

119

MINISTRIES

“The following is a direct script of a teaching that is intended to be presented via video, incorporating relevant text, slides, media, and graphics to assist in illustration, thus facilitating the presentation of the material. In some places, this may cause the written material to not flow or sound rather awkward in some places. In addition, there may be grammatical errors that are often not acceptable in literary work. We encourage the viewing of the video teachings to complement the written teaching you see below.”

Minor Prophets, Major Messages: Jonah - Be Merciful, Even as Your Father is Merciful

WARNING: The Subject material in this teaching may not be suitable for children.

The so-called “Minor Prophets” are a collection of twelve prophetic books in the Tanakh—that is, the Old Testament. Even though they are called the “Minor Prophets,” these books contain “major messages” that remain relevant to believers today. In this series, we will unpack the major messages of each Minor Prophet. We will discuss their practical applications for believers today and how they connect to the Messiah’s work and teachings in the New Testament.

Today, we are looking at the Book of Jonah. Let’s dive in.

Jonah: An Overview

Jonah was the son of Amittai and a prophet from Gath-hepher (Jonah 1:1; 2 Kings 14:25). He prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II in the eighth century BC, which is the setting of the story of Jonah. The Book of Jonah talks about how God calls Jonah to go and preach to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire:

Jonah 1:1-2

Now the word of the LORD [YHWH] came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”

However, Jonah was reluctant to go. And from what we know about the ancient Assyrian empire, it’s easy to understand why. In the eighth century BC, Assyria was infamous for its violence and cruelty. They delighted in torturing and inflicting as much pain as possible upon their victims. The scholar James Bruckner gives a summary of what archeologists have discovered about this ancient nation. Be warned: it’s quite horrific.

The Assyrian kings were proud of their cruel and terrible reputation and went to great trouble and expense to record their exploits for posterity. Archaeologists have uncovered many reliefs (large stone wall panels with carved depictions) of grisly post-battle scenes, which were erected in palaces so that they could be seen daily. In addition, written descriptions of post-battle tortures of prisoners were preserved on obelisks and cylindrical pillars. Discovered in these pictorial and written displays are gruesome details and horrific boasting...Records brag of live dismemberment, often leaving one hand attached so they could shake it before the person died. They made parades of heads, requiring friends of the deceased to carry them elevated on poles. They boasted of their practice of stretching live prisoners with ropes so they could be skinned alive. The human skins were then displayed on city walls and on poles. They commissioned pictures of their post-battle tortures where piles of heads, hands, and feet, and heads impaled on poles—eight heads to a stake—were displayed. They pulled out the tongues and testicles of live victims and burned the young alive. Those who survived the sack of their city were tied in long lines of enslavement and deported to Assyrian cities to labor on building projects. Tens of thousands in hundreds of cities suffered this fate over the two hundred and fifty years of the Assyrians' reign of terror (c. 883–612).

—James Bruckner, *The NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 28-29

As we can see, Assyria was exceedingly evil and violent. So, it's really not surprising that when God commanded Jonah to preach to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, Jonah instead decided to flee in the opposite direction by boarding a ship bound for Tarshish:

Jonah 1:3

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD [YHWH]. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD [YHWH].

However, God does not allow Jonah to run away from his mission. He sends a storm that threatens to sink the ship, and Jonah is thrown overboard (Jonah 1:4-16). God sends a great fish that swallows Jonah (Jonah 1:17), and after three days and three nights, the fish vomits him out onto dry land (Jonah 2:10). Jonah then goes and preaches to the people of Nineveh, who, surprisingly, repent and are spared by God:

Jonah 3:4-10

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

In the final chapter, Jonah is angry about God's mercy toward the Ninevites (Jonah 4:1-4). God provides a plant to shade Jonah from the sun but then causes it to wither, which makes Jonah even angrier (Jonah

4:5-9). God uses this as a teaching moment, and the book ends with a question:

Jonah 4:10-11

And the LORD [YHWH] said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

So, that’s how the book ends. God asks whether it is right to be angry about him having mercy on Nineveh.

Jonah’s Major Message

Jonah’s major message is that God is merciful, and he wants his people to be merciful as well. God’s final question to Jonah is really a question to *all* readers of the book: are we willing to accept that God loves the wicked; that he is willing to forgive them when they genuinely repent? If we are honest, many of us sometimes struggle with accepting that.

The intention of this story is to evoke a sense of compassion toward the wicked. The Ninevites are portrayed as ignorant—they don’t even know their right hand from their left! They’re like children. God does not even mention Nineveh’s cruelty in his question to Jonah. Instead, God invites Jonah—and us—to look a little deeper, beyond Nineveh’s actions, to try to see them as ignorant fools who have been caught up in a destructive, generational pattern of violence. It is all they have ever known. As such, they should be pitied rather than hated. They need to be introduced to the Lord so they can be saved and taught a better way.

After all, isn’t that the mission of Israel—to be a light to the nations? And yet you have Jonah—a prophet of YHWH, someone we would expect to be the righteous hero of the story—who flees God’s presence and rejects the mission that God gave him. He gets angry at God for being too merciful when sinners repent. He proclaims that he would rather die than live in a world where God spares his enemies (Jonah 4:3). Now, lest we are tempted to look down on Jonah, in light of Nineveh’s wickedness, his attitude and actions are completely understandable on a human level. A sense of “pity” toward one’s enemies usually does not come naturally. But God wants us to be merciful like *he* is merciful (Luke 6:36). He wants us to love our enemies and to see them as people made in his image, even though it goes against our natural inclination.

Interesting Connections

God’s plan for Israel from the beginning was that they would be a blessing to the Gentiles (Genesis 12:3). God has always desired that the Gentiles would repent of their sins and idolatry, come to know him, worship him, and keep his Sabbaths (Isaiah 56:1-8). The people of Israel were meant to be God’s instrument for revealing God to all nations.

However, like Jonah, many Israelites were not enthusiastic about this mission. Throughout Israel’s history, there were religious leaders who tried to suppress God’s message of repentance to the Gentiles. For instance, there is Jewish literature known as the Book of Jubilees, written sometime in the second century BC (James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees 1-21* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 25-37). Jubilees is a rewriting of the Genesis and Exodus stories, and it was very influential among some sects of Judaism in Yeshua’s time.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Jubilees is anti-Gentile. The book states that God himself created spirits to rule over all the Gentile nations and lead them away from following him (Jubilees 15:30-32). It further states that some Gentile peoples, like *all* the descendants of Lot and the Philistines, are destined for annihilation (Jubilees 16:9; 24:30). The Book also directly prohibits Jews from having fellowship with and eating with Gentiles (Jubilees 22:16). The fact that Peter was criticized for eating with Gentiles in the Book of Acts (Acts 11:2-3) demonstrates that these anti-Gentile attitudes, as expressed in the Book of Jubilees, were widely held in the first century.

In light of these sentiments, it is easy to see why many religious leaders in Yeshua's day were content to let the Gentiles face judgment rather than appeal to them to repent. But contrary to what Jubilees says, the story of Jonah proves that God wants Gentiles to repent. And God does not allow his message of repentance to be suppressed. Just like Jonah's message resulted in many Gentiles being saved after he came out of the fish, Yeshua's message resulted in many Gentiles being saved after he came out of the grave. Yeshua commanded his disciples to make disciples of "all nations" (Matthew 28:19-20) and sent the Spirit to empower them to preach the message of repentance to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Despite many religious leaders attempting to stop it, Yeshua's message went forth and saved many people from their sins, like what happened in Nineveh.

How Jonah Points to the Messiah

Yeshua directly references the story of Jonah as a sign of his death and resurrection. Just as Jonah was in the fish's belly for three days and nights, so too Yeshua was in the "heart of the earth" for three days and nights (Matthew 12:40). Moreover, Yeshua points to Nineveh's repentance to shame those in his generation who hear his message and yet refuse to repent (Matthew 12:41). If Jonah's message caused the people of Nineveh to repent, how much more should the Messiah's message cause us to repent?

Additionally, Jonah's message of showing mercy toward one's enemy is echoed in Yeshua's teaching to love one's enemy (Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36). Like the author of Jonah, Yeshua reminds us that God has compassion for his enemies, and so should we. Yeshua said:

Luke 6:35-36

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

Yeshua commands us to "pray" for our enemies, those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). He commands us to "greet" our enemies (Matthew 5:47). This is not natural for us to do! We must *choose* to show love toward our enemies despite how we feel. Doing these things helps us to stop dehumanizing our enemies and start seeing them as people created in God's image. It isn't easy, but God still loved us when we were *his* enemy. Even our enemies are made in God's image, and we must love them as God loves them.

And that is Jonah's major message. God is merciful, and he wants us to be merciful too. The story of Jonah challenges our natural inclination to hate the wicked. It reminds us that God's love extends even to our enemies, and that he desires their repentance and salvation. Yeshua himself emphasized the importance of loving your enemies and showing mercy. When we do that, we reflect the character of our Father in heaven and fulfill our mission to be a light to the nations.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

WEBSITE: www.TestEverything.net

TWITTER: www.twitter.com/119Ministries#