We have all heard exaggerated stories beginning with “the biggest fish I ever caught,” followed by a description of the “fish that got away.”

The story of Jonah might be titled, “the biggest fish that caught me, when I was trying to get away”...from God’s call on my life.

Criticism of The Book of Jonah

The book of Jonah has been a point of contention among theologians for centuries. It has been labeled fiction by some, a myth by others and a parable by still others. Many refuse to believe that the God who made the heavens, the earth, the starry hosts and the sea, could have miraculously saved one of His wayward children in the belly of a great fish, which He had created, and then spit him out unharmed on the Mediterranean shore.

Skeptics may want to read the “Weekly World News” of June 16, 1987 which stated, “Shark swallowed fisherman then spit him out alive.” Mikado Nakamura gave an interview from his hospital bed in Kanazaw, Japan.

But Jonah's encounter was vastly different from Mikado’s. There is no record of Jonah being hospitalized for bodily harm. God cared for and preserved His prophet for future use, inside of the great fish.

God's Verification of Jonah

God not only placed His mark of ownership on this often criticized book by placing His name in its contents 38 times, but Jesus personally verified this wonderful account. When speaking to the Pharisees of His day, He said of Jonah, “The men of Ninevah will stand up at the Judgement with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now ONE greater than Jonah is here.” (Matthew 12:41)

The Message of Jonah

The book of Jonah speaks strongly and clearly about obedience to God, but it also speaks about God’s forgiveness when we fail to obey. God understands our human frailty and He is willing to forgive, correct and redirect our lives when we fail to obey Him. That is what He did for Jonah,
and that is what He has done for each of us countless times when we come to Him with repentant hearts. But perhaps its greatest message is God’s pity upon the heathen multitudes and His desire to save them.

History of Jonah

Jonah was born in Gath-Hepher near Nazareth where Jesus lived as a child with His parents. Jonah’s father’s name was Amittai.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were wrong when they said, “No prophet has arisen out of Galilee.” (John 7:52) Jonah was a prophet of God who had come from Galilee.

Jonah lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II, who reigned over Israel for 41 years. God gave Jonah the privilege of bringing a pleasing prophecy to King Jeroboam II. He told Jeroboam that his kingdom would be expanded. (2 Kings 14:25) Most likely this placed him in good standing with the King.

Israel’s Spiritual Life

Jeroboam II was blessed militarily just as Jonah had prophesied. He recovered much of the territory Israel had lost to the Syrians, but Israel’s military successes did not help its spiritual life. Israel remained committed to two golden calves which Jeroboam I had instituted as a replacement for the worship of Jehovah.

The account of Jonah has been said to parallel Israel. It is narrow, selfish, with no love for the world beyond itself.

Jonah, One of 13 Minor Prophets

The book of Jonah is unique among the books written by the minor prophets. It contains only one prophecy. Each of the other 12 books, written by minor prophets, contain prophetic utterances. Instead it is an account of the actions of one of God’s prophets. It recounts Jonah’s disobedience to God’s call, God’s intervention, and finally God’s will being carried out by his prophet.

Miracles in the Book of Jonah

The Book of Jonah contains many miracles:

1. The raging sea — The calming of it.
2. God’s preparation and direction of a great fish.
3. Jonah being swallowed by the great fish.
4. The fish not digesting Jonah.
5. Jonah remaining alive in its belly for three days.
6. The fish vomiting Jonah onto dry ground.

But the greatest recorded miracle is the repentance of the pagan Gentiles of Ninevah.
LIVING WAY BIBLE STUDY

Personal Application

Heavenly Father,
You call each of us to work in Your Kingdom.
What a high and holy privilege You have given us.
May Your Holy Spirit enable us to carry out
Your mission with thankful and joy-filled hearts.
Amen

Jonah 1:1-3

1. We are told that the "word of the Lord" came to Jonah. List ways that the "word of the Lord" comes to us today.

2. Why was Jonah being sent by the Lord to Ninevah?

3. How do you think the Lord views our nation today?

4. How did Jonah react to God's call on his life?

5. Using a map in your Bible, try to locate Joppa, Ninevah, and Tarshish. Which direction (N.S.E.W.) had Jonah been told to go? Which direction did Jonah go?

6. Has God placed a call on our lives today? (Mark 16:15, Matthew 28:19-20, Philemon 6, Colossians 3:16-17, Romans 12:6-8)

7. When Jonah boarded the ship in Joppa, what was he attempting to do? Is that ever possible? (Psalm 139:7-10)

Jonah 1:4-6

8. How did the Lord stop Jonah?
2.

9. Was Jonah the only one affected by God's action? What does that tell us about sinful conduct in our own lives?

10. How did the sailors aboard the ship react to the storm?

11. Where was Jonah and what was he doing?

12. Who addressed Jonah and what did he say?

Jonah 1:7-10

13. What action did the sailors take to determine the person responsible for the storm? Who determined the outcome? (Proverbs 16:33)

14. When the lot fell to Jonah, list the questions which the sailors addressed to him.

15. Write Jonah's answer and comment on it.

16. Which part of Jonah's reply do you think most terrified the frightened sailors?

17. What information had Jonah already given the sailors?

18. Relate Proverbs 9:10 to the heathen sailors aboard the ship.


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