

Jonah 1:1-6

Jonah 1:1-6 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, (2) “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.” (3) But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (4) But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up. (5) Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep. (6) So the captain came to him, and said to him, “What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish.”

Questions On The Text

What was God’s instruction to Jonah?

Verses 1-2: Capitalised LORD is Hebrew Yahweh. Yahweh told Jonah to go to Nineveh and “cry out against it.” Nineveh is referred to as a “great” city because it was one of the royal cities of Assyria. At this point, Israel had been forced to pay tribute to Assyria for about 100 years, so Jonah would have had no great love for the Assyrians.

But whatever Jonah’s personal feelings were, God’s instruction to him was to go there and warn them. The reason given for this warning is that “their wickedness” had come up before God. Yahweh was certainly not limited to dealing with Israel, but has always been Lord of the whole earth. The word translated “wickedness” can equally be translated “calamity” or “trouble” which would imply that the Assyrians were already experiencing the judgment of Yahweh. If so, the people’s hearts had been prepared to receive Jonah’s message, and Jonah’s mission was to give the Assyrians the opportunity of repentance and to avoid God’s final decisive judgment.

How did Jonah respond?

Verse 3: Jonah did not respond with obedience, but immediately set in motion a plan that would ensure that he was unable to do what God had told him to do. He went to the coastal city of Joppa (which is today called Jaffa), and hired a ship bound for Tarshish.

Several things need to be noted about this. First, the city of Tarshish was at the Western end of the Mediterranean Sea, whereas Nineveh was hundreds of kilometres to the north-east. Including stops at various ports, the trip would have taken up to twelve months. That means that it would have cost Jonah a considerable amount of money. He really didn’t want to obey God!

Second, Jonah’s purpose was to flee from the presence of Yahweh. Since he knew that Yahweh was not just a local deity, but had created all the land and the sea (see 1:9), it is unlikely that he really thought that he would have much success in this. But clearly God’s presence is with those who do His will in a special way (see Matthew 28:19-20), and it is doing God’s will that Jonah was really trying to avoid.

How did Yahweh respond to Jonah’s disobedience?

Verse 4: Yahweh brought a great tempest onto the sea. The words translated “sent out” literally mean “hurled.” It is the same Hebrew word used in 1 Samuel 18:11 to describe how King Saul “cast” a spear at David to pin him to the wall.

This word is also used in Jonah 1:5 as they “threw” the cargo overboard, as well as in verse 15 when they “threw” Jonah overboard. The tempest was so severe that the ship itself started to break up.

How did everyone react to the storm?

Verse 5-6: The sailors (literally “salts”) were afraid. We wouldn’t expect experienced sailors to be easily frightened by a storm, so this should give us a fair indication of its severity. Each of the sailors had different gods implying that it was a multinational crew.

The first response of the crew is to pray; then they hurl the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. In contrast, Jonah is below deck fast asleep, the Hebrew indicating a very deep sleep as in Genesis 2:21 when God caused a deep sleep to come upon Adam so that He could operate on him. Noticing Jonah’s absence, the captain woke him and demanded to know why he was not also in prayer.

Further Questions For Discussion:

Why did God give the Assyrians an opportunity to repent?

Why did Jonah go to such great lengths to avoid obeying God’s command?

Why was Jonah’s plan to avoid God so foolish?

Was the storm that God sent an act of judgment or an act of mercy?

What do you think of Jonah’s sleeping while the crew prayed?