

A FLEEING PROFET AND THE MERCIFUL GOD
A Bible study guide for the book of Jonah
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| 1. The Lord sends a missionary | 2.Kings.14:23-27; Jonah 1:1-3 |
| 2. The Lord sends a storm | Jonah 1:4-16 |
| 3. The Lord sends a fish | Jonah 2 |
| 4. The Lord sends a revival | Jonah 3 |
| 5. The Lord sends a plant and a worm Jonah 4 | |
| 6. The mark of Jonah: God has sent his Son | Matth.12:38-41 and 16:1-4 |

1. THE LORD SENDS A MISSIONARY
2.Kings.14:24-27 and Jonah 1:1-3

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR THE WHOLE BOOK OF JONAH (should be printed for everyone and read in the beginning of the first Bible study.)

- **Jonah lifetime** overlapped at least partly with that of king Jerobeam II of Israel (793-753 BC). The kingdom of David and Solomon had been divided into two in 930 BC: Judah in the south and Israel in the north. Jonah lived in Israel. He was born in the village of Gath Hopher near Nazareth. The temple was in Judah, but Israelites didn't go there and fell deeper into idol worship by the year.
- **The kingdom of Assyria** existed for more than one thousand years. It had two golden periods, later of which overlapped Jonah's lifetime (900-612 BC). Since one hundred years before Jonah, the kings of Assyria had waged imperialistic wars, famous for their cruelty. Defeated nations had to pay tribute to Assyria and often they were forcibly moved from into Assyrian captivity. Israel still existed as a state, but it was paying huge sums of protection money to Assyria.
- **Nineveh** was the biggest city of Assyria. Archaeologists have discovered tens of thousands of written clay tablets from its ruins. The descriptions of the Assyrian wars have a touch of sadism in them: mutilated bodies, naked people thrown on sharp poles and left hanging there, mountains of skulls beside gate posts...

2.Kings.14:24-27

Find Gath Hopher and the border area between Hamath and Dead Sea from a map. Jerobeam in verse 24 refers to Jerobeam I. The sin of Jerobeam refers to two calf-idols that the first Jerobeam raised in Bethel and Dan.

- How would you estimate/ assess the forty years of Jerobeam II as a king of Israel?
- When we think of Jerobeam's reign, what may have been the situation of those Israelites who believed in Yahweh and no other god?
- How do you think people of Israel valued Johah as a prophet?
- (ONLY IN JAPAN: What would people in Japan think about a prophet who prophesized that the Kurile Islands will again come into Japanese hands – and it would actually happen afterwards?)

Jonah 1:1-3

Nineveh

- How did Johah's new task differ from his previous task as a prophet?
- Why didn't the Lord command his prophet to preach against the idol worship in his own country but wanted to sent him to far-away Nineveh?
- What may have been God's purpose by sending a missionary to the most violent capital in the whole world?
- What do you think about the message Johah was commanded to proclaim in Nineveh (2)?
- Why didn't the Lord frighten the inhabitants of Nineveh by some other means, for example sending enemy troop to its gates? Why a missionary?
- Jonah tried to imagine the welcome he would get in Nineveh. What would probably happen to a foreign missionary in that violent city?
- What do you think the Lord wanted to accomplish through this mission trip a) in the home country of the missionary, and b) in the life of the missionary?

The flight

Find Nineveh, Japho and Tarshish from a map. Nineveh was situated near Mosul of modern Iraq. Tarshish was in the modern Spain – the utmost end of the world at that time. Japho is the modern Jaffa.

- Try to find as many reasons as possible why Johan wanted to flee from his God given task.
- Count from a map how many kilometres there are between Gath Hefer (Nazareth) and Nineveh on one hand, and between Gath Hefer and Tarshish on the other. Which of these places is a further away?
- What do you think: did Jonah really believe that he would be able to flee from the eyes of the Lord? Give your reasons.
- What does the Bible mean when it says (in the original Hebrew) that Jonah wanted “*to flee from the presence of the Lord*” (3)?
- Give a rough estimate how much money (compared to a man’s monthly pay) Jonah had to pay for his ticket to Tarshish?
- What do you think Jonah said to his family when leaving for Tarshish?
- When did Jonah perhaps think he could return back home?

The application

- To which task did the Lord call you and how did he do it?
- Who are “the inhabitants of Nineveh” to whom you should proclaim the word of the Lord?
- If you have ever tried to flee from Lord’s presence, please tell us how and why it happened?
- How could we prevent ourselves from doing the same mistakes as Jonah did?

THE GOSPEL: Jesus, unlike Jonah, left voluntarily the heaven to become a missionary for the whole world, knowing perfectly well, how it all would end. After his resurrection he has sent his messengers to the whole world, also to our cities, and without any invitation from our side. That shows how much Jesus loves every city in the world.

2. THE LORD SENDS A STORM

Jonah 1:4-16

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: At the time of sailboats the sailing season ended at the end of September in the Mediterranean; after that, autumn storms made it too dangerous. In the Acts we read that as many as 300 people could travel in a big sailing ship (Acts 27:37). Such ships also had roars (13). “The Lord” (“Yahweh”) is the proper name of the God of Israel (9, 14, 16).

In the grip of a storm

- What do you think about the Lord using natural disasters (such as storms, earthquakes or tsunamis) for punishing people or stopping a fleeing prophet (4)?
- What would you think about God who was not able to command the elements of nature?
- What impression do you get about the sailors in this text?
- Find from the text the things that the sailors did in order to save themselves. In which order did they proceed?
- Was Jonah afraid in the storm or wasn’t he? Why do you think so – give your reasons?
- What made Jonah sleep so soundly that he didn’t wake up in the middle of the storm?
- From the gospels we learn that Jesus, too, slept soundly in the storm. What was the difference between his sleep and Jonah’s sleep?
- What was the captain’s understanding about the unseen world (6)?
- How do you think Jonah felt when the sailors decided to settle the problem of guilt by throwing lots/dice (7a)?
- Which discrepancy is there between Jonah’s confession and his life (9)?
- Why did Jonah tell the truth about his flight to the seamen, and didn’t try to explain it away (10)?
- What does the reaction of the sailors to Jonah’s confession show about them (8,10-11)?
- Why did Jonah ask the sailors to throw him to the sea instead of jumping there by himself (12)?
- What do you think was the motivation of Jonah when he said the words written in verse 12?
- Why were the sailors unwilling to throw Jonah to sea although they knew that the storm was his fault (13-14)?
- What do you think about verse 15?
- Did the faith of the sailors change for the time being or for good (14, 16)? Give your reason.

- What was perhaps the promise the sailors made to Jonah's God. Think of various alternatives (16)?

The application

- What does this text have to say to a Christian who tries to flee God in one way or another?
- What different means/ ways does God have today for catching people like Jonah?
- Look at the text once more and answer: how does the Lord use even the flight of his child for the good of his Kingdom?
- What in this chapter touches your heart most?

THE GOSPEL: In these verses Jonah is again a prototype of Jesus. Our Saviour was willing to be thrown to the lake which is burning with fire and brimstone, so that we wouldn't have to be thrown there. This is how the storm of God's anger against our sins was pacified.

3. THE LORD SENDS A FISH Jonah 2

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: This chapter is called the Psalm of Jonah. It is full of quotations from the Book of Psalms, which at that time was used as the hymn book in temple services. Was this "fish" a whale or some kind of sea animal, which has become extinct since, we don't know. (Jesus uses the word "sea-creature" in Matth.12:40). The period of "three days and three nights" is counted according to the Hebrew system: a new day starts while the sun goes down, and one hour before or after the sunset is counted as a whole day.

The Psalm of Jonah

- Imagine Jonah's situation and try to find as many things as possible which threatened his life and his mental health during those three days.
- How can you see that this psalm is not a mere poem, but a prayer?
- What in this psalm shows that Jonah prayed his prayer already in the belly of the fish and not after he had got out of there (2, 11)?
- Where did Jonah find the courage to pray to the God, from whose presence he had been fleeing up till that time?
- What would one expect someone praying in a situation like that?
- Why do you think Jonah quoted in this situation "the hymnbook", in other words verses from different psalms he knew?
- What surprising elements are there in verse 3?
- From whose hand did Jonah take his suffering (4)?
- What does verse 5 say about Jonah's faith?
- Do you think you could have said what is the words of verses 4-5 during the fiercest storm of your life? Why? Why not?
- Why does Jonah mention the temple here (5, 8)?
- How does Jonah know that the Lord will raise him from his "grave" (6-7)?
- Apply verse 8 into your own life.
- Of whom does Jonah speak in verse 9, and what connection does this verse have with the rest of his psalm?
- What does Jonah actually promise in verse 10?
- The sentence: "Salvation is of Lord" contains in Hebrew an allusion to the name of Jesus, "the Saviour". Why do you think Jonah ended his prayer with these words (10b)?
- What touches your heart most in Jonah's prayer and why?
- Which verses in this psalm could be applied to the situation of Jesus after he had entered the hell/ Sheol?
- Read Rom.6:4 and think how we could apply this psalm to our own baptism?
- What, according to this text, you should do, if you have messed up your life as Jonah did?

History or legend?

- What is your opinion: is it possible for a human being to stay alive in the belly of a whale (or some kind of sea-monster) for 30 hours? Give your reasons.
- Why do you think most of the theologians of our day deny the possibility of such a miracle?

- As we will see later, Jesus held Jonah as a historical person and even compared himself with him. What will happen to our faith and our concept of God if we consider the book of Jonah only as some kind of a legend?

THE GOSPEL: Jesus was reciting Psalms on the cross as Jonah did in the belly of a fish. He, too, spent three days in Sheol (according to the Hebrew way of counting time). Jesus believed in his resurrection as much as Jonah believed in his. In fact, the psalm of Jonah would fit perfectly well to the mouth of our Saviour while hanging on the cross.

4. THE LORD SENDS A REVIVAL **Jonah 3**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: Niniveh is mentioned in the Bible soon after the Flood – and already then it is called a big city (Gen.10:12). Archaeology shows us that there has been on settlement in Nineveh as early as 4500 BC. Jonah and the people of that city understood each other, because Hebrew and Accad are related languages.

The names and ruling years of Assyrian kings are well known, thanks to the clay tablets. But because we don't know the year Jonah went to Nineveh, we can't be sure of the name of the king either. In the middle of the 8th century BC there were many kings in succession.

Call to be a missionary – once more!

- Try to imagine the physical state of Jonah after the fish had vomited him on some beach of the eastern Mediterranean (2:11)?
- What was the God like in whom Jonah believed at this point of his life? Compare it to the concept of God he had had before his trip (1:9; 2:10b and 4:2)?
- Where had Jonah got hold of/ obtained the faith he now had in God?
- Do you think it was easier for Jonah to become a missionary after his flight than it would have been before it?
- Look at a map. How many kilometres approximately did Jonah have to walk? How long do you think it took him?

Jonah is preaching the Law

- How do you think your countrymen would react, if someone started to preach on the streets of the capital: “Forty more days and this city will be destroyed”?
- How would you react if you heard this kind of a sermon in your church?
- How did Jonah muster the courage to preach like this to the notoriously violent Assyrians?
- Why didn't Jonah describe in his sermon in detail how he was saved from the belly of a whale?
- Why did the Lord want to warn Nineveh (unlike, say, Sodom) that a catastrophe was imminent?
- Think of various reasons why the inhabitants of Nineveh did not silence the foreign prophet?
- What surprises you most in the response of the king to Jonah's message (6-9)?
- What made the king wish that Jonah's God would perhaps have mercy on his city?

The prerequisite of a revival

- What made Jonah's message so powerful?
- What would have happened if Jonah had walked through Nineveh shouting: “God loves all the people of the world, you included”?
- Why must the law be preached before a revival can take place?
- Where could we muster the courage to preach to our own contemporaries as sharp a law as Jonah preached to Nineveh?
- Jesus said about himself that he is “*greater than Jonah*” (Matth.12:41). What did he mean by that? (We will return to this theme next time.)

An ominous sign?

- Assyrian clay tablets mention over and over again “an ominous sign” from the year 763 - a complete eclipse. This is but a guess, but let's suppose that this happened just before Jonah arrived at Nineveh. How much do you think that would have affected the minds of the people there.
- What was Jonah needed for, if such an ominous sign had already made people frightened?

THE GOSPEL: This story proves that there is no hopeless case on this earth, neither a person nor a city. If the word of God can break the hearts of cruel Assyrians, it can do the same with any other nation, or with ourselves, or with the person for whom you are worrying today.

5. THE LORD SENDS A PLANT AND A WORM

Jonah 4

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: In verse 2 Jonah utters a confession of faith, which again is a quotation of some central texts of the OT. At that region, the temperature can soar as high as 50 degrees Celsius, especially when the desert wind is blowing. In spite of this, Jonah decided to sit outside the walls of Nineveh for more than a month. The plant in verse 6 was probably a gourd which can grow quickly as long as four meters. But this does not happen in one single night without a God's miracle.

The Lord changes his plans

- Consider different alternatives of how Jonah knew, that the Lord had changed his mind about Nineveh (3:10-4:1)?
- How can Jonah 3:10 and the following verse be reconciled: *"Whenever a prophet speaks in my name and the prediction is not fulfilled, then I have not spoken it; the prophet has presumed to speak it, so you need not fear him."* (Deut.18:22).
- Suppose that the prediction of someone, who calls himself a prophet in our day, proves to be mistaken. Is this person, in your opinion, allowed to resort to the case of Jonah, or is he a false prophet?
- What does the verse 4:2b tell us about the situation/fate of this country and that of the whole world? What about world missions?

The missionary gets angry

- Why do you think the Lord often lets his child have a temptation after a great success?
- What exactly was it that made Jonah so angry with God (4:1-2)?
- Do you think Jonah's rage is understandable and excusable? Give your reasons.
- What means did Jonah have to deal with his anger?
- Jonah was wishing himself dead twice in this chapter (4:3,8). Why did he want to die?
- What should Jonah have answered to God's question (4)?
- What do you think about the explanation/ commentary, according to which Jonah was depressed in a psychological sense of the word?
- What does this chapter say about the anger/ depression of a **church worker**/ a person who is working for the Lord?
- Why did Jonah go outside the city instead of going home (5)?

The gourd

- What other things than heat made Jonah's condition unbearable while he was sitting in the desert?
- Jonah is said to feel joy only once during this whole story, in verse 6. What does this fact tell about him?
- How do you find God's way of dealing with Jonah, according to verses 6-7?
- The Lord poses the same question to Jonah for a second time. Why (4,9)?
- Compare Jonah as he was in the belly of the fish to the Jonah who is sitting in the desert. What are the differences?
- Jonah is the only missionary in the whole OT who was sent to preach to heathens. In which way is he a prototype of all missionaries?

Application

- What does chapter 4 have to say about your own anger?
- If you ever have felt that the Lord was bullying you on purpose, when was it?
- What is "the gourd" by which the Lord has tried to make you feel better?
- What should a church worker do if he/she is angry with God?
- What consolation is there for us in the 4th chapter?

The end

- What do the last verses show us about God's character (10-11)?
- What is the significance of the word "animals" in verse 11?

- What happened to Jonah after God had spoken to him? Think of various alternatives.
- What may the Israelites of Jonah's day have said when they heard about his trip to Nineveh? What about the king Jeroboam II?

THE GOSPEL: The book of Jonah ends with God's grace towards heathens. When we look at its last verses we can understand why he wanted to send his own Son to this world.

Jonah had been right when fearing that the Assyrians would sooner or later swallow Israel. The revival of Nineveh touched only one generation. From the year 745 onwards, the Assyrian Empire conquered Northern Israel bit by bit. Four decades after the eclipse (722) it destroyed Samaria and took the nine tribes into captivity, whence they never returned.

But finally there came a doomsday for Nineveh, too. In the year 612 BC, Babylonians captured the city and burned it to the ground. The prediction of Jonah didn't materialize after 40 days, but after 150 years. For centuries nobody knew its whereabouts. It was not before the 1840s that it was found from under the desert sand near Mosul. The Nineveh is long gone but the book of Jonah is still around. As Jesus said: *"Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away"* (Luk.21:33).

6. THE SIGN OF JONAH: GOD SENT HIS SON Matth.12:38-41 and 16:1-4

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: In the language of the Bible a **sign** can mean two things: a) something that goes with a covenant and proves that a certain person or group belongs to God's people (the Sabbath, circumcision, baptism). Or it can mean b) a miracle by which God shows his power and might for men to see.

- If there was a situation in your life when you wanted to get a sign from God, when was it?
- Say with your own words: what does Jesus try to say to Pharisees through these two little speeches?

A wicked and adulterous generation

- What was the opinion of Jesus about the authenticity of the revival in Nineveh (41)?
- Compare the reaction of the people of Nineveh to Jonah's preaching to the reactions of the Pharisees to the preaching of Jesus. Why the difference?
- Why do you think the reaction in our country to the teachings of Jesus is more like that of the Pharisees and not that of Nineveh?
- The Pharisees had already seen many miracles that Jesus had performed. Why did they want to see one more sign (12:38 and 16:1)?
- What kind of sign would perhaps have made Pharisees convinced that Jesus was God?
- Why didn't even the resurrection of Jesus make the Pharisees convinced that Jesus was God?
- What did Jesus mean by calling himself *"something greater than Jonah"*?

The sign

- In which situations do people usually ask for signs in our day, what kind of signs they ask and from whom?
- Why is it sometimes dangerous to make big decisions on the basis of a sign?
- What is the difference between "the sign of Jonah" and the signs people try to obtain for strengthening of their faith?
- How does "the sign of Jonah" contain God's mercy?
- Where can our contemporaries come into contact with "the sign of Jonah"?
- In what way was Jonah's sermon a sign for the people of Nineveh of God's presence in their city?
- In which respect was Jonah's journey to the bottom of the sea a prototype of a Christian baptism. See also Rom.6:3-5?
- On which grounds can we call the Holy Communion "the sign of Jonah"?
- Once more: why are the Bible, the Baptism and the Eucharist "the signs of Jonah"?
- Why must we not require any other sign for strengthening of our faith but "the sign of Jonah" (16:4)?
- Why will the final judgement of the Western countries be harder than that of non-Christian countries?
- How could we help to take the sign of Jonah to as many people as possible on this earth?

THE GOSPEL: The Christian baptism contains the death and resurrection of Jesus (Rom.6:3-5). The Eucharist does it, too. The death and resurrection of Jesus are the main theme in the whole Bible. If you ask how you can know that Jesus is God, the answer is: look at the sign of Jonah. If you ask, how you can know that Jesus loves

you of all the people, the answer is: look at the sign of Jonah. That is why this one sign should be enough for you for all your life, even without any other signs.