's purse; God hears when we say a bad word, even if no one else does.)
2. Lead the students to imagine the horror of living for three days inside of the great fish. What would it be like? (pitch black, confined, smelly, irritating, nauseating, etc.) Then point out how Jonah turned to the Lord during this dark hour and was saved. We should learn to recognize hard times as the Lord's way of calling to us. The Lord tried to call to Jonah in less painful ways, but he refused to listen. Listen to God when He calls.
3. Jesus himself draws the comparison between Jonah in the great fish and Jesus in the tomb (Matthew 12:39-40). Jesus goes on in Matthew 12 to condemn those who in His day rejected His message of repentance and salvation through faith, even though someone greater than Jonah was delivering the message. We too have been warned. The people of Nineveh will also rise up on the Last Day to condemn us if we reject His call to repentance and faith.
4. God does not take pleasure in our suffering. He allows hardships so that we might take notice and obey. So also when Jonah had suffered through his ordeal, God called to him again.
5. Bringing the Word of God will very seldom make us popular with the world, for God's Word begins with the condemnation of the law. No one likes to be condemned, but only the hammer blows of the law can break the stubborn, rebellious pride of our sinful hearts. Think of how much courage it took for Jonah to speak law to the cruel inhabitants of Nineveh. What things today make us afraid to speak God's Word?
6. This lesson demonstrates how eager God is to forgive sinful mankind and to shower us with His blessings. Yet forgiveness comes only through repentance.
7. As God demonstrated to Jonah just how much more valuable human beings are than material things on this earth, so the students should be led to recognize that all our hearts are filled with the same selfish nonsense that clouded Jonah's understanding. (We might, for example, hope that the star player on the other team gets hurt so that our team might win; or we might lose sight of the fact that the life of a human being is more important than the earthly inheritance others might leave for us.)
8. Point out how foolish it would be to "not know your right hand from your left," and then help the student to realize that that is how unbelievers are spiritually. Even young children can be teachers of those who do not know God's Word or Jesus as their Savior.

PASSAGES

These passages can be assigned as memory work or simply discussed in class as to how they fit the lesson.

Lower

Deuteronomy 6:4 - Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

Proverbs 3:5 - Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding;

Psalms 143:10 - Teach me to do Your will, For You are my God

Middle

Matthew 4:10 - You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.

Matthew 7:24 - Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock

Matthew 16:24 - Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.

Upper

Psalms 90:2 - Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.

Jeremiah 23:28 - He who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?" says the LORD.

Colossians 3:17 - And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

HYMN CHOICES

Take My Life and Let It Be - TLH #400

Jesus Lead Thou On - TLH #410

What God Ordains Is Always Good - TLH #521:1-4