



St Luke's Connect Group Notes
Autumn 2022

Jonah – the reluctant messenger

Winston Churchill once said “The farther backward you look, the farther forward you are likely to see.” The book of Jonah is one of the so-called twelve minor prophets, and in these books we look backward more than 2,500 years. Understanding what they teach helps us to see farther forward than would normally be expected.

Many people will have heard the story “Jonah was swallowed by a whale.” But there is much more to the story than that!

- This is the story of the most reluctant messenger in the Bible!
- It challenges us about how we view those who don’t know God, and about our attitude to evangelism.
- We see the God of great grace towards “outsiders” and of great patience towards “insiders”.
- Key verse: “I knew you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love.” Jonah 4:2
- Key themes: -
 - Don't be surprised if God’s plans differ from yours
 - Be willing to do the hard things that God asks
 - Remember that God cares for the world and not just for the church

Careful readers will find that the book of Jonah is a crafted work of literature. Its four chapters recount two incidents. In chapters 1 and 2 Jonah is given a command from God but fails to obey it. In chapters 3 and 4 he is given the command again and this time he carries it out. The two accounts (rather like “scenes”) are laid out in a parallel pattern: -

Scene 1 (chapters 1 & 2)	Scene 2 (chapters 3 & 4)
<i>Jonah, the pagans, and the Sea</i>	<i>Jonah, the pagans, and the City</i>
Jonah and God’s Word	
1:1 God’s Word comes to Jonah	3:1 God’s Word comes to Jonah
1:2 The message to be conveyed	3:2 The message to be conveyed
1:3 The response of Jonah	3:3 The response of Jonah
Jonah and God’s World	
1:4 The word of warning	3:4 The word of warning
1:5 The response of the pagans	3:5 The response of the pagans
1:6 The response of the pagan leader	3:6 The response of the pagan leader
1:7f How the pagans’ response was ultimately better than Jonah’s	3:7f How the pagans’ response was ultimately better than Jonah’s
Jonah and God’s Grace	
2:1-10 How God taught grace to Jonah through the fish	4:1-10 How God taught grace to Jonah through the plant

The book of Jonah – its place in the Old Testament

There are twelve “minor prophets” at the end of the Old Testament, and Jonah is number five in the list. Unlike other prophets, there is very little prophecy in the book of Jonah – it is a story.

Not much of a prophecy!

Although the book is placed amongst the prophets, there is only one line of prophecy in the whole book: “Forty days from now, Nineveh will be destroyed.” Jonah 3:4

The meaning of “Jonah”

The Hebrew word “Yonah” means “dove.”

Gath Hepher

2 Kings 14:25 tells us that Jonah came from Gath Hepher, which is three miles north of Nazareth in lower Galilee. In John 7:52, the Pharisees say “Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.” So, what about Jonah?!

Jonah – Story or Fact?

Jonah – story	Jonah - fact
View 1 Jonah is a parable about Israel’s lack of faith and responsiveness to God compared with that of the so-called ungodly nations. It is a good story and told in an exciting style.	View 2 The Bible has a number of miraculous events – so why not preserve a man in a whale? The style of the book of is similar to the stories of Elisha and Elijah.

Jonah can be viewed as a story or a fact, but the message is this:

God loves all the world and wants everyone to turn to Him.

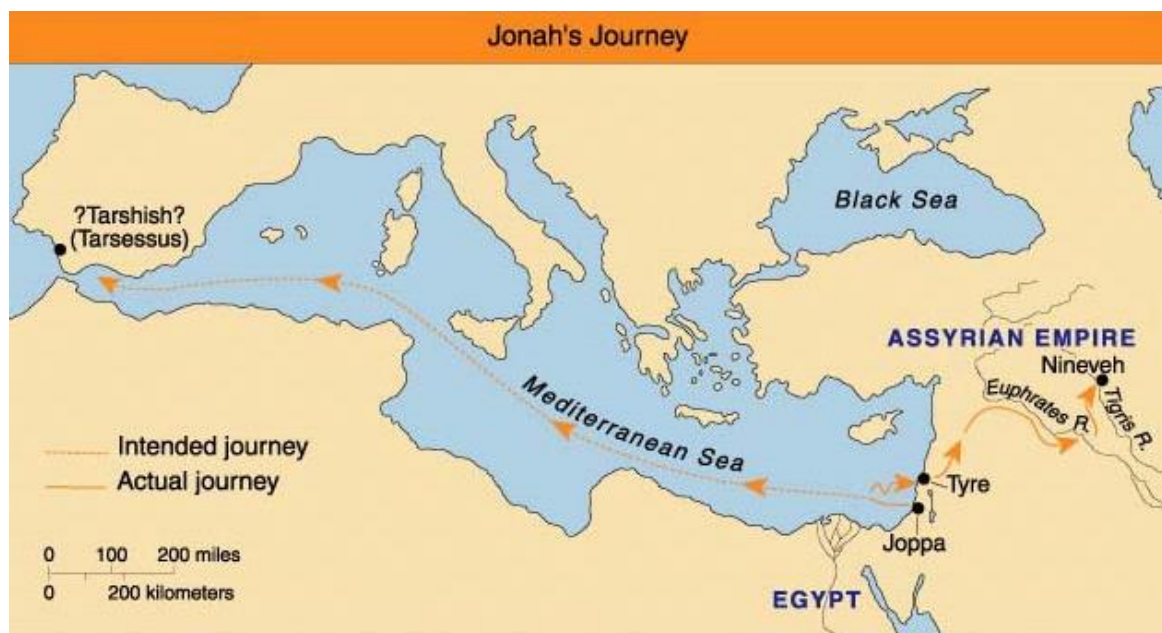
Jonah’s dilemma

Jonah wants a God of his own making, a God who simply smites the bad people (e.g. the Ninevites) and blesses the good people (e.g. Jonah and his fellow countrymen).

However, when the real God shows up, Jonah is thrown into fury or despair.

Jonah finds the real God to be an enigma because he cannot reconcile the mercy of God with His justice. How can God (Jonah asks) be merciful and forgiving to people who have done such violence and evil? How can God be both merciful and just?

Is this dilemma answered in the book of Jonah? Is it answered in the rest of the Bible?



Tarshish

The exact location of Tarshish is unknown. It could be a city in Spain (Tarsessus) or it could be metaphorical "as far away as possible."

Joppa

A port in the south of Israel. Now known as Jaffa, this is where Kevin and Jennifer Cable minister – they are St Luke's Church Mission Society partners.

Nineveh

According to Genesis 10:11 Nineveh was founded by Nimrod the hunter.

Nineveh was the stronghold of the huge, powerful and aggressive Assyrian Empire. The city of Nineveh had over 1,500 towers and the walls were so thick that you could drive three chariots abreast along them.

Nahum (one of the twelve Minor Prophets) prophesied the fall of Nineveh, which occurred in 612BC. The city was obliterated and only rediscovered centuries later.

Assyria

Assyria expanded under powerful emperors such as Tiglath-Pileser (I, II and III) Sargon, Sennacherib and Esarhaddon. Under Esarhaddon the Empire extended from the Persian Gulf down and into Egypt.

They were known for crushing any opposition, stealing the treasures, destroying the cities, and taking a nation into captivity.

Read Jonah 1:1-16

1. Look up 2 Kings 14:23-27

Jonah is mentioned as a prophet working through the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (the northern Kingdom) - 793-753 BC. He foretold the extension of Israel's border during a time of relative prosperity and peace, when the Assyrian threat was reduced. The book of Jonah is anonymous and claims to be about him and not by him.

2. Have you ever been caught up in a terrible storm while travelling?

3. What is surprising about God's command in verse 2?

4. Why do you think Jonah disobeyed?

5. Hearing God's call

Jonah heard the call of God and ran the other way. You might like to look up (one or two) other prophets who heard the call of God and how they responded: -

- Elijah in 1 Kings 17:1-6
- Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:4-19
- Isaiah in Isaiah 6:1-3
- Moses in Exodus 3:1-4

6. We may think that Jonah is failing in his attempt to flee from God – but do we sometimes live this way ourselves?

7. What have you found most often keeps you from doing something that you believe God wants you to do?

- I don't want to make waves
- I'm not qualified
- I'm afraid I might not be hearing God correctly
- Other

Suggestions for Prayer – see later in these notes

Something for me to do/ remember

Read Jonah 1:17 – 2:10

1. Has there been a time when you felt isolated, lonely or discouraged? What caused it?
2. What do you suppose Jonah did when he was in the fish?
 - Repented
 - Wondered what was going to happen next
 - Reflected on his life
 - Other
3. What would you call Jonah's prayer from inside the fish?
 - A cry for help
 - A psalm of thanksgiving
 - A spiritual recommitment
 - A confession of hope
4. Imagine a friend who was once living as a Christian, but who has now stopped. They say “I cannot come back to God knowing what has happened.” How would you answer from Jonah 2?
5. Does Jonah seem to exhibit hope that God will deliver him?
6. Is it easier to believe that God will provide deliverance when you're “in the belly of the fish” or when you are “on dry land?”
7. Much of Jonah's prayer can be found in the book of Psalms. How does this encourage us to be familiar with some of the Bible?
8. “The greatest miracle does not take place in the belly of the fish but in the heart of the prophet.” What do you think?

Suggestions for Prayer – see later in these notes

Something for me to do/ remember

Read Jonah 3

1, Have you ever received a second chance to do something you had failed to do, or failed to do properly, the first time? What was different the second time around?

2. What differences can you spot in Jonah's reaction in 1:3 and 3:3-4? Why do you think this is?

3. Jonah's sermon is pretty short – 8 words in English and 5 in Hebrew!

The American author John Piper has written: “Books don't change people, paragraphs do. Sometimes even sentences.” Is there a short phrase or a scripture that has really impacted your life in a special way?

4. How would you describe the Ninevites' response to the message: -

- Radical
- Humble
- Sincere
- Appropriate
- Just what God wanted

5. Have you heard of large-scale turnings to God

(a) in church history?

(b) around the world today?

How might such news encourage our hearts? Do you look out for “good news” like this?

6. Compare the different reactions: Jonah with the sailors in chapter 1, and then Jonah with the people of Nineveh in chapter 3. Who is listening more to God? How can it be that sometimes not-yet-believers are more willing to listen and to change than believers?

Suggestions for Prayer – see later in these notes

Something for me to do/ remember

Read Jonah 4

1. When you were young and you didn't get your own way, how did you react?

2. How does Jonah respond to Gods mercy to Nineveh? Jonah was angry with God: -
 - Because God didn't do what He had said?
 - Because God acted in a different way from what he wanted
 - Because he didn't think the Ninevites were worthy of God's mercy
 - Other ...

3. Are there times when you get angry with God? What sparks you off?
 - Life in general
 - The state of the world
 - Not understanding God's will for your life
 - Other ...

4. What lesson does God teach Jonah through the vine?
 - That he had no right to be angry
 - That it is God's right to decide who receives His mercy
 - That God's provision shouldn't be taken for granted
 - That Jonah should change his attitude about the Ninevites
 - Other ...

5. What is the good news about God in this passage?

6. If God is concerned about town cities and villages, how does this affect our attitude and prayers for the area we live in?

7. The book of Jonah ends with a rather enigmatic question. One commentator suggests “The book forces us to contemplate our personal destiny. It remains unfinished in order that we may provide our own conclusion ... For you are Jonah: I am Jonah”. It is as if God shoots this arrow of a question at Jonah, but Jonah disappears, and we realise that the arrow is aimed at us. How will we answer?

Suggestions for Prayer – see later in these notes

Something for me to do/ remember

Luke 15:11-32 - A familiar parable

Bible commentators have noticed similarities between the story of Jonah and the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15.

In the first half of the book, Jonah plays the part of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-24) who runs away from his father. In the second half of the book, Jonah is like the older brother (Luke 15:25-32) who obeys his father but berates him for his graciousness to repentant sinners.

Read through the parable of the prodigal son. What similarities do you spot between the parable and the story of Jonah?

Read Matthew 12:38-42

Here is the one reference to Jonah in the New Testament.

1. Why do you think the Pharisees and teachers of the law wanted to see a miracle?
2. In what ways does Jesus respond to this demand for a miracle?
3. What are the key similarities between the experience of Jonah and that of Jesus? And what are the significant differences?
4. Why do you think Jesus spoke of the people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South (Queen of Sheba)? You may like to look up 1 Kings 10:1-10. See also question 6 in the study on Jonah 3.
5. Thinking back over the studies in Jonah, what has this taught us about our faith?
 - In relation to ourselves?
 - In relation to what God can do?
 - In relation to others?

Thank God

- For the death and resurrection of Jesus and all that means for us.

Ask God

- For His grace for yourself and other Christians as we seek to share the good news.

Suggestions for Prayer

Jonah 1:1-16 – “I won’t go”

Thank God

- That the scriptures are so honest, showing how even a prophet like Jonah can get it wrong!
- That He wants to bless all peoples, even those (like Nineveh) who are openly opposed to him

Ask God

- To give you confidence that His grace can reach the people in your life
- Pray for Kevin and Jennifer Cable, based in Jaffa (was Joppa) – a recent newsletter is attached in these notes

John 1:17-2:10 – “I will go”

Thank God

- For the way in which the Scriptures help us in times of difficulty

Ask God

- To help for those who feel they are in the depths. That may be individuals or countries, e.g. Ukraine, Pakistan etc

Jonah 3 – “I’m here”

Thank God

- For what we learn about His character in this passage
- That all over the world, lives are being changed by His grace

Ask God

- Pray for the Pain’s in Japan – a recent newsletter is attached in these notes
- Pray for the UK that we shall see a significant turning to God

Jonah 4 – “I shouldn’t have come”

Thank God

- That He is always willing to teach us more

Ask God

- That we will have compassionate hearts for those who don’t know His love