

Before starting this lesson, read the book of **Jonah**. You may find it helpful to read the book, go thru the lesson and then read the book once again. Since it is a short book, it will not be difficult to do.

Of all the books in Scripture, Jonah is probably the most questioned and criticized. After all, fish do not go around swallowing and then spitting people out. And besides, how could a person survive inside a fish and not be destroyed by its digestive juices?

In spite of these questions, for more than 2000 years people believed the story of Jonah really happened. But then, in the last 160 years, some Bible scholars decided it did not happen. It was only a Jewish legend.

As a result, many people today are not sure if Jonah is fact or fiction. To find an honest answer, we need to ask more questions.

Is it biologically possible?

What did Jews and early Christians believe? It was their story and they lived 2000 years closer to the event.

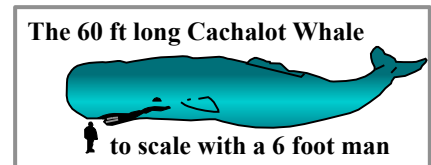
And lastly, what did Jesus teach about Jonah?

Question #1

IS THE STORY OF JONAH BIOLOGICALLY POSSIBLE?

The most accurate answers will come from people who spent their life hunting whales.

In 1928 an English newspaper tells about a man who saw a 60 foot carcass of a cachalot or sperm whale. It had been brought on land and cleaned on the inside. Its mouth was propped open, so people could go inside and look. He and 12 others walked into the mouth, thru the throat and entered into its stomach which was like a fair-sized room.



Whale hunters learned so much about these whales that they have



written many books. One author said the cachalot always ejects the contents of its stomach when dying. He saw it happen and it included solid masses 8 x 6 x 6 feet. (*The Cruise of the Cachalot*, Frank Bullen). Another author, a manager of a whaling station said this kind of whale can swallow lumps of food up to 8 feet in diameter. (Sir Frances Fox, *63 Years of Engineering*).

This same manager described an experience which he said was carefully investigated by the scientific editor of a Paris newspaper, as well as another scientist.

In Feb. 1891, the whale ship Star of the East was in the vicinity of the Falkland Islands and the look-out sighted a large sperm whale 3 miles away. Two boats were lowered....The second boat attacked the whale but was upset by a lash of its tail...One (man), James Bartley, disappeared....

The whale was killed. And in a few hours the great body was lying by the ship's side and the crew busy...removing the blubber. ... They worked all day and part of the night. The next day they attached some tackle to the stomach, which was hoisted on deck. The sailors were startled by spasmodic signs of life and inside was found the missing sailor, doubled up and unconscious. He was laid on the deck and treated to a bath of sea-water which soon revived him; but his mind was not clear, and he was placed in the captain's quarters, where he remained 2 weeks a raving lunatic...

(He) gradually gained possession of his senses and at the end of the 3rd week had entirely recovered from the shock and resumed his duties. During his sojourn in the whale's stomach, Bartley's skin, where exposed to the action of the gastric juice, underwent a striking change. His face, neck, and hands were bleached to a deadly whiteness....Bartley affirms that he would probably have lived inside his house of flesh until he starved, for he lost his senses thru fright and not from lack of air.

This is from *Explore the Book*, by J. Sidlow Baxter in his first chapter on Jonah. Dr. Baxter was an English Bible scholar and teacher. Living in England all his life, it was easy for him to check these facts since it had been an English ship. Being the scholar he was, he would not have included it in his book if he had not verified it in his country.

All this information answers our 1st question.

It is **biologically** possible for a whale to swallow or eject a person whole. In the last 125 years, at least one person has been inside the stomach of a whale and lived to tell about it.

Having said this, I need to add, the Bible never calls it a *whale*. Both the Hebrew and Greek words that are used, mean *large fish*. We are told it was prepared or sent by God. 1:17 (in some Bibles, 2:1) In other words, it was not just any fish that happened to come along. God sent the right fish to the right place at the right time. It may or may not have been an actual whale. In fact God could have created a unique fish just for the situation - a one-of-a-kind fish. But, to satisfy our western minds that always wants scientific proof – yes, it *is* biologically possible.

Question #2

WHAT DID JEWS AND EARLY CHRISTIANS BELIEVE ABOUT JONAH?

What the Jews believed is especially important. Their literature was full of picture language. They were known for their many legends. So Jews automatically knew which of their literature was fact and which was fiction - which was history and which was legend.

In the 1st century AD, from outside the Christian world, there were 2 **Jewish** men who wrote about Jonah

Philo, a philosopher

Josephus, the historian. Both refer to Jonah as a story that really happened.

From within the **Christian** world, church leaders such as:

Irenaeus, Chrysostom, Jerome, Augustine - all of them wrote about Jonah as fact.

Writings from early Christians in the Roman catacombs all say the story of Jonah was fact.

Question #3

WHAT DID JESUS TEACH ABOUT JONAH?

Matthew 12:38-41 *Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.*

He answered, 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 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be 3 days and 3 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 religious leaders ask Jesus to prove He is the promised Messiah.

Jesus replies, *My proof is the prophet Jonah*

As certainly as he was buried in the fish and returned alive, with that same certainty, I will be buried in the earth and return alive.

As certainly as Nineveh responded to Jonah and was spared, with the same certainty, because you leaders refuse to listen to Me, you will be judged.

Jesus used Jonah to prove the certainty of His resurrection and their judgment.

The story of Jonah could only be proof if both He and the Jewish leaders believed it was fact. No one would ever use a legend as proof to skeptical listeners.

These 3 areas: biology

the belief of Jews and early Christians

the teaching of Jesus

give us important information about the story of Jonah.

But in the end, what **we** believe about Jonah will be determined by our concept of God.

If God is limited to only that which can be explained or done by you and me, then obviously the story of Jonah is impossible. It has to be fiction. In fact, a lot of the Bible would have to be fiction.

But, if God is Creator of heaven and earth and has all power, is anything too hard for God?

Could God have sent a fish to swallow Jonah? Of course.

Could God have controlled the digestive juices of that fish? Yes

And even if Jonah died within the fish, could God have brought him back to life when the fish spit him out on dry land? Absolutely.

The real issue of this story is not Jonah. It is not even what kind of fish was involved.

The real issue is God. *How big is your God?*

Personally, I believe God could do all of this. It is why I teach the story as history - as a real event that happened.

This means we need a perspective of time – when did this happen?

In Jewish history of the Old Testament, their first 3 kings were Saul, David and Solomon over a united kingdom.

But then there was a civil war that divided the nation into the north and the south – Israel and Judah.

The capital of **Israel** was Samaria.

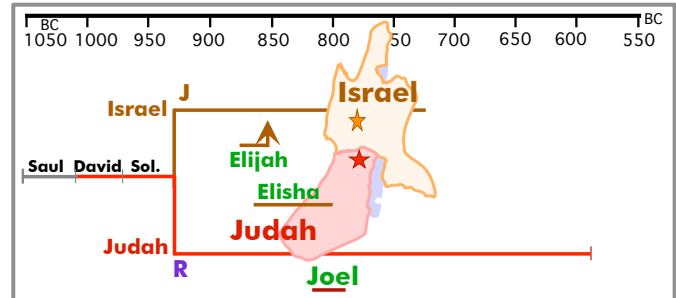
The capital of **Judah** was Jerusalem.

In the English alphabet, the letter after I is J.

This helps us remember, the first king of Israel was Jeroboam.

The letters R and S are next to each other.

This helps us remember Solomon and Rehoboam were next of kin – father and son.



The first 2 prophets in the northern nation of **Israel** were Elijah and then Elisha 862-798.

The first prophet in the southern nation of **Judah** is Joel 814-789 BC. His ministry was during the last years of Elisha.

But being in different countries, they did not know each other

Now we come to the prophet **Jonah**.

To find the time of his ministry, we first look for information in his book. But the only personal fact is that he is the son of Amittai - not much to go on.

This is why the books of Kings and Chronicles are so important. They provide the background for all the prophets.

Kings gives us the background to Jonah. 2 Kings 14:23 ff.

Jeroboam ...II, ...became king in Samaria and he reigned 41 years. He did evil in the eyes of Yahweh

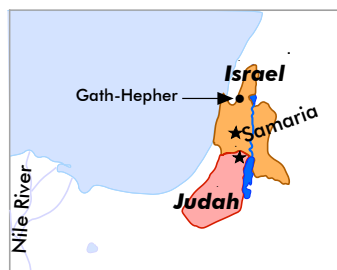
Jeroboam II, was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hámath to the Sea of the Arabah, in

accordance with the word of Yahweh, spoken thru His servant Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-Hepher.

The Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them.

And ...He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam II.

These verses in Kings give us a wealth of information. We know this is the same Jonah, because he is the son of Amittai.



We have his birthplace - Gath-hepher.

This was a little town in northern Israel, between Mt. Carmel and the Sea of Galilee.

Next, we are told he gives a message to the king of Israel. So Jonah is not only *from* Israel but also a prophet *to* Israel, his own people.

From the name of the king we know the general time. Jeroboam I had been the first king of Israel in the 900's. Jeroboam II is king number 13 in the 700's. He was king 41 years, 783-743 BC.

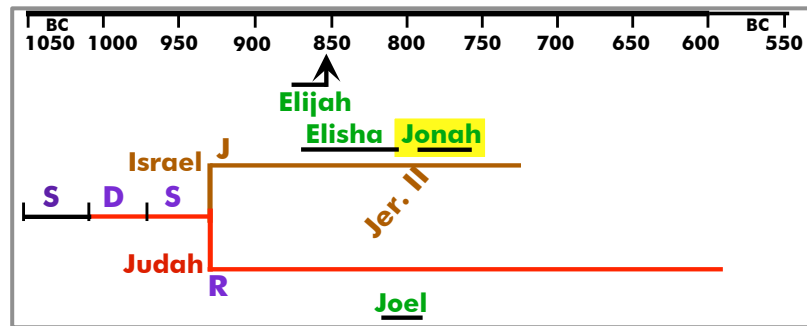
To establish his credibility, we can assume God had Jonah begin his ministry as prophet before Jeroboam comes to power.

Then near the beginning of king Jeroboam's reign, c. 782 BC, God sends Jonah with the message,

God will enable you to expand the boundaries of Israel.

Putting these facts together, leads us to Jonah's date of ministry c. 790 – 755 BC. – a period of some 35 years.

In summary then, Jonah is a prophet to Israel, his own nation. He begins just 8 years after Elisha's death. His message is based on what is happening both in Israel and the surrounding nations.



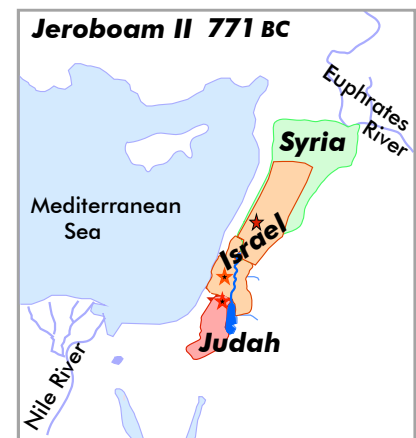
Some 20 years before Jonah & Jeroboam II, Israel's king and people had been rebelling against God, so He allowed Syria to conquer most of Israel's land, c. 803 BC.



Finally, after trying everything else, Israel's king decided to ask God for help. God responded and both king Jehoahaz, and the next king, Jehoash (798-783), recovered part of their country.

Now in 783 BC, a new king of Israel comes to power, Jeroboam II.

As encouragement, God sends a message thru Jonah. In mercy, He will continue to bless the nation so the king can defeat Syria and regain some of the land the Jews used to have back in the time of David and Solomon - the glory years when Israel was at her greatest. Rather than more judgment, God uses mercy to bring His people back to obedience.



Over the next 10-12 years it happens, just like Jonah said. Israel expands her boundaries into Syria, 125 miles north of Damascus.

During these years Israel takes the mercy and blessings of God, but rejects the worship of God. The king and people continue with idolatry and immorality. This means God must now change His actions. As He blessed by giving them land, now He will judge by taking their land. But this time He will not use the nation of Syria.

The Assyrian nation has become the new empire. This is the nation to be



feared. Jonah knows time is short. As prophet to his people, he warns them... *Repent - turn from idolatry, or God will send a more powerful nation to conquer us.*

Then one day, very unexpectedly, God commands Jonah to leave Israel, go to Nineveh and preach against *it*. Jonah should have been delighted. He can tell the enemy God is going to judge *them*.

But instead of heading east, Jonah runs in the opposite direction. People have given many reasons. Fear, prejudice against Gentiles, concern for his reputation. But none of these is true.

Jonah gives us the reason 3 times in Jonah 1. Twice in verse 3 and once in verse 10 it says, *Jonah ran away from the Lord.*

This does not mean Jonah thinks he can get away from God. He knows God is everywhere; God is omnipresent. The Hebrew literally says,

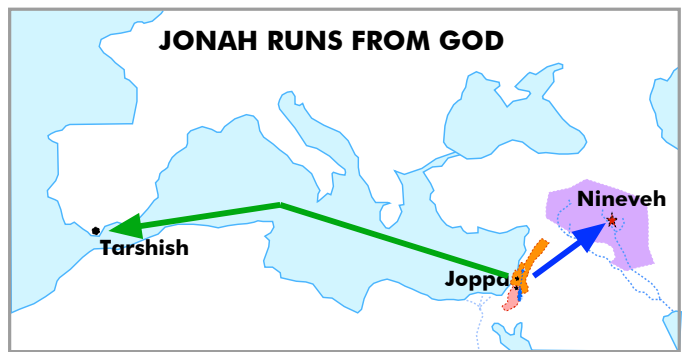
he ran from the face of Yahweh. This is a Hebrew idiom or phrase with a special meaning.

A prophet represented God to the people. It was expressed in Hebrew as representing God's **face** to the people. To flee from God's face means Jonah does not want to represent God's face. He does not want to be a prophet anymore. To put it simply, Jonah says, *God, I quit.*

This story is easier to follow if you look at a map of the Old Testament. Jonah begins in the northern nation of Israel.

God wants him to go 500 miles northeast to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. That is located between the 2 northern branches of the Tigris River.

Instead, **Jonah** first goes southwest to the Mediterranean coast to a town called Joppa. There he buys a ticket for Tarshish, 2300 miles to the west. Tarshish is a Phoenician settlement in Spain, by the Straights of Gibraltar. In other words, Jonah is going as far as possible in the opposite direction.



Jonah is taking himself into exile. As a Jew, he believes God is everywhere.

But as a Jew, he also believes a **holy** God can only **command** His people inside the **holy** land.

So Jonah wants to get as far away as possible so God cannot repeat the command, *go to Nineveh*.

Jonah knows this is disobedience; he knows God punishes disobedience. Over the years this is what he has told his own people. So why is **he** now disobeying? The answer is connected to his people and nation.

Israel has not responded to Jonah's message nor to God's mercy and blessings. Because she has continued in idolatry, God will have to punish. Jonah knows God will use the Assyrian empire to do it. By this time Assyria has become notorious for her brutality and torture.

When she takes captives, she pulls out their tongues or ties them down and literally skins them alive. She impales them on posts, leaving them to die a slow, painful death. She beheads them or burns them alive; mutilates their bodies by cutting off hands, feet or ears while the people are still living. She gouges out the eyes of the captives. She enjoys torturing children in front of their parents.

Jonah knows that because of Israel's idolatry, God will allow them to be conquered by the Assyrians. He knows that then the Assyrians will do some of these things to his people.

So when God says, *go preach against Nineveh, I am going to destroy it*, we would expect Jonah would be thrilled and rush to give them this message. But Jonah is not delighted because he knows God. When he gets God's message, his thoughts go something like this.

If I go and preach in Nineveh, the people might repent. And then it would be just like God to forgive them and they will be spared. Then later on, God will use them to punish my people and torture them.

Now on the other hand, if I do not go, the people of Nineveh will never hear the message; they will not repent and God will have to destroy them. They are far more wicked than we are. Assyria will be gone and Israel will be spared. Only I will be punished, having to live in exile apart from my people and country.

Jonah is ready to sacrifice himself for his nation. Jonah is not disobeying out of rebellion against God. He is disobeying to protect and save his nation. His motive is good. It is out of love and compassion. But his love is misguided, so instead of helping, he only hurts himself and the people around him.

Jonah's disobedience brings immediate trouble.

He gets on the boat and just a little ways out to sea, a storm suddenly appears. It is so violent, that even the experienced sailors on the ship are convinced they will die. Jonah admits his disobedience and reluctantly, the sailors throw him overboard. Instantly the storm ends. The sailors know it is supernatural and they worship Yahweh, the God of Jonah.

Because the sailors turn to God does not mean Jonah's disobedience is OK. God works in spite of Jonah - not *because* of him. Yes, the sailors worship God and that is the most important.

But Jonah's disobedience brought great disaster to their lives. Financially they are ruined. These are Phoenician sailors who make their living as traders. They have left from one of their colonies, the port of Joppa. Their boat has been filled with merchandise to be sold or traded at various ports thruout the European coast line of the Mediterranean Sea and then coming back along the African coast. During the storm, when they throw everything overboard, they lose their merchandise and all their bags of money. They lose everything they had to make a successful business trip.

After the storm and without any goods, the sailors have to return to Joppa. Naturally they tell everybody about their loss and what had caused it.

As experienced sailors, they know the storm they experienced had been supernatural. Joppa was a Phoenician seaport and trading center with merchants coming and going from cities to the north, east and south. Over the next weeks, merchants who had been in Joppa return to their countries, which would include Nineveh. They take with them this strange story about a storm, a Jewish prophet who disobeyed his God and when he was thrown overboard, the storm immediately stopped. This part of the story will get to Nineveh long before Jonah arrives.

Meanwhile, back in the Mediterranean, when Jonah was thrown overboard, he thought he would die. But then suddenly, he finds himself inside this large fish. Immediately he knows this fish has not been sent as punishment, but as preservation. Chapter 2 is a psalm of thanksgiving that he composes while inside the fish. In the original Hebrew there is not one single request. It is only praise, thanksgiving and confession.

He ends his repentance by telling God he is ready obey. He says, *what I have vowed, I will make good.* In plain English he is saying, *God, You called me to be a prophet. A few days ago I quit, but now I will make good on my vow. I will do what You called me to do.*

He closes with a final statement, *salvation comes from God.* He means, *God, I've done my part. I will obey. But You, God, are the only One who can get me out of this fish.*

When Jonah writes this book, he shows how God responded to his statement. In the very next verse he explains that God commanded the fish to the coastline and the fish got rid of him on dry land. *Salvation came from God.*

Jonah now has another chance. God sends him with the same message. This time Jonah obeys.

It will take him at least a month to get there, since it is 500 miles northeast from Israel to Nineveh. Nineveh itself is enclosed by a wall that is almost 8 miles around. In 3:2 Nineveh is called the great city. A more accurate translation is greater Nineveh. Jonah is not being sent just to Nineveh, but to the metro area, a combination of 4 cities. Technically, during this period of history, Nineveh is not even the capital of Assyria; it is 1 of the other 3 cities within greater Nineveh.

These 4 cities - metropolitan Nineveh - have a circumference of 60 miles or 3 days journey with some 600,000 people.

According to 3:4, Jonah starts preaching - *40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*

God uses the number 40 in Scripture when He wants to show the situation involves either judgment or testing. In this case, it involves both. It provides a test to see if the Assyrians will respond to the message and judgment if they do not.



The king immediately knows what is wrong. God is holding them responsible for their violence and evil ways. Notice that God had not told Jonah, *go preach against Nineveh because they do not worship Me.* He said, *Go preach because of their wickedness.* We do not know how much understanding they had of Yahweh, the God of Israel. They knew *about* Him, yes, but it is questionable if they had sufficient knowledge to believe *in* Him. They certainly had not been taught by the Jews. They had not even seen any example from God's people. But they intuitively know their brutality, wickedness and torture are wrong.

This is a principle that was true then and is still true today. God holds people responsible for the knowledge they have at the moment. If they respond, He will send them someone with more information.

Based on Jonah's message, God expects the Assyrians to do something about their cruelty. In fact, He has already been working thru circumstances and nature over the last several years.

Altho Assyria was still expanding her empire, recently she had unexpectedly lost several battles.

Over the last 6 years, starting in 765 BC, she had gone thru 2 severe plagues of disease.

During this same period there had also been a solar eclipse.

According to the cultures of *that* day, all of these were omens of judgment. So the people in Nineveh already believe the gods are angry at them. But they do not know which gods nor specifically why.

Now Jonah comes saying, *Yahweh God is going to judge you for your great wickedness.*

Chapter 3:5 says *they believed God.* This means they accept the fact, *Yes, what Jonah says is true; we will be destroyed because of our wickedness.* All along they have sensed their brutality and cruelty was wrong; circumstances have emphasized it. Now Jonah has confirmed it.

The king of Assyria commands both people and animals to put on sackcloth as evidence of their humility and repentance.

Sackcloth was cloth made from goat's hair. It was rough and heavy and usually used for sacks. In the days of the Bible, people from all cultures of the Middle East would also use this cloth to make simple garments. These would be worn when they wanted to show grief or sorrow. They also wore them to show repentance and humility before God.

We can understand **people** wearing sackcloth garments. But the thought of **animals** with sackcloth over them seems absurd or ridiculous. However, it was typical of countries in that day. They considered animals as a part of their city. So when there was a victory, animals wore garlands. In time of mourning, animals wore sackcloth and were included in the fasting.

Based on the king's command, *everyone* in the city repents or responds. This does not mean everyone agrees to worship only Yahweh, the God of Israel. But it does mean everyone is willing to show by outward action - by fasting and putting on clothes that show humility - they *agree* - their extreme violence and wickedness is wrong.

They believe they are in danger of being destroyed. However they also believe, if they respond, God may spare them. But where did they get that idea? Jonah had only told them, *forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown*. Jonah certainly does not want them spared.

I think we have the answer in the New Testament. In Luke 11:30, Jesus says Jonah **himself** was a sign to the people.

I would like to suggest the sign is Jonah's appearance. From being inside the fish, I think God allowed his skin to be bleached. It would have been so unusual, everyone would have asked, *what happened to you*. He would have said, *I got swallowed by a fish*. Ordinarily no one would have believed him. But from their merchants, the Assyrians had already heard about the storm, the Jewish prophet and his disobedience. The people would have immediately asked, *are you **that** prophet, the one thrown overboard?* In getting answers about his appearance, the people would learn the rest of the details. Altho **he** was disobedient, when he repented, God spared him.

Jonah is now a sign to the people in Nineveh. If God showed mercy to him, maybe God will show mercy to them.

It is exactly what God does.

Because they change their attitude, God changes His action. He shows mercy and does not destroy them.

This makes Jonah mad. In chapter 4:2 Jonah says, *See God, I told You so. I knew it was like You to forgive them.*

Only a few weeks earlier Jonah had been thrilled with God's mercy to him. He had written a Psalm of praise.

But now, when God shows mercy to the Assyrians, he resents it.

He becomes so upset, he cannot hear God's answers. So God uses nature to get thru to him.

First God provides a **castor bean vine** that grows miraculously to give wonderful shade for the day.

But the next morning God sends a **worm** to destroy the vine.

Later in the day, He sends a **hot, east wind** that is painful to Jonah's sensitive skin.

With this, Jonah becomes even more upset and says he wants to die. God now makes the application.

*Jonah, you are concerned about your **physical** welfare
I'm concerned about the people and their **spiritual** welfare.
You are upset because a **plant** died
I'm concerned if 120,000 **children** die.
You want to spare a **plant**
I want to spare these **people**.*

Jonah has ended his book with these answers from God. They make a powerful point. But it also leaves us wondering what happened after that.

Secular history tells us, **that** generation of Assyrians continued with their change in behavior. But less than 40 years later, the next generation returned to their cruel ways.

Jonah, as God's prophet returned to Israel.

His total ministry was some 35 years, from 790-755 BC.

His experience in Nineveh lasted some 30-40 days, near the end of his ministry, c. 759 or 758.

Eventually Jonah understood and accepted God's actions. We know this not only from the fact he wrote this book, but also in the way he put it together.

The **OUTLINE** – it is all about **God's mercy**.

GOD'S MERCY to Jonah <i>in spite of</i> his disobedience	1
As a result he was grateful	2
GOD'S MERCY to Nineveh <i>because of</i> their repentance	3
As a result he was angry	4

The **THEME** of this book is not Jonah's disobedience, but **God's mercy**.

God does not enjoy sending punishment.

The **PURPOSE** of this book

★ **To show that God wants to deal** with everyone **in mercy and kindness** - Jew or Gentile.

★ **To rebuke Israel.**

Under Elijah, Elisha and Jonah the Jews had more than 100 years of miracles, blessings, and warnings, but there was no response.

The Gentiles in Nineveh have less than 40 days of warning and there is immediate response.

God uses the pagans to rebuke His people. If they had learned and responded, they would never have been conquered by the Assyrians.

★ **To picture the death and resurrection of Jesus.**

★ **To picture the Jews as a nation.**

In disobedience they refused to give God's message to the world.

So God allowed them to be swallowed as a *nation* by the Gentiles.

But He has preserved them as a people within the Gentile nations.

When nationally they are willing to say, *we are ready to obey; We will give Your message,*

God will use them again as His mouthpiece.

Jonah gives **us** both encouragement and warning

Jonah disobeyed, but when he repented, God used him once again.

Disobedience and failure never needs to make us unusable. When we are willing to obey, God will show us mercy.

It is never too late to be used by God.

That is our encouragement. But there is also a warning.

Jonah thought love for his people made it OK to disobey what God had said. And when God did not do things the way **he** wanted, he got so mad at God, he could not even hear His answers.

There are times those **we** love willfully rebel against God. God begins His discipline in their lives. In compassion, we try to rescue them or soften their trouble. We pray that God remove the discipline or problem. Our motive of love is admirable. But getting in the way of God when He is disciplining others, can lead to our disobedience, resentment at God and inability to hear His answers. If **we** cannot accept *what* God is doing in the *way* He is doing it, then He will have to discipline us as well.

Like Jonah, too often we are trying to change what God is doing. We need to learn the lesson Jonah learned.

It is not for us to change God - it is for God to change us!