

Sunday 21st September 2025 - How To Read The Bible: The Book of Jonah

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Date: 21 September 2025

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[0 : 00] We are in the second week of this relatively new Sunday series that we're doing called How to Read the Bible. And it's a title which, as I said last week, it's a bold ambition perhaps, because while the 66 books that make up the Bible have got plenty of beautifully straightforward stuff to teach us about God, ourselves and our world.

These books also contain considerable content which can come across as complicated and cryptic and even sometimes crushingly confusing.

And so the aim of this series is to try to clear some of that confusion by offering ways to think about and engage with the Bible so that as we read it, we might be more able to encounter God through its words and through its wisdom.

Now, given that, as we said last week, the Bible is not really just one book, but it is this collection of 66 smaller books.

Here's a key question for us to consider when reading perhaps any one of these individual books that make up the Bible. And the question would be this. What kind of writing is this that I'm reading?

[1 : 21] What kind of writing is this? Is it, for example, a history book in which the writer is attempting to give maybe an accurate historical record of what actually happened?

Or is it, say, a book of wisdom? You know, a collection of wise thoughts about what it means to be human and relate to God. Any one of these books, they could be instead a book of poetry, in which feelings about God are expressed, often using metaphors and imagery.

Equally, could the book be a parable, kind of fable, you know, a made-up story, but one that's got deeper truth in it? Is it a book of law, rules for how to live?

Or is it a book of prophecy, in which a prophet shares messages that they believe God has given them, usually in the Bible about justice and how people should live together?

Or might a book of the Bible be a letter, sometimes called an epistle, written from one person to an individual or group at a particular time for a particular reason?

[2 : 32] Is it a gospel, of which there are four, you know, accounts of Jesus' life designed to tell a convincing story of who Jesus is?

Or might it even be what's called an apocalyptic book, sharing insights not previously known about how things might unfold?

You see, the brilliant but at times bewildering truth about the Bible is that it contains all of these kinds of writings.

And then sometimes, just to complicate things further, an individual book in the Bible can be a mix of these different genres. With, say, a parable put next to a bit of history, maybe with a bit of prophecy or a bit of poetry thrown in for good measure.

And so trying to work out what kind of stuff it is that we're reading, no wonder that the Bible overall can sometimes be incredibly confusing.

[3 : 33] I guess it's a bit like, you know, going down a high street, going into Waterstones perhaps, taking a book from every department on every floor, ripping off the covers, gluing them together and then handing it over to someone without any explanation about what it is that they're going to be reading.

That's the kind of idea, it seems, about how the Bible is actually put together. And yet if, as we read the Bible, if we can generally work out the kind of writing, you know, the kind of genre we're reading, well, that can make all the difference to our understanding of what God might be wanting to say to us through these very human stories.

And so we're going to try and do that today by taking one of the shortest books, you might be pleased to know, in the Bible.

One with only four chapters, and it's the book of Jonah. So we're going to explore what kind of writing the book of Jonah is, and perhaps most importantly, hopefully, work out what God might be wanting to say to us through it.

Now, if you're familiar at all with the story of Jonah, you'll be aware that he is most famous for being swallowed by a big fish.

[4 : 54] Indeed, this fish incident, fish gate, we could call it, is why it's usually seen as a story suitable for children. You know, it's kind of an exciting story of the sea.

And in fact, in order to introduce or perhaps familiarize ourselves with the story, we're going to watch a version of Jonah, but we're going to watch a children's cartoon version of it.

And I'll explain why later. But here's a version of the story of the book of Jonah. Heroes of the Bible. Jonah. This is Jonah. Jonah was a prophet. That means it was his job to tell people what God told him to say.

Yep. One day, God told Jonah to go to Nineveh because the people of Nineveh were doing bad things. But instead, Jonah ran away.

[5 : 52] Where are you, please? And went to the port to board a ship. Going the other way, he was hoping to get away from God.

Oh, my. He sailed for a place called Tarshish. While he was at sea, God sent a great and powerful wind over the sea that caused a storm that seemed like it would break the ship apart.

Fearing for their lives, the sailors tried everything they could think of to save the ship. Meanwhile, Jonah was sound asleep.

So the captain went down and said, How can you sleep at a time like this? Get up and pray to your God. Maybe he will help us. Then the crew figured out that Jonah was the reason for the storm.

Uh-oh. And they asked him, Who are you? Why is this happening to us? Jonah told them who he was and that he worshipped the one true God who made the sea.

[6 : 56] Then he told the sailors to throw him in the sea so the storm would stop. No, why? The sailors still tried to escape the storm, but it was no use.

Ah. Ah. So they asked God for forgiveness and threw Jonah into the sea. The storm stopped at once. Whoa. The sailors were amazed at God's power, and they vowed to serve him.

Ah. Ah. Now God sent a great fish to swallow Jonah. Ah. Great. And Jonah was inside the fish for three days and nights.

Jonah prayed to God from inside the fish, and God ordered the fish to spit Jonah out. Yuck. God told Jonah again to go to the city of Nineveh to tell them what God had said about them.

I get it. I get it. This time, Jonah obeyed God and went to Nineveh to deliver God's message. Ahem.

[8 : 08] The people of Nineveh stopped doing bad things and turned to God. They were saved. Because they listened to the message that God had given Jonah.

There we go. And it's a good story, isn't it? The story of Jonah. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh to tell the people there to repent of their evil ways. Jonah doesn't want to go.

Sails in the opposite direction. The storm blows up, which is seen as God's judgment on Jonah. So the crew eventually throw Jonah overboard, which means that the storm then stops.

Jonah sinks down, only to be swallowed by a big fish. And he stays in this fish's belly for three days and nights. Jonah prays to God. The fish vomits Jonah out on dry land.

And then Jonah does go to Nineveh. Tells the people to repent and turn to God, which they do. And then a cartoon version of the story ends. And you can see why it's sometimes felt to be a good story for children.

[9 : 17] You know, a dramatic adventure story. It's proper sort of biblical octonauts stuff in some ways. And yet, is Jonah really a children's story at all?

You see, I'm not sure it is. And I suspect we miss out on an awful lot of its truth if we simply think it is for children. What's more, most children's versions, books or videos, including that one, they leave out the final chapter, the fourth chapter of the story, which, as we'll see later, is perhaps the main point of the whole book.

So, let's begin by unpacking this story, by asking that question from earlier. What kind of writing is this?

Now, the assumption over the years is that Jonah is a book of prophecy, since Jonah was a prophet, and God had given him a message to deliver to the people of Nineveh. But equally, the book of Jonah has also been thought by many to be a book of history. And that's certainly often been the way it's been taught to children. You know, it's a true story of a real person in a historical setting.

[10:40] And there's reasons for that, because Jonah is reckoned to have really existed. And he's mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. So, in the place that he's mentioned, which is 2 Kings, chapter 14, verse 25, we read this, that the king at the time, King Jeroboam, extended the boundaries of Israel, just as the Lord has promised his servant Jonah, son of Amittai, who was a prophet from Gath-Hefa.

So, Jonah, it seems, was a real person. And he was around at the time of King Jeroboam II, which was around about 760 BC.

And this little town, Gath-Hefa, that's a real town. It's about five miles from Nazareth. And Nineveh, in the story, was a real city. In fact, Nineveh is modern-day Mosul in Iraq.

And indeed, it's what was reckoned to be the burial tomb of Jonah from the 8th century BC, that you may remember, was sadly destroyed by ISIS back in 2011, I think it was.

Moreover, it's not just that Jonah was a historical person. Jesus himself, at one point, refers to Jonah. Jesus talks about the way in which the people of Nineveh repented when Jonah preached.

[12:07] And we're told he says this. He says, For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man, the way Jesus referred to himself, will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

And so those are just some of the reasons why the story of Jonah, from the book of Jonah, is reckoned by many to be a real historical story of prophecy and a pretty miraculous adventure in the belly of a fish.

The interesting thing, though, is that the book of Jonah probably wasn't written until around 400 BC. We know that from the style of writing and the language that it uses. Particularly as it's got, in amongst the Hebrew, some Aramaic terms in the book that wouldn't have been known until the Israelites spent time exiled in Babylon, many centuries after Jonah's time.

So if the book of Jonah was written some, what, 360, 370 years or so after Jonah's actual time, that would be like us today writing about Oliver Cromwell or the fire of London.

[13:33] And we need to bear that gap in mind when thinking of Jonah as history. What's more, unlike most of the other books in the Bible named after prophets, people like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and so on, the book of Jonah contains no mention of particular king's names or events, nothing in history to date it.

It's far less specific. In fact, the book doesn't mention the king's name. It just says the king of the city of Nineveh, which is in itself an interesting expression, because we know that it's countries, not cities, that have kings.

And again, suggests that perhaps seeing it as history may not be quite right. More than this, though, perhaps most of all, when we actually read the book of Jonah, I think we can identify it as a particular style of writing.

In fact, I'm going to give us a sheet with the book of Jonah printed on it, as I hope this will make more sense for us, rather than trying to read things on the screen.

I'm going to give us all a sheet, and it will hopefully become clear as we go round. So if you can take one of those and pass those on, that would be great. I know this is a bit like English class at school kind of comprehension side of it, but yes, please, mate.

[15:06] Thank you. You can give those out. That would be great. You can take one of those, pass them on. And the good news is you get to take this home as well. How generous is that? Or you can recycle it later. But you get a bit of the Bible to take away with you today.

You can pass one on to everyone. That would be grand. Just the one sheet. There's two sides of it. Chapters one and two on one side, and chapters three and four on the other.

So while they're going around, you can familiarize yourself a little bit with it if you wish. And then we'll look at the first page, the chapters one and two, briefly together.

So if we look at the first page, it's the Book of Jonah chapters one and two. Let's look just briefly at chapter one. And apologies this morning if you're colorblind, as I didn't quite know how else to do this, but you'll hopefully see that I've highlighted a number of different words in different colors.

In particular, look at, if you can, please, the green words for a start. And as you scan down the green words, what do you notice about the kind of words that these green words highlight?

[16:21] How would you describe what you notice about these green words? Descriptive. Yeah, spot the teacher. Yes, well done, Trish. Descriptive, indeed.

In other words, that spring to mind about these green terms? Cataclysmic. I like it. By which you mean kind of what? Exaggerated? Sort of.

Yeah. Violent, emotional, extreme, perhaps. Yeah. We might say, I think, that these green words are all very exaggerated.

You know, everything is either great or big or extreme. Huge. Yeah. It sounds much like a sort of larger-than-life story. Told more, perhaps, for effect than simply being an historical account.

So the green words are all kind of exaggerated terms. But what you know is about the words in red. If you scan through those quickly, what's the kind of common factor with these red words?

[17:30] Directional. Yes, indeed, Dave. Yeah. In particular, what kind of directions are described in there? Up and down. Yes.

Excellent. They're all up and down words. What might that indicate if we're going through a story that's got lots of upwards and downwards and upwards and downwards?

Well, I would suggest it's trying to tell us that there's a bit of a journey going on here. That it's a story that has got lots of literal ups and downs to it.

And perhaps there might be a larger truth in seeing this journey as one of ups and downs and not necessarily simply an historical account.

You see, if Jonah is a story with a larger truth, if there's more going on here than perhaps first appears, I'd suggest that when we read Jonah, it's actually a parable.

[18:33] Not necessarily a true story, but a story which has truth in it. a story with a deeper meaning. Now, if it is a parable, might say a fable, perhaps.

What might its meaning be? Well, it seems that Jonah is meant to represent the people of Israel as a whole.

Israel was a nation called by God to share God's good ways with the rest of the world. And it seems that's the idea behind Jonah being called by God to go to Nineveh, a different country.

Go and help them to turn from wickedness and instead embrace my ways of love and kindness. But just as Israel disobeyed their call to share God's good ways to the rest of the world, so too Jonah disobeys God.

As we saw, he runs away from his mission. Now, because of their disobedience, the people of Israel felt that God eventually allowed them to be conquered and thrown out of their own land, might say exiled, and ironically, history tells us that the people of Israel were exiled by the Assyrians whose capital city was Nineveh.

[19:58] And so mirroring that story, Jonah too gets punished for his disobedience by being thrown out, thrown overboard, we might say exiled in his case into the abyss of the sea.

Just as the Israelites were exiled in Assyria and then by the time that the book of Jonah was written, many more of God's people had in turn been exiled also into Babylon. The people of God, they would have felt imprisoned, alone, completely cut off from all they knew, may be strangers in a strange place, as if swallowed up, perhaps, like Jonah in the belly of a big fish.

And so that's why if we look at chapter 2, just down a bit on that first page, here's what we see Jonah doing in verse 1 of chapter 2.

We're told that from inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. And what does he pray from inside the fish?

Well, he prays what turns out to be a kind of greatest hits compilation of all sorts of lines from the book of Psalms, which was the prayer book of the people of Israel, which was compiled when the people of Israel were in exile.

[21:25] We haven't got time to go through the whole prayer, but it's a great prayer. It's a brilliant prayer, in fact, from Jonah because he's stitching together all sorts of themes from all sorts of Psalms, kind of cherry-picking the relevant bits from loads of them.

Psalms that have become incredibly precious to the people while they were exiled from their own land. So it fits that Jonah's doing this while he is exiled in the fish's belly.

So, for example, there's one, Jonah chapter 2, verse 2, he says, In my distress I called to you, Lord. And that echoes Psalm 130, verse 1, where we read, Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord.

Or then we get this one, the next verse, Jonah 2, verse 3. He prays, You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me.

All your waves and breakers swept over me. And that sounds very similar to Psalm 42, verse 7, where we're told that deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls.

[22 : 30] All your waves and breakers have swept over me. And as we go through Jonah's prayer, there are many more cross-references, as you can see on the screen.

Indeed, I think we're meant to see this time for Jonah in the fish's belly, and therefore the people of Israel's time in exile as a time where they took stock, a time, you might say, of repentance, where they seek forgiveness and want to start a new way with God.

You see, Jonah's been taken down, as he says in chapter 2, verse 2, equivalent, really, to the realm of the dead. And interestingly, the time it's mentioned that it took for him to get there, which was a distance of three days and three nights.

That was how long ancient folks believed it took for the dead to descend to these realms. But even if Jonah, even if the people of Israel felt that they were in the realm of the dead, exiled and alone, even in these depths, even in this fish's belly, this exile, this death, if you like, there was hope.

For example, not only does Jonah finish his prayer by echoing Psalm 3, verse 8, when he declares this, that the end, salvation, saving, comes from the Lord.

[24 : 01] But it's interesting, the fish itself is also significant. So again, if you cast your eyes back to your sheet, you'll see two-thirds of the way down on the first page is that the word for fish in chapter 1, verse 17, I've put it in light blue, if you can make that out.

The word for fish is in light blue. And in the original text, the Hebrew word for fish here is male. It's a male fish that swallows Jonah.

But then if you notice, the next sentence, chapter 2, verse 1, I've highlighted the word for fish in purple because the gender of the fish in the original language changes.

In Hebrew, the fish is now described as female. So why might this be? Well, I'd suggest it's because we're meant to see this female fish as almost being pregnant with Jonah, you know, holding him in her belly until he's ready to be reborn.

Indeed, if you cast your eyes right down to the bottom of that first page, the next time the fish is mentioned, gender reverts to being male in that light blue.

[25 : 28] In a sense, because the female's work in helping Jonah to grow has been done. And so it's the original male fish who vomits Jonah out, out of the belly, out of the depths, alive again, onto dry land.

That, it seems, was God's salvation for Jonah. The fish wasn't a punishment. It was time for Jonah to take stock, start again with God, echoing the salvation that God offered to Israel when they too would eventually return from exile to their own dry land to once again try to be God's people in the place God had called them to be.

And ultimately, I think, it's for this reason, this kind of understanding of what the belly of the fish is all about. That's why Jesus refers to this story when he says, for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

I think Jesus was referring to this same process of descending to the realms of the dead, taking sin to die with him before being reborn, resurrected out of the belly, if you like, or out of the womb of the tomb to usher in the new resurrection life with God.

Now, as we saw earlier with that children's cartoon, the parable of Jonah goes on to tell us that Jonah decides to do what God originally asked by going to preach to the people of Nineveh who respond to his message positively and with repentance.

[27 : 16] And if you remember, that's where the cartoon version ends, where effectively it seems everybody lives happily ever after. But that's the end of chapter three.

That's not actually how the book of Jonah ends. because despite his journey to the depths of death and back in the fish's belly, while we'd hope that that transforms Jonah in a new way, actually, Jonah remains an angry, resentful, bitter man.

You see, despite the fact in the story that the Ninevites turn from their evil ways towards God's goodness and love, you'd think that would make Jonah happy. But in fact, Jonah is gutted about their change and his true feelings come out.

And so at the beginning of chapter four, we read this, the Ninevites have repented, but Jonah was very upset. In fact, he became angry and he prayed to the Lord and said, Lord, isn't this exactly what I thought would happen when I was still at home?

That's why I was so quick to run away to Tarshish. I knew that you are gracious, you are tender and kind, you are slow to get angry, you are full of love, you are a God who takes pity on people, you don't want to destroy them.

[28 : 44] Lord, take away my life, I'd rather die than live. In other words, Jonah wanted God to punish these Ninevites, but he knew that if he preached to them, then they turned to God and God would forgive them, and so he runs away.

But now these Ninevites have repented and you've forgiven them, God, it's like, oh, just kill me now, what's the point of this, where's the revenge that I wanted these Ninevites to suffer?

And so God replies to Jonah by saying, do you have any right to be angry? Indeed, the whole book concludes with a question with God saying to Jonah, Nineveh has more than 120,000 people.

They can't tell right from wrong. Nineveh also has a lot of cattle. So shouldn't I show concern for that great city? Again, in other words, says God, these Ninevites are people, people made in my image, and despite their terrible behavior, despite the fact that you don't like them, I still love them and always will.

I even love their cows. Therefore, of course, I'm going to be concerned for their welfare by doing all I can to help them turn away from their sins.

[30 : 14] And that conclusion, I would suggest, is the point of this whole parable, this whole story of Jonah, the big fish, the people of Nineveh, all of that, is a story which invites us, even forces us, to consider how God's justice and God's mercy can coexist.

It poses the question, how can a loving God forgive people who have done such terrible things while claiming to still be a God of justice?

God's mercy that Jonah just couldn't handle. Indeed, he ran away from that. He gave up, saying, I'd rather be dead than see you forgive these people.

And so, in fact, perhaps far from being a hero of the Bible was that cartoon portrayed him as. In this parable, at least, Jonah has to be one of the most tragic people of all, utterly consumed with resentment.

And indeed, that resentment of people, particularly of their enemies, that would continue to be part of the story of Israel's life in the Bible. They would have resented perhaps the Egyptians and the Assyrians and the Babylonians and the Romans.

[31 : 38] All these enemies who did, yes, terrible things to them, but ultimately people that they wanted God to take revenge on and not forgive.

And so, if we go full circle, in response to that question in the beginning, what kind of writing is this? Well, I suggest the book of Jonah, as I say, is a parable, not a true literal story, but instead a story of truth in which a prophet decides to ignore God because he knows deep down that God will choose to forgive rather than destroy those he wants to hate.

Now, just to finish, what does that mean for us? What does this book mean for us? Well, the way I see it, and you can have your own interpretations and views, I'm sure, but the way I see it, far from being a children's story, Jonah is as relevant for our times as any other book in the Bible because I suggest that we too are now living at a time when those who some declare to be our enemies, if you read the news, it will be immigrants, refugees, people on boats, they are being blamed for the majority of our troubles and they are being attacked.

And indeed, the idea that God loves them and is as concerned for their welfare as he is about ours, or just as it was for Jonah, that idea is perhaps too much for some people to take.

Now, I appreciate, yes, of course, we are living in difficult and challenging and seriously troubling times. But I'd also suggest the demonization of immigrants as opposed to focusing on the real cause of our nation's decline, which for me is the extreme inequality and greed that's been allowed and enabled to grow by successive governments for far too long.

[34 : 04] that's what I would suggest the prophets of our time need to rise up against. And ultimately, most importantly, the book of Jonah, as with every book in the Bible, points to Jesus, the one in whom we see a God who works tirelessly to combat injustice while exhorting us to love our enemies, to forgive those who wrong us, and to welcome in the poor, the stranger, the oppressed, as people known and loved by God.

That's how I suggest we read the book of Jonah, and indeed that, I would suggest, is part of the way in which we can read the Bible.
Amen. Amen.