

# **Jonah's Mission to Nineveh**

*Jonah's narrowness and God's universal love*

- Chapter I      –    Jonah's call and flight**
- Chapter II     –    Jonah's prayer and deliverance**
- Chapter III    –    Jonah's sermon and Nineveh's repentance**
- Chapter IV     –    Jonah's anger and God's reproof**

## **I – Jonah's call and flight**

The Old Testament book of Jonah is referred to three times in the New Testament, thus the seal of divine truth is affixed to the story. However, this entry in the Bible has become most offensive to human reason and is always a favorite subject on the index list for scoffers. The Lord Jesus Himself assures us of the fact that Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of a fish. Jesus also confirms the fact that by one man's preaching Nineveh was led to repentance. In **Matthew 12:39-41** we read: "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here." The other two testimonies of Christ are found in **Matthew 16:4**: "A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but

**none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.” and in Luke 11:29,30: As the crowds increased, Jesus said, “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.”**

The book of Jonah especially shows that God, even in the Old Testament, was a God not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles. Even though God had chosen Israel to be his people in a particular sense, yet he did not absolutely exclude the Gentiles from the salvation of Christ. Jonah’s Mission to Nineveh and the results of this mission are a powerful, practical proof of the Lord’s mercy. **Psalm 36:5-7: “Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O Lord, you preserve both man and beast. How priceless is your unfailing love!”**

The call that Jonah received from God was short but clear and unmistakable. **“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” Jonah 1:2** Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. It was situated on the upper Tigris and about 600 miles northeast of Jerusalem. Nineveh was called a *“great city”* and in Chapter 4:11 we read that there were more than 120,000 people in it. Nineveh was a great city indeed, and yet a heathen city. This city was under God’s government and judgment and its downfall was its great wickedness. So great was its wickedness that it sent up to heaven a stench as that of a cesspool. Jonah was sent to this city of sin and vice to preach repentance. He was to preach against the sins of this city and to threaten the Ninevites with divine wrath and punishment. He was to tell

them that if they continued in their sins they would deserve both an earthly and then an eternal judgment.

We don't have to go into detail about this ancient wicked city - just look at the large and modern cities of our country. We have many Nineveh's right in our own back yards, and we see that Jonah's mission is also our mission and duty.

The recent Senate crime investigations have uncovered sin and vice in various modern metropolises of our country. It is common knowledge that our country has become more and more loose in its moral conduct. But, to bring it close to home, all of us are tempted by the sins of our times. I **Peter 5:8-9 "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings."** Satan is at work not only in the large cities but also in the small cities and countryside. Through the modern means of transportation and communication, the entire world has become one large Nineveh.

As in the days of Jonah, so also today, there is only one way to help the situation. We see our modern world is hastening at break neck speed toward its own perdition. It is the preaching of the Word of God that is the only remedy. Just as surely as we are all Christians, so we have received the call to: **"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."** Mark 16:15 But are we heeding this call, or is our voice, Christian influence and example at such a low ebb that it is

confined only to our own circles? As God's people you represent the future church. To hear and learn God's Word is the one thing needful for the future of the church. Your interest in congregational matters, mission work at home and abroad, and in general Christian stewardship will then be but fruits of your continuance in God's Word.

### **Jonah Flees Before the Lord**

Jonah had hardly received the call to go to Nineveh when he set out not to go to Nineveh. He wanted to flee from the presence of the Lord. He hurried to Joppa and there found a ship ready to sail for Tarshish. Here there was a stroke of good fortune as he was able to book immediate passage. Why didn't the Lord throw up some hindrance or barrier to stop Jonah from his way of error? The very fact that one may meet with success and good fortune in the way of a sinful project is no assurance that God is well-pleased or unconcerned. The story of Jonah shows that at times God permits evil. Although God may permit evil, his intention is never to ruin human life, but rather to preserve it.

Jonah's flight to the west was done in order to get as far away from Nineveh as possible. However, he was to learn that he could not get away from God. Jonah knew, as he later testifies to the sailors, that his God was the God of heaven, a God who had made the sea and the dry land. No one can hide or flee away from such a God. But Jonah's design was to get out of the borders of the land so that he could say to God that now it was impossible for him to go to Nineveh and to preach against it. But why did Jonah try to get away from a duty which God had called him to do? Jonah conferred with flesh and blood and the result was that pride and arrogance

filled his heart. He foresaw that after having preached the law to Nineveh, that they would repent and God would then forgive them and take them into his favor. Jonah simply did not approve of the Lord's sparing this city. Jonah thought that the sparing of Nineveh would be a slur upon himself and God. Jonah was an Israelite and reasoned that sparing Nineveh would be a slur upon his own people. Israel, he thought, should remain a singular and a peculiar people of God. Jonah's plan was to flee and leave this enemy of Israel to its well-deserved fate. In this way, Jonah reasoned, I will render the best service to my people and to the true church of God.

Refusing to be of any service to the heathen city of Nineveh, Jonah entered a ship manned by heathen mariners and thought nothing of being served by them. But does Jonah stand alone in this respect? Dear friend, look to yourself. We think nothing about using people and goods from foreign lands. But when we should carry out our true calling and render to a foreign country the God-pleasing service of bringing them the Word of God in order that they can be saved - we are often found slow and indifferent. When Jonah flees, Nineveh must perish. When Christians fail in their true calling and cease to be the salt and light of the world (*both publicly and privately*) - then there is little hope for the world.

We find that Jonah, the deserter from God, thought himself safe and sound in the ship. But God sent a pursuer after him in the form of a mighty tempest from the sea. It is always sin that brings storms and tempests into peoples' lives. This wind was not sent after Jonah to destroy him, but rather to fetch him back to God and duty. It is divine grace that sent this tempest, and mercy was the object of this storm. It is a great mercy to be redeemed and called home when we go astray, though it is by

a roaring and raging tempest. On the other hand, it is real divine wrath when God, weary of showing mercy, finally forsakes the stubborn, obstinate sinner. Anyone who has spurned all advice and chastening has sealed their own doom. Though this storm was sent for Jonah's sake, yet others are affected. The heathen mariners cried out in fear to their idols, for none of them knew the true God. Jonah, however, as yet was oblivious of the storm. Neither the noise without nor the sense of guilt from within could awakened Jonah. Finally, the captain of the ship had to go down and rouse Jonah from what might be called his *"sleep of sin"*. It is ever the policy of Satan (*once he has drawn people away from God and their duty*) to rock them asleep in carnal security. In this way, his victims may not be sensible of their misery and danger. Therefore it concerns us all to watch and pray.

The event that follows is in exactly the reverse order of what was expected. He who should have been reproving the King of Nineveh and his subjects, is himself rightly reproved by a heathen shipmaster. The shipmaster cried out in **Jonah 1:6**: **"How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish."** Thus a heathen must remind a prophet of his duty to God.

Jonah later confesses that he knew this great tempest came upon the ship on his account. But still he did not confess his iniquity. Not until they had cast lots in order to find out who was the cause of this evil, did Jonah say: **"Pick me up and throw me into the sea,"** he replied, **"and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."** **Jonah 1:12**

These heathen sailors believed this storm to be the evidence of the anger of *“the gods”*. Here we might enter into a lengthy discussion about calamities and the part that God plays in them. Here suffice it to say this storm, as well as all adversities in this life, are a result of sin. Whatever calamity and evil that God suffers the world to be affected with are meant to serve the Gospel. People should realize that they are sinners and deserve God’s Judgment. They should believe in the Gospel of divine grace thorough Christ and that God punishes people in time in order that they may not perish in eternity.

When floods blot out homes and lives, when earthquakes destroy, and when tornados devastate we should not (*like the weather forecasters*) merely investigate the physical causes of these evils but rather regard them primarily as judgments of God. These are all judgments which we have all deserved just as well as those so afflicted. When the news came to Jesus that 18 men had been killed when the tower of Siloam fell, our Lord said in **Luke 13:2**: **“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”** Calamities should not lead us to say as the Pharisee in **Luke 18:11**: **“God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers...”** We should rather pause for a moment, fold our hands and earnestly pray with the publican in **Luke 18:13**: **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”**

Nobody in that boat came right out and confessed or even asked: *“Lord, is it I?”* They suspect one another, and they were determined to find the truth. They thought that it would be better for one man to die for the people, rather than that the whole ship be lost. Because the lot fell upon

Jonah, the sailors began to question him about various things. Surely, Jonah's experience when he withheld his sin must have been similar to David's as expressed in **Psalm 32:3: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long."** Jonah never makes a frank confession by telling them: **"I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."** **Jonah 1:9** To be sure the sailors are startled and amazed to think that it was from such a God that Jonah was fleeing. Their pagan gods were localized, but Jonah's God extended over land and sea. The sailors asked Jonah questions in **Jonah 1:8: "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"** Jonah had denied in deed what he had confessed with his mouth. Jonah was responsible for his behavior and found guilty before God.

We, as Jonah, may likewise be tempted when surrounded by strangers and in a strange county to think that we can now act just as our flesh prompts us, to live like the world lives and sip the wine of worldly pleasure. Then all of a sudden one who conducts life like this becomes known as a worshiper of the true God. Such actions now become a stumbling block to unbelievers, and they are offended. Now the nonbeliever is not looking into God's Word and tasting his grace, but will all the more shun and ridicule it because of our example. Paul says in **Romans 2:24: "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."** Hence at home and abroad let us not walk as fools, but rather use godly wisdom. We should act like God's people so that the world will not ask us: **"What have you done?"** **Jonah 1:10**

## **Jonah is cast into the Sea**

After Jonah had confessed his guilt and it was known that a criminal was aboard ship, the storm grew more and more tempestuous. The mariners believed that something must be done to pay for the guilt which had been revealed. They did not dare, however, to take things into their own hands. Instead they asked: **“What should we do to make the sea calm down for us?”** **Jonah1:11** The heathen sailors showed a quality that all people possess – the natural knowledge of God. Here is what they knew:

- 1. They know that God exists, that there is some Supreme Being**
- 2. That this God must be angry with people because of their sin**
- 3. That atonement is necessary if the sinner is to escape the just punishment of God**

This *“natural knowledge”* agrees with the Christian religion, but only up to this point. From here on a natural knowledge of God is full of questions but never has the right answer. Those who possess a natural knowledge want to satisfy God and his just wrath, but cannot as they become fools. Many are found sacrificing animals in an endeavor to please God and to make atonement. Why should such sacrifices be of any great value? God creates millions of animals daily and can also take the life and breath from them. Such sacrifices were only a reasonable and common service in the Old Testament. Animal sacrifice was a symbol that points to the future atoning death of Christ on the cross. Think of the Pharisee and his modern counter-point today in organizations such as the lodge. The lodge will promote the belief that good deeds are righteous acts and can be considered the necessary payment in order for people to be in harmony with God. The entire human history of religion shows that all natural knowledge is foolishness. We may find it difficult to overrule our reason

and instead find obedience to God through faith in Christ alone without the deeds of the law. When one despairs of human knowledge and turns to hear the Word of God it is the beginning of real wisdom. In the Bible we learn that only Christ is our Savior and that Jonah was only a “type” of Christ. For just as Jonah voluntarily offered himself to face death as a payment for sin, so Christ (*who was without sin*), gave himself unto death in order to pay for all human sin and guilt. Christ willingly had himself cast into the raging sea of God’s wrath, and by his sacrificial death calmed the sea of eternity for all of his people.

The centurion who stood at the foot of the cross and he said: **“Surely he was the Son of God!” Matthew 27:54** We also find that these pagan sailors, when they saw that the sea was now calm understood that this was done by the power of Jonah’s God. Immediately they began to offer sacrifices to this true God and made solemn vows for obedience in the future. Thus God turned Jonah’s wickedness into good in order to save many people. Jonah first became a preacher of righteousness to these seamen and then God turned him back to Nineveh. God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance and to the knowledge of the truth.

### **Jonah Is Delivered**

Last year a pastor was heard over a certain radio service trying to ridicule the reality of Jonah being swallowed by a fish. He referred to this Bible story as the fairy tale. It is true, that our reason also takes offense to this and similar miracles, as they are recorded in the Scripture. Even Luther writes: *“This story is so wonderful that it sounds unbelievable and*

*seems to be a greater lie and absurdity than any fable of the poets; and if I had not found it in the Scriptures, I would laugh at it as at a huge lie. I myself would not believe it if it were not written in the Bible.”* So for Luther, Christ says: **“The Scriptures cannot be broken.” John 10:35** If anyone chooses to deny even one miracle – then all of the miracles set forth in the Bible would have to be denied as well.

No doubt many of you have heard the objection that is often raised about the story of Jonah, namely, that a whale could not swallow a man because its gullet is so narrow that it can swallow only very small sea animals. The King James Version of the Holy Bible was translated from the original and uses the words in Matthew 12:40: **“whale’s belly”**. But in the New International Version of the Holy Bible the term used is *“great fish”*. The original Hebrew text states: *“huge sea monster”* and is the closest to the true translated meaning. In every instance the original text states that it was a *“large fish”*. The word used by Christ signifies a *“sea monster”* in general.

So really we find no difficulty here. Jonah may have been swallowed by a shark or some other marine animal. God could have had Jonah swallowed by a whale with a gullet so small that only a minnow could pass, but there is no evidence in Scripture that it was a whale. Scripture simply states: *“a large fish”* and our faith leaves it with that. We trust him, for the Word of the Lord is right, and all his works are done in truth.

## **II – Jonah’s Prayer and Deliverance**

Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. The question is: Was Jonah in the belly of the fish dead or alive? We understand that in nature it would be impossible to be alive in a fish’s belly. But to the God of nature – nothing is impossible. Jonah’s prayer in the belly of the fish confirms the truth of the story. Jonah begins his prayer with the confession that God has heard his cry: **“In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.”** Jonah 2:1-2

The fish might well be called Jonah’s grave and a prison to which Jonah was condemned for his disobedience. For Jonah’s disobedience, he might indeed be under the wrath of God and he might as well be in the belly of hell. In this experience, Jonah not only tasted temporal death but in his conscience he experienced something also of the terror of eternal death. Jonah actually thought that he was in hell. In his prayer the prophet describes in detail the trouble that he was in. Jonah’s entire prayer breathes the Spirit of God and we find in it quotations from many of the psalms. We can now see how good it is to commit portions of the Scripture to memory. Perhaps you felt that memory work in the confirmation class was rather a futile thing, but the time may come when you will rise up and thank the pastor that encouraged you to commit to memory various Bible passages. When Jonah could make no use of his Bible in the belly of the fish – his memory of scripture helped to furnish a way to pray for deliverance and to provide a way to take his case before God. Much of his prayer is borrowed from David’s Psalms and Jonah used

the same words that David used when he lifted his voice to God in prayer. A paper alone could be written on just this prayer of Jonah, but we must hasten on for fear that we will not cover our assignment.

After having gone through the terrors of hell, Jonah called to God through his prayers and found him to have the power and grace to grant his prayer. The Lord delivered Jonah from his grave and placed him on the dry land of the living from which he had been cut off. Jonah's resurrection, though not from the dead (*for he lived in the fish*) was indeed as from the grave for surely the experience was very similar to being buried alive.

Here again we behold Jonah as a type of Christ. Christ died, and was buried. He endured the storm which our sin had raised and in our stead endured all the furies and torments of hell. He lay in the grave three days and three nights as did Jonah – for he was held a prisoner for our debt. But death could not hold him. On the third day he came forth (*as did Jonah*) to preach repentance and remission of sins, even to the Gentiles.

### **III – Jonah's Sermon and Nineveh's Repentance**

Now God extends to Jonah a second call: **"Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."** Jonah 3:2 He must now preach the very same thing that he was ordered to preach earlier, but would not. Let every preacher adhere to the Word and preach the message which the Lord in the Scripture has requested and this will please the Lord. The results of a true ministry will accomplish that which pleases God. Now Jonah's message is that of the Law: **"Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed."** Jonah 3:4 Jonah's role was to expose the sins

of the people of Nineveh and to threaten the sinners with God's wrath and punishment. This was the affect: **"The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."** When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened." **Jonah 3:5-10**

Wearing sack cloth and ashes was an oriental custom symbolic of grief, especially over sin. But Nineveh not only expressed sorrow over their sins by this symbolic gesture, but they also changed their way of living and thereby showed true repentance. They now turned from their sin and pursued righteousness.

The king of Nineveh together with his people prayed for something that seemed impossible. Jonah had preached: **"Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed."** **Jonah 3:4** Yet the people of Nineveh hoped against hope to be spared. Here let us learn to place our full trust in God's grace as well. Often we forfeit gifts and benefits because of our lack of trust and lack of prayers. **"Ask and it shall be given you..."** **Luke 11:9** is the promise of Scripture. Look at the case of Nineveh – God took into account the

prayers of these people and we read: **".... he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."** **Jonah 3:10** The people of Nineveh repented, and God in mercy received them. Thus Christ's words find their application already in the Old Testament: **"I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."** **Matthew 8:11-12** We find the same true today - how many have been brought up and educated in the Lutheran Church and from youth on were taught from the Bible. These people were the *"subjects of the Kingdom"* mentioned in Matthew. But, sadly, many after confirmation are no longer reading their Bible. Perhaps we think of many a classmate, schoolmate or family member, who should remember Christ and not forsake the baptismal covenant. Many a pastor looks over the church records to find that many never returned after their early church experiences. This passage comes to mind: **"Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon."** **Isaiah 55:7** Those who listen to God's Word today and resolve by God's grace never to sell themselves short of God's blessings for a mere worldly prize will be rewarded. We should rededicate ourselves even if we are prodigals who have returned home so that we may have abundant life in Christ.

## **IV– Jonah’s Anger and God’s Reproof**

Jonah had preached: **“Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed.”**  
**Jonah 3:4** Then Jonah went out of the city angry because it had not been destroyed. You say: *“What? Jonah who had been so wonderfully delivered from the tempestuous sea in spite of his disobedience is displeased because God shows mercy upon the people of Nineveh? Is this possible?”*  
But wait, let us not be too hasty in putting the accusing finger on Jonah. He is here portrayed to us so that we may see the natural disposition of our hearts. **“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.”**  
**Jeremiah 17:9** We have the same human heart as portrayed by Jonah. By nature we also displease God’s great mercy by failing to bring the Gospel to many people who are within our reach. We are quick to condemn others and by the Law to sentence them to destruction. We are slow to save them and bring them the joy and comfort found in Christ alone. There are many we could have saved for eternity.

God had to again teach Jonah by means of a vine the meaning of his Gospel truth. Likewise, God also teaches individuals and nations again and again through the Bible and by his mercy in their everyday lives.

Perhaps just a minute ago we were ready to pounce upon Jonah for such base ingratitude, for such selfishness and narrowness. But when we find this weakness of Jonah in ourselves, we can all the more appreciate God’s dealings with him - for here we behold God’s dealings with us as well. God does not deal with Jonah as an enemy but as a friend. He does not reprove him as an ungodly person but patiently corrects him as a child. He asks the question: **“Have you any right to be angry?”** **Jonah 4:4** Notice

the tender and considerate way that God deals with this frail individual. Just as it was God's grace alone that saved the many heathens of Nineveh, so it was that same grace, love, and mercy that saved Jonah. This same love saves St. Paul, the malefactor on the cross, the woman of Samaria, the people of Europe, Asia, you and me.

Jonah sat in his booth outside the city so that he could see what God would do with Nineveh. God, who had before prepared a large fish to safeguard Jonah from the injuries of the water, here now prepares a great vine to safeguard Jonah from the searing sunshine. This vine became a great comfort and joy to Jonah for it gave shade to Jonah's head and assured him of God's loving kindness. God then sent a worm which smote the plant and it withered, causing Jonah to be filled with grief. A parching east wind added to his misery and Jonah longed for death. He says: "It would be better for me to die than to live." **Jonah 4:8** Now God asks Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" **Jonah 4:9** Jonah answers with bitterness: "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." **Jonah 4:9** God now reminds him of the injustice of his anger. God says to Jonah: "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" **Jonah 4:10** Consider the many people in Nineveh who have not come to the sufficient knowledge to know their right hand from their left – God has a tender regard for them. With a consideration for those who did not know of Christ, the city was spared. May this encourage mission groups to support their missionaries with

finances, faith and prayers. Though many are incapable of discerning or doing much of anything with their right or left hands, they are capable of participating in God's favor and of obtaining salvation through our efforts.

God reminds Jonah that the vine had nothing to do with Jonah's labor, he didn't make it grow. Likewise the people in Nineveh (*whom God had compassion on*) were all the work of his own hands. God had planted them and made them grow; he therefore had reason to have compassion on them.

The vine sprang up over night and died in a moment - that was the end. Nineveh was an ancient city and therefore not to be given up as easily. There were precious souls in Nineveh that God had pity upon. These souls were not short-lived; they were immortal and therefore carefully and tenderly considered. One soul in that city to God was of more value than the entire earthly wealth of the planet.

We have reason to hope that Jonah, after this, was well reconciled to the sparing of Nineveh and was as well please with it as he had been displeased before his reformation. May this story of Jonah teach us all to be filled with zeal and bring the Gospel to all nations. There is one Lord over all nations, and God is rich in mercy to all that call upon him. There are those in Nineveh as well as in Israel that respect God and are accepted by him through their faith in Jesus Christ. All individuals and nations who repent and turn from evil will find mercy and eternal life.