

## Jonah - "The Black Hole of Self"

*"The smallest package in the world is someone wrapped up in herself."*



### Background on the man

1. Jonah is one of the best-known, least studied and controversial men in our Bibles. He is the only prophet that Jesus identifies himself with in his death, burial, and resurrection, thus making a strong statement about his historicity (2 Kgs 14:24-25 places him in a real family at a real time in history).
2. He was a prophet by profession, not "election" like Amos (Amos 7:14-15). In other words, Jonah was a servant of Yahweh, not a stranger to Him (cf. Jon 4:2 and Ex 34:6). He was used to God speaking to him, commissioning him, etc. And, prophets were *supposed to* "bring the heat" when they preached. That means that the *message* God asked him to deliver could *not* have been the issue.



### Background on the "mission"

1. Nineveh is one of the oldest and largest cities on earth (Gen 10:11; Jon 1:1;4:11). Two of its kings' palaces averaged 625,000 ft<sup>2</sup>! (By comparison, The Biltmore is 175,000 ft<sup>2</sup>). The city had 5-story walls, 10-story towers, a moat and 15 gates. When God called it a "great" city, He meant it! Also, although Jonah had not previously been there, it is almost certain that he would have heard about the city from traveling merchants who would have passed through his land.
2. The Assyrian army was the most feared "killing machine" on the planet. We still have enormous wall carvings depicting Assyrian soldiers tearing out tongues and eyes, skinning people alive, cutting off noses and body parts, and building pyramids out of human heads! They had been Israel's enemies for over 100 years, and two Israelite king's names actually appear in Assyrian war records (Ahab, Jehu).
3. This is the nation that was ruling and overrunning the world of Jonah's day. Dr. Allan Ross has said that we have virtually no artistic artifacts left from this entire empire, only the remnants of war and warfare.
4. Assyria is the nation that eventually destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, and carried off the ten tribes associated with the north.

### Lessons Learned from a Pathetic Prophet:

1. Jonah was a "gracist" – someone who uses grace to *segregate* rather than sanctify.
2. Jonah's "notion of *nation*" had blinded him to God's passion for people (4:11).
3. Jonah lost sight of the *purpose* of the Covenant (i.e. to bless the nations) in the face of the "perks" of the Covenant (4:2).
4. Jonah lost his joy, seeking it in his own *comfort* rather than in compassion to others (4:6-9; Is 58:10-11; Mk 8:35).
5. Jonah's real "journey" was from resentment to anger to depression (4:1-3).

6. Jonah stands in stark contrast to every other “character” in this story. Considering that this is the only prophetic book in our Bible that is more about the *prophet* than the prophecy, we must conclude that its purpose for being in Scripture is to instruct us about Jonah and Yahweh, *not* the Assyrians.
7. The entire prophetic “message” of the Book of Jonah is only eight words in our English Bibles!

Person or Thing in book	Obeded Yahweh	Disobeyed Yahweh
<i>Jonah</i>		✓
the wind at sea	✓	
the sea	✓	
the pagan sailors	✓	
the fish	✓	
the Ninevites	✓	
the King of Nineveh	✓	
the plant	✓	
the worm	✓	
the east wind	✓	
the sun	✓	

8. **(Q4a)** It is worth pondering *why* Jonah has gone “below” on the ship. Fatigue was *not* the reason. The sailors were Gentiles (Jews *hated* the sea, and were afraid of bodies of water). Jonah’s sleep was facilitated by his indifference to the sailors and isolating himself from them.
9. **(Q4b)** This passage is the “heart” of the book, for it simultaneously exposes what Jonah knew to be true of Yahweh, and was true of himself. Jonah refused to go to Nineveh, *not* because of what he knew about the Ninevites, but because of what he knew about Yahweh! Jonah would rather have been dead than share the grace that had been shown to him. Even his “sacrificial” willingness to be thrown overboard to save the sailors must be understood as an attempt on his part to *not* go to Nineveh, not as some altruistic burst of compassion and remorse!
10. **(Q5a)** These sailors *truly* “feared” Yahweh, as was evidenced in their attempt to save themselves *and* Jonah, even though he was the apparent cause of their suffering. This kindness must *not* be assumed to be the result of a ship full of “nice men.” Their *genuine* fear of Yahweh, contrasted with Jonah’s profession of faith (1:9), leaps from the page!
11. **(Q5b)** The Ninevites stand out in contrast to Jonah because they put personal comfort (e.g. food, clothing) beneath personal integrity. Their shame over the sin “silenced” their hunger pangs and the assault of abrasive garments on their skin.
12. **(Q5c)** This passage is so unthinkable, it appears incredible. In the Ancient Near East in general, and among Assyrian royalty in particular, this type of humility and humiliation on the part of a king *without coercion* is startling. This can only be understood in light of Yahweh’s penetrating grace.
13. **(Q6)** For a genuine believer, one cannot make “shipwreck of their faith,” and also not make shipwreck of their life. In both the Genesis and 1 Timothy passages, conscious, willful disobedience is view here.
14. **(Q8)** It is important to remind ourselves that Jesus is talking about “saving” one’s life. The unspoken assumption here is that each listener is *in need of* “saving.” This is *not* a statement about justification either. In other words, they (i.e. me) are always in danger of losing their life. We typically never think of ourselves as always in “danger,” especially when were taking such good “care” of ourselves. We need to pursue a biblical understanding of the *danger* we are in through our tendency to be self-centered as much as we stress the place of self-sacrifice as the path to self-discovery.

15. **(Q9)** This passage necessitates us changing our *gaze*—looking away from ourselves, and perhaps also our *geography*—putting ourselves in the *place* where there is great need.

*“How much larger your life would be if your self could become smaller in it.”*

[G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pg 24]



## “Stumbling Stones”

- (Q3)** Be careful *not* to jump immediately to motivation (i.e. “why”) and miss the real motive. This question in the study is fishing for something deeper. The bottom line here is that Jonah did not *want* to go to Nineveh. He did not “*feel*” like obeying Yahweh’s clear and personal command. Fear may certainly been behind his choice (i.e the motivation), but Jonah didn’t “go” because he didn’t “feel” like going! There is enormous application here for us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with our “recreational” approach to obedience.
- (Q5)** Be careful that you are actually contrasting Jonah each time in these four passages. Don’t just talk about the heart of the individual/group in the passage. Talk about how *Jonah* is different from them in terms of his values, his passions, his prejudices, etc. The point here is that Jonah was totally self-absorbed.



## “Going Deeper”

- (Q4c)** “Have you ever complained about the provisions or accommodations while you were involved in some type of service ministry (e.g. mission trip, VBS, Habitat, etc.)?”
- (Q4c)** “Can you relate to Jonah’s obsession with his own comfort in the face of the (possible) “discomfort” of total destruction facing the Ninevites?” Explain.

### “Discomfort” (*ra’ah*) in the Book of Jonah

who is facing “discomfort”	form of the “discomfort”	Refs
the pagan sailors	Devastating storm at sea; impending shipwreck and inevitable loss of life.	1:7,8
entire Ninevite population	Loss of all life through a judgment of Yahweh	3:10; 4:2
Jonah	<i>“It’s too hot outside!”</i>	4:6

- (Q5a)** “*Professing* faith and *confessing* faith are distinguishable by how they respond in the face of suffering and danger. Which do you think was true of Jonah?” Explain.
- (Q5d)** “Would you have done for Jonah what God did here?” Explain. **(Note:** This passage is perhaps the clearest teaching on the nature of ‘grace’ in this book. Help group members to see the similarity between their own refusal to give Jonah comfort (if they did) and *Jonah’s* refusal to extend grace to the Ninevites on behalf of Yahweh.
- (Q5d)** “Jonah is complaining about the *weather* in the face of the destruction (and damnation) of an entire city—right before his eyes! Think back on conversations you have had with other believers lately. Were they as disengaged from the people around you as his?”
- (Q6)** Have group members share here. Help them see the *progression* away from the heart of God on the part of His prophet who “professed” to fear Him.