

JONAH

Just two pages...and it's funny!

This is an easy book of the Bible to read

- It is short.
- It is easy to relate to Jonah. He does not want to do what God asks, so he heads the opposite direction. During a great storm at sea, Jonah recognizes that he is the reason. He is thrown overboard. The storm stops. Jonah is swallowed by a whale and later spit up. Then he does what God asked in the first place.
- God keeps forgiving and rescuing people who disobey. Whew!
- It is a whale of a story. (Groan.) Jonah truly is full of humor. Some of the puns do not translate easily from Hebrew into English, but the gentle humor of the story is clear.

How to find Jonah

This is a very short book among 39 Old Testament books. Here are three methods to find it:

1. Look it up in the Table of Contents. You will find Jonah near the end of the Old Testament among the twelve minor (short) prophets. It is the eighth book from the end.
2. Find the beginning of the New Testament (the Gospel of Matthew) and page backwards. These are all short books. If you miss Jonah and find yourself in Obadiah or Amos, just page forward a few pages.
3. Just turn to it. (Hey, I'm kidding.) People who just open to the right spot easily miss Jonah. It helps to remember that this book is after Amos and Obadiah and before Nahum and Habakkuk.

A little background

1. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the nation that conquered Israel and deported so many

that they became known as the lost ten tribes of Israel. It is located in modern Iraq. To get the emotional impact, think Nazi Germany, the Taliban or the Al Qaeda network.

2. Tarshish is in the opposite direction of Nineveh. Two possibilities for the historical Tarshish are a city on the Mediterranean coast north of Israel and a city on the coast of Spain. Tarshish is west and north. The best route is by ship. Nineveh is east and south. The quickest route is overland.
3. Was Jonah really swallowed by a whale? In the book of Jonah, he is actually swallowed by a "great fish." In Matthew, when Jesus compares three days in the tomb with three days in the whale, the Greek word is literally "whale." At least one reliable account reports a man found alive in the belly of a sperm whale. However, it is not necessary to believe the historicity of this book. Ancient Jewish division of the Old Testament places Jonah among the "writings," poetry and tales, such as Proverbs and Job. Jonah is a parable, not a news report. Its truth is the wideness of God's mercy despite human attempts to limit whom God loves and pities.
4. Chapters 1, 3, and 4 are pure stories. Chapter 2 is a poem prayer. If you like poems and psalms, you will enjoy this. If you have felt really low, you will want to pray it. If you can't stand poetry or want fast action, skip to chapter 3.
5. My favorite piece of humor, which does not translate easily, appears in chapter 3. By this time, Jonah has brought God's warning to the great and wicked city. Everyone repents and the king declares a fast. All the people and cattle put ashes on. The Hebrew literally says that the cows put ashes on themselves.

A question to ask after you finish reading: **Are there people whom I do not want God to forgive?**