

BOOKS OF THE BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

by WAYNE PALMER



J O N A H



Copyright © 2018 Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118-3968
1-800-325-3040 • CPH.org

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Concordia Publishing House.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover art: © Shutterstock.com

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Jonah focuses on God's mercy toward a foreign people and the reluctant prophet He sent to them. When Jesus prophesied His own suffering, death, and resurrection in Matthew 12, He pointed to the example of Jonah, who was punished for his disobedience, "buried" within the fish, and then raised to "life" when the fish vomited him up on dry land on the third day.

AUTHORSHIP

Jonah was written by the prophet Jonah himself.

PURPOSE

Jonah teaches us God's mercy toward a Gentile nation who was an enemy of Israel. This shows God also is merciful toward all people—even those who act as enemies of His own people. Jonah also teaches God's love for His servants, even those who are hesitant to do His will.

OUTLINE

For the purposes of this study, we will divide Jonah into seven scenes:

SCENE 1

Account of Jonah's Call and His Reaction (1:1–3)

SCENE 2

On Board Ship in the Midst of a Storm at Sea (1:4–17)

SCENE 3

Inside the Great Fish (2:1–10)

SCENE 4

Yahweh Gives Jonah His Assignment a Second Time (3:1–3)

SCENE 5

Jonah Delivers the Message; Nineveh's Response (3:4–10)

SCENE 6

Jonah's Prayer in Nineveh (4:1–3)

SCENE 7

Jonah Sits outside the City of Nineveh; Yahweh Teaches a Lesson on Mercy (4:4–11)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

SCENE 1: ACCOUNT OF JONAH'S CALL AND HIS REACTION—JONAH 1:1–3

God calls His prophet Jonah to preach in Nineveh. Jonah foolishly turns his back on God and flees in the other direction.

Read 1:1–3.

Q 1: Describe a time you shirked or fled a responsibility the Lord laid on you.

A 1: Think of the times you failed to joyously fulfill the roles He has given you in this life—as child, friend, spouse, parent, worker, or supervisor. As you repent, ask God to forgive your failings for Jesus' sake and to give you His Holy Spirit to empower you to faithfully serve Him now and in the future.

God would not release Jonah from the divine call to proclaim His Word as a prophet. He sent a mighty storm to turn Jonah back.

SCENE 2: ON BOARD SHIP IN THE MIDST OF A STORM AT SEA— JONAH 1:4–17

God would have been just to punish Jonah. Instead, He sent a storm to stop the prophet in his tracks.

Read 1:4–6.

Q 2: If the captain and sailors had their own gods to which they prayed, why would the captain ask Jonah to pray to his God?

A 2: The sailors were very religious. They believed there were many local gods and weren't sure which god had sent this storm—perhaps Jonah's God had. This provided God the opportunity to glorify His name to them through the words of His prophet.

God used the storm not only to bar the flight of the wayward prophet but also to reveal His power, glory, and mercy to the Gentile sailors.

Read 1:7–16.

Q 3: What great witness did Jonah give to the captain and his sailors?

A 3: Most pagan religions consider the land and sea to have been here eternally; their gods were thought to have come on the scene later. Though the sailors thought their gods were powerful, they did not believe they could completely control the mighty, sometimes chaotic sky and sea. But Jonah identified himself as a Hebrew; introduced God by His personal name, LORD (Yahweh); and told them God created the sea and the dry land—and thus had complete control over both. God demonstrated that control when He intensified that storm and the waves when they tried to save Jonah, but instantly stilled the storm and waves when they obeyed and threw Jonah overboard. When the sailors saw God's power, they feared Him exceedingly, offered a sacrifice, and made vows to Him.

God saves His prophet from drowning by providing a great fish.

Read 1:17.

Q 4: Do you consider the fish swallowing Jonah to be punishment or salvation—Law or Gospel?

A 4: Perhaps it is both—God's punishment of Jonah while also saving him from drowning in the sea. Consider that God could have stilled the storm without Jonah having to be thrown into the sea and being swallowed by the fish. God gave Jonah three days inside the fish to live with the consequences of his disobedience. But it also gave him time to repent, pray, and set his heart to obey God's call to go and preach in Nineveh.

Q 5: What similarities do you see between Jonah in this storm and Jesus in the storm on the Sea of Galilee in Mark 4:35–41?

A 5: Both were sleeping in the boat during the boisterous storm. Both were awakened by sailors/fishermen who were terrified that their ship would sink and they would drown. Jonah's storm stopped when he was thrown into the water; the winds of Jesus' day immediately stopped and the waters grew calm when He spoke.

SCENE 3: INSIDE THE GREAT FISH—JONAH 2:1–10

Saved from certain drowning and death beneath the waves, Jonah prays to God, praising Him for His great compassion and vowing to obey the Lord's command.

Read chapter 2.

Q 6: What indicates that Jonah felt relief rather than distress while he was inside the stomach of the fish?

A 6: When he spoke of his distress and fear, he always used the past tense, referring to the moments he was sinking into the Mediterranean and fearful he would drown. His present tense speech from inside the fish indicates peace and relief.

Q 7: What critical event does verse 7 record for us?

A 7: It records the moment when Jonah stopped trying to turn his back on God, repented, and cried out to God for help.

Q 8: What significance is there that Jonah made a vow or sincere promise from within the fish?

A 8: Though we don't know the content of the vow, they are usually made in times of distress and great need. When making vows, people promise that if God delivers them, they will serve Him in a special way they didn't before. Perhaps Jonah was promising to obey if God should again call him to go to Nineveh.

SCENE 4: YAHWEH GIVES JONAH HIS ASSIGNMENT A SECOND TIME—JONAH 3:1–3

God calls Jonah to preach to Nineveh a second time, and Jonah obeys.

Read 3:1–3.

Q 9: Should we read anything into the mention that God called Jonah a second time?

A 9: We should not necessarily assume that Jonah was back to his old ways, still wanting to avoid his mission trip to Nineveh and hope God would forget all about him. It could be that Jonah wanted to be sure God still wanted him to go—that he hadn't disqualified himself by his first refusal.

Q 10: How can we find encouragement from God's second call to Jonah?

A 10: Because of our sins and failings, we might feel disqualified from the work God has given us (parenting, being a church leader, supporting our spouse), but God's forgiveness is complete. He can remove our paralyzing guilt, restore us, and enable us to complete the work He has set before us.

Q 11: How does Jonah indicate the size of Nineveh?

A 11: He mentions how long it would take to walk through the city.

Q 12: Why is its size important?

A 12: It indicates God's concern for the many, many people living there. He does not want to destroy all the people in this city without first bringing His Word. Think about all the people God can touch through the members of your congregation as they go about their daily lives. He wants His Word to be shared with all those people that they may repent and be given saving faith in Christ Jesus.

SCENE 5: JONAH DELIVERS THE MESSAGE; NINEVEH'S RESPONSE—JONAH 3:4–10

God is concerned for all people—even those we might consider beyond hope or redemption.

Read 3:4–5.

Q 13: What lesson should Jonah have learned from the Ninevites' response to God's call for repentance and faith?

A 13: Jonah should have understood that God's Word is all-powerful (since the Holy Spirit is working through that Word), and no person is beyond hope or outside of God's loving concern.

Q 14: Which people in your circle of family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances seem beyond hope or redemption? How might Jonah's experience in Nineveh give you new insight and courage?

A 14: A person can stubbornly, proudly, and persistently reject the Gospel we try to share, but the Holy Spirit can break through the hardest heart. Often those who react the most harshly may actually be closer to being converted than those who respond with indifference. Clearly, God's Law and Gospel are getting under that person's skin.

The people of Nineveh respond to Jonah's preaching with amazing repentance.

Read 3:6–10.

Q 15: What is remarkable about the king's response to hearing Jonah's warning?

A 15: Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, where they considered their kings to be gods. For one of these proud kings to humble himself, remove his royal robes, cover himself in rough sackcloth and ashes, and fast rather than feast is truly something only the Holy Spirit could have brought about. (In contrast, the Book of Esther shows a Persian king who refuses to permit even a hint of sadness or misfortune in his presence.)

Q 16: What moved God to forgive the people of Nineveh?

A 16: We could mistakenly think their repentance moved God to pity and forgive them—but Jonah only describes these details to show us the depth of regret and repentance the Holy Spirit had worked in their hearts through the Law Jonah had preached. God's forgiveness of the Ninevites was won by Jesus' sacrifice—nothing more and nothing less.

Q 17: Jesus used the humble response of these Ninevites to God's Word to shame the Jews of His own generation who refused to repent at His preaching (Matthew 12:38–41). What is so ironic about Jesus comparing Himself to Jonah?

A 17: Jonah despised the people of Nineveh—and we will see in the next chapter that Jonah was angry with God for not destroying the city. Yet even with such an angry, childish prophet bringing God's Word, the Ninevites repent. Compare that to God's own Son, Jesus Christ, who came with sincere love and concern for His people's salvation—even to the point of weeping over Jerusalem's unrepentance and willingly going to the cross to save them—yet they only responded to Him with rejection and murderous hatred.

Q 18: What stern warning and reminder does this comparison hold before us?

A 18: We can easily grow coldhearted and indifferent like the Jews of Jesus' day—or even turn openly against Jesus. May the Holy Spirit use this warning to bring us to repentance, faith, and salvation.

SCENE 6: JONAH'S PRAYER IN NINEVEH—JONAH 4:1–3

Most missionaries would be overjoyed at such an overwhelming response to their message. But Jonah is despondent as he speaks with the Lord in prayer.

Read 4:1–3.

Q 19: Describe Jonah's attitude. Why is he so upset with God?

A 19: Jonah is exceedingly angry. The Hebrew literally says, "It [God's sparing of Nineveh] became evil to Jonah as a great evil." He is upset because Assyria is a national enemy of Israel with a reputation of cruelty toward the nations it conquers—similar to the Nazi concentration camps. God's complete and free forgiveness of such a brutal people didn't make sense to Jonah.

Q 20: What do we learn about the relationship between Jonah and God from this prayer?

A 20: Jonah is definitely wrong in how he is thinking, but he is not afraid to open his heart and pour out what he feels to God—even though it is clearly not the way God is thinking. It is like a child speaking to his father. In the remainder of the chapter, we will see this dialogue unfold between God and Jonah. Notice how God speaks to Jonah as a dear Father to His young, immature son.

SCENE 7: JONAH SITS OUTSIDE THE CITY OF NINEVEH; YAHWEH TEACHES A LESSON ON MERCY— JONAH 4:4–11

When he was given the precious opportunity to proclaim God's compassion and mercy, Jonah preached, but his heart was certainly not in it—at least not a heart of love and compassion for the Ninevites. God sets out to teach him a lesson on what mercy is all about.

Read 4:4–11.

Q 21: What was Jonah's purpose for building the booth?

A 21: This was a temporary structure designed to shield him from the heat of the sun while he watched through the forty days to see whether God would destroy Nineveh. This was the sort of booth the Israelites were to build every autumn during the Festival of Booths to remember when their ancestors wandered in the wilderness, living in tents. It reminded them of God's provision of manna and water throughout the forty years and made them appreciative of all the gifts they enjoyed in the holy land.

Q 22: How does the vine show God's tender love and compassion for Jonah?

A 22: Jonah is like a small child sitting and pouting, making himself miserable and uncomfortable for nothing. Clearly his booth is poor shelter. God provides the vine with its deep, cooling shade to show He loves him and cares about him.

Q 23: What lesson is God trying to teach Jonah through the vine and the worm?

A 23: Jonah was really only concerned with himself and his own comfort; that is why he so appreciated the vine that shaded him. When the worm destroyed it, God made the sun blaze on him so that Jonah would feel what it was like to lose something dear to him. He wanted Jonah to realize how much He loved the people of Nineveh, and He did not want to lose them without sharing His offer of forgiveness and peace.

Q 24: How can this book help us examine our attitude toward missions?

A 24: It reminds us to examine our hearts to see where our love is. Are we more concerned with our own desires and comfort than with the salvation of the unknown people around us? Is all of our time, effort, and finances going toward things that make us happy, or are we investing in sharing the Gospel with people who do not know God?

BOOKS OF THE BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

by WAYNE PALMER



J O N A H