

## Prayer

When I call upon You, Lord Almighty, hear my voice and deal gently with me, for I am bruised from the journey of life. I am not ashamed to come before You, Lord, for You have called Your people 'friends'. Be my friend now when I need You most; bring me through my hour of need and lead me safely on, for I have vowed to do Your will O Lord. I long to fulfil Your call. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*What has God said to you recently through other people? Pray about what He has shown you.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray this week about witness.** Ask the Lord to fill His people with a desire to witness to their faith, and the boldness to declare it
- Pray for those who are exploring the seas in a quest for knowledge
- Give thanks for the fellowship of your church and all it means to you

## Meditation

Lord God Almighty:

If we are troubled,  
    lead us into the peace of Your presence;

If our minds are confused,  
    bring us knowledge and understanding;

If our hearts are broken,  
    comfort us with Your unsurpassed love;

If our strength is failing,  
    touch us with Your loving help and healing;

If our feelings are bruised,  
    pour on us the balm of Your comfort and Word;

If our pathway ahead is puzzling,  
    guide us the calm and steady hand of Your Spirit;

For in You, and in Your peace,  
    we are eternally blessed and forever saved.

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## Bible Study - Jonah 1:1-6

<sup>1</sup> For this is the word of the LORD that came to Jonah son of Amittai; <sup>2</sup> 'Go immediately to that great city Nineveh, and preach against it; for their wickedness insults me.' <sup>3</sup> But Jonah attempted to flee from the LORD'S presence by going to Tarshish. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going there, paid the fare and boarded the ship to travel as a passenger to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

<sup>4</sup> But the LORD sent a great wind over the sea, and such a great storm arose on the sea that the ship was at the point of breaking up. <sup>5</sup> Then the sailors were afraid, and each one cried out to his own god. They threw the ship's cargo into the sea in order to lighten it. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone below into the ship's hold, where he had lain down and was fast asleep.

<sup>6</sup> The captain came and said to him, 'What are you doing sound asleep? Get up! Call on your god! Perhaps he will take notice of us and spare us!'

## Review

The story of Jonah is one of scripture's more strange tales. It begins in a matter of fact way as if it was part of a far bigger story, and it would certainly be good if we knew much more about this man! However, the only other mention he gets in scripture is in 2 Kings 14:25 where Jonah is credited with a word from the Lord advising King Jeroboam II about the boundaries of Israel, around 780BC. In general, the book of Jonah is about a man who was sent by God to preach against Nineveh (see Jonah 3:4), the capital city of Assyria, which rose to great worldly power many years after the events of 2 Kings 14. For these reasons, it is not easy to work out exactly when this story took place. In addition, the book is more like a story than a prophecy as such, but this is something we will look at later in the study.

It is immediately obvious that Jonah was highly reluctant to take on the role of a prophet. Nevertheless, the story of his famous flight from God resulting in his being swallowed by a whale has become a well-known Old Testament favourite. It is unfortunate, however, if we place too much emphasis on the early part of Jonah's story, especially the whale, because the story as a whole contains many treasures and it helps us in two important ways. Firstly, Jonah's relationship with the Lord is described in detail throughout the book and this gives us an insight into the call of a prophet in the Old Testament. Secondly, the particular task to which Jonah was called was no ordinary prophetic role. Jonah only spoke a few words of prophecy (3:4), yet the results of this are a crucial reminder to us of God's universal call to all people to repent.

There is much to take in during the early verses of the story. Jonah, son of Amittai, was an Israelite. The Lord called him to go to the capital city of Israel's northernmost neighbour Assyria, which at that time was an increasing great threat to the safety of the northern kingdom of Israel. If the dating of 2 Kings 14 is roughly correct, then 60 years later, this city was responsible for the military overthrow and destruction of all Israel (as described in 2 Kings 16:5ff). With this in mind, we realise that God was asking Jonah to go to the very heart of Israel's fiercest enemy and confront them with the consequences of their wickedness!

Before the days of Jonah, Elijah and Elisha had exercised significant prophetic ministries mainly within the borders of Israel and Judah, but occasionally outside (see the story of Naaman – 2 Kings 5). This was the first time that a prophet had been called to deliver God's judgement directly and exclusively to a hostile neighbour of Israel! Little wonder therefore that Jonah fled from the Lord and travelled in the opposite direction to that to which he had been called. Nineveh was to the North East of Israel, and the port of Joppa was to the south west, with Tarshish even further westwards across the seas. It is also worth noting that although it is uncertain where 'Tarshish' was (either North Africa or Spain), the place name is closely related to a Hebrew word for 'ruin'. If the name was being used as a pun, it worked! Jonah was heading for ruin by running away from God's call!

Our passage today concludes with the description of a great storm sent by the Lord on the sea. It was a popular belief amongst many Israelites of those days that the Lord was a God of the land but not the sea, so the Lord's raising of a storm (1:4f.) was a reminder of God's universal creative authority. We who think we read today can easily gloss over the violent storm as just a dramatic feature of the story, but it demonstrates yet again the blind foolishness of running from the Lord. Even though Jonah could not admit it, the pagan sailors were able to see the supernatural nature of what was happening. The captain of the floundering ship soon confronted Jonah with a highly pertinent question; would the God who created the storm save those on board if those who believed in him slept in the ships hold (1:6)?

Each part of the story of Jonah has important things to say to us about the mission of God's people in the world; and this question is an important place to start.

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## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Read around the passage 2 Kings 14:25 and make your own judgement as to whether this scripture 'fits' the story of Jonah.
2. Have you known a situation in your own life in which you have run away from the Lord? Are there any similarities with this story?
3. What can we learn of God's mission to the world from this passage?

## Discipleship

### Discipleship issue in this text

- *Obedience and discipleship*
- *The Lord's control of all Creation*

- *The unexpected godly awareness of pagans*

**Personal comment:**

*This book of the Old Testament is one of the first that I translated from Hebrew, many years ago, when studying it not for any academic reason, but simply in order to understand it better. Without going into detail (which I will save for a fuller study of this text), there are a number of clues within the Hebrew of this story that help us understand what is going on. It describes, very accurately, the way in which people run from God, and we should not read over this passage lightly as if it is a fairy tale.*

**Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *In what ways do people run away from God today, and how do they differ from Jonah's experience? What means do people use to get away from God today, and how can they be overcome? Think about these things and talk about them to a friend.*
- *Consider; what is the difference between starting a new life somewhere else and running away from problems? Many people try to 'start anew', but do they really manage this?*

## **Final Prayer**

Lord, grant me peace this night, I pray. Strengthen my heart so that I trust in your everlasting promises, and confidently defeat all the wiles of the evil one. Glory be to God the Father who is faithful; glory be to God the Son who is compassionate; glory be to God the Spirit who is ever mindful of my soul. AMEN

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