

## The Adventures of Jonah

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Of all the prophets in the Bible, Jonah is one of the most curious. His adventures are legendary; so is his defiance of God. Despite his famous shortcomings, he remains one of the most successful of God's appointed messengers. No other prophet converts a pagan city as hardened and pitiless as Nineveh, yet he leaves a legacy that is tarnished.

Nineveh was not the capital of Assyria at the time, though it was the religious center of the empire. According to official records, the Assyrians had suffered a number of calamities in the years preceding Jonah's visit. Famine, military setbacks, bad omens, and domestic uprisings within a relatively short span left the population fearful. Like many moderns left in the wake of catastrophe, they no doubt wondered why their gods allowed them to suffer such misfortune.

Following an unsuccessful detour to Tarshish, Jonah makes his way east to Nineveh, preaching his message against the city: "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed" (Jonah 3:5). A mere eight words in English (and only five in Hebrew), this line is a summary of Jonah's message. He is so effective that even the city's ruler hears the news and demands that the entire population repent in the hopes that God will spare them. Why is Jonah so successful? It is the indubitable nature of Jonah's message that captures the Ninevites' attention.

The Assyrians practiced extispicy, reading animal livers to discover messages from the gods. A diviner would whisper the question into the ear of the animal, slaughter it, and closely examine its liver. The pattern of veins and other features on the organ would hopefully reveal the proper answer. Archaeologists have uncovered dozens of texts and even model livers made of clay. It did not always give satisfactory answers, as one might expect. Contrary to the less-than-forthcoming practice of extispicy and other methods of divination, Jonah explodes on the scene, preaching with determined certainty that the people's actions have prompted divine retribution. It is the certainty of his message that captures the attention of the Ninevites mired in political and religious chaos.

Because of the true repentance of the people, God mercifully stays His hand of judgment. Surprisingly, Jonah's response is an angry one. In some ways it is understandable. The Assyrians gloried in their brutality. Reliefs depict Assyrian soldiers torturing and impaling their victims,

breaking legs, cutting out tongues, and piling up severed heads and hands of their foes. In one sense they were the world's first terrorists. Their targets included the people of Israel and Judah. It is easy to see why Jonah eagerly anticipated the destruction of these artisans of cruelty.

Can a people so barbaric be given mercy? Jonah discovers that indeed they can. And there the book ends rather unexpectedly, as the prophet is rebuked by God. It leaves the reader wanting more. What about the rest of the story? What happens to Jonah? Does he ever accept that the Lord of Israel can forgive a pagan people? Unfortunately, the prophet's fate remains a mystery.

In a world where it seems that biblical values have been turned upside down, the book of Jonah is needed more than ever. While we marvel at the theological richness of Paul, the practical advice of Peter, and the always-timely messages of Jesus, we must also hear the message of Jonah. Christians, too, can be guilty of self-righteous elitism. It is not uncommon for believers to pass judgment on those whom they consider less faithful. Perhaps more people would feel freer to confess their sins (cf. James 5:16) and respond to an invitation at a sermon's conclusion if there were less Christians like Jonah and more like Christ. We would do well to remember that the ground is level at the foot of the Cross.

God's line of questioning penetrates Jonah's prejudices. We must picture ourselves standing alongside God's wayward prophet when the Almighty questions him. He asks Jonah – and us – “Does the deliverance of other souls not please you, even if they belong to those who have done a terrible wrong?” Consider carefully before you answer that question.