

Bible Study Notes and Questions on the Book of Jonah

Introduction: This book does not identify the author although according to Jewish tradition the author is the author himself, Jonah son of Amittai; from Gath-hepher in Zebulun, Israel. The name Jonah means “dove” and Amittai means “true, my truth, truth of the Lord, truthful, my faithfulness.” Jonah’s ministry was in the time of king Jeroboam II of Israel (**793-753BC**). He had prophesied that the northern borders of Israel up to Hamath would be restored having foretold the victories of king Jeroboam II (**2Kings 14:23-27**). Internal troubles in Assyria had allowed king Jeroboam to restore Israel’s northern borders, but Assyria still remained a threat during this time.

Jonah was told by the Lord to go to Nineveh, capital of the Assyrians. Jonah was disobedient in going in the opposite direction on a ship bound for Tarshish (possibly Tarsus where the apostle Paul came from or a place as far away as Spain).

There are differences of opinion why Jonah ran away rather than obey the word of God. A particular view held is that Jonah was well aware of the Assyrians being a very cruel people in the vile things they did to their enemies when they had captured them. Jonah’s hatred of them meant the thought of God telling him to go and speak to the Ninevites was unacceptable. He had wanted to see Nineveh overthrown leading to the destruction of the Assyrians. It may be for this reason why Jonah fled. By fleeing from the presence of the Lord (**1:3**) Jonah was renouncing his vocation from being a prophet because a prophet stood in the presence of the Lord (**1Kings 17:1**).

However, looking at **4:2** Jonah knew God’s grace and mercy in holding back such evil on Nineveh. God wanted to show his patience and compassion in delaying punishment for as long as possible. There is a time when God’s patience will run out as it did later for Nineveh in the time of the prophet Nahum when this city was totally destroyed in **612BC**. In Jonah’s day it was still the time of God’s mercy, patience and grace.

It is the writer’s view of these notes that Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a large fish (possibly a whale). Jesus showed Jonah was a sign of his resurrection (**Matthew 12:39-40**). Looking at the evidence of Jonah’s prayer in **2:1-9**, it would seem possible that he died and was resurrected. The large fish had saved Jonah from being drowned.

It is possible that a man can be swallowed by a large fish such as a whale. A whaler, called James Bartley was found in a whale caught off the Falkland Islands in February 1891. He had been one of the sailors thrown in to the sea because of a whale that had attacked their boat. J. Bartley was believed to have been drowned until a whale was captured and killed. He was found still alive in an unconscious state in the whale. He made a complete recovery after three weeks.

Summary of the Chapters

Chapter 1: Jonah and the storm.

Jonah had attempted to run away to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. Disobedience had resulted in him being thrown overboard from a ship in a great storm. He was swallowed up by a big fish.

Chapter 2: Jonah’s prayer in the big fish.

Jonah’s prayer showed thanksgiving (**2:1-6**), contrition (**2:7-8**) and rededication (**2:9**). It is very much a psalm of praise. God’s answer was shown in Jonah’s miraculous deliverance.

Chapter 3: Jonah and the great city of Nineveh.

On hearing God’s word for the second time to go to Nineveh, Jonah obeyed. On entering the great city, Jonah spoke to the people of Nineveh warning them that the city will be overthrown in forty days. The effect was astonishing in seeing the people of Nineveh repent. God had turned away the evil he had intended to bring on that city.

Chapter 4: Jonah and the Lord’s reproof.

Jonah showed his great anger and displeasure in not seeing Nineveh overthrown. God reproved Jonah to show him that he cared for Nineveh being God of the Gentiles as well as God of the Jews. God was teaching Jonah of his grace and mercy towards the Gentiles that they too can come to know him if they repent.

Suggested way of attempting the bible studies

The intention of these bible study notes with questions was not to give a lengthy exposition and interpretation of this book, but to provoke everyone interested to read the scriptures and to attempt to think about the text. Time spent with others in a small group up to about ten to fifteen people who are willing to study the scriptures is of immense value where there is time to ask questions and give views on a particular text. Such bible studies should be interactive i.e. dialogue between everyone present.

It is advisable where possible to have someone leading the bible study who can facilitate in guiding the study possibly giving a short introduction up to fifteen minutes and adding questions to provoke discussion where necessary. If no one feels able to lead in the group that meets, it is suggested that you read together the portion of scripture to study. Then give a short time of about ten minutes before each person shares what the scriptures are really saying. Try to avoid just giving opinions but attempt to see what the Lord is revealing to you as a group during the bible study. Perhaps a bit of time should be allowed to give a concluding summary to finish the study.

Starting the bible study with prayer and worship can be of benefit in leading to a stimulating time studying the scriptures together. An exhaustive concordance and any relevant resources can be of value in contributing to the study.

Questions

Section 1

- 1) Why did Jonah disobey the word of the Lord in **1:1-2**? See also **4:2** and **Jeremiah 18:8**.
- 2) Jonah was found asleep in the midst of the storm. What did this reveal of his spiritual state at the time? See **1:5-6**.
- 3) How did the mariners know Jonah was disobedient to God? See **1:7-10**.
- 4) What was the mariners' response to God when they were in the storm and after Jonah was cast into the sea? See **1:11-16**.
- 5) Why was it impossible for Jonah to escape from the presence of the Lord? See **1:3-10; 2:4**. Consider also **Genesis 3:8-10** and apply **Psalms 139:23-24** to your own situation.
- 6) What had happened to Jonah physically from the time he was thrown into the sea and the time in the big fish? See **2:1-9**.
- 7) What changes can be seen in Jonah through his prayer in **2:1-9**?
- 8) What could Jonah mean in prayer when he says: "*I remembered the LORD*" (**2:7**)? See also **Psalms 63:5-7; 77:11-12; 105:4-6; 143:5**.
- 9) What is meant by a vow in **2:9**?
See also **Judges 11:30-40; Proverbs 20:25; Ecclesiastes 5:5**.
- 10) What was the response of the people of Nineveh to the word of the Lord through Jonah as shown in **3:3-10**?
- 11) Why was Jonah so displeased with God in **4:1-3**?
- 12) What do we know of Jonah's attitude towards the city of Nineveh in **4:1-5**?
- 13) What was God teaching Jonah in **4:4-11**?
- 14) Show from the text in **4:9-11** that Jonah was acting selfishly?

Section 2

These questions have been produced to encourage more individual study. They can still be studied as a group study depending on how much time a particular home group wish to study in depth.

- 1) Show what proof we have from scripture that Jonah was an historical character and the narrative was historical. See **2Kings 14:23-27; Matthew 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:29-32**.
- 2) What lessons can we learn from the book of Jonah?
- 3) What is known of the city of Nineveh? See **1:2, 3:2-10; 4:11**.
You may find it helpful to read Nahum's prophecy for Nineveh.
- 4) What does the book of Jonah reveal of God's character?
- 5) What was known of the character of Jonah?
- 6) Some writers of Jonah have portrayed him as religiously intolerant showing no mercy to Gentiles. Is that true from the evidence seen in the book of Jonah?

Section 2 continued

7) Can you see the miracles that took place in the book of Jonah?

8) In what ways is Jonah seen as a type? Would you agree or disagree that the following types shown below seem to be what Jonah typified **(i)** typically foreshadowing the history of his own nation, Israel, **(ii)** anticipating the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, **(iii)** a type of Christ himself, as God's "sign" messenger?

Bibliography

The resources below are helpful in finding out more about the little book of Jonah. The author does not necessarily agree with the views held by the writers of the reading material.

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