

In the first half of the book of Jonah, we see the only Biblical record of a prophet refusing to proclaim the message that the LORD had given him to preach. Jonah's rebellion did not last long because the LORD gave him time to reconsider his disobedience while in a fish's belly at the bottom of the sea. Jonah came out of that experience with a new appreciation for God's forgiveness and redemption.

Jonah 1

1 Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.

“Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai” – There is only one other brief mention of the prophet Jonah in the OT (2 Kings 14:25), so the bulk of what we know about Jonah is what we can glean from this book and the brief references to him by Jesus (Matt. 12:39-41; 16:4; Luke 11:30, 32). The reference in 2 Kings tells us that he lived during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel. Here we are told that the LORD spoke to Jonah and gave him a specific task to do.

“saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me” – Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the nation that would eventually conquer the northern kingdom of Israel and lead them away captive. Many prophets in the OT proclaimed God's judgment against other nations, but this is the only time that the LORD instructed a prophet to go personally to a Gentile nation to deliver a message. God's holiness demanded that He judge Nineveh for their wickedness and yet He was willing to show mercy because He wanted to spare them for a time. Perhaps He didn't want to destroy Assyria yet because He wanted to use them later as a tool of judgment against Israel.

3 But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

We will explore the reasons for his disobedience later in chapter 4, but Jonah did not want to obey the LORD's instructions to go to Nineveh and cry out against their wickedness. He instead travels to Joppa, a city on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and finds a ship that was going to Tarshish. We don't know for sure where Tarshish was but many commentators believe it was on the southern coast of Spain. It seems that Jonah was attempting to get as far away from Nineveh as he could. We have to wonder why Jonah believed he could flee from the presence of the LORD since he had to know that the LORD is both omnipotent and omnipresent. Perhaps he was attempting to flee from the place where the LORD had spoken to him (the land of Israel), hoping that the voice of the LORD would not follow him.

Verses 4-6: The LORD sent a great storm on the sea that threatened to sink the ship. The sailors wake Jonah, who had fallen asleep, so that he could join them in each man calling on his own god for help.

7 And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.

Casting lots was a method to ask the gods questions under the premise that the gods controlled what would otherwise be the random results of the casting. They wanted to discover who onboard the ship had angered his god. The LORD made sure that Jonah was identified as the reason for their predicament.

Verses 8-14: We are told that the sailors asked Jonah to disclose his background and what he had done to offend his God. They apparently had heard of the great things the LORD had done in the past and it frightened them greatly to hear that Jonah was running from the LORD. Jonah's solution to save the sailor's lives and their ship was for them to toss him into the sea. To their credit, the sailors did not want to take that drastic step and only wanted to do it as a last resort. They attempted to row the ship to shore but finally gave up when they were unsuccessful.

15 So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging.

After praying and asking the LORD to not hold them responsible for Jonah's life, they threw him off the ship and immediately the storm came to an end. When the sailors saw the power of the LORD, they honored Him by offering a sacrifice and making vows (v. 16).

17 Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

“Now the LORD had prepared a great [large] fish to swallow up Jonah” – The LORD, being omniscient, had arranged the circumstances for Jonah to be tossed into the sea and had a “great fish” ready to swallow and rescue him from sinking to the bottom of the sea and drowning there. We are not told what species of fish this was and the Hebrew word for “whale” is not used here. The LORD had a fish of sufficient size in the right place and at the right time to swallow Jonah.

“And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” – We also do not know what kind of experience that Jonah was having for three days and nights, although we are given some clues in the next chapter. We don't know how he survived except that the LORD preserved Him. Jesus compared His own death, burial, and resurrection to Jonah's time in the belly of the great fish (**Matt. 12:40** “For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”), so perhaps Jonah did die in the fish's belly and the LORD raised him from the dead.

Jonah 2

1 Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, 2 And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, *and thou heardest my voice*.

“Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly” – Apparently Jonah was alive and was conscious during at least part of his time in the belly of this great fish. He was aware of the desperate nature of his situation and began praying to the LORD.

“And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction [distress; trouble] unto the LORD, and he heard me” – Jonah was definitely in distress and recognized how much trouble he was in. He was going to die unless the LORD helped him and so he began praying to the LORD. Jonah is likely remembering the essence of his prayer and is recounting it here in poetic language. Jonah states that even while he was in the bottom of the sea inside the belly of a great fish, the LORD still was able to hear his prayer.

“out of the belly of hell [abode of the dead] cried I, and thou heardest my voice” – Jonah is stressing the fact that the LORD heard his cry for help even on the threshold of death. The LORD was the only One Who could rescue Jonah from this situation.

Verses 3-6: Jonah recognizes that it was the LORD Who has cast him into the sea as a punishment. Yet, despite being cast out of the LORD's sight, Jonah still looks to the Him for redemption. Jonah's situation looks desperate as he sinks to the bottom of the sea but the LORD rescues him from certain death.

7 When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.

“When my soul fainted [to grow weak and feeble] within me I remembered the LORD” – When Jonah was on the verge of death, he repented of his disobedience and prayed to the LORD for help.

“and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple” – Jonah's prayer came when he was at his weakest and most desperate moment and while he was far geographically from the temple of the LORD. Even then the LORD was still able to hear his prayer. Jonah's statements should encourage us when we are in desperate situations, knowing that the LORD can still hear us.

Verses 8-9: Jonah rejoices in the fact that those who worship worthless idols are depriving themselves of the mercies and blessing that can only come from the LORD. Jonah, grateful that the LORD had forgiven and rescued him, praises the LORD and promises to keep the vows that he has made to Him. Jonah gives praise to the LORD by stating that salvation can only come from the LORD and not through any false god.

10 And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry *land*.

The expression “dry land” refers to land that is above the water, as opposed to land that is under the water. The fish did not vomit Jonah out in the depths of the sea, but onto the seashore. The LORD responded to Jonah's repentant prayer for help by commanding the fish to vomit Jonah out of his belly. We are not told the geographic location where the fish did this, although some commentators believe it may have been near Joppa since the LORD still wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh (Jonah 3:1-2).