



**The Anglican Parishes of Whittington,  
Weeford and Hints**

*What the Lord requires of you is to do justice and to love mercy and to  
walk humbly with your God*

---

**The Book of The Prophet  
Jonah**

**An Introduction to this  
sacred text**



# Jonah

I called to the LORD

out of my distress,

and he answered me;

out of the belly of Sheol I cried,

and you heard my voice.

## THE BOOK OF JONAH

The story of Jonah has great theological import. It concerns a disobedient prophet who rejected his divine commission, was cast overboard in a storm and swallowed by a great fish, rescued in a marvellous manner, and returned to his starting point. Now he obeys and goes to Nineveh, the capital of Israel's ancient enemy. The Ninevites listen to his message of doom and repent immediately. All, from king to lowliest subject, humble themselves in sackcloth and ashes. Seeing their repentance, God does not carry out the punishment planned for them. At this, Jonah complains, angry because the Lord spares them.

This fascinating story caricatures a narrow mentality which would see God's interest extending only to Israel, whereas God is presented as concerned with and merciful to even the inhabitants of Nineveh (**4:11**), the capital of the Assyrian empire which brought the Northern Kingdom of Israel to an end and devastated Jerusalem in 701 B.C. The Lord is free to "repent" and change his mind. Jonah seems to realize this possibility and wants no part in it (**4:2**; cf. **Ex 34:6**). But the story also conveys something of the ineluctable character of the prophetic calling.

The book is replete with irony, wherein much of its humor lies. The name “Jonah” means “dove” in Hebrew, but Jonah’s character is anything but dove-like. Jonah is commanded to go east to Nineveh but flees toward the westernmost possible point (1:2–3), only to be swallowed by a great fish and dumped back at this starting point (2:1, 11).



The sailors pray to their gods, but Jonah is asleep in the hold (1:5–6). The prophet’s preaching is a minimum message of destruction, while it is the king of Nineveh who calls for repentance and conversion (3:4–10); the instant conversion of the Ninevites is greeted by Jonah with anger and sulking (4:1). He reproaches the Lord in words that echo Israel’s traditional praise of his mercy (4:2; cf. Ex 34:6–7). Jonah is concerned about the loss of the gourd but not about the possible destruction of 120,000 Ninevites (4:10–11).

Unlike other prophetic books, this is not a collection of oracles but the story of a disobedient, narrow-minded prophet who is angry at the outcome of the sole message he delivers (**3:4**). It is difficult to date but almost certainly is postexilic and may reflect the somewhat narrow, nationalistic reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.

As to genre, it has been classified in various ways, such as parable or satire.

The “sign” of Jonah is interpreted in two ways in the New Testament: His experience of three days and nights in the fish is a “type” of the experience of the Son of Man (**Mt 12:39–40**), and the Ninevites’ reaction to the preaching of Jonah is contrasted with the failure of Jesus’ generation to obey the preaching of one who is “greater than Jonah” (**Mt 12:41–42**; **Lk 11:29–32**).

## **The Book of Jonah may be divided as follows:**

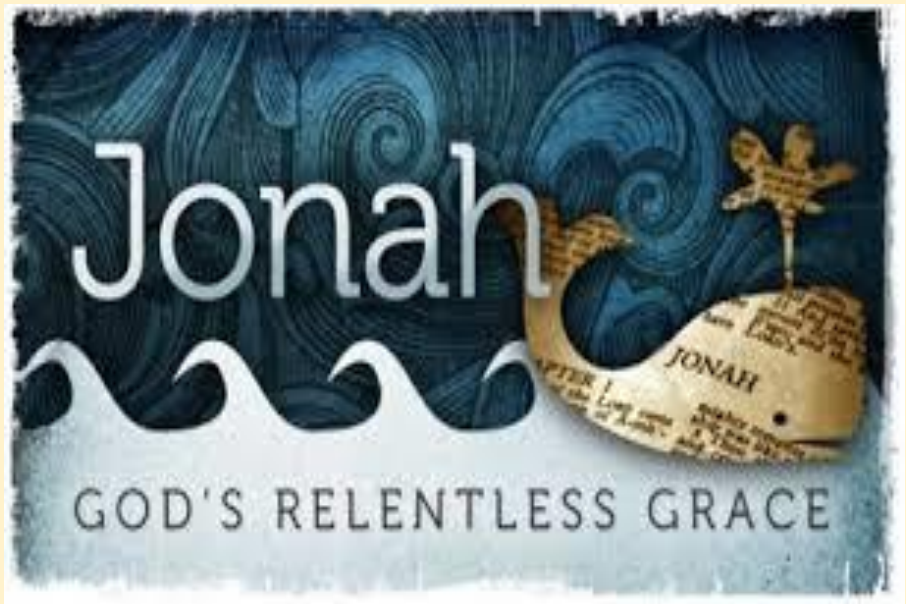
- I. Jonah’s Disobedience and Flight (**1:1–16**)
- II. Jonah’s Prayer (**2:1–11**)
- III. Jonah’s Obedience and the Ninevites’ Repentance (**3:1–10**)
- IV. Jonah’s Anger and God’s Reproof (**4:1–11**)



## **Questions for REFLECTION**

Jonah was an unwilling prophet given an assignment which he found displeasing. He chose to flee away from God rather than obey Him. Have you ever found yourself wanting to turn and run away rather than obey God?

It is better to obey God than to disobey Him. Often in spite of our rebellion, God in His mercy will give us another chance to serve Him when we return to Him.



## Study 1

Jonah 1: 1-16

1. What did God tell Jonah to do?
2. Why did he run away?
3. Jonah tried to get away from God's presence (verse 3). Is this possible ?  
(Genesis 4:16, Job 1:12, Psalm 139:7 – 12)
4. How can we as Christians keep away from God's presence?  
(Psalm 51:11)
5. What was the result of Jonah's disobedience?
6. Why do you think Jonah was able to sleep through the storm?
7. How can we as Christian "sleep spiritually" ?  
(Romans 13: 11-14)
8. Can you use verse 13 to explain the term "Obedience is better than sacrifice"  
(1 Samuel 15:22)



## Study 2

Jonah 1:17 - Jonah 2:1 - 10

1. What did Jonah do to make God let Him out of the fish.
2. Jonah seemed to understand God's loving kindness and mercy (verse 8). How can we as Christians obtain the mercy of God? (Hebrews 4:14 – 16)
3. Despite all that was happening to Jonah he still made a "Sacrifice to God" with the voice of thanksgiving. (verse 9)  
What does the sacrifice of praise mean to us as Christians ?  
(Hebrew 13: 15 - 16, Acts 16: 23 – 26)
4. How long was Jonah in the belly of the fish ?  
For how long was Jesus in the grave ? (Matthew 12:39-40)  
If God could do these two great miracles why do we find it hard to trust Him for smaller things?

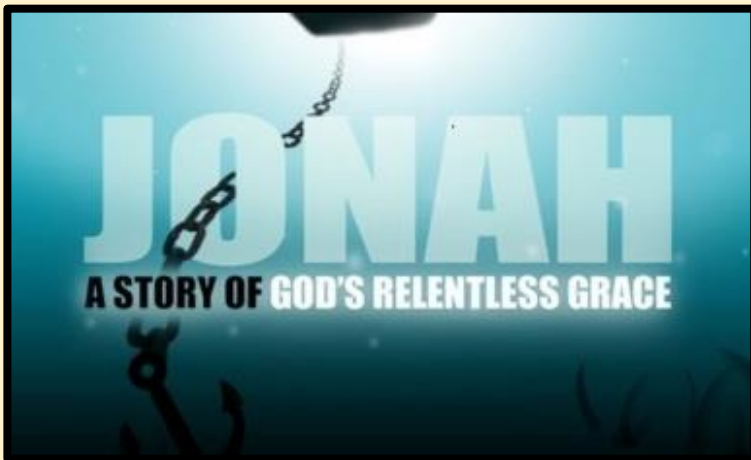




## **Study 3**

Jonah 3:1-10

1. What made the people of Nineveh repent?
2. How long did it take for the people of Nineveh to repent when Jonah started preaching?
3. Do we sometimes find it hard to preach the gospel If yes, why?
4. What would happen if we never preached the gospel? (Romans 10:13-15.)
5. Where did Jonah get his forty-day deadline from? (verse 4)
6. What was the result of the people of Nineveh's repentance?
7. How can we use our local groups as a venue to preach the gospel.



## Study 4

Jonah 4: 1-11

1. Why was Jonah displeased?

What attributes of God's character are mentioned in verse two?

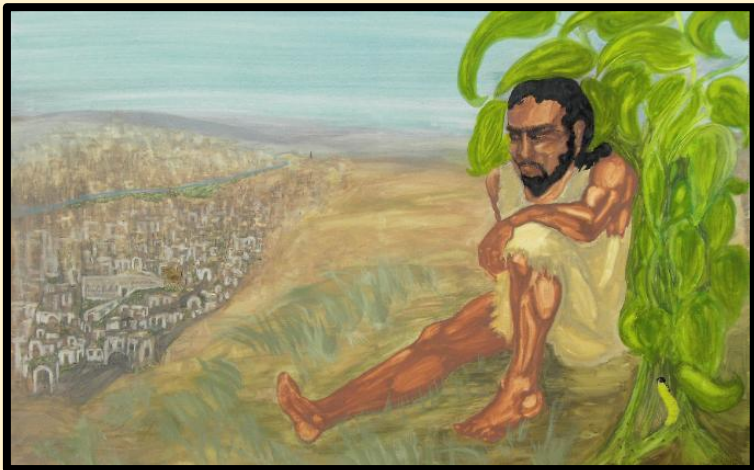
2. If Jonah knew so much of God's grace and compassionate heart why was he so surprised that God did not destroy Nineveh?

3. Do you think a knowledge of God's love and mercy would help your relationship with God?

(2 Peter 1:1-3)

4. God used a brilliant illustration to show Jonah why he did not destroy Nineveh

(verse 5 - 11) Has God ever given you a picture or illustration on the need to preach the gospel?



## Other Books / Articles to Read

Derek Pamment (2017) The Book of Jonah and its Relevance For Today in RUACK Journal

<http://ourvillagechurch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Summer-2017.pdf>

Joy Tetley (201=03) Emmaus Bible Resources: A Rebellious Prophet (Jonah)

Irene Nowell (2015) Jonah, Tobit, Judith (NEW COLLEGEVILLE BIBLE COMMENTARY: OLD TESTAMENT)

Robert Alter (2016) Strong as Death is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel

Colin S. Smith (2012) Jonah: Navigating a God Centred Life

*© Text from American Catholic Bishops. Text and images are used for study purposes only and remain the copyright and intellectual property of the originator. Used here under fair use clause of copyright law / not for profit.*

