

# The Prophet Jonah

by Joelee Chamberlain

Have you been enjoying the Bible stories I've been telling you? I certainly hope so, since I've really enjoyed telling them to you. And they are all true stories, aren't they? About people who really lived and things that really happened. I'm sure you already knew some of the stories, but maybe you didn't know all of them. Well, today why don't I tell you a story that I'm sure you already know, but it should be fun to hear it again. I always like hearing stories more than one time, don't you?

So today let's talk about Jonah. Yes, that's about Jonah and the big fish! I don't know if you remember it or not, but I mentioned Jonah to you back another time when I was telling you about the wicked kingdom of Israel and how they never had even one good king. Jonah was a prophet then during that time. Jonah believed God and trusted God. From what we can figure, Jonah probably lived and did his prophesying around the time that the great prophet Elisha died. (Remember when we talked about Elisha and all of the miracles he performed?)

At the time that Jonah was living, the wicked Assyrians were getting powerful. These are the Assyrians, remember, not the Syrians. Those are two different peoples. These Assyrians lived over near Babylon, and the main city, the capital of Assyria was the big city of Ninevah. The king of the Assyrians lived in Ninevah. And the Assyrians didn't worship the Lord God. Instead they worshipped several different false gods.

Well, gradually the Assyrians became more and more powerful. And they were very cruel, and they were going around being very, very mean to lots of people. The bigger their empire grew, the more people they were mean to. And some of the people they were mean to were in the kingdom of Israel, the 10 northern tribes. In fact, around 100 years after the time of Jonah, it was the Assyrian empire that finally conquered the kingdom of Israel and took them away as captives to other lands. Now, the Jews were God's special people, weren't they? (Remember, the Jews are also called Hebrews and the children of Israel, aren't they?) So why had God allowed the Assyrians to do this to the Jews, to His special people? That's right, because the kingdom of Israel was worshipping idols and doing other very wicked things. But let's get back to Jonah and way before the Assyrians captured the kingdom of Israel.

Okay, then. One day the Lord spoke to Jonah. The Lord said, "Jonah, you get up and you go to Ninevah, that great city, and you cry out against it, because they are so wicked and I know that."

Well, remember, I said that Ninevah was the capital city of the Assyrians? And the Assyrians were often being very mean to the kingdom of Israel? Well, Jonah didn't like the Assyrians at all! And here the Lord was telling Jonah to go to Ninevah in Assyria and warn them to repent, to be sorry for being so wicked! We find out later that Jonah didn't want the Assyrians to repent -- Jonah wanted the Lord to punish them instead! But I'm getting ahead of the story!

Well, after the Lord told Jonah to go to Ninevah, what do you think Jonah did? Do you

think Jonah obeyed the Lord and went and warned Ninevah about their sins? No!! Instead, Jonah went just the opposite way! Instead of going up over the mountains and across the desert to Ninevah, Jonah went the other way down to the Mediterranean Sea, and he found a ship there that was getting ready to sail far away! And Jonah paid some money, and he got on that ship. The Bible tells us that Jonah was running away from the Lord! Now, that's really a silly thing to try to do, isn't it! We can't run away from God! But Jonah, even though he was a prophet of the Lord, didn't want to do what the Lord had told him to do, so he figured that if he ran away, he wouldn't have to warn Ninevah.

So Jonah got on the ship, and he went down inside the ship and he lay down and he fell asleep. Well, while the ship was out on the Mediterranean Sea, the Lord sent a great big wind and caused a great big storm. The storm was so bad that it seemed as if the ship would be all broken up and they'd all drown. The sailors were all really scared because of this enormous storm, and they all started praying to their false gods. (Of course, a false god can't do anything, can it?! It's not God at all! Only the Lord God is God!) Anyway, they cried out to their false gods, and then they began throwing things from the ship into the water to make the ship not weigh so much, hoping that the ship wouldn't sink.

Well, the wind was blowing and the waves were making the ship jump around, and the sailors were all scared -- but what was Jonah doing during all of this? Why, Jonah was fast asleep down inside the ship!!

The captain of the ship saw Jonah asleep and went up to him. The captain said, "What do you mean by sleeping?! Get up! Call on the name of your God! Maybe that God will remember us so that we won't all die!"

Then the sailors decided that this terrible, unusual storm might be for a reason. They said, "Maybe one of us has done something especially bad, and that is what has brought this awful storm." So they cast lots some way to try to see who might have done something bad. And from this they decided that the one who'd done something very bad was Jonah.

So they said to Jonah, "Please tell us why we are having this evil thing, this storm. What do you do for a living? Where are you from? What country do you live in? What kind of person are you?"

Jonah said, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

Then the sailors were very, very scared, and they said to him, "Why have you done this?!" You see, the sailors knew that Jonah was trying to run away from the Lord, because he had told them this.

Well, the storm was really bad, and the waves were very big. So the men said to Jonah, "What should we do to you so that the sea will quiet down?"

And what do you think Jonah told them?! Why, Jonah said, "Pick me up and throw me

into the water, and then the sea will be quiet for you. Because I know it's because of me that there is this big storm for you."

Well, even though Jonah had told them to throw him into the sea, the men tried to row as hard as they could to try to make the ship go toward the land, but they couldn't do it. The storm was so bad and the waves were against them.

Finally the sailors decided that they'd better throw Jonah overboard. And the sailors cried out to the Lord, "O Lord, we beg you, please, we beg you, don't let us die because of this man's life. Don't blame us. Because, O Lord, You are doing what You want to do."

And they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea -- and what do you think happened then? Why, the sea suddenly became quiet! The storm was over! The wind didn't blow hard anymore, and the waves weren't big anymore!

This really made the sailors fear the Lord a lot, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made promises.

So now the sailors and their ship were saved, but what about Jonah? Jonah was in the ocean, and he was going down, down into the water, and seaweed was wrapping around him. Do you think that the Lord had forgotten Jonah? No! But the Lord was teaching Jonah that he couldn't run away from God! And the Lord had a great big fish be all ready and waiting there, and this fish came up and swallowed Jonah whole! And Jonah was inside of that fish's stomach for 3 days and 3 nights while that great big fish just swam around!! Just imagine that!

Well, Jonah was inside the big fish, and Jonah prayed to the Lord God from inside that fish. Do you think God could hear Jonah's prayers while he was inside of a fish and way down in the water? Yes, of course! The Lord can always hear our prayers, no matter where we are. And Jonah prayed to the Lord. Jonah said, "I'm in so much trouble, Lord, and I'm calling to you from inside of this fish. I know you can hear me. You are the one who made it that I would be here. I was in the water, and the water was all over me, and the seaweed was wrapping around me, but you saved me from dying, O Lord my God. And now that I'm so unhappy, I remember You, and I am praying to You and You will hear me. I will thank You and will do what I promised. You are the one Who saves."

And the Lord heard Jonah's prayer, and the Lord spoke to the fish, and the fish went up near to the beach and began to vomit. And the fish vomited up Jonah right there on the dry ground! Imagine that! If the fish had vomited up Jonah way out in the ocean, what good would that have done?! But the Lord had the fish go up to the dry ground and there vomit up Jonah.

Well! So again, the second time, the Lord spoke to Jonah. The Lord said, "Get up. Go to that great city of Ninevah and preach to it what I told you to preach before."

Do you think Jonah tried to run away again? No! Jonah had learned that he must obey the Lord, hadn't he!? Jonah got up, and he went way, way over to Ninevah. It would have taken him many days to get there. And when he got to Ninevah, the capital city of the Assyrians, he saw

that it was really a very big city. The Bible says that it was "a city of three days' journey." I'm not sure, but I think that means that it would take 3 days just to walk around it! Anyway, it was really big! Jonah walked for about a day into the city, well into the city! Then he began calling out, "In 40 days Ninevah will be overthrown!!" To overthrow something means to pull it down, or break it up, to destroy it. "In 40 days Ninevah will be overthrown!"

And how do you think the wicked people of Ninevah and their king liked that? Do you think they ignored Jonah or just laughed at him or tried to kill Jonah? No! The people and the king believed what the Lord had Jonah say. The great king of the Assyrians there in Ninevah got up from his throne and took off his king's robes, and he put on sackcloth and sat down in the ashes. That was a big sign of mourning, of being sorry. And the king of Ninevah sent out a proclamation that said, "The king and all of the leaders say that neither man nor animals, not even in the herds, are to eat anything or drink anything. And let every man and the animals all be covered in sackcloth and let everyone cry out mightily unto God. Yes, let everyone stop doing evil things! Who knows? Maybe God will stop being angry and decide not to destroy us?"

Now that was a very, very wise thing for the king of Assyria to do, wasn't it? And it was very, very wise of the people to all do what the king said, too, wasn't it? They were all to pray to the Lord God and ask that He be merciful to them. And the Lord is merciful, isn't He? Well, the Lord saw that the people of Ninevah were really and truly being humble before Him and being sorry for their great wickedness, so the Lord decided not to punish them then.

But what about Jonah? Did Jonah just preach this and then go home? No, Jonah stayed there. And Jonah saw that the people of Ninevah were humbling themselves before God and praying to God. And do you think Jonah was happy to see these wicked people repenting, being sorry for their wickedness? He should have been happy about it, shouldn't he? But he wasn't!! You see, Jonah knew how much the Assyrians had been mean to the people of Israel, and Jonah wanted to see them punished! Jonah was so angry and so unhappy that he actually prayed to the Lord and told Him so! Jonah said, "Please, O Lord, isn't this what I said would happen when I was still back in my own country? That's why I tried to run away from You, because I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, that You take a long time to get angry, and You are very kind. And for this reason, O Lord, please, I beg You, just let me die! It is better for me to die now than to live!"

And the Lord said, "Are you doing well to be angry??"

Then Jonah went outside of the city of Ninevah and he sat down to watch to see if maybe the Lord would destroy the city after all. But God wanted to teach Jonah some more. So the Lord God had a gourd plant grow up, and this plant, probably a vine, grew up and made a nice shade for Jonah. And Jonah was very glad because of the gourd plant and its shade. But then God had a worm come in the morning the next day, and the worm evidently cut across the stem of the gourd plant, because the gourd plant died and withered up, and that way there would be no more shade for Jonah. And when the sun came up that morning, God had a very hot wind come from off the desert. And the sun was so hot as it beat down on Jonah's head. And Jonah was very faint, and Jonah wished he were dead. Jonah said to himself, "It is better for me to die than to live."

Then God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry because of the gourd?"

Jonah said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, even so much that I want to die!"

Then the Lord said, "Jonah, you have had pity on the gourd plant. You didn't take care of the plant, and you didn't make it grow. It just came up overnight, and it died overnight. It was just a plant."

And the Lord said to Jonah, "Now, and shouldn't I spare a great big city like Ninevah where there are more than 60,000 people as well as lots of animals?"

And that is the end of the book of Jonah! The Bible doesn't tell us what Jonah thought after the Lord told him that. But I would imagine that Jonah was ashamed of himself, wouldn't you? Or at least he should have been! But we know from history that the Lord did not destroy Ninevah at this time of Jonah. Because they had repented and humbled themselves before the Lord, the Lord spared them for quite a while. The Lord is merciful, isn't He? But the Assyrians later went back to being very wicked and cruel, though. These are the people who later conquered the kingdom of Israel and took them away as captives. However then later still the Lord did destroy the Assyrian empire after they had gone back to being so very wicked. The Lord will punish evil, won't He?

*So what can we learn from the book of Jonah? Do you have any thoughts? Well, I learned several things from it. Shall I tell you what they are? All right. One thing I learned is that no matter where we are, God can take care of us and can hear us pray. Remember, even way down in the water inside the big fish, God heard Jonah's prayers and took care of him. Another thing I learned is that we can't run away from God! And I learned it that when we know we are supposed to do something, we should do it, no matter how much we don't want to! Also, I learned that we shouldn't want bad things to happen to bad people; instead, we should pray that the bad people would be sorry and stop being bad.*

*But another thing I learned is that the Lord is merciful, and if we are truly sorry for what we've done, He will forgive us. Now, we may have punishments in this life for the bad things we do, but there can also be a punishment after we die. What would that punishment be? Yes, it would be that we couldn't go and be with the Lord God, with Jesus, after we die. But remember, the Lord loves us so much that He made a way that we would be able to be with Him forever after we die. What is that way, do you remember? Yes, God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world as a little baby. And when Jesus, the Son of God, grew up into a man, He died on the cross for our sins. Jesus is God, isn't He? And Jesus never did any sins at all. So when Jesus died on the cross, He took the punishment for our sins, didn't He? And if we just believe that and are sorry for our sins and trust the Lord Jesus to forgive our sins, then when we die, we will go to be with Him forever. Won't that be wonderful, to be with God forever?*

Now, I want to tell you one more thing about Jonah. A long, long time after the time of Jonah, when Jesus was here on earth, Jesus said to some men that he would give them the sign of the prophet Jonah. Jesus said to them, "Just as Jonah was 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of

the huge fish, in the same way the Son of man (Jesus meant Himself), the Son of man will be 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth."

Now what does that mean? What is "the sign of Jonah?" Well, let's think about it. How long was Jonah inside of the great big fish? Yes, for 3 days and 3 nights. And that would almost sort of be like Jonah was dead during that time, sort of like being buried in the big fish, wouldn't it? After all, Jonah certainly couldn't do anything inside that fish except pray, could he?! But then later after Jesus died, what was done with His body when they took it down from the cross? That's right, it was put into a cave for a grave. And a cave would be inside of the earth, inside of the ground, wouldn't it? But do you remember how long Jesus was in the grave before He was alive again? Yes!! It was 3 days and 3 nights!! So "the sign of Jonah" that Jesus told the men about was that He, Jesus, would be dead and buried for 3 days and 3 nights, and then He'd be alive again!!

So whenever you hear the story of Jonah, and you get to the part about where Jonah was inside the big fish for 3 days and 3 nights, just remember that this was a sort of picture of how long Jesus was going to be dead. Only Jesus, when He came out of the grave never, ever died again, did He? And He is still alive in heaven, and if we just trust in the Lord Jesus to forgive our sins, we can be with Him someday in heaven forever and ever. God is very merciful, isn't He?