

Prophet Jonah



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Prophet Jonah^[1] was sent to a community in Iraq. Renowned Islamic scholar, ibn Kathir calls it Nineveh. As is the case with all the Prophets of God Jonah came to Nineveh to call the people to worship One God. He spoke of a God free from any partners, sons, daughters or co equals and implored the people to stop worshipping idols and engaging in evil behaviour. However, the people refused to listen, and tried to ignore Jonah and his words of admonishment. They found Prophet Jonah irritating.

The conduct of his people exasperated Jonah and he decided to leave. He gave a final warning that God would punish their arrogant behaviour but the people jeered and claimed that they were not afraid. Jonah's heart filled with anger towards his foolish people. He decided to leave them to their inevitable misery. Jonah gathered a few meagre belongings and decided to put as much distance as possible between himself and the people he had come to despise.

“And remember when he (Jonah) went off in anger.” (Quran 21:87)

Ibn Kathir describes the scene in Nineveh immediately after Jonah left. The sky began to change colour, it turned as red as fire. The people were filled with fear and understood that they were only moments from destruction. The entire population of Nineveh gathered on a mountaintop and begged for God's forgiveness. God accepted their repentance and removed the wrath that was hanging ominously over their heads. The sky returned to normal, and the people returned to their homes. They prayed that Jonah would come back to them and guide them to the straight path.

In the meantime, Jonah had boarded a ship in the hope that it would take him as far away from his heedless people as possible. The ship and its many passengers sailed into the calm seas. As the darkness fell around them, the sea suddenly changed. The wind began to blow violently and whipped up a storm of great magnitude. The boat shuddered and felt as if it were about to split into pieces. The people huddled in the dark and decided to throw their luggage overboard but it made no difference. The wind blew and the boat trembled. The passengers decided the weight was contributing to their dilemma so decided to cast lots to throw one of the passengers overboard.

The waves were as high as mountains and the wild storm plunged the boat up and down as if it were as light as a matchstick. It was a seafaring tradition to cast lots by writing down all the names and drawing one person to be cast overboard. The name was drawn and it was Jonah, but the people were appalled. Jonah was known to be a pious and righteous man and they did not want to throw him into the angry sea. They cast again and yet again, but both times the name drawn was Jonah's.

Jonah, the Prophet of God knew that this was not random. He understood that this was in destiny as predetermined by God so he looked at his fellow passengers and flung himself over the side of the boat. The passengers gasped in horror as Jonah fell into the water to be scooped up in the enormous jaws of a giant fish.

When Jonah awoke from unconsciousness, he thought that he was dead and was lying in the darkness of his grave. He felt around him and realised that this was not a grave but the belly of the giant fish. He was afraid. He felt his heart beating deep in his chest and lurching towards his throat with every ragged breath he took. Jonah was sitting in strong, acidic, digestive juices that were eating away at his skin and he cried out to God. In the darkness of the fish, in the darkness of the sea and in the darkness of the night Jonah raised his voice and called out his distress to God.

“None has the right to be worshipped but you oh God, glorified are you and truly I have been one of the wrongdoers!” (Quran 21:87)

Jonah continued praying and repeating his supplication to God. He realised his wrongdoing and begged for God's forgiveness. Prophet Muhammad tells us that the angels are drawn to humankind remembering God. This is what happened to Prophet Jonah; the angels heard his cry in the darkness and recognised his voice. They knew of Prophet Jonah and his honourable behaviour in the face of adversity. The angels approached God saying, “isn't that the sound of your righteous servant?”

God answered yes. God heard Jonah's call and saved him from his distress. Jonah remembered God in times of ease, so God remembered Jonah in

his time of distress. The supplication that Jonah used can be repeated by anybody in times of distress. God said in Quran that He saved Jonah, and thus He will save the believers. **(Quran 21:88)**

At God's command the giant fish surfaced and ejected Jonah onto the shore. Jonah's body had been burned by the digestive juices; his skin could not protect him from the sun and the wind. Jonah was in pain and continued to cry out for protection. He continued to repeat his supplication and God caused a vine/tree to grow over him offering protection from the elements and providing Jonah with food. As Jonah slowly became well again he realised that he needed to return to his people and continue the work God had proscribed for him.

"And, verily, Jonah was one of the Messengers. When he ran to the laden ship, he agreed to cast lots and he was among the losers, then a big fish swallowed him and he had done an act worthy of blame. Had he not been of them who glorify God, he would have indeed remained inside its belly (the fish) until the Day of Resurrection. But We cast him forth on the naked shore while he was sick and We caused a plant of gourd to grow over him. And We sent him to a hundred thousand people or even more, and they believed, so We gave them enjoyment for a while." (Quran 37:139-148).

When Jonah recovered he returned to Nineveh and was amazed at the change in his people. They informed Jonah of their fear when the sky had turned blood red and how they had gathered on the mountain to beg God's forgiveness. Jonah lived amongst his people and taught them to worship One God and to live lives of piety and righteousness and more than 100,000 people living in Nineveh lived in tranquillity...for a while.

The story of Prophet Jonah teaches us to have patience, especially in the face of adversity. It teaches us to remember God in the good times and the bad. It teaches us to remember God in this life so that He will remember us when we die. If we remember God when we are young He will remember us when we are old and if we remember God when we are healthy He will remember us when we are sick, sad, or tired. Distress can be relieved only, by turning to God with sincerity.

Footnotes:

[1] Based on the work of Imam Ibn Kathir. The Stories of the Prophets.