

# JONAH - A TEACHER'S GUIDE

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## THE CENTRAL QUESTION:

### What does this book/story say to us about God?

This question may be broken down further as follows:

- a. Why did God do it/allow it?
  - b. Why did He record it for our study?
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1. Do you remember hearing the story of Jonah as a kid? What did you think of it? Did you want to try it? Is it just another miracle story? Is it possible to believe that this story actually happened as it says? Would you feel more comfortable among modern scientific friends if the book of Jonah were not in the Bible? Does the story seem a little “unrealistic?” Did Jesus believe it? (Matthew 12:38-41) Is Jonah mentioned as a historical character elsewhere in the Bible? (2 Kings 14:25)

“The credibility of Jonah’s experience with the great fish has often been maligned. Similar incidents, however, are not lacking in recorded literature. The issues are really the greatness of God and the authority of God’s Word. The great fish was provided by God, not primarily for Jonah’s punishment, but for four other reasons: (1) *salvation* from drowning (2:2–6), (2) *transportation* to Nineveh (2:10), (3) *education* from God (2:10), and (4) *recommission* from God (3:1, 2). Jonah’s punishment and apparent end were accomplished on the deck of the ship. God’s provision for a return journey was the fish. The “fish” may or may not have been a whale. It may have even been the enormous whale shark, a frequent visitor to the Mediterranean waters. The phrase “three days and three nights” does not necessarily denote a 72-hour period. In Hebrew thought, a *part* can constitute the *whole* in time reckoning. Thus Jonah was in the belly of the great fish at least part of three separate days. Jonah’s importance rises significantly due to his experience being found on the lips of the Lord Jesus Christ. Both Matthew and Luke record the Lord’s drawing of an analogy between Himself and Jonah (Matt. 12:39ff. and Luke 11:29ff.). Interestingly, the appropriation made by Matthew apparently differs from that of Luke. Matthew seems to emphasize the time preceding deliverance, while Luke focuses on the actual event of deliverance from death.” (*Believer’s Study Bible*)

“The Book of Jonah has been described as a parable, an allegory, and a satire. The famous story of the ‘great fish’ (often erroneously thought of as a whale) has led many to dismiss the book as merely a biblical ‘fish story.’

“It is a mistake (based in part on the difficulty some readers have in coming to terms with the miraculous character of the story line) to assume that the events and actions of the book are not historical in nature. While the story line is unusual, it is presented as normal history. Further, Jesus used the story of Jonah as an analogy of His own impending death and resurrection (see Matt. 12:39–41). Jesus’ analogy depends on the recognition of two historical realities: (1) the historical experience of Jonah in the belly of the great fish, and (2) the historical experience of the repentance of the people of Nineveh based on the preaching

of Jonah (see also Luke 11:29–32). Indeed, the phrase ‘the sign of the prophet Jonah’ must have been a recurring phrase in the teaching of Christ, as it is found on more than one occasion in Matthew’s account of Christ’s ministry (see Matt. 16:4). Thus any view of the Book of Jonah that does not assume it describes historical events is obliged to explain away the clear words of Jesus to the contrary.” (*Nelson’s Study Bible*)

“The **great fish** simply did what it was told. This is an obvious miracle, the precise details of which are not stated. We do not know if the fish was a specially created one or a modified whale; nor do we know how Jonah breathed for 72 hours. God likely chose that Jonah stay inside the fish for **three days and three nights** because that was the time ancients thought someone needed to come back from Sheol. Hence, Jonah’s return from the fish would represent a miraculous rescue from death and destruction.” (*Spirit-Filled Life Study Bible*)

“The book of Jonah is different from the other prophetic books, because it gives only one sentence of what the prophet Jonah preached. Instead, this book tells how Jonah disobeyed the Lord and refused to warn Nineveh that it was going to be destroyed. Jonah even wanted the city to be destroyed, because it was the capital city of Assyria, a hated enemy of Israel. But the Lord corrected Jonah; then Jonah went to Nineveh and preached the Lord’s message.

“When many people think about the book of Jonah, they think only of Jonah being swallowed by a huge fish. However, the message of this book is that the Lord wants to have mercy on everyone; as Jonah says to him:

*“You are a kind and merciful God, and you are very patient. You always show love, and you don’t like to punish anyone, not even foreigners.” (4.2b) (CEV)*

“The book portrays God’s absolute sovereignty over his creation. But above all it portrays God as a God of love and mercy, who would rather forgive and save even the enemies of his people, rather than punish and destroy them.” (*GNB*)

“This book has no stated author, though tradition ascribes it to Jonah, the main character of the book. No other suggestion commends itself, and logic dictates that Jonah had every reason to record both his harrowing encounters with ocean, fish, plant, and worm, and also the marvelous Ninevite revival. This man, whose name means “dove” (cf. Hos. 7:11; 11:11), was a prophet, son of Amittai [meaning “Truthful.”] (1:1), a native of Gath Hopher (2 Kin. 14:25) in Zebulun, a town about two miles north of Nazareth. Thus Jonah is described in terms that would point to his being a real person, and his experiences actual and historical.

“The historical events recorded, as well as the writing of the narrative (perhaps the earliest prophetic book) apparently occurred during the reign of Jeroboam II (793–753 B.C.) in Israel (the northern kingdom). Uzziah was king in Judah, and the Assyrian king was either Adad-nirari III (810–753 B.C.) or Asshur-dan III (771–754 B.C.). This was a time of relative weakness in Assyria, while for Israel it was a time of border expansion (something prophesied by Jonah, cf. 2 Kings 14:25) and prosperity. Israel’s consequent arrogance and pride displeased the Lord, and God raised up Amos and Hosea to proclaim to His people

Israel that she would be judged (Amos 7:8; 8:2) and be sent into exile “beyond Damascus” (Amos 5:27), i.e., in Assyria (Hosea 9:3; 10:6; 11:5). Isaiah and Micah are also Jonah’s contemporaries, and it was in this political and spiritual climate (800–750 B.C.) that the Lord commissioned Jonah to go to Nineveh and warn its inhabitants of the danger of imminent divine judgment. The general period of the prophet’s ministry and the writing of the book was the eighth century. Similarities of the book to the Elijah-Elisha narratives reinforce the eighth century position. Arguments for a postexilic date, or at least a date after the destruction of Nineveh in 612 B.C., are not persuasive.

“Four different views have been suggested as to how the book should be interpreted: (1) *Myth*—This view claims that the book has no historical basis; its purpose was only to entertain and to teach moral truth. Those holding this position usually date the book in the sixth-fifth century B.C. It is unlikely, however, that prophetic Hebrew literature ever makes use of this particular literary type. (2) *Allegory*—This view was quite attractive at the height of the era dominated by older liberal theology. It sees the book as a challenge to extreme Jewish nationalism during the fifth century as the Jews returned to Judea and Jerusalem under the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah after the Babylonian captivity. The book’s characters are understood symbolically: Jonah represents the Hebrew people; the sea, possibly Gentile nations; the great fish, the Babylonian Empire; the three days/nights in the great fish, the seventy years of captivity; and Nineveh represents the Gentiles needing a Hebrew witness. This view is inadequate, however, for it fails to account sufficiently for all the characters and it is contrary to a natural reading of the text. (3) *Parable*—This popular position presents the book as a narrative discourse which communicates spiritual truths to be applied by the reader. The book as a whole is not viewed as historical, though historical realities may undergird the book. In this view, problematic issues need not be broached. The book may be dated anywhere between the eighth and fourth centuries B.C. Against this view is the fact that the book does not fit the mold of parabolic literature. (4) *History/biography*—This is the traditional approach to the book and one which was almost universally accepted until the Enlightenment and the advent of modern historical criticism. This view sees the book as a straightforward historical account of the actual experiences of the eighth-century prophet Jonah. It should be noted that Jesus affirmed the historical nature of the book (cf. Matt. 12:38–41; 16:4; Luke 11:29, 30, 32). The Book of Jonah, then, depicts the actual historical events in the life and ministry of the eighth-century prophet.

**“The pervading theme of Jonah is God’s gracious extension of His mercy to Gentile nations through the preaching of repentance. Nevertheless, the book is unique in the number of theological truths expounded in one brief volume** (forty-eight verses). These additional themes are worthy of note: (1) the universal appeal of Israel’s God (cf. the mariners, 1:16; the Ninevites, 3:5); (2) the sovereignty of God over life, elements, and circumstances (cf. the storm, 1:4; the fish, 1:17; the plant, 4:6; and the worm, 4:7; in this connection one should observe that the preoccupation of antagonists and defenders with the great fish has detracted from the theological truths resident in the book); (3) a contrast between the ineffectiveness of the gods of the mariners (1:5) and the

Ninevites, and the saving competency of YAHWEH as witnessed by the mariners (1:16), by Jonah (2:10), and by the people of Nineveh (3:5–10); (4) a further contrast concerning the nationalistic pride of Israel and the failure of the nation to comprehend the nature of her missionary task and the purpose of God to bestow His loving-kindness upon all peoples—this whole issue is made lucid in the life of the prophet himself (cf. 4:1, 2); (5) finally, the story of Jonah’s encounter with the fish as a typology prefiguring the Lord’s three-day sojourn in the tomb and His subsequent resurrection (cf. Matt. 12:38–41). **It is probably correct to state that the main character of the book is really God. No less than thirty-nine times is He directly referred to as YAHWEH or Elohim. In comparison, Jonah is mentioned eighteen times. The sovereign, covenant God of glorious attributes is the hero of this short prophecy.**” (*Believer’s Study Bible*)

“This large city [Nineveh] was the capital of Assyria, a violent pagan nation despised by the Israelites. Yet the Ninevites repented when they heard of God’s impending judgment, whereas the Israelites kept ignoring similar messages sent to them. Thus the book was a challenge to the self-righteous and ethnocentric attitudes of the Israelites.

**Nineveh:**

- A prominent Assyrian city on the east bank of the Tigris River about 280 miles north of Babylon.
- Founded by Nimrod, along with Rehoboth Ir, Calah, and Resen (Gen. 10:11–12), forming a massive urban quadrangle 60 miles across.
- Rivalled Babylon for beauty and splendor with its royal palaces, temples, broad streets, public gardens, and impressive library containing more than 26,000 clay tablets—one of the largest in the ancient world.
- Defended by an outer wall and an inner wall 100 feet high and 50 feet wide.
- Irrigated by the Khasr River, whose flow was controlled by a dam built by Sennacherib (c. 705–681 A.D.), and also by a large aqueduct that carried water from a second dam thirty miles away.
- Target of prophecies by Zephaniah (Zeph. 2:13–15) and Nahum (Nah. 1:1; 3:1), who warned of the city’s ultimate destruction.
- Destroyed in 612 A.D. by a siege of Babylonians, Scythians, and Medes, who penetrated its defenses when sudden floods eroded the walls (compare Nah. 2:6–8).
- Quickly became a mound of ruins that was ignored until just a century ago.” (*Word in Life Study Bible*)

“Assyria, a nation which had achieved a near-legendary reputation for cruelty, was in mild decline during these years, but it remained a threat. The repentance of Nineveh probably occurred in the reign of Ashurdan III (773–755 B.C.). Two plagues (765 and 759 B.C.) and a solar eclipse (763 B.C.) may have prepared the people for Jonah’s message of judgment.” (*Nelson’s Complete Book of Bible Maps and Charts*)

“The royal inscriptions of Assyria afford the best commentary on the burning denunciation of ‘the bloody city.’ In the wake of their conquests, mounds of heads, impaled

bodies, enslaved citizens, and avaricious looters testified to the ruthlessness of the Assyrians. Little wonder that Judah joined in the general outburst of joy over the destruction of Nineveh!" (*New American Bible*)

"Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 A.D.) boasted of dyeing the peaks of mountains red with the blood of his slaughtered enemies. He was known to flay his captives (possibly while they were still alive), and spread their skins on the walls of conquered cities.

"Another atrocity cited by Ashurnasirpal, as well as by his successor, Shalmaneser II (859–824 A.D.), was to have the heads of slain enemy warriors cut off and stacked into a pillar in front of a defeated city. Then the conquerors threw boys and girls from the city into bonfires.

"Sennacherib (705–681 A.D.), who sent a force against Judah and Jerusalem in the time of Hezekiah (2 Kin. 18:13–19:36), described cutting the throats of his enemies like lambs, and cutting off their lives as one cuts a string. Apparently he took grim pleasure in eviscerating his captives...

"Nineveh had a double wall, the inner portion of which was 100 feet high and 50 feet wide." (*Word In Life Study Bible*)

"Jonah was one of four Old Testament prophets whose ministries were referred to by Christ (cf. Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:32). The others were Elijah (Matt. 17:11-12), Elisha (Luke 4:27), and Isaiah (Matt. 15:7)....

"Shalmaneser III (859-824 B.C.) made the city of Nineveh a base for military operations. During his reign Israel came into contact with Nineveh. He wrote that he fought a coalition of kings of Aram and others including "Ahab the Israelite" (in 853 B.C.). Later he wrote that he received tribute from "Jehu, son of Omri," who is pictured in the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser. Neither of these events is mentioned in the Bible. Azariah, king of Judah (790-739), paid tribute to Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727). Menahem, king of Israel (752-742), did the same (2 Kings 15:14-23). In the reign of Ashur-dan III (772-754) Jonah preached to the Ninevites (see the *Introduction to Jonah*)." (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*)

"The kings in Assyria during the reign of Jeroboam II, according to the chronology employed in this commentary, were Adad-nirari III (810–782), Shalmaneser IV (782–772), Ashur-dan III (772–754), and Ashur-nirari V (754–746). There is evidence that possibly indicates that during the reign of Adad-nirari III a religious revolution occurred. Nabu (Nebo), the god of Borsippa, appears to have been proclaimed sole, or at least principal, god. Some see a possible connection between this monotheistic revolution and the mission of Jonah to Nineveh (see Vol. II, p. 60)....

"Some have estimated the population of the walled city at 160,000. How many people may have lived outside the city is not known. Some writers have interpreted the reference in Jonah 4:11 to the 120,000 persons who could not discern between their right hand and their left, as applying to small children only. They have accordingly estimated the total population of Nineveh to have been from 600,000 to 2,000,000. Since such a large population could not have lived inside Nineveh, they have included in Jonah's Nineveh

“Sargon’s city,” now called *Khorsabad*, 12 mi. (19.2 km.) north of Nineveh, and Calah, now *Nimrud*, south of Nineveh at the confluence of the Greater Zab and Tigris rivers. However, those cities, although belonging to Assyria, were separate units with their own protective walls and administrations, and are never included in Nineveh in the ancient historical records.” (*SDA Bible Commentary*)

### **Chronology:**

**792 B.C.** Jeroboam II begins to reign in Israel

**c. 770 B.C.** Approximate time of Jonah

**c. 745 B.C.** Assyrian Empire pushes westward under Tiglath-Pileser

**722 B.C.** Israel is taken captive by Assyria

**612 B.C.** Nineveh falls to the Medes and Babylonians

Jonah prophesied between 793 and 753 BC during the days of Jeroboam II of Israel. See Dr. Gerhard Hassel’s book on *Jonah: Messenger of the Eleventh Hour*. He believes that Jonah’s story was true and mentions stories of other people who have been swallowed by sea creatures and survived. The story of Jonah has led to the telling of many jokes, some of them actually happened!:

A former drug addict, now turned preacher told of many disturbing statistics about drug abuse. He then pounded his Bible and said it was the only answer. Afterwards, a drug addict asked him if he really believed all those stories in the Bible. He said yes. Then he was asked if he believed in the story of Noah and even Jonah. Again he said yes. Then the questioner asked what he thought Jonah was thinking while in the belly of that big fish. After thinking for a moment he replied that he would just have to ask Jonah when he got to heaven. “What if Jonah doesn’t go to heaven?” asked the questioner. ‘Then you can ask him’, replied the preacher!”

“A little girl was observed by her pastor standing outside the pre-school Sunday School classroom between Sunday School and worship, waiting for her parents to come and pick her up for “big church.”

The pastor noticed that she clutched a big storybook with the title, “Jonah and the Whale” under her arms.

He knelt down beside the little girl and began a conversation. “What’s that you have in your hand?” he asked.

“This is my storybook about Jonah and the Whale,” she answered.

“Tell me something, little girl,” he continued, “do you believe that story about Jonah and that whale to be the truth?”

The little girl nodded, “Why of course I believe this story to be the truth!”

He inquired further, “You really believe that a man can be swallowed up by a big whale, stay inside him all that time, and come out of there still alive and OK? You really believe all that can be true?”

She declared, “Absolutely, this story is in the Bible and we studied about it in Sunday School today!”

Then the pastor asked, "Well, little girl, can you prove to me that this story is the truth?" She thought for a moment and then said, "Well, when I get to Heaven, I'll ask Jonah." The pastor then asked, "Well, what if Jonah's not in Heaven?" She then put her hands on her little hips and sternly declared, "Then YOU can ask him!"

A teacher in Idaho asked a group of children what they learned from the story of Jonah. One child responded: "even the fish learned that you can't keep a good man down!"

The book of Jonah is actually one of the most historically supported minor prophets. He is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 and Jesus talks about him in the Matthew 12:38-41; 16:4; and Luke 11:29-32. Jesus spoke of the story on several occasions as being a historical fact. Do we want to doubt the truthfulness of Jesus?

2. What picture of God did Jonah have? Was he happy and proud of how God treated him? Was he proud of how God treated the Ninevites? Does Jonah contribute anything of importance to your picture of God?

Jonah had a great picture of God, but he was embarrassed and angered by God's behavior! (Jonah 4:1-3) Compare Jeremiah and Paul. (Jeremiah 9:23,24; Romans 1:16,17) Why was Jonah embarrassed about his picture of God? Or was he?

In contrast, Joshua, like Moses before him, recognized that God's reputation was an even more important issue than the fate of Israel! (Compare Genesis 18:25; Exodus 32:7-14; Deuteronomy 9:6-13,26-29; 32:26,27; Numbers 14:11-16; Job 42:7,8; Ezekiel 36:22,23; Daniel 9:14-19; John 15:15; Romans 1:18; 2:17-24) God's friends are jealous for His reputation. Real friends are always like that!

3. How did Jonah know that throwing him into the sea would stop the storm? (Jonah 1:9-12) On what basis could he make such a statement? Well, wasn't he a prophet? Did God actually send the storm against the ship that Jonah was in? (Jonah 1:4) Or is this just a general understanding that whatever happens, God is behind it? When Jonah said he was a worshiper of Yahweh, "the God of heaven, who made land and sea", did the sailors think of the evil "god" of the sea, Mot, who always seemed to be angry?

While we certainly would agree with the statement that God is over all and has the power to allow or prevent anything He chooses, in general He allows people to exercise their freedom and thus to learn, even if what they learn is the dire consequences of evil. God probably sent the storm in this story in the same sense as He killed Saul. (See 1 Chronicles 10:3-14) We have no way of knowing for sure if Jonah had some specific revelation about the cause of the storm. The sailors were certainly terrified enough (Jonah 1:10) when they learned the truth.

4. Where did Jonah think he had gone when he was swallowed by that big "fish?" He says he went down into Sheol (sometimes translated hell). It is interesting to note how different translators deal with Jonah's comments. Did Jonah make some "foxhole" promises?

**Jonah 2:2:**

“...He doth answer me, From **the belly of sheol** I have cried, Thou hast heard my voice.”  
(*YLT*)

“...out of **the belly of hell** cried I, and thou heardest my voyce.” (*Geneva*)

“...out of **the belly of hell** cried I, and thou heardest my voice.” *King James Version*

“...out of **the belly of hades** called I, Thou didst hear my voice.” *Rheims*

“...I cried out of **the belly of hell**, and thou hast heard my voice.” *Confraternity*

“...Out of **the belly of Sheol** cried I: thou heardest my voice.” *1890 Darby Bible*

“...Out of **the belly of Sheol** cried I, (And) thou heardest my voice.” *American Standard Version*

“...Out of **the belly of Sheol** cried I, and You heard my voice.” *The Amplified Bible*

“...Out of **the belly of Sheol** I cried, and You heard my voice.” *New King James*

“...Out of **the belly of Sheol** I cried for help. You heard my voice.” *New World Translation*

“...out of **the belly of Sheol** I cried for help, and thou hast heard my cry.” *NewEnglish Bible*

“...from **deep within Sheol** I cried for help, and you heard my voice.” *Revised English Bible*

“...out of **the belly of Sheol** I cried, and thou didst hear my voice.” *RSV*

“...out of **the belly of Sheol** I cried, and you heard my voice. *The New Revised Standard Version*

“...From **the belly of Sheol** I cried out, And You heard my voice.” *Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures*

“...from **the belly of Sheol** I cried, And you have heard my voice.” *The Jerusalem Bible*

“...from **the belly of Sheol** I cried out; you heard my voice!” *The New Jerusalem Bible*

“...I cried for help from **the depth of Sheol**; Thou didst hear my voice.” *NASB*

“...I cried for help from **the depth of Sheol**; You heard my voice.” *NASB, 1995 Update*

“...from **the innermost part of Sheol** I cried for help.” (*Berkeley*)

“From **the heart of Sheol** I called for help; thou didst hear my voice. *Smith-Goodspeed*

“From **Sheol’s belly** I plead; you hear my voice.” *The Anchor Bible*

“...Out of **the womb of Hades** did I exclaim, And thou didst harken unto my voice.” (*Helen Spurrell*)

“...out of **the depth of the grave** have I cried, and thou hast heard my voice.” *Leeser*

“...From **the depths of the grave** I called for help, and you listened to my cry.” (*NIV*)

“...from **the belly of Death** I cried, and thou didst hear my voice.” *Moffatt, 1935*

“...from **the depths of death** I called, and Lord, you heard me!” *The Living Bible*

“...From **the midst of the nether world** I cried for help, and you heard my voice.” *NAB*

“...From **the tomb of the dead**, I called for help and you heard me.” (*Clear Word*)

“...From **deep in the world of the dead** I cried for help, and you heard me.” (*GNB*)

“...From **the depths of my watery grave** I cried for help, and you heard my cry.” *God’s Word*



“...I was **about to die**, so I cried to you, and you heard my voice.” *The New Century Version*  
“...I called to you from **the world of the dead**, and Lord, you heard me!” *New Living Translation*

Notice that Sheol, Hell, Hades, my watery grave, the womb of Hades, Death, the world of the dead, the nether world, and the tomb of the dead are all translated from the same Hebrew words. This is because there is no distinction in the Hebrew. To the Hebrew mind everyone goes to the same place until the resurrection occurs. From Jonah's perspective he had already arrived there! He had no idea that he would ever return to the solid earth!

It is interesting to note that numerous stories from both ancient and modern times attest to the fact that large “fish” or “whales” have swallowed humans and then spit them up again alive. One of the most modern examples was reported in the “*Weekly World News*” of June 16, 1987 where the headlines read: “Shark swallows fisherman—then spits him out alive!” The lucky man was named Mikado Nakamura and he gave an interview to the Newspaper from his hospital bed in Kanazawa, Japan. (See *The Anchor Bible*, “*Jonah*” p. 151)

“For anatomical reasons it seems most unlikely that ‘fish’ is correct, but several toothed whales are recorded from the E Mediterranean, including some that are capable of swallowing a man. In the early part of this century there were one or two reasonably authenticated cases of men surviving after being swallowed (*PTR* 25, 1927, pp. 636ff.)” (*The New Bible Dictionary*)

“In the first place, it is necessary to observe that the Greek word *cetos*, used by St. Matthew, is not restricted in its meaning to ‘a whale,’ or any *Cetacean*; like the Latin *cete* or *cetius*, it may denote any sea-monster, either ‘a whale,’ or ‘a shark,’ or ‘a seal,’ or ‘a tunny of enormous size.’ Although two or three species of whale are found in the Mediterranean Sea, yet the ‘great fish’ that swallowed the prophet cannot properly be identified with any *Cetacean*, for, although the sperm whale has a gullet sufficiently large to admit the body of a man, yet it can hardly be the fish intended, as the natural food of *Cetaceans* consists of small animals, such as medusæ and crustacea. The only fish, then, capable of swallowing a man would be a large specimen of the white shark (*Carcharias vulgaris*), that dreaded enemy of sailors, and the most voracious of the family of *Squalidæ*. This shark, which sometimes attains the length of thirty feet, is quite able to swallow a man whole. The whole body of a man in armor has been found in the stomach of a white shark; and Captain King, in his survey of Australia, says he had caught one which could have swallowed a man with the greatest ease. Blumenbach mentions that a whole horse has been found in a shark, and Captain Basil Hall reports the taking of one in which, besides other things, he found the whole skin of a buffalo which a short time before had been thrown overboard from his ship. The white shark is not uncommon in the Mediterranean.” (*Smith's Bible Dictionary*)

5. “Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale.” (Jonah 1:17) How long would that be? If Jesus was dead three days and three nights as we reckon time, He would need to be crucified on Wednesday in order to rise on Sunday morning? How long was Jonah inside this creature?

To the ancient Jews any part of a day counted as one day. Furthermore, when they said “days and nights” it referred to whole days. Thus “three days and three nights” could mean just a little over 24 hours if you pick the right 24 hours. Notice, by comparison that Jesus was in the grave a small part of Friday, all of Saturday, and about half of Sunday by Jewish reckoning. Their understanding and concern about the minutia of time was nothing like ours.

6. What about the sailor’s use of an “magical” practice, like casting lots to find out who it was on the boat that was causing this storm? Does God see through these kinds of needs among people who believe in such things? If our church officers were chosen today by “casting lots” could you then be certain that they were the right choices? Surely the two men they chose as candidates to take Judas’ place (Acts 1:12-26) were very carefully selected. They prayed over both of them. And if the lot had fallen on the other one, would it have been a mistake? Should we use this method for selecting church officers today? Think how much time we could save!

We do not even know exactly how the casting of lots was done. It appears that it was done by choosing the odd straw or stick or perhaps by choosing an odd colored stone out of a jar or jug. In any case it is clear that the method was intended to represent a chance selection of items. (See **1 Samuel Teacher’s Guide #14**; **Numbers Teacher’s Guide #16**; **Joshua Teacher’s Guide #12**)

7. What do you think of the appeal made by the king of Nineveh (Jonah 3:6-9)? What kind of picture of God did he have? Who do you think had the biggest effect on the people—the King or Jonah?

It is quite clear that the King was used to authoritarian methods! I wonder how he could order animals to wear sackcloth! Unfortunately, the picture he had of God was not much above His own arbitrary rule! In any case the combined effect of the King’s edict and Jonah’s preaching apparently “converted” most of the city! What an incredible result! It is too bad we can’t attribute this wonderful result to a better picture of God, but people are not often moved by just that!

8. What gave Jonah such authority? Was it his recounting of the “whale” story? Have you ever heard of an evangelist that won a whole city?

See #6 above for a note on Jonah’s effectiveness. Did he keep any “souvenirs” of his travels!? In the early years the surrounding nations did respect Yahweh, perhaps because they remembered David and Solomon! What did Jonah say to the people of Jerusalem when he came home? Do you think the peoples of Nineveh and Jerusalem believed his story? The story is certainly told in such a way in the ancient Hebrew that one is expected to believe that it is a part of an historical episode.

9. How do we go to the world with a serious message about what’s going to happen at the end of the world, and at the same time, tell them that God is infinitely gracious, patient, loving, and compassionate? Is there any way we can phrase that so it won’t confuse people? Didn’t God’s graciousness make Jonah want to die? Was he hoping to go home with the message

that with God's help he had managed to singlehandedly wipe out the Ninevites?! If on the other hand Jonah comes home and explains that he has evangelized the Ninevites so they didn't have to be destroyed as God had said they would be, would his neighbors want to stone him?

This is a very serious question raised by the book of Jonah! It seems to suggest that there is a time in people's lives when a little "thunder" may be appropriate. Certainly children need "emergency measures" from time to time! But ultimately we need to educate people as to the full and incredible freedoms that God has actually offered us. We need to spell out the terrible consequences of choosing evil. But then we need to show that these consequences are not imposed as a punishment by God Himself. This is probably best illustrated by the death of Christ. He died as a direct result of sin (Isaiah 53:4-10; 2 Corinthians 5:21) but we are not to think it was a punishment sent from God (Isaiah 53:4) But the misunderstanding of this issue is so serious that people who thought that they were the greatest and most obedience servants of the true God, actually took Him out and crucified Him in God's name!

Jonah may have quietly returned back home hoping that not too many people would ask where he had been or what he had been doing! We can hope that eventually he developed a better attitude about his success in Nineveh than appears in the book. **It would have been good if he could have been as successful in "converting" the people back in Jerusalem or Samaria! Why wasn't Jonah as successful with the Hebrews as he apparently was with the Ninevites?**

10. What is the real message of Jonah? Why is Jonah upset by God's kindness toward the Ninevites? Look at Jonah 4. Doesn't this imply that there was a rather extended conversation between Jonah and God earlier? Can you imagine what was said during that conversation?

There seem to be several major messages in the book of Jonah.

- 1) God takes a very personal interest in all peoples of all nations. He is not just interested only in "His own people" unless you remember that in reality we are all His children.
  - 2) Jonah somehow learned that God was incredibly gracious, loving and kind. But Jonah seemed to hope that that kindness did not extend to the Assyrians!
  - 3) God is apparently prepared to do almost anything that will result in people learning the truth about Him.
11. Look at Jonah 3:9,10. What do we mean when we say, "God repented of evil"? God seems to change His mind about destroying Nineveh.

**Jonah 3:10:**

And God seeth their works, that they have turned back from their evil way, and **God repenteth of the evil** that He spake of doing to them, and he hath not done it.  
*Young's Literal Translation*

And God saw their works, that they had turned from their evil way: and **God bethought himself of the evil**, which he had spoken that he would do unto them, and he did it not. *Leeser*

And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and **God repented of the evil**, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not. (*KJV; Darby, ASV*)

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, **God repented of the evil** which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. (*RSV*)

When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, **he repented of the evil** that he had threatened to do to them; he did not carry it out. *The New American Bible*

When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, **he repented of the evil** that he had threatened to do to them; he did not carry it out. (*NAB*)

God saw what they did, and how they abandoned their wicked ways, and **he repented** and did not bring upon them the disaster he had threatened. (*NEB*)

Then God saw their actions, that they had turned from their wicked way. So **God relented of the evil** which he had said he would do unto them, and he did it not. *Smith-Goodspeed*

When God saw what they were doing, and how they turned from their evil life, **God did relent**; he decided not to inflict the punishment he had said he would inflict upon them. *Moffatt*

...**God relented of the punishment** which He had said He would inflict on them. And He did not do it. (*Berkeley*)

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and **God relented from the disaster** that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. (*NKJ*)

God saw their efforts to renounce their evil ways. And **God relented about the disaster** which he had threatened to bring on them, and did not bring it. (*NJB*)

When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then **God relented** concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it. *The New American Standard Bible, 1995 Update*

...**God changed his mind** about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. (*NRSV*)

God saw what they did; he saw that they had given up their wicked behavior. So **he changed his mind** and did not punish them as he had said he would. (*GNB*)

When God saw what the people did, that they stopped doing evil, **he changed his mind** and did not do what he had warned. He did not punish them. (NCV)

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, **God changed his mind about the calamity** that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. *NRSV*

...**he spared them**, in his mercy, their threatened punishment. (Knox)

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, **he had compassion** and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. (NIV)

And when God saw that they had put a stop to their evil ways, **he abandoned his plan to destroy them** and didn't carry it through. (TLB)

When God saw that they had put a stop to their evil ways, **he had mercy** on them and didn't carry out the destruction he had threatened. *The New Living Translation*

When God saw what the people had done and how determined they were to turn from their wicked ways, He had compassion on them. **He decided not to destroy the city** as He had originally planned. (*Clear Word*)

God saw what they did. He saw that they turned from their wicked ways. So **God reconsidered his threat** to destroy them, and he didn't do it. *God's Word*

God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And **God renounced the punishment** He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out. *Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures*

When God saw that the people had stopped doing evil things, **he had pity and did not destroy them as he had planned.** *The Contemporary English Version*

See **1 Samuel Teacher's Guide #17**. See also Genesis 6:5-7; Exodus 32:14; 1 Samuel 15:11,35; 2 Samuel 24:16; 1 Chronicles 21:15; Jeremiah 26:13,19; Ezekiel 24:14; Joel 2:13,14; Amos 7:3,6; Jonah 4:2; compare Psalms 2:12; Contrast 1 Samuel 15:29; Numbers 23:19; Malachi 3:6.

12. What about Jonah's complaint? (Jonah 4:1-3) Is it fair for God to send one of His prophets off so far to give such a message and then just make him look like a false prophet?

God seems to be delighted when even the most cruel of peoples are prepared to learn something about Him. God has even put people to death in order to say something to other people! (See story of Uzzah - **Proverbs Teacher's Guide #11**; **Leviticus Teacher's Guide #13**; **2 Samuel Teacher's Guide #5**) God is not nearly so concerned about the details or the length of our lives on this earth as He is about what happens to us in eternity. The few events of this very brief life are only a preparation time for eternity. God knows that He will resurrect us when He is ready, and He knows what the results will be at that time. So those results are not nearly so worrisome to Him as they seem to be to us! Our only

important concern is to be sure that our relationship with Him is okay so He can do for us what He so much wants to do!

13. Is this just a message about Jonah being disobedient by not at first doing what God had asked him to do, or is there a really significant theological matter involved here regarding Jonah's attitude toward God?

Jonah's understanding of God's character and government are most exemplary. But Jonah is not prepared to be as considerate of his enemies as he is afraid that God will be with those enemies! How do we feel about our enemies!? The greatest truths about a person's character are demonstrated, not by how he treats his friends—or even who those friends are—but by how that person treats his enemies! Thus the way God deals with the Ninevites is a most significant theological matter. We need to compare the book of Nahum and Zephaniah as well when we ask this question.

14. In light of Jonah's comments about God, do you think he did his preaching with real conviction? Or all the while did he have in the back of his mind that God would probably not go through with this threatened punishment?

It is too bad we don't know more about the life of Jonah and how he came to know God so well! If we knew the answer to that question, we might better be able to know how he felt about this knowledge and understanding of God. It is likely in view of his comments in Jonah 4:1-3 that he had considered this possibility! He nevertheless apparently preached with enough conviction so the King and the entire city came to regard his predictions as serious and they decided to take the God of Israel seriously.

15. What do you think of Jonah's attitude about God? What about God's attitude toward these number one enemies of Israel? If Jonah understood that God is the kind of God that is implied in Jonah 4:2, why wouldn't he be proud of it and want to share that message?

God, as usual is very gracious even to the worst of sinners. These Assyrians were very cruel to those who were uncooperative or rebellious against their plans. It was their custom to take such people out and flay them with sticks until their entire skin was black and blue and then skin them alive!!! How could God love such people? How could Jonah even come near them? It would take quite a bit of convincing to get almost anyone to go to such a group of people! Jonah must have felt that God was able to care for him no matter what happened, and the experience with the "fish" convinced him that God was serious about this assignment!

Even if you thought that God was incredibly gracious, it would not be natural for any human to want to preach a fearsome message to people who would apparently just as readily skin you alive as look at you! In light of all this, one might wonder whether Jonah's reluctance was primarily because of his understanding of God's graciousness, or because of his understanding of the Assyrian's treatment of their enemies! If we knew more about what Jonah said to his fellow Jews about God, it would be easier to know how he really felt about Him! Jonah's statement in Jonah 4:1-3 suggests however that at least part of his reluctance was because he suspected that God would forgive these terrible people instead

of carrying out His threatened punishment! Imagine having such a great picture of God and being reluctant to take action because you were afraid God was too kind and too generous and He might not actually carry out their destruction as promised!

16. What was Jonah really afraid of? It seems that he was most of all concerned about his own reputation! (Jonah 4:1-3) Is it not apparent that Jonah didn't really care much about God's reputation nor about the heathen inhabitants of Nineveh?

Jonah's biggest fear seems to be that his own reputation had been destroyed.

**Deuteronomy 18:21,22:**

<sup>21</sup> And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?'-- <sup>22</sup> when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, **if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the LORD has not spoken;** the prophet has spoken it presumptuously, you need not be afraid of him. (RSV)

<sup>21</sup> You may wonder how you can tell when a prophet's message does not come from the LORD. <sup>22</sup> **If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD and what he says does not come true, then it is not the LORD's message. That prophet has spoken on his own authority, and you are not to fear him.** (GNB)

<sup>21</sup> If you wonder, 'How shall we know whether the prophecy is from the Lord or not?' <sup>22</sup> this is the way to know: **If the thing he prophesies doesn't happen, it is not the Lord who has given him the message; he has made it up himself. You have nothing to fear from him.** (TLB)

Didn't Jonah have good reason to be apprehensive in the light of this passage?

17. By comparison, what about us? How long has it been since you have heard a sermon about the "signs of the end" with all the dates being given and a real conviction that these signs are proof of the nearness of the end? Could we even today preach with conviction about the nearness of the end? What explanation should we give of the reasons for the delay? Would a study of this matter—the reason for the delay in the second coming—help us to reorient our thinking toward a more correct picture of God? How many years of warning were given to the people before the flood?

In the early years of the SDA Church we pointed to certain events known in history as proofs that the time of the end was near. These included the Lisbon earthquake (1755); the dark day (May 19, 1780) when the sun turned dark and the moon looked like blood; the falling of the stars (November 13, 1833); and the end of the 1260 year period (1798) when the pope was taken captive by Napoleon's forces. But at the beginning of the 21st century these signs seem to be getting old! Are we embarrassed that God is still waiting? Should we be embarrassed? What if we are part of the reason for the delay?

What has God always said about the nearness of the end? (See 1 John 2:18; Compare Joel 1:15; 2:1,2; 3:14; contrast 2 Thessalonians 2:1-6; Revelation 7:1-3) Why would God want each generation to think that the coming of the day of the LORD was near? Isn't it so we will always be ready? If God cries "wolf" too many times, do people get tired of hearing it?

18. Compare the response of the Ninevites to Jonah's message and the final comment about Israel and Judah themselves given much later at the end of 2 Chronicles 36:15,16. Who seems the most "Christian" or saveable?

How can we explain the much more favorable response from the heathen Assyrians than from the "faithful" Jews? Even the Old Testament Jews responded to the discovery and reading of God's word on several occasions. (Nehemiah 8; 2 Kings 22) But how did the Jews in Jesus' day respond to appeals from the "Word"? They wanted to kill Him! They thought they knew the Bible inside out. It had no more conversion appeal for them. This would suggest that such "appeals" will work for a while but not indefinitely.

19. Do you expect to see Jonah in the kingdom? If so, what do you think he will have to say about this whole experience? Don't you think he will look back and be able to say, "The picture of God that I was ashamed of then, I am proud of now?" Are we Adventists proud or distressed that God has waited 160 years? Are we being true friends of God and correctly representing Him?

While this is primarily a thought question, it is a very serious one. Jonah is mentioned by Jesus in the New Testament as we noted, but he is not found in Hebrews 11. Jesus makes no statement that would give a clear indication that Jonah will be in heaven. Personally, I am convinced that Jonah will be there. Do we know of any Bible writers that clearly will **not** be in heaven? Many aspects of Jonah's experience are very parallel to our experience today. We can learn many lessons from his story. May our picture of God be as good as his!

20. What did the angels learn from the stories and books of Jonah and Nahum?

It seems that God has an interest in all the peoples of planet earth and not just Hebrews. The entire book of Jonah was written for the benefit of the Assyrians and actually the peoples of Israel and Judah and the prophet Jonah look pretty bad by comparison!

"Jonah is a unique book. Not only is Jonah different from the other prophets we study in this volume, but his book is also different from any other Old Testament book. Because of these differences, Jonah is, in my estimation, the most miraculous book in the Bible. Let me explain—first the uniqueness and then the miraculousness of Jonah's book.

"All the other prophetic books we are studying consist mainly of oracles—that is, messages from God delivered by the prophet. These messages are usually couched in poetic language. In contrast, Jonah is a story. All the other prophets appear in a good light. They may not always be popular with the people, but they are seen as righteous people who speak for God. **Jonah is a villain. He, the prophet, is portrayed in a bad light. He runs away from God and tries to avoid God's call.**



**“Among the twelve ‘minor prophets’, Jonah is the only one whom God sends to minister in a foreign land. Obadiah may prophesy about Edom, but he does not ‘work’ there. The other prophets clearly minister to Israel or Judah. Outside of a few isolated cases, we know little about the success or failure of other prophets. Jonah’s preaching is successful almost beyond belief yet he is disturbed by that success! Jonah is different—even from evangelists today!**

**“All of this makes it miraculous to me that the book not only has been preserved by the Jews, but that it even has found a place in their (and our) inspired set of books! The book of Jonah makes God’s prophet and His people look bad and Israel’s worst enemy, Assyria, look good. Would Adventists, or any group, want to preserve and canonize a book that portrayed them in a bad light and pictured one of their worst enemies (atheists?) in a good light? Israel, under the prompting of God’s Spirit, did just that when she put the book of Jonah in the Bible!**

**“All of this was meant to jar Israel out of her self-centeredness and lead her to begin to reach out to other nations and be missionary minded. Israel was meant to be just like God with His great missionary heart. So are we, and that is the great lasting message of Jonah.” *Bible Amplifier - Jonah*, p. 157, 158**

The angels must have marveled that God had any interest in this very cruel nation known as Assyria. Why did God send a prophet to them? Why not to Moab, Edom, Syria, Egypt, Tyre and Sidon and Babylon? Is it possible that God saw something in Nineveh that He didn’t in these other places? Do we believe that God is fair? Why did He keep working with Israel and Judah? For a few more years at least? Are we to conclude that Jonah was sent to Nineveh because God saw something there that He recognized as being responsive to His appeals that He didn’t find even in Israel and Judah? Did the angels learn something about God’s missionary Spirit and His willingness to reach out to other peoples, even those who didn’t appear to be very ready for the gospel?

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khart@llu.edu

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