

Jonah

Author

The Book of Jonah does not claim Jonah wrote it. Nowhere in the Bible does it record who wrote it.

Background

The Book is about God's ministry through the prophet Jonah to Nineveh – a sinful city of another nation called Assyria. Jonah was a native of Gath Hopher in Zebulun in Israel (see 2 Kings 14:25). Gath Hopher was about 2 Miles north of Nazareth.

Date

The events in Jonah probably occurred during the reign of King Jeroboam II in the northern nation of Israel. This was between 793-753 B.C. 2 Kings 14:25 says Jonah predicted the wide extent of the conquests of Jeroboam II. These conquests and associated prosperity had led to these 10 northern tribes of Israel becoming proud and arrogant. This displeased God, so He sent the prophets Amos and Hosea around this time or a few decades after to warn His people in Israel they would be judged (Amos 7:8 and 8:2) and sent into exile "*beyond Damascus*" (see Amos 5:27) to Assyria (see Amos 9:3, 10:6 and 11:5). In this spiritual climate, God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria to warn its people of God's impending judgment on them.

The main teachings of Jonah

The main teachings of the Book of Jonah are:

1. God *extended His grace and mercy* to *Gentile nations* through the *calls to repentance and warnings of judgment* given through His prophets. This is the first recorded instance in the bible of God sending a prophet to call a Gentile city to repentance. God had saved individual Gentiles by grace through faith before this, but this was the first large-scale call to repentance. The Lord and His angels went to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to see if the sins were grave enough to demand punishment but there is no mention recorded in the Bible of a message calling for repentance being preached in these cities (see Genesis 18:16-19:29).
2. God was willing to extend His lovingkindness to people *not under the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants* (see Jonah 4:2). God showed how deeply concerned He was about such people.
3. Believers must obey even if they do not fully understand God's instructions and purposes. Jonah had *no precedent* for what God called him to do. But he did have numerous passages

in previous Old Testament writings referring to God ministering to Gentiles. Examples of this were Rahab the prostitute, Ruth and Naaman the Syrian.

Jonah may also initially disobeyed God because of hearing about past Assyrian atrocities against his own nation.

Possibly Hosea's and Amos' predictions about Assyria conquering Israel had been given just before this. If this was true, Jonah may have preferred to see Nineveh destroyed so that they could not conquer Israel.

4. God is revealed as being extremely slow to anger in practice (see Jonah 4:2)
5. God's *love* and *mercy* is *far greater* than that of His prophets. Jonah wanted to see God punish Nineveh and was *angry* when God did not (see Jonah 4:1-4).
6. The people of Nineveh showed what Old Testament *conversion* involved – turning from known sins to the one true God (see Jonah 3:8 and 3:10). The Book of Jonah clearly shows that by His mercy God accepted such Old Testament conversions of Gentiles. Note also the turning of the Ninevites from their sins to God was linked to them beginning to have *faith* in Him (see Jonah 3:5).

Jonah had many “open doors”

The Book of Jonah has a great lesson for us about not being too reliant on “open doors” in our circumstances in discerning God's will. Jonah 1:1-2 records that God told the prophet Jonah to go to the Assyrian city of Nineveh and preach there. Jonah chose to disobey this guidance. He decided to flee instead to Tarshish in Spain.

Note, however, that Jonah had many “open doors” of favourable short-term circumstances to enable him to flee to Spain. Firstly, on his way to the sea-port of Joppa, he happened to have no “closed doors” in his circumstances. Nothing hindered him on his way to Joppa. Secondly, when he arrived at Joppa, he found a ship that was going to Tarshish. Thirdly, he just happened to have enough money to pay the fare. Fourthly, the ship owners or captain just happened to be pleased to accept him as a passenger. Having such favourable “signs” in our short-term circumstances might have made some of us think in a similar situation, “Possibly that was not really the Holy Spirit telling me to go the Nineveh to preach. It was probably my imagination or Satan speaking instead.”

It was only *later* that circumstances became unfavourable and acted as a confirmation of the Holy Spirit's original guidance to Jonah about preaching in Nineveh. The Lord sent a great wind and a violent storm against the ship that Jonah was on, eventually leading to Jonah being returned to dry land (see Jonah 1:4-2:10). *Without the Holy Spirit's original guidance*, it would have been very difficult determining whether Jonah's earlier favourable or later unfavourable circumstances were the correct signs of God's will.

Therefore, we need to be very careful before we say that a particular “open door” of favourable circumstances is a clear sign of God's will.