

Introduction to Jonah
Dr. Steven R. Cook

Author:

The author of the book is Jonah. His name (יְהוֹנָתָן *Yonah*) means “dove.” Jesus regards Jonah, and the account of this book, as true history (Mat 12:39-41).

Audience:

The book of Jonah was written to Israel to show that God’s grace and mercy extends to Gentiles, even those whom Israel regards as their evil enemies.

Date of ministry:

Jonah lived during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 B.C.), and prophesied that some of Israel’s land would be restored (2 Ki 14:23-25).

Historical Background:

Jeroboam II was king in Israel—the northern kingdom—and was following in the idolatrous practices of Jeroboam the son of Nebat. Because of Israel’s repeated violation of the Mosaic Covenant, God decided to send His people into captivity in Assyria (Hos 9:3; 11:5; Amo 5:27). Assyria was known for its great cruelty to others. “Assurbanipal, one of its rulers, was accustomed to tear off the hands and the lips of his victims. Tiglathpileser flayed them alive and made great piles of their skulls...It was to this city whose accumulated wickedness had risen up as a vile stench in the nostrils of God, that Jonah was commanded to go. Nineveh was the enemy of Israel.”¹

It was to Israel’s enemy that Jonah was called to preach. “Before Jonah arrived at this seemingly impregnable fortress-city, two plagues had erupted there (in 765 and 759 B.C.) and a total eclipse of the sun occurred on June 15, 763. These were considered signs of divine anger and may help explain why the Ninevites responded so readily to Jonah’s message, around 759.”²

¹ Gerald B. Stanton, “The prophet Jonah and His Message.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 108 (April 1951) 240.

² John D. Hannah, “Jonah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1462.

Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, stood on the eastern bank of the Tigris River. It had walls 100 feet high and 50 feet thick, and the main one, punctuated by 15 gates, was over seven and one half miles long. The total population was probably about 600,000 including the people who lived in the suburbs outside the city walls (cf. 4:11). The residents were idolaters and worshipped Asur and Ishtar, the chief male and female deities, as did almost all the Assyrians.³

Message:

Jonah had strong national pride and hated the Assyrians, and his attitude reflected that of Israel. Though God hated the evil of the Assyrians, He loved them and desired their salvation. For this reason, God called Jonah to preach to them (Jon 1:1-2), but His prophet declined and ran away (Jon 1:3). God began a series of judgments upon His disobedient prophet which included a storm (Jon 1:4), the pressure of Gentile sailors (Jon 1:5-16), and a great fish that swallowed him (Jon 1:17). From the belly of the great fish Jonah was humbled and cried out to the Lord, who saved him (Jon 2:1-10). The humbled prophet then obeyed the Lord and preached to the Ninevites (Jon 3:1-4), and the people of the city believed in God and the Lord changed His mind about the judgment He was going to bring on them (Jon 3:5-10). God's mercy and grace greatly upset Jonah to the point where he wanted to die (Jon 4:1-3), but the grace God showed to Nineveh was shown to Jonah, which grace reflects the Lord's sovereignty (Jon 4:4-11).

The overall purpose of the book of Jonah is to reveal that God's grace, compassion, and mercy extends to evil and hostile nations just as it does to His people.

Outline:

1. God's call and Jonah's rejection (1:1-3)
2. God's pursuit of the fleeing prophet (1:4-17)
3. God's discipline and Jonah's prayer (2:1-10)
4. God's recommission and Jonah's obedience (3:1-10)
5. God's reply to Jonah's anger (4:1-11)

³ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Jonah.

Jonah 1:1-17

The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city [an ancient city on the east bank of the Tigris river; see Gen 10:11-12] and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me [i.e. preach, that judgment might be avoided].” ³ But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD [מִלְפָּנֵי מִלְפָּנֵי *millifne* – used elsewhere of leaving the presence of a ruler; see Gen 41:46; 47:10; Est 8:15; in this way, Jonah was fleeing from his commission to preach]. So he went down to Joppa [35 miles southwest of Samaria], found a ship which was going to Tarshish [Spain], paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. ⁴ The LORD hurled [תִּלּוּל *tul* - to hurl, cast – Hiphil stem] a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up [now God acts]. ⁵ Then the sailors became afraid and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten *it* for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep [רָדַם *radam* – to be in heavy sleep; cf. Gen 2:21; 15:12]. ⁶ So the captain approached him and said, “How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps *your* god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.” ⁷ Each man said to his mate, “Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity *has struck* us [Pro 16:33].” So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ Then they said to him, “Tell us, now! On whose account *has* this calamity *struck* us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?” ⁹ He said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰ Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, “How could you do this?” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD [i.e. fleeing from God’s commission], because he had told them. ¹¹ So they said to him, “What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?” -- for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy. ¹² He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea [Jonah would rather die than go back and do God’s will]. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm *has come* upon you [cursing by association].” ¹³ However, the men rowed *desperately* to return to land but they could not [they cared more about Jonah than he cared about them], for the sea was becoming *even* stormier against them [God’s storm prevented them]. ¹⁴ Then they called on the LORD and said, “We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life and do not put innocent blood on us [a strong moral system; cf. Rom 2:14-15]; for You, O LORD, have done as You have pleased [recognizing God’s sovereignty; see Psa 115:3; 135:6; Isa 46:9-10; Dan 4:35].” ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they

offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. ¹⁷ And the LORD appointed [מָנָה *manah* – appoint, muster, number – Piel stem; cf. Jonah 4:6-8] a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights [cf. [Mat 12:39-41](#)].

Summary: The first chapter of Jonah shows God’s prophet spiritually declining further and further away from God, as he went down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the ocean, and down into the belly of the great fish. The chapter opens with God’s call to Jonah to go and preach in Nineveh, a great Assyrian city located on the eastern bank of the Tigris River (Jon 1:1). He was to preach against their wickedness and to warn them about God’s judgment (Jon 1:2). But Jonah ran in the opposite direction to Joppa, a coastal city on the Mediterranean Sea, located about 35 miles southwest of Samaria. The text informs us that Jonah was fleeing “from the presence of the Lord” (Jon 1:3), which meant he was avoiding God’s directive will to preach. The omniscient Lord knew Jonah would run away and chose him in spite of his rebellious and uncompassionate heart. Furthermore, Jonah’s rebellion did not cancel God’s call, for the sovereign Lord of the universe would have His way; rather, it introduced an element of divine discipline that could have been avoided had his prophet submitted rather than rebel. God began His discipline by sending a great storm against the ship so that it was about to be destroyed (Jon 1:4). The pagan sailors sought deliverance by praying to their gods, but Jonah did not want God to intervene, but to leave him alone; for this reason, he went down into the ship and fell asleep (Jon 1:5). The captain noticed Jonah’s strange behavior and approached him and asked him to pray, with the hope they would not perish (Jon 1:6). In the meantime, the sailors cast lots as a means of determining which of their polytheistic gods had been offended and sent the storm, and the lot fell on Jonah (Jon 1:7). In the OT God permitted the occasional use of lots among His people to determine His will. Lots were used by Aaron to determine the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:8), by Joshua to divide the land among the Israelites (Jos 18:10), and by the apostles to select Matthias as the twelfth apostle (Act 1:26). Though practiced by unbelievers (Jon 1:7; John 19:24), God sovereignly used this method with the sailors to identify Jonah as the reason for the storm (cf. Pro 16:33). Today, believers are guided by God’s Word and the Holy Spirit, not the casting of lots. The sailors questioned Jonah (Jon 1:8), who told them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land” (Jon 1:9). Then they became afraid, for they knew he was fleeing from God’s call, for he’d told them (Jon 1:10). The sailors asked what they should do to make the storm cease (Jon 1:11), and Jonah said, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm *has come* upon you” (Jon 1:12). The believer out of fellowship brings discipline upon himself and the lives of those

around him; but the one who stays in God's will proves to be a blessing. Jonah probably lacked the courage to jump into the sea himself, so he advised the sailors to do it; but they were repulsed at the idea of throwing him overboard and desperately tried to row to land, but could not (Jon 1:13). So, they prayed to God, recognizing His sovereignty over their situation and asked that He not hold them liable for Jonah's death (Jon 1:14); then they threw the prophet overboard and the sea instantly became calm for them (Jon 1:15). The sailors feared the Lord and made sacrifices and vows (Jon 1:16), which could be an indication of their salvation. God then appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, which served both as a means of discipline and protection (Jon 1:17). In His infinite wisdom and sovereignty, God could have chosen a number of ways to save Jonah, but He chose the fish, intending to use it as a sign of the burial of Christ (Mat 12:39-41).

Jonah 2:1-10

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish [where the Lord was keeping him alive], ² and he said, “I called out of my distress [צָרָה *tsarah* – *straights, distress, affliction, trouble*] to the LORD, and He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol [the place of the dead]; You heard my voice. ³ “For You had cast [שָׁלַקְתָּ *shalak* – *to throw, fling, cast* - Hiphil] me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the current engulfed me [Jonah realizes God used the sailors to put him there; cf. [Jon 1:15](#)]. All Your breakers and billows passed over me [or – “all the mighty waves you sent swept over me” NET]. ⁴ “So I said [self-talk], ‘I have been expelled from Your sight. Nevertheless, I will look again toward Your holy temple [see 1 Ki 8:38-39].’ ⁵ “Water encompassed me to the point of death [he nearly drowned]. The great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head. ⁶ “I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars *was* around me forever, but You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. ⁷ “While I was fainting away, I remembered [זָכַרְתִּי *zakar* – *to remember, call to mind*] the LORD, and my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple. ⁸ “Those who regard vain idols [הִבְלִי-שָׁוְיָ – *havle-shawe* – *lit. empty-nothing*] forsake their faithfulness [or, “Those who worship worthless idols forfeit the mercy that could be theirs” NET], ⁹ but I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving [faith can bring praise in the midst of the trial]. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation [יְשׁוּעָה *yeshuah* – *salvation, deliverance*] is from the LORD.” ¹⁰ Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land.

Summary:

In the previous chapter, Jonah had turned away from God’s call to preach to the Ninevites, so the Lord hurled a great storm on the sea and pressured him through the ship’s captain and sailors, who eventually threw him overboard in order to save their own lives. Jonah would have died, except God sent a great fish to swallow him and keep him alive (Jon 1:17). God used the fish, both as a form of punishment and as the means of his salvation. It’s likely Jonah did not adjust his thinking immediately to the situation, but had to work through what was happening to him. After a brief amount of time within the stomach of the fish, Jonah realized he was being kept alive supernaturally by God. This supernatural rescue prompted God’s prophet to construct a prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord (Jon 2:1). What follows in Jonah 2:2-9 reveals the prophet’s mind is saturated with a knowledge of God’s Word, as Jonah borrows heavily from various passages in the Psalms (see handout). While constructing his prayer, it cannot be determined if Jonah consciously drew excerpts from the various Psalms, or if they naturally percolated up in his thinking because

his mind naturally thought this way from years of reading Scripture. Either way, Jonah thought and prayed biblically and the Lord heard his cry. Jonah said, “I called out of my distress to the LORD, and He answered me. I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice” (Jon 2:2). Jonah recognized God’s sovereignty over what was happening to him; for though the sailors had physically tossed him into the sea (Jon 1:15), he credits God with their actions (Jon 2:3). The sailors acted out of desperation and were motivated by fear of death; however, their attitudes and actions were influenced by the circumstances God controlled, as they were driven to do His will. Jonah does not blame the sailors, but interprets their actions from the divine perspective, realizing God was the One who controlled them; therefore, he could say of the Lord, “You had cast me into the deep” (Jon 2:3a). Jonah saw the sailors’ action of tossing him overboard as God’s action of discipline. They were His agents of punishment, like the storm, waves and fish. Though Jonah realizes he’s under divine discipline (Jon 2:4a), he also knows he is being saved, and that he will see the Lord’s temple, and this encourages him (Jon 2:4b). He briefly describes his time in the ocean, before the fish swallowed him, as a time when he thought he was being laid to rest in a watery grave. He states, “Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head. I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars *was* around me forever. But You have brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God” (Jon 2:5-6). Jonah thought he was going to die, so his mind turned to the Lord, and he said, “While I was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple” (Jon 2:7). Jonah prayed to the only true God for salvation, and the Lord heard him. This stands in contrast to those who turn to idols and, by their own decision, forsake the mercy that could be theirs from the Lord (Jon 2:8). Jonah then vows to offer sacrifices to God with an attitude of thanksgiving (Jon 2:9a), and concludes his prayer, saying, “Salvation is from the LORD” (Jon 2:9b). Within this context, Jonah is speaking about his physical deliverance. The time Jonah spent in the fish was precisely what was needed to help him gain his spiritual sight; and once he had it, “Then the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto the dry land” (Jon 2:10). In this chapter, Jonah experienced both discipline and grace from the Lord, who “is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5b). The discipline came because the prophet was arrogant and disobedient to God’s call. The grace came when he humbled himself and turned back to the Lord with a willing heart. Jonah’s prayer of thanksgiving reflects his humility and grateful heart for God’s deliverance, for the prophet knows the Lord is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth” (Exo 34:6).

Jonah's Prayer	Various Psalms
I called out of my distress to the LORD, and He answered me. (Jon 2:2a)	In my trouble I cried to the LORD, and He answered me. (Psa 120:1)
I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice. (Jon 2:2b)	Thou hast delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol. (Psa 86:13b)
Thou hast cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the current engulfed me (Jon 2:3a)	Thou hast put me in the lowest pit, in dark places, in the depths. (Psa 88:6)
All Thy breakers and billows passed over me. (Jon 2:3b)	All Thy breakers and Thy waves have rolled over me. (Psa 42:7b)
So I said, 'I have been expelled from Thy sight. Nevertheless I will look again toward Thy holy temple.' (Jon 2:4)	As for me, I said in my alarm, "I am cut off from before Thine eyes"; nevertheless Thou didst hear the voice of my supplications when I cried to Thee. (Psa 31:22)
Water encompassed me to the point of death. The great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head. (Jon 2:5)	Save me, O God, for the waters have threatened my life. I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me. (Psa 69:1-2)
I descended to the roots of the mountains. The earth with its bars <i>was</i> around me forever, but Thou hast brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. (Jon 2:6)	O LORD, Thou hast brought up my soul from Sheol; Thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit. (Psa 30:3)
While I was fainting away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to Thee, into Thy holy temple. (Jon 2:7)	In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, and my cry for help before Him came into His ears. (Psa 18:6)
Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness (Jon 2:8)	I hate those who regard vain idols; but I trust in the LORD. (Psa 31:6)
But I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. (Jon 2:9a)	Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High (Psa 50:14)
Salvation is from the LORD. (Jon 2:9b)	Salvation belongs to the LORD (Psa 3:8a)

Steps to Spiritual Maturity

Dr. Steven R. Cook

The advance to spiritual maturity is a process that takes time as Christians learn and live God's Word on a regular basis. But this is not an easy process, for we live in the devil's world and are confronted with many obstacles and distractions that seek to push or pull us away from God. Though constant distractions are all around us, we are "destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). Bringing our thoughts into captivity means focusing our minds on God and His Word (Isa 26:3; Pro 3:5-6; Col 3:1), and not allowing our thoughts to be bogged down and trapped with the cares of this world (Matt 6:25-34). This requires spiritual discipline to learn and live God's Word on a regular basis as we advance to spiritual maturity. Biblically, there are several things believers must do to reach spiritual maturity:

1. **Be in submission to God.** Scripture tells us to "Submit to God" (Jam 4:7), and "present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Rom 12:1). Being in submission to God means we desire the Lord's will above all else. When this happens, God's Word opens up to us (Jo 7:17).
2. **Continually study God's Word** (Psa 1:1-2; 2 Tim 2:15; 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). As Christians, we cannot live what we do not know, and learning God's Word necessarily precedes living His will. Therefore, from regeneration onward, we study God's Word in order to replace a lifetime of worldly viewpoint with divine viewpoint.
3. **Live by faith** (Rom 10:17; Heb 10:38; 11:6). Learning God's Word becomes effective when mixed with our faith as we apply Scripture to all aspects of our lives. Our faith is effective when God's Word is more real than our experiences, feelings or circumstances. The writer to the Hebrews states, "But my righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him" (Heb 10:38), for "without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Heb 11:6).
4. **Accept God's trials** (Deu 8:2-3, 16; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 3:17; 4:12-13). God uses trials to strengthen our faith and develop us spiritually. Often, we don't like hardship, but we must learn to accept it as necessary. For the Lord uses it to burn away the dross of our flawed character and to refine those golden qualities consistent with His character. The growing believer learns to praise God for the trials, knowing

He uses them to advance us spiritually (Rom 5:3-5; 2 Cor 12:7-10; Heb 12:11; Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet 4:12-13).

5. **Be filled with the Spirit** (Eph 5:18). Being filled with the Holy Spirit means being controlled by Him. It means we follow where He guides, and His guidance is always according to Scripture.
6. **Walk in the Spirit** (Gal 5:16-21). Walking in the Spirit means we depend on Him to sustain us as seek to do His will.
7. **Restore broken fellowship with God through confession of personal sin** (1 Jo 1:5-9). The confessed sin is directed to God, which is faithfully forgiven every time (1 Jo 1:9).
8. **Fellowship with other believers** (Act 2:42; Heb 10:24). Spiritual growth does not happen in isolation, as God expects us to exercise our spiritual gifts for the benefit of others.
9. **Serve others in love** (Gal 5:13). We are part of the body of Christ and God calls us to love and serve each other. Peter states, “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet 4:10).
10. **Take advantage of the time God gives** (Eph 5:15-17; cf. Heb 5:12; 1 Pet 1:17; 4:1-2). The believer does not reach spiritual maturity overnight, and since we have only a measure of time allotted to us by God (Psa 139:16), we must make sure our days are not wasted on meaningless pursuits, but on learning God’s Word and living His will.

As Christians, we will face ongoing worldly distractions in our lives which are designed by Satan to prevent spiritual growth. We have choices to make on a daily basis, for only we can choose to allow these distractions to stand between us and the Lord. As Christians, we experience our greatest blessings when we reach spiritual maturity and utilize the rich resources God has provided for us. However, learning takes time, as ignorance gives way to the light of God’s revelation. Frustration is often the handmaiden of ignorance, but spiritual success comes with knowledge of God and His Word.

Jonah 3:1-10

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you [which was probably delivered in Aramaic, the language of the Assyrians; cf. [Isa 36:11](#)].” ³ So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh [about 550 miles from Samaria] according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city [with a population of at least 120,000], a three days’ walk [probably including the rural areas outside the city]. ⁴ Then Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk [ca. 15 miles]; and he cried out and said, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown [𐤆𐤏𐤏𐤍 *haphak* – to turn, overturn, used of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; see [Gen 19:24-25](#)].” [“forty days” implies grace to repent or judgment will come] ⁵ Then the people of Nineveh believed in God [concerning His message of judgment]; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them [as an outward display of inward humility]. ⁶ When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. ⁷ He issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water [which would limit the fast to three days].” ⁸ “But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands [they instinctively knew their behavior was sinful; see [Rom 2:14-15](#)].” ⁹ “Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish.” ¹⁰ When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do *it*.

Summary:

After Jonah’s humbling experience in the stomach of the great fish (Jon 2:1-9), and being vomited onto the onto the dry land (Jon 2:10), God recommissioned His recalcitrant prophet to deliver a message to the Ninevites (Jon 3:1), saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you” (Jon 3:2). Jonah is obedient to God, “So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD” (Jon 3:3a). It is likely Jonah obeyed the Lord more from a fear of punishment than from a heart of compassion. Nineveh was located 550 miles from Samaria, the capital of Israel, and it would have taken Jonah nearly a month to get there, assuming he was dropped near there and traveled 20 miles per day. Once he arrived, it took him three days to walk through the city, delivering his message as he went. The population of Nineveh was at least 120,000

(see Jon 4:11); however, the number of residents could rise to over half a million, if the 120,000 refers only to children. Whatever the number, God cared about these people enough to send His prophet as an ambassador to warn them of His pending judgment. Jonah's message was simple, as he cried out, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jon 3:4b). The message included an element of time, people, and divine action. The time was forty days, the people were the Ninevites, and the action was divine destruction (because of their wickedness and violence). It's possible Jonah's punishment by God served as a sign to the Ninevites that God was to be taken seriously. Luke tells us, "Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites" (Luke 11:30). This could imply either they knew about God's judgment against Jonah because of his disobedience, or they saw Jonah with the physical marks of his discipline. Either way, they were moved to believe his message, as the text informs us, "Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them" (Jon 3:5). Here is simple faith in action, as they believed in God. They took the message of judgment seriously, and correctly reasoned that forty days were given as a probationary period in which they could reform their behavior and perhaps avoid God's wrath. The act of fasting and wearing sackcloth were outward signs of inward affliction that reflected a humble heart. As the residents of the city fasted, word traveled up to the king himself, who "arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, [and] covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat on the ashes" (Jon 3:6). The king then formalized the fast with a decree that encompassed everyone in the kingdom and forbade eating food or drinking water (Jon 3:7). The lack of water would have limited the fast to three days. During the time of fasting, he commanded them, saying, "let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands" (Jon 3:8). The word "violence" (חַמָּס *chamas*) refers to evil-violence committed against the innocent and undeserving. This is consistent with what we know about the Assyrians, who were known for their great cruelty to those whom they'd conquered, not showing mercy to the poor, helpless or widows. The king acknowledged their sinfulness and reasoned that since God had not brought judgment already, that there was opportunity to turn from their violent ways and avoid it, stating, "Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish" (Jon 3:9). And we learn that God did spare them from His judgment, for "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do *it*." (Jon 3:10). In the Bible, some of God's pronouncements of judgment were conditional. That is, He would show mercy and spare them judgment if they changed their ways. However, there were times when God's judgment was certain, and no amount of reform could stop it. God is slow to anger (Exo 34:6; Num 14:18; Psa 86:15; Jon 4:2), which refers to His great

patience, but His patience does not go on forever, and eventually He brings judgment upon the arrogant who refuse to humble themselves. The Assyrians eventually returned to their evil practices and destroyed Israel nearly 37 years later in 722 B.C. This shows that the repentance of one generation is merely the repentance of one generation, and that believing and humble parents does not guarantee believing and humble children. Eventually, God would destroy the Assyrians in 612 B.C.

Jonah 4:1-10

But it [God's mercy] greatly displeased [עָרַץ *raa* – *to be evil, bad*; used of the Ninevites in Jon 1:2; 3:8] Jonah and he became angry [חָרַח *charah* – *to burn, be kindled with anger*].² He prayed to the LORD and said, “Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my *own* country? [i.e. at the beginning of his flight in Israel] Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity [Jonah knew God was this way; cf. [Exo 34:6](#); [Psa 86:15](#); [103:8](#)].³ “Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.” [Moses and Elijah also asked God to take their lives; see [Num 11:14-15](#); [1 Ki 19:4](#)]⁴ The LORD said, “Do you have good reason to be angry?” [God's question was designed to provoke inner thought; cf. [Gen 3:9, 13](#); [16:8](#); [1 Ki 19:9, 13](#)]⁵ Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city [perhaps waiting to see if God's judgment would fall].⁶ So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort [God comforted Jonah]. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.⁷ But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered.⁸ When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint [God afflicted Jonah; cf. [Job 2:10](#)] and begged with *all* his soul to die, saying, “Death is better to me than life.” [Jonah's third request to die; cf. [1:12](#); [4:3](#)]⁹ Then God said to Jonah, “Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?” And he said, “I have good reason to be angry, even to death.” [not biblically rational]¹⁰ Then the LORD said, “You had compassion on the plant [which has no soul] for which you did not work and *which* you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight.¹¹ “Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons [eternal beings] who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand [likely an allusion to children], as well as many animals?” [God cares about animals]

Summary:

God's mercy toward the Ninevites reflects His love for all people (see [John 3:16-17](#)), but Jonah became angry when God did not destroy the Ninevites ([Jon 4:1](#)). Jonah's hatred was likely born out of a nationalistic pride that wanted to protect his fellow Israelites, since he would have known about God's prophecies through [Hosea](#) and [Amos](#), that the Lord was going to use the Assyrians to judge His disobedient people ([Hos 9:3](#); [11:5](#); [Amo 5:27](#)). If this is his reason, then Jonah's anger is

unjustified, for it was Israel's sin that was bringing God's judgment, and destroying the Assyrians would not prevent it. Jonah then prays to God and reveals his original reason for fleeing to Tarshish, saying, "for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity" (Jon 4:2). Jonah knew God was this way (Exo 34:6; Psa 86:15; 103:8) and thought he could withhold God's compassion, and bring only His judgment, by fleeing away from Nineveh. But God's grace would not be withheld because of a disobedient prophet. When Nineveh did respond positively to the message, God extended grace and did not bring judgment. However, Jonah got angry, because in his heart he hated those to whom he preached, secretly desiring their destruction. It's ironic that Jonah enjoyed God's grace, even though his attitude is not in line with God's attitude, and that he gets angry when God does not destroy his enemies, but has no problem when God does not destroy him for his sin. Jonah was so upset over the matter that he asked God to take his life (Jon 4:3), but the Lord challenges His prophet, asking, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" (Jon 4:4). Jonah is not the first prophet to ask God to kill him, for both Moses and Elijah asked for the same (Num 11:14-15; 1 Ki 19:4). When God asks questions, it's not because He's seeking information, but to get the person to introspect, and to think about their behavior, because sin often clouds judgment. He did this with Adam and Eve (Gen 3:9, 13), Hagar (Gen 16:8), and Elijah (1 Ki 19:9, 13). Jonah then went outside the city and waited to see what would happen (Jon 4:5), which might imply that the forty days were near. God tried to teach Jonah a lesson by causing a plant—likely a castor oil plant—to grow up "to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant" (Jon 4:6). But God destroyed the plant, so that it withered and died (Jon 4:7), and in the morning, when the sun came up, "God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with *all* his soul to die, saying, 'Death is better to me than life.'" (Jon 4:8). This is the third time Jonah asked to die (cf. Jon 1:12; 4:3). God obviously controlled the circumstances which affected Jonah's comfort and affliction (cf. Job 2:10; Isa 45:7; Amo 3:6). Again, God challenged His prophet's attitude about the situation, asking, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" (Jon 4:9a), and again, Jonah responded irrationally, saying, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death" (Jon 4:9b). Though Jonah says he has good reason to be angry, he provides none. God then tells Jonah, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and *which* you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know *the difference* between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?" (Jon 4:10-11). God uses an *a fortiori* argument, which argues from the lesser to the greater, to help Jonah understand his thinking is irrational when compared with God's

reasoning; for if Jonah had compassion on the plant, a lesser and temporal thing in God's creation, it stands with greater reason that he would have compassion on the Ninevites, which are greater, and eternal creatures. Though Jonah preached God's message, which implied an opportunity for repentance, inwardly, he hoped the Ninevites would not respond and that God would pour down His wrath. Overall, Jonah's attitude was antithetical to God's compassion, which reveals God's child can do His will outwardly while rejecting it inwardly.