

## THE PROPHET JONAH

*Reading: Jonah 1-4*

Jonah was a prophet of Israel. The story about him is an unusual story because it tells of a prophet who was very unwilling to do the Lord's will. The other prophets we learn about were very willing to bring the Lord's Word and messages to the people of Israel or Judah. But you see, in this story, Jonah was not asked to give a message to the people of Israel or Judah. He was asked to give the Lord's warning to the worst enemy the kingdom of Israel ever had—to the Assyrians who had their capitol city at Nineveh. Jonah was commanded by the Lord, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me" (Jonah 1:2). He was to tell the people of Nineveh that unless they were sorry for their sins and changed their ways they would have to be punished and their city destroyed.

Jonah didn't want to give the people of Nineveh this warning. He did not want them to be given a chance to be sorry and change. He wanted them to be destroyed, for they were the enemies of Israel. Because of this, Jonah tried to do a very foolish thing. He tried to run away and hide from the Lord. Of course we can't get away from the Lord, can we? For the Lord is present everywhere. But Jonah did not realize this.

He fled down to the city of Joppa on the seacoast, and there got on a ship going to Tarshish—far away from Israel. Little did he know that the Lord was still with him! In fact the Lord caused a great wind to come up and the ship was caught in a great storm and was in danger of being destroyed. The sailors were afraid and prayed to their gods—for they were foreigners and did not really know the Lord. They threw all of the cargo overboard to make the ship lighter, but they were still in great danger.

Where was Jonah during all this? He was down below in the ship fast asleep. There the captain of the ship found him and woke him up and told him to call upon his God to save them. Still the storm raged on. They then decided that they would all cast lots to see who was to blame for their great trouble. Jonah was chosen by the lots. They then asked him what his work was, and where he came from. Jonah answered, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven" (Jonah 1:9). He also told them that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord. Then everyone on the ship was very afraid and asked Jonah why he had done what he had, and asked him what they should do to him to make the sea calm. He told them that if they threw him into the sea then it would grow calm, for he knew he was to blame.

But the men on the ship were kind men and not cruel. They didn't want to have to throw Jonah overboard. They tried very hard to row the ship to land, but it was so stormy it was impossible. Finally, even though they hated to do it, they threw Jonah into the sea, to save their own lives. Right away the sea became calm. Those still in the ship immediately worshiped the Lord and offered a sacrifice to Him.

But what happened to Jonah? The Lord prepared a great fish to be near the boat. This great fish swallowed Jonah up. But Jonah was not hurt. For three days and three nights he was in the belly of this fish. During that time Jonah prayed to the Lord and promised to do the Lord's will. Then the Lord spoke to the great fish and it vomited out Jonah onto dry land, and he was safe.

Again Jonah was commanded by the Lord to go to Nineveh and warn them to stop their evils or be destroyed. This time Jonah did what the Lord told him, even though he still hated the Assyrians. Now Nineveh was a very big city. It took three days to go across it. Jonah entered the city and after one day's journey he cried out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). He hoped the people of Nineveh would not listen to the warning. You see, Jonah wanted the people of Nineveh to be destroyed by the Lord.

But the people of Nineveh *did* believe Jonah's warning. All of them, both great and small, began to repent—to be sorry. When the king heard what Jonah had said, he took off his robes and put on a rough cloth instead and sat in ashes to show how sorry he was for the wrong he had done. Then he commanded all his people to fast—that is, not eat or drink anything. They should all be covered with sackcloth and pray to God and turn from their evil ways. They should do this because then maybe the Lord would have mercy on them.

When Jonah saw that all the people of Nineveh repented of their sins, he was very angry. He prayed to the Lord and asked the Lord to take his life from him because he was so angry he wanted to die. The Lord said to him, "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Jonah 4:4). Then Jonah went out of the city and sat on its east side, and made himself a booth or shelter. He sat in its shade and watched to see what would happen to the City, Nineveh. He still hoped it would be destroyed. There, outside the city, he sat and sulked.

Then another strange thing happened. The Lord made a plant to grow up beside Jonah's booth to give him more shade. He was very happy over the plant and it comforted him in his anger and unhappiness. The Lord was trying to teach Jonah a lesson—a lesson in mercy and kindness. For the very next day the Lord caused a worm to kill the plant and it withered away. Then a strong, hot, east wind came up and the sun was so hot on Jonah's head that he felt weak. In his anger over the plant he again said he wanted to die. The Lord then asked him, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" (Jonah 4:9). And Jonah answered, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!" (Jonah 4:9). The Lord then said to him that if he felt pity for the plant, which grew up one day and died the next, shouldn't He—the Lord—show mercy on the great city of Nineveh?

It is here that the story of Jonah ends. The city of Nineveh was not destroyed, for the Lord showed mercy. We do not know if Jonah learned his lesson about mercy and got over his hatred of the Assyrians. We can hope that he did, but we do not know. But we can learn the lesson about mercy taught here. We can learn to forgive and give people a second chance, just as the Lord does.