

*A Study of the Book of Jonah*  
Course Study Guide

**Introduction**

**Jonah** is the fifth book of the Twelve Minor Prophets. Open your Bible to the table of contents and review the list of the Twelve Minor Prophets. (Starts with **Hosea**)

What do you know about the books of the Minor Prophets other than **Jonah**?

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What do you know about the **Book of Jonah**?

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Why do we tend to know more about the **Book of Jonah** than the 11 other Minor Prophets?

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*Jonah is a book so famous that echoes of it abound in literature and the arts, so people seem to “know” it even if they have never consciously read the Bible... Yet a story as familiar as Jonah and the whale is bound to suffer. Some aspects get amplified, others are forgotten, and the narrative gets flattened into a two-dimensional flannel graph. In this way its radical call to repentance, faith, and mission is lost.” From Concordia Commentary on Jonah by R. Reed Lessing (hereafter referred to as “CC-Jonah”).*

**Background**

In recent times the historical accuracy of **Jonah** has been challenged. In essence they challenge its genre. According to *CC-Jonah*, different genres in the Old Testament (OT) include historical narratives, genealogies, legal documents, prophecies, laments, songs, parables”, etc. For over 2000 years **Jonah** has been considered an historical narrative. Many now call it fiction, parable, legend, or a novella. The official position of the LCMS is that the **Book of Jonah** is an historical narrative. This is also the position of the Roman Catholic Church and all conservative Reformed churches. How do the following Bible verses support that conclusion?

Compare **Jonah 1:1 – 2** with **2 Kings 14:23 – 25**. What do you see in these verses that supports the historicity of **Jonah**?

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What evidence do we see in **Matthew 12:38 – 42** that support Jonah being an historical narrative. (**Luke 11:29 – 32** is a correlating text)

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Once again look at **2 Kings 14:23 – 25** and compare it to **Luke 11:31 – 32**. What do these verses say about the stature of Jonah?

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The author and exact date of writing of **Jonah** are unknown. *CC-Jonah* states,

*“...Jonah’s mission to Nineveh can be dated within the historical context of the eighth century BC, but the text does not contain any specific details regarding the book’s author or date of writing. As it stands, the narrative of Jonah is an anonymous and undated work. Hence, although the events described pertain the eighth century BC, it is possible that the book itself may have been composed later. However, the evidence points to a preexilic and not a postexilic date of writing, and it is not impossible that the narrator was Jonah himself.”*

**Jonah’s** inclusion in the Canon of the OT with the other Minor Prophets points to an earlier writing than some of the later books including the books of Daniel and Chronicles. Many linguistic characteristics regarding the Hebrew used in **Jonah** also point to a pre-exile time period for the writing. At the very least, there is almost universal agreement that **Jonah** could not have been written after the third century B.C. because of a reference in the Deuterocanonical Book, Sirach, which was written at that time.

Where does the person of Jonah fit into the history of Israel/Judah? When we read **2 Kings 14:23 – 25** we learned that Jonah lived during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash in Israel and Amaziah the King of Judah. Let’s review when this was in relation to Old Testament and world history.

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One tradition holds that Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath raised from the dead by Elijah in **1 Kings 17:17 – 24**. Another tradition or possibility is that Jonah was protégé of Elisha mentioned in See **2 Kings 2:3 – 7**. Considering the timeline, which is more plausible?

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As we go forward examining the **Book of Jonah** keep in mind who Jonah was and how we are like Jonah. Also, look for examples of irony. *CC-Jonah* states:

*“Jonah is a highly sophisticated literary masterpiece that fits the genre of historical narrative. The structure and use of key words convey numerous ironies that are intended to satirize **Jonah**, and those like him, who seek to limit the grace of God to themselves and who resent the God of Israel extending salvation to all – even Gentiles – through faith.”*

## An Examination of the Biblical text

Let's read **Jonah 1:1 – 3**

What are we told about Nineveh in these verses? \_\_\_\_\_

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Nineveh is referenced many times in the Bible. Today it is the site of Mosul in Iraq. What do we learn about Nineveh in **Genesis 10:1, 6 – 12?**

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Let's take a look at a map showing the Assyrian Empire during the time period of Jonah when Nineveh was its capital. Note the extent of their Kingdom and their threat to Israel. We will examine this in more detail later.

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We are not initially told why Jonah ran away from the call of the Lord. If God called you to go and preach against the people of a “great” and “evil” city what would be your reaction?

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Let's jump ahead and read **Jonah 3:3 – 5, 10 – 4:3**. Why did Jonah originally flee to Tarshish?

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The fact that Jonah feared that God would relent and not destroy Nineveh indicates that Jonah had intimate knowledge of God's ways and character. However, what did he not understand about the true nature of the Law and Gospel?

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What does this say about Jonah's attitude toward the Ninevites and how are we just like him?

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Dr. Timothy Keller, a prominent Presbyterian Christian apologist and minister, states that Jonah fleeing from God and God “chasing” after Jonah are good metaphors of

Sin and Gospel. He states that we all hide or flee from God and that until we, as Christians, acknowledge that our nature is to be a “fugitive” from God we cannot take the first steps toward God. What do you think of those statements and how do we flee or hide from God?

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Verse 3 uses a literary form called a chiasmic structure or chiasm to make a theological point. Wikipedia defines a chiasm as:

*“...a literary structure used in the Torah, the Bible, as well as in other (older) texts. Concepts or ideas are placed in a special symmetric order or pattern in a chiasmic structure to emphasize them.*

*For example, suppose that the first topic in a text is labeled by A, the second topic is labeled by B and the third topic is labeled by C. If the topics in the text appear in the order ABC...CBA so that the first concept that comes up is also the last, the second is the second to last, and so on, the text is said to have a chiasmic structure.*

CC – *Jonah* explains the chiasmic structure of **Jonah 1:3** as a “ABCDCBA” pattern defined as follows:

**A** But Jonah arose to flee to flee to *Tarshish* away from *the presence of Yahweh*

**B** He went down to Joppa

**C** and found a ship

**D** going to *Tarshish*

**C** He paid its price

**B** and boarded it

**A** to with them to *Tarshish* away from *the presence of Yahweh*

Why do we care about this literary style in this verse? Note the beginning and end of the chiasm. What is at the beginning and end of the chiasm and what is the significance? (Hint: It is an irony.)

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Read **Jonah 1:4 – 17**.

How is God working differently in verse four from verse one and how has control shifted between God and Jonah?

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God initially directed Jonah to go to Nineveh through His revealed Word. Now God sends a storm to get Jonah literally turned around. Dr. Keller points out that the storm not only was impacting the sailors and threatening their lives but also any other ships in the area. In essence, they constitute “innocent” collateral damage. Similarly, we have storms in our lives – some direct, some indirect.

How should we relate the storms of life? Compare this with **Hebrews 12:7 – 11**.

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How do we deal with this concept of being impacted by the indirect storms in other people’s lives? What is our reassurance?

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How does Satan want us to interpret the storms in our life?

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What do you make of Jonah being sound asleep, deep in the cargo hold of the boat during a raging storm?

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How are we like Jonah, “asleep”, as a church body, congregation, and as individuals within the storms in the world around us?

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*CC-Jonah’s* comment on verse seven is interesting about the perspective of the sailors:

*“It is safe to assume that the mariners would not have set sail on such a voyage had there been a hint of bad weather. They assume the unexpected storm has a supernatural cause and investigate who must have offended the divine. Someone’s sin has to be responsible for this calamity! To the ancient mind, storms were not the products of impersonal meteorological forces but were directed to specific ends by specific wills. If the person at fault is found and dealt with, the danger may pass.”*

Dr. Keller calls the sailors' prayers "Prayers of terror" because the sailors are not only fearful of dying they are fearful of their gods. How do we do the same? How are our prayers different?

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Look again at verse nine. How would you describe Jonah's statement about the Lord?

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What do you think of Jonah's "confession" in general? What do you think his attitude is?

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Commentators have postulated at least three possible motives for Jonah telling the sailors to throw him overboard. What do you think are the reasons?

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How did Jonah know that it would calm the sea if he were thrown overboard?

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Considering Jonah's confession and his knowledge of God's will that it was necessary for him to be thrown overboard to calm the storm, what does this tell you about Jonah's longevity as a prophet and what warning and hope does that give us? 😊

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Why don't you think Jonah didn't just climb overboard and cast himself into the sea?

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Why do you think the sailor's worked so hard to not throw Jonah overboard? How do you think you would have reacted?

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What is the difference between the sailor's prayers in verse 5 compared to verses 14 – 16 and what do you think accounts for this difference and how has God used this storm for good for all, even the pagan sailors?

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What lesson(s) is (are) there for us in our witness to those around us?

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Dr. Lessing in *CC-Jonah* points out that the only two named individuals in the **Book of Jonah** are God (Yahweh) and Jonah. **Jonah** is about Jonah and his relationship to God and vice versa. Similarly, the purpose of the Book is to show how we are like Jonah and point us to Christ. How are we like Jonah in these verses?

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How is Jesus like Jonah in these verses?

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Dr. Lessing in the *Concordia Commentary (CC-Jonah)* also points out the following:

*Jonah 1:6 introduces the first of twelve questions asked throughout the narrative. In 1:6 the captain questions Jonah. The sailors will interrogate him with six questions in 1:8, 10-11. The king of Nineveh asks a rhetorical question in 3:9. In the final chapter, Jonah puts an angry question to Yahweh (4:2), who addresses three questions to Jonah (4:4, 9, 11). The use of questions is especially characteristic of Wisdom literature. The aim of such questions is to teach the readers. Since ten of the twelve questions are directed toward Jonah, the narrator is subtly placing us, the readers, in Jonah's position. We will watch the narrator do this in a not-so-subtle way in 4:10-11. Thus the questions put to Jonah are also asked of us. They are designed to lead us to the same repentance and renewed faith that Jonah needs.*

We have already discussed the first question to Jonah in verse six. How do the other questions in this section apply to us?

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It is important to better understand Jonah's mindset at the time he was swallowed by the fish. This is given to us in Chapter 2. Some ancient texts have **Jonah 1:17** included with chapter 2. In order to get the full perspective of God's provision of the great fish and its impact on Jonah, let's include Jonah 1:17 and read **Jonah 1:17 – Jonah 2:10**.

While most of **Jonah** is an Historical Narrative, we see a switch to what type of Biblical literature in **Jonah 2:2 – 9**?

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Note the many similarities between the *Song of Jonah* and the **Book of Psalms in the following comparisons**. (Note: there are several other comparisons besides those listed.)

**Jonah 2:2 vs Psalm 18:6**

**Jonah 2:2 He said: "In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry. NIV**

**Psalms 18:6 6 In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. NIV**

**Jonah 2:3 vs Psalm 42:7**

**Jonah 2:3 You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. NIV**

**Psalms 42:7 Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me. NIV**

**Jonah 2:4 vs Psalm 5:7**

**Jonah 2:4 I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' NIV**

**Psalms 5:7 7 But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house; in reverence will I bow down toward your holy temple. NIV**

Based on these and other similarities between the *Song of Jonah* and the **Book of Psalms**, what does this tell us about Jonah's thinking when he thought he was going to drown in the sea and what example, or lesson is there for us?

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What does Jonah's use of the Psalms say about the canonicity of the Psalms and the development of the Canon of the Old Testament?

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Note again **Jonah 2:4 & 7**. What is the significance of Jonah or the Psalmist remembering or "looking toward God's "holy temple"?"

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What is the Christian equivalent to this?

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**Jonah 2:7** is the halfway mark of the book. What appears to happen to Jonah in this verse that fits with storytelling device?

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As you read through the Song of Jonah, what part of a typical prayer is missing from Jonah's prayer? (Hint: think of the mnemonic device "ACTS" for the pattern of a prayer.)

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CC-Jonah comments *"The prophet is 'pro-life' when all is well and it is his life --- but 'pro-death' when Yahweh's ways are not his ways and it is the Ninevites that is spared. Some might say that Jonah has a fox-hole religion, or perhaps a deep sea o fish-belly religion... Like all OT and NT believers, Jonah is... 'Saint and sinner at the same time'."*

How are we the same as Jonah? \_\_\_\_\_

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What is the irony in verse 8? (Hint: Who are the idol worshippers in the **Book of Jonah**?)

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In verse 9 we read Jonah's proclamation that **"Salvation comes from the Lord."** What is the irony here considering who Jonah's attitude toward who should receive the Lord's salvation?

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What is God's response to Jonah's prayer and why do you think He responds to Jonah's prayer in the way that He does?

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When looking at Jonah's attitude before he was swallowed by the fish and then Jonah's subsequent attitude and prayer, what can we learn about our own prayer life?

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In effect, what does this great fish effectively become or symbolize in NT theology?

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CC-Jonah comments *"The verb 'vomit' [in Hebrew] is dramatic. We might imagine the prophet being thrown out of the fish's mouth or even walking out. The narrator does not say that the fish spat Jonah out or even coughed him up. Undoubtedly, the fish spews Jonah out in obedience to the Word of Yahweh, but the word 'vomit' suggests the fish's repugnance towards Jonah."*

How do you respond to those who question Jonah being swallowed by a "whale" and living in it for three days and three nights?

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### **A Brief Aside to look at The Sign of Jonah**

Compare again **Luke 11:29 – 32** to **Matthew 12:38 – 42**. These texts approach or explain "The Sign of Jonah" in different ways. What is "The Sign of Jonah"?

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Some argue that "The Sign of Jonah" is the Resurrection. They compare Jonah being vomited onto the shore to Jesus rising from the dead. How would you argue against that?

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### **The Story Continues: Jonah 3 & 4**

Read **Jonah 3:1 – 2**.

Considering Jonah's disobedience the first time, what is missing from God's words the second time?

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What is the message for us when we fail in our mission?

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Read **Jonah 3:3 – 10**.

Dr. Lessing in *CC-Jonah* points out that “*There has been considerable debate about the “a walk of three days”*”. According to *CC-Jonah*:

*Excavations have revealed that at the height of Nineveh’s size and influence as capital of the Assyrian Empire during the seventh century [B.C.], it occupied an area of some 1850 acres. The width of its broadest part was approximately three miles, and its walls measured approximately 7.75 mile...in circumference. That of course would not require a three-day journey...”*

However, many have proposed that the Bible is referencing the region of Nineveh similar to what was described in **Genesis 10:11 – 12**. It is important to note that the city of Nineveh was not yet declared the capital of Assyria. That occurred in about 700 BC under King Sennacherib. Some have proposed that it took three days to properly preach across the city while others hold that the Bible is describing an area of influence similar to a “Greater Metropolitan Area” concept.

Why is the discussion about “a walk of three days” relevant or important?

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What do you think of Jonah’s sermon in verse 4? \_\_\_\_\_

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What is the significance of “forty” in the Bible? What other examples can you recall?

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How might the phrase “Nineveh will be overturned” have a double entendre?

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Considering Jonah’s attitude and that he was a foreign, if not enemy, Jewish prophet, why do you think the people repented?

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What message(s) is(are) there for us in this?

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Dr. Lessing notes the following in *CC-Jonah*:

*“Donald Wiseman argues for the possibility that a cosmic sign could have facilitated Nineveh’s repentance. He notes that the occurrence of a total solar eclipse on June 15, 763 BC, during the reign of the Assyrian King Assur-dan III (772-755 BC), a contemporary of the Israelite king Jeroboam II (ca. 786-746 BC), to whom Jonah ministered (2 Kings 14:25). Wiseman cites Ninevite versions of omen texts from the series “Enuma Anu Enlil” that predict the calamities that might happen following such an eclipse: ‘The king will die, rain from heaven will flood the land. There will be famine.’ And, ‘A deity will strike the king and fire consume the land’...In Assyrian religion, solar eclipses and also earthquakes were taken as signs of divine anger. Wiseman notes a record of an earthquake occurring during the reign of Assur-dan, although it is unclear whether this is the same Assur-dan as the one referred to above.”*

Does this affect your answer on why do you think the people and the king repented? Why or why not?

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How do the words of Jesus in **Matthew 12:41** and **Luke 11:32** confirm the true repentance of the people of Nineveh at the time Jonah preached to them?

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Compare **Jonah 3:9 – 10** to the story of King David just after he had committed adultery and murder in **2 Samuel 12:13 – 22**. Note the similarity of the repentance of King David (the believing Jew) to the King of Nineveh (the pagan gentile). What hope in God did each have?

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Why do you think God answered King David’s prayer differently than the King of Nineveh’s and what is(are) the message(s) for us?

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How would God’s people of the day (the Jews in Judah and Israel) have likely reacted had the outcome of the stories of King David and the King of Nineveh been reversed?

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Would it not give us greater comfort and encouragement had God acted to “take care of His own”, King David? So what is the message for us?

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How is this indirect evidence that the Bible is of God not men?

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Compare **Jonah 3:10** to **Exodus 32:3 – 14**. How do we explain that God is said to have changed His mind? See also **Malachi 3:6** and **Numbers 23:19**.

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When it comes to the verses that describe God changing his mind or repenting, much of the controversy stems from the interpretation/translation of the Hebrew verb stem that can be translated in different ways that describes God as “repenting”, “changing His mind”, “turning”, etc. This Hebrew verb has given trouble to translators beginning with the Septuagint going forward. Most theologians over the last 200 years have generally ignored/avoided the controversy. Dr. Lessing in *CC-Jonah* further explains this Hebrew word as follows:

*“The essence of the verb seems to be the reversal of a decision or verdict as well as a change in disposition toward the people. Hans Walter Hoff suggests that ‘to repent...designates a change of mind prompted by the emotions, a turning away from an earlier decision on the part of someone deeply moved.’ Thus, the word includes not only a change of attitude, but a reversal in action toward people who themselves have changed.”*

Looking at this explanation requires that God have emotions. Does God have emotions and what proof can you give to back up that position?

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How are God’s emotions different from ours?

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**Jonah 3:10** and **Exodus 32:12** are the only two places in the Bible where God both turns away fierceness of His anger and changes his verdict about evil. In one instance he does this for his chosen people, Israel, and in the second he does this for the Gentile pagans in Nineveh. What is the significance of this theologically and for us personally?

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#### Chapter 4 – The Unusual Conclusion to the Book of Jonah

Read **Jonah 4:1 – 3**.

What is the source of Jonah’s anger and how is that source a god to him?

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One commentator describes Jonah as being “double-minded” by putting his god ahead of the one true God and references **James 1:5 – 8**. What are your thoughts on this and how do we do the same thing?

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What does Jonah not understand about God’s grace and what is the irony in that when you compare what happened to Jonah with the great fish?

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Read **Jonah 4:4 – 11**.

What is significant about how God responds to Jonah being angry with Him and Jonah’s prayer to die?

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How does Jonah “respond” to God’s question and how do we do the same thing?

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Why does Jonah go out and build a shelter east of the city? What do you think is going through his mind?

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The same Hebrew word that is translated “provided” or “appointed” in verses 6, 7, and 8 regarding the vine, worm, and wind, is the same word used to describe the great fish that God “provided” or “appointed” to swallow Jonah. What could this imply about the nature of all four entities and help answer skeptics accusations about how these things occurred?

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What is God doing in these “provisions” or “appointments” in verses 6-9? What is His goal?

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Dr. Lessing in *CC-Jonah* comments about how the Hebrew for “God” changes in this chapter as follows:

*There is a subtle change in the use of divine names at this point. In 4:2 – 3 Jonah prays to ‘Yahweh’ and ‘Yahweh’ replies in 4:4. But in 4:6 it is ‘Yahweh Elohim/ God’ who provides the qiqayon plant, and it is simply ‘Elohim/ (the) God’ in the object lessons of 4:7-8 and who speaks in 4:9. Then again it is ‘Yahweh’ who speaks in 4:10 – 11. These changes indicate that with the three provisions in 4:6 – 8 (the plant, the worm, and the wind), Jonah is moving farther away from ‘Yahweh’, the covenant name of Israel’s gracious God...”*

How does this apply to what is happening within liberal/mainstream Christian denominations that more and more deny the faith based on the Bible?

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What is different about Jonah’s appeal to die in verse 3 from verses 8 – 9?

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What does God mean in verse 11 that the Ninevites “do not know their right hand from their left” and how should that shape our attitude and actions toward unbelievers?

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What is God’s logic in His appeal to, and questioning of, Jonah? What irony is He pointing out to Jonah?

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What does this say about God and what comfort does that give us?

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Overall, what was God’s mission in sending Jonah to Nineveh vs Jonah’s perception of God’s mission?

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What are some possible reasons as to why God had the **Book of Jonah** end without ever hearing Jonah’s response or subsequent actions?

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What do you think happened to Jonah? \_\_\_\_\_

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*“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:19-20 NIV*