

Bi235 Old Testament 2

Lesson Bi235-32 Jonah and God's Love

Who gets to decide whether God loves someone or some group of people? Do you have the right to decide? Do I? The prophet Jonah was sure that God did not love the Assyrians, Israel's enemy, but he was wrong.

Some years after the time of Elijah and Elisha, God raised up another prophet in the Northern Kingdom, named Jonah. According to Second Kings (14:25), Jonah promised better days ahead for Israel. While Jeroboam the Second reigned, Israel began to prosper and expand, just as Jonah predicted. But God had another mission for Jonah. He sent him as a missionary to the capital city of Assyria. Yahweh told Jonah, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because it is very wicked" (Jonah 1:2).

Assyria was conquering nations all across the Middle East and was becoming a great empire. Assyrians worshiped many gods and goddesses and were especially brutal toward their enemies. Since the time of King Ahab, Assyria had been a major threat to the safety of Israel. Its kings sometimes fought Assyria, and other times paid tribute to avoid war. King Jehu destroyed the descendants of Ahab, but had to pay tribute to Assyria. An Assyrian stone carving shows Israelites carrying silver, gold, vessels, fruit, and lumber to Assyria in exchange for peaceful relations.

So Israel had good reasons for fearing Assyria. Israel believed that any nation that attacked her was also attacking God. Israel hated Assyria and assumed that God hated Assyria too. Jonah was shocked that God was asking him to go to Nineveh. He was so shocked, that instead of traveling east to Nineveh, he got on a ship sailing west.

God sent a bad storm on the sea. Sailors were crying out to their gods and throwing cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Meanwhile Jonah was asleep below deck. The ship's captain woke him up and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will save us" (Jonah 1:6).

The sailors thought that a god must be angry with one of them, and sent the storm as revenge. "Let's cast lots," they decided, "to see whom the gods are angry with." They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. So they fired questions at him.

Jonah answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship Yahweh, who made heaven, the sea, and the dry land."

"What have you done? Why are you running away? What should we do to you?" they asked.

"Throw me overboard, and the sea will become calm," Jonah replied. "I know it's my fault that this storm has come upon you."

Instead, the sailors tried all the harder to row the ship toward land, but they failed. Then they began crying out to Yahweh, "Please, Yahweh, don't hurt us for throwing Jonah overboard. Don't hold us accountable for his death." Notice that these pagan sailors began praying to the true God, but Jonah had not uttered a prayer for their safety, or for his own life.

So they threw Jonah overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. Then the sailors began to fear the LORD. They offered a sacrifice and made promises to the LORD. Although Jonah was turning away from God, the sailors were turning toward God and worshiping him (Jonah 1:7-16).

Jonah sank in the sea and was drowning, but God sent a big fish to rescue him. The fish carried him back to land, and vomited him out onto a beach. Then God repeated his command to Jonah. “Go to Nineveh and announce to it the message I give you.”

This time Jonah obeyed the LORD. He traveled to Nineveh, and began walking around in the city. He repeated this message, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown!” Now Jonah and all the Israelite prophets knew that a prediction of doom always included the possibility of avoiding doom. The key to avoiding doom was a change of heart and a change of behavior. God wanted people and nations to turn to him in repentance.

Repentance was always a possibility. Jonah knew this. He said, “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who can decide not to send calamity” (Jonah 4:2). But after Jonah announced doom for the city, something happened. The whole city—the king and people—repented. The king issued a decree that everyone should call urgently on God. They should give up their evil ways and violence.

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. Jonah was angry. “I hate God’s enemies,” he muttered, “why doesn’t God hate them, too?” Jonah didn’t agree with any mercy for Nineveh. He had decided that they didn’t deserve mercy.

Instead of prayer, Jonah complained to God. But the LORD replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

Jonah sat on a hill outside the city and waited for it to be destroyed. God caused a plant with wide leaves to grow up beside Jonah to shade him from the sun. The next day, the plant withered, and Jonah began suffering from the scorching sun.

God said, “You are sad that you have lost the shade of the plant, but you aren’t sad at all about Nineveh. Don’t I have the right to have mercy on Nineveh—thousands of people that know little about God?” So Jonah sat there, waiting for God to come around to his way of thinking, and God kept waiting for Jonah to come around to his way of loving (Jonah 4:4-11).

This story is **important** because it shows that no one but God should decide who is worthy of the love of God.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that God’s people in the past, such as Jonah, and God’s people today should share the good news with everyone. In the future, in heaven, there will be people from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Let’s **review** this lesson—

1. Why was Assyria hated in the ancient world? [Pause]
 - A. If you said, “Because they made war against every nation standing in their way, and brutally destroyed their enemies,” you are correct.

2. Why was Jonah reluctant to preach to Nineveh? [Pause]
 - A. If you said, “He feared and hated Assyrians; he was afraid his preaching might lead to their repentance; and he suspected that God might be merciful instead of destructive,” you are correct.
3. What happened when Jonah preached in Nineveh? [Pause]
 - A. If you answered, “The whole city repented and cried out to the LORD; and the LORD responded by sparing the city from destruction,” you answered correctly.
4. How did Jonah react? [Pause]
 - A. If you said, “Jonah was angry with God for sparing the city; he was spared from drowning, but he didn’t want God to spare an entire city of Assyrians,” you are right.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to listen to it at least three times. As you hear the story each time, imagine how it happened. See the events in your own mind. Then tell the story in your own words as you remember it. Then listen to the story again and re-tell it until you feel sure you are repeating the words and actions correctly. Use this story to challenge your people to share God’s love with others who don’t know him.

It’s true that Israel was the chosen people, but God always intended to bless other peoples and nations through Israel. All Christian believers today are brothers and sisters of Israel. Like Israel, we have a duty to share the love of God with others. We are commanded by the Lord Jesus to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19).