

## JONAH - 2



by Richard Flood, used by permission. All rights reserved.

## Word List

Hesed (chesed)  
Sheol  
The Pit  
Chaos

## Basic Bible References

Jonah 1–2  
Exodus 4:10–14  
Jeremiah 1:4–8

## SUMMARY

The opening verses of the book of Jonah lead readers to think that this is one more of the books of the faithful prophets. It is, but this book is different. For these are not the words of Jonah. Every other book attributed to a prophet contains mostly the words of that prophet. Not so with Jonah. Instead, the book of Jonah is an odd story about an odd character named Jonah and set in a place that thrived long ago and far away.

Jonah is not simply a recalcitrant prophet; Jonah is a totally disobedient prophet. His planned flight to Tarshish is his attempt to disobey God by running away. But Jonah will learn what an impossible task that is. No one can be free of God. After his botched attempt at utter disobedience, Jonah ends up right back where he started, only a little messier.

## JONAH - 2 THE ADVENTURES OF JONAH



### *There Goes Jonah*

**Read Jonah 1:1–3.** God—who is prominent throughout this story—sets things in motion by giving a divine order to Jonah. He is to travel to that mammoth and powerful city Nineveh to tell the inhabitants that God is aware of their sinful actions. The first question that might be asked is, why? What is God planning to do? First, certainly, God wants an end to their evil behavior that is causing great suffering to others. God is sending Jonah to the Assyrian capital to put an end to the suffering of Assyria’s neighbors. But Jonah’s fear is that if the Ninevites repent, God might also forgive them. God has a reputation for that kind of thing. After all, in the Hebrew scriptures, the most used term for describing God is *hesed* or *chesed* (loving-kindness).

Hesed is God’s loving kindness—mercy and grace—to us and to the whole creation. Hesed is also performed by people through actions far beyond and above what is culturally or ethically expected. Jonah performs none of these, but the sailors do. God constantly is surrounding everyone with hesed. As we will see later in the story, Jonah simply hates that about God. And in later chapters in this Resource Book, we will see that hesed is the main topic in our study of the book of Ruth.

### *And Away We Go*

The story of Jonah begins with God calling him to go to Nineveh, but Jonah has other plans. Jonah is not merely a reluctant prophet, he *refuses* the role. Jonah does not argue with God, he does not engage in sharp repartee with God. Jonah simply does not go when he is told to go. It was not unheard of for hesitant prophets, like Moses and Jeremiah, to argue with God. Then God offers them reassurance and ultimately they accept the assignment. For example, **read Exodus 4:10–14 and Jeremiah 1:4–8.** But Jonah takes off without uttering a single word to God. Jonah’s plan is simple: 1) find a ship headed for the other side of the Mediterranean—away from God’s territory; 2) go there; 3) settle down; and 4) do nothing.

When he arrives at Joppa he pays for his passage and waits for the ship to sail. In the same way that Jonah said nothing to God, Jonah does not speak to the sailors either. Note that Jonah does not speak until verse 9. Also note that Jonah is the only person in the story who has a name.

## *Inviting Chaos*

**Read verses 4–17.** The people of Israel were not familiar with life on or near the sea. They left sailing to their coastal neighbors, the Phoenicians. Throughout the ancient Middle East, the sea—and in fact all large bodies of water—was symbolic of chaos. Chaos highlighted the impotence of humanity, for who could control the sea or bring order out of the chaos of its crashing waves? The Bible begins with the answer to that very question: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.” (Gen 1:1–3)

The book of Job makes the same kind of statement about God’s unique power:

Who pent up the sea behind closed doors  
when it leapt tumultuous out of the womb,  
when I wrapped it in a robe of mist  
and made black clouds its swaddling bands;  
when I cut out the place I had decreed for it  
and imposed gates and a bolt?  
“Come thus far,” I said, “and no further;  
Here your proud waves must break.

(Job 38:8–11 New Jerusalem Bible)

God creates the world not out of nothing, but by bringing order out of the chaos of “the waters” (see Gen 1:1–3). The creation poem in Genesis 1:1–2:3 details God’s work of creation—which is nothing short of the destruction of chaos. God promises Noah, after the flood—the unleashing of chaos—that chaos would not be set free again: “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” (Gen 8:22) There will be order and dependability.

The symbol of water/chaos is used throughout the Bible. Moses is shown to have God’s power when he lifts his hands and God parts the Red Sea, allowing the people cross it dry shod (Ex 14:21). Jesus walks on the water (Mt 14:25) and commands the Sea of Galilee (Lk 8:24b). The demons in the story of the Gerasene demoniac are driven by Jesus out of the possessed man and into pigs. The pigs carry the demons over a cliff and into the sea—back into chaos (Lk 8:33). Revelation 21:1



begins the celebration of “a new heaven and a new earth” by saying, “*and the sea was no more*” (italics mine). So here, Jonah’s attempt to live without God and without God’s direction puts both his life and the lives of those around him into chaos. Note, too, Jonah has none of God’s power to control the chaos of his life—or the sea.

### *“Prays” Like a Sailor*

Merchant sailors throughout history have been thought of as rough, profane, sometimes lawless men. Going to sea was certainly one way for the hunted to escape the law. A crew in the Mediterranean would contain men of many nationalities and backgrounds. They were not noted for their piety. Shore leave was not primarily used as a time to find a place to worship. Yet, look at these sailors. As the terrible storm breaks upon them, Jonah is asleep. Those whom Jonah might have looked down on as pagans are busy praying, as well as trying to control the ship. They are not Israelites, for each sailor calls upon his own god. The contrast between the sleeping Jonah and the praying sailors is heightened when the non-Israelite captain shouts to Jonah, “Get up, call on your god!” (v. 6) A heathen is commanding a Hebrew prophet to pray!

In verse 9, Jonah answers the captain’s question: “of what people are you?” One can almost hear a superior tone as Jonah identifies himself and his God, “the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” The reader might well question Jonah’s claim that he worships this God. For if that were so, what is he doing on that ship? Jonah talks big, but his actions contradict his words.

The news of Jonah’s insult to his amazingly strong God strikes greater fear into the sailors’ hearts. Is Jonah nuts? What does he think he is doing by running from his God? He has put all these people in danger with his disobedience.

Jonah’s answer to their question of how they can escape the storm (v. 12) shows Jonah to be honest and brave (or is it that he would rather be dead than go back to God?). Face to face, Jonah is willing to be sacrificed to save the lives of these non-Israelites. The sailors’ answer to Jonah’s statement shows them to be men of compassion and integrity. They had tried their best to keep the boat afloat in the midst of the storm. When it becomes obvious that there is no more they can do—with the exception of tossing Jonah overboard—they *pray to Jonah’s God*. They pray for their own lives and for God to note their lack of guilt in the sacrifice of Jonah. After the deed is done, the sea immediately calms. It is obvious to the sailors that Jonah’s God is not one to toy with—a

point Jonah had not taken into account until now. The sailors are amazed and converted. When last we see them, they are making vows to Jonah's God and offering sacrifices.

These foreigners, these "heathen," are decent people. It becomes obvious that "foreigners" can have compassion, sincerity, and piety as true and real as anyone's. Jonah, as we will see, does not consider that when he thinks of the Ninevites. Perhaps he is one of those folks who can appreciate an individual from another race or religion face to face but cannot see the larger group as consisting of worthwhile people. One of the overarching themes of the book of Jonah is, how are God's chosen people to treat the outsider? Who is the stranger in God's eyes?

The reader is forced to compare the strangers, the foreign sailors, to the only Israelite on board—Jonah. They work; he sleeps. They pray willingly; Jonah is ordered to pray. They act; he only reacts—not even speaking until he is commanded to. So far, foreigners, 1; Jonah, 0 (although he does get credit for allowing them to sacrifice him).

### *Jonah Prays*

**Read Jonah 2.** Finally, in—of all places—the belly of a great fish, Jonah begins to pray. His prayer is not an original one. Almost every verse is taken from one psalm or another. Praying the psalms, Jonah gives thanks for God's intervention that has saved him from drowning. When Jonah thought he was at the end of his life, God intervened. The theme of the prayer is deliverance, which comes only from God. The prayer speaks of deliverance from the "deep," "the heart of the seas," "waves" and "billows," all standing for chaos, perhaps even the chaos of one's own thoughts. *Sheol* (2:2) was the abode of the dead; it was not a place of punishment, simply a place to be. It was thought to be under the earth. "The Pit" in verse 6 is a reference to *Sheol*.

This prayer is the only thing in the book that does not move the story forward, and the vows in the prayer are never acted upon in the rest of the story. We never see Jonah praise God as he promises in verse 9, nor does he offer sacrifice. Never does he mention just why he is in such trouble; never does he pray one word of repentance. When he is vomited out, he is the same angry, frustrated man he was when he started out. In addition, his prayer takes aim at "those who worship vain idols" (v. 8) when such people have just shown him compassion. His commendation of his own actions rings hollow. Jonah prays, but the prayer is weak and he soon forgets it.

Lying face down in the sand and covered with fish vomit, Jonah will no longer refuse to do God's work. But it seems more like waving a white flag than heartfelt obedience. The fish is at God's disposal, as are the storm and the sea. The fish obeys its maker, as do the plant and the worm later in the story; which is more than we can say for Jonah. Will Jonah ever learn? Will we?

## FOR FURTHER STUDY AND REFLECTION

### *Memory Bank*

Memorize Genesis 1:1–3 for its beauty and to remember the role of water in the Bible—a symbol for chaos.

### *Research*

1. In a concordance or a website such as *oremus Bible Browser* (<http://bible.oremus.org/>), look up the word *Nineveh*. Read several of the verses in the Hebrew scriptures that talk about the evils of Assyria and its capital, Nineveh.
2. Research the history of the ancient Near East to see what religions were popular at the time. Research further one of the religions that interests you.

### *Reflection*

1. How does the knowledge that water is a symbol for chaos help you understand some passages? How do you see chaos manifesting itself today? How is God asking you to respond to it?
2. How do you react to people of different faiths? What are your ideas about how God views their worship?
3. How do you run away from God when God calls?