

Major Lessons from Minor Prophets Eager to Forgive (Jonah)

Lesson #6 for May 11, 2013

Scriptures: Jonah 1-4; Psalm 139:1-12; Isaiah 42:5; Revelation 10:6; Matthew 12:39-41; 2 Kings 17:5-23; 2 Chronicles 36:15-17.

1. Read Jonah 1-4. The story of Jonah with all his foibles is one of the best-known stories in the Bible. Many modern thinkers believe it is a fairy tale. They have heard about the big fish, but they know almost nothing about Jonah or about his visit to Nineveh. There are many amazing things about this book in addition to that fish story. We need to remember that if we think the story is a fairy tale, we are calling Jesus a liar! (Matthew 12:39-41)
2. Read 2 Kings 14:23-25. During the lengthy reign of Jeroboam II, Jonah the son of Amittai was known as a successful prophet from Gath Hopher because he had predicted the expansion of the northern kingdom's territory by taking it away from the southern kingdom of Judah. Presumably, he was respected by his colleagues and may have actually worked for the king.
3. Historically, we know that about 50 years later, the northern country of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians whose capital was Nineveh. Israel had already been threatened and overrun by the Assyrians several times and was forced to pay tribute to them. In order to understand the book of Jonah, we need to consider what we know about each of the principal participants.
4. **The "big fish":** There are, in fact, numerous stories in both ancient times and even modern times in which human beings and even large animals have been swallowed by large sea creatures such as large sharks or even whales.

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)

5. How long do you think Jonah was actually in the belly of the fish/whale? To the ancient Jews, any part of a day was counted as one day. Thus, three days and nights could refer to one full day and parts of two days, one on either side. It is important to compare this with the time Jesus was in the grave.
6. The story is told of 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!
7. 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!"
8. **Nineveh/Assyria:** 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.**
 - ◆ 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 (ca. 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. [*sic*] [B.C.] 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*)

9. Assyria was legendary for its cruelty. The repentance of Nineveh probably followed three major events in their history: Two plagues in 765 and 759 B.C. and a solar eclipse in 763 B.C. These events may have prepared the people for Jonah's message of judgment.
10. Assyria dominated the central portion of the ancient Near East for almost 300 years from around 900 B.C. to almost 600 B.C. Ahab (Israel), Jehu (Israel), Azariah (Judah), and Menahem (Israel) all paid tribute to Assyria. It is estimated that the walled city of Nineveh contained about 160,000 citizens. If you include the people who lived in nearby villages, it is possible that the total went up to 2 million.

792 B.C.: Jeroboam II began to reign in Israel.

ca. 770 B.C.: The days of Jonah and his ministry to Nineveh.

ca. 745 B.C.: The Assyrian Empire pushed westward under Tiglath-Pilezer III.

722 B.C.: Israel was taken captive by Assyria and disappeared into history.

612 B.C.: Nineveh fell to the Medes, the Scythians, and the Babylonians.

11. Compare the response of the Ninevites to God's final comment about the kingdom of Judah in 2 Chronicles 36:15,16. Which of these two nations seems to have been more savable?
12. How well did the king of Nineveh understand Israel's God? What do you think of his instructions to his people? (Jonah 3:6-9) How could a cow wear sackcloth? Why do you think Jonah had such an impact on that enormous city? How do you think the king heard about Jonah? Did Jonah tell the story of what happened to him? Did that give greater force to his evangelistic message?
13. **Jonah:** Try to imagine yourself in Jonah's shoes. He was known as a successful prophet. He was given a message by God, and he told his friends that he was single-handedly going to go to Nineveh and declare its destruction! Don't you think all of the Israelites were rejoicing to hear such a message? How do you think the Israelites felt when Jonah returned and announced that the Ninevites had repented and that the city was not destroyed? Did God care about Nineveh?
14. Considering the incredible impact which that one sentence message of Jonah seemed to have on the city of Nineveh, why did he seem to have so little impact on the people back in Israel?
15. **What picture of God did Jonah have?** Read Jonah 4. He knew God was a forgiving, gracious God! Was he proud of how God treated him and the Ninevites? Moses and Joshua recognized that God's reputation was an even more important issue than the fate of Israel! Consider others who spoke with God. (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!

16. 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 he take God's words seriously? Did God actually send the storm against the ship that Jonah was in? (Jonah 1:4) Or, is that 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?
17. Where did Jonah think he had gone when he was swallowed by that big "fish"? He believed he was in "the belly of Sheol," "the tomb of the dead," "the womb of Hades," or "the world of the dead"! (Different translations of Jonah 2:2)
18. What was Jonah really afraid of? It seems that he was most of all concerned about his own reputation! (Jonah 4:1-3) Did Jonah really care much about God's reputation? Or, about the survival of the heathen inhabitants of Nineveh?
19. Jonah's biggest fear seemed to have been that his own reputation had been destroyed. Hadn't the Israelites been warned about "false prophets"? Was Jonah concerned about being labeled?

Deuteronomy 18:21,22:

²¹ And if you say in your heart, "How may we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?"—²² 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)

²¹ "You may wonder how you can tell when a prophet's message does not come from the LORD. ²² **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)

20. **The book of Jonah:** 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

21. One of the unique things about the book of Jonah is that the “message” of Jonah is only one sentence long: “In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed!” (Jonah 3:4) Why was the book preserved? Both Jonah and the Israelites were portrayed in a bad light.
22. The book says a lot more about God than it does about Jonah! God is absolutely sovereign over His creation. He controlled the sea. He sent messages to Jonah. He controlled the fish, and He controlled the plant that Jonah sat under as he watched from a distance waiting to see Nineveh being destroyed. He even controlled the worm that killed the plant!
23. It is likely that Jonah was the very first prophetic book to be written. He probably wrote in the 770s B.C. during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.). The Assyrian kings during that time were Adad-Merari III (810-753 B.C.) and Asher-Dan III (771-754 B.C.). During the latter part of Jeroboam II’s reign, the ministries of Amos and Hosea in the northern kingdom and Isaiah and Micah in the southern kingdom also took place.
24. Four different major views have been suggested for understanding the book of Jonah: 1) Myth, 2) Allegory, 3) Parable, or 4) History/biography. If we are to take the narrative of the story itself seriously and also take the words of Jesus (Matthew 12:38-41; 16:4; and Luke 11:29-32) seriously, then we must believe that the story of Jonah is historically accurate.
25. The predominant theme of the book of Jonah seems to be God’s gracious extension of His mercy to Gentile nations. However, notice some other major themes of the book: **1)** God’s appeal to Jonah, the sailors, the Ninevites, and finally, Jonah again. **2)** God’s sovereignty over life, the weather, and circumstances, even controlling the plant which Jonah stood under and the worm that destroyed the plant. **3)** A very important contrast between the ineffectiveness of the gods of the mariners and the Ninevites in contrast to the sovereignty of Yahweh, Israel’s God. **4)** The contrast between God’s purpose in placing the nation of Israel at the crossroads of the ancient world so they could witness to all nations around them and their own nationalistic, ethnocentric pride which prevented them from doing any of that. And, **5)** Jonah’s three day journey in the belly of the fish/whale as a type of the three day rest by Jesus in the tomb.
26. If you had been Jonah, would you have written this book when the events were all over?
27. **God:** The main character of the book is really God. He is mentioned directly 39 times. Jonah is mentioned only 18 times.
28. Does God change His mind? (Jonah 3:9,10; Exodus 32:14; Numbers 23:19; 1 Samuel 15:10,11,29,31; 2 Samuel 24:16; Jeremiah 4:28; Romans 11:29; Malachi 3:6)
29. Was it fair for God to send a successful prophet of His on such a long journey only to have him come back looking like a false prophet? The Ninevites seemed to be mortal enemies of the Israelites. Among other things, they had oppressed Israel and exacted harsh tributes. Eventually, they were going to destroy the entire northern kingdom of Israel. So, how should a good Israelite prophet feel about them? Often, the real truth about a person’s character is found not in how he treats his friends but in how he treats his enemies.
30. In our day, are we afraid of being called “false prophets” when we talk about the Lisbon earthquake (November 1, 1755), the dark day and the sun turning black (May 19, 1780), even the falling of the stars (November 13, 1833)? What about the end of the 1260-year period in 1798? Even members of our own church are questioning what we have traditionally taught about 1844!
31. Do you expect to see Jonah in heaven? If so, what do you think he will have to say about this whole experience? What do we Adventists say about the fact that we have apparently been responsible for delaying the second coming of Christ by at least 170 years?

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Info@theox.org

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