Answers to tough questions in Jonah

1. Were Jonah's adventures some kind of mythical story, or did the prophet actually experience those amazing miracles?

Those who have a problem with the idea of miracles have a great problem with Jonah. The miracles in this book happen on a grand scale: a relentless storm, survival inside a large fish, repentance by the leader of a recognized world power. These are not for the timid in faith. Some skeptics and critics simply deny Jonah's historical validity. Others attempt to offer substitute spiritual lessons by making parts of Jonah allegorical or interpreting the whole book as a parable.

Two factors speak strongly in favor of taking Jonah at face value: (1) The role of the miracles in Jonah offended the central character. Those miracles made him look cowardly, mean, and bitter. Given the constant tension between the prophet and the mission God had given to him, the greatest miracle of all is probably that Jonah eventually recorded these God-glorifying and prophet-humiliating historical events. (2) Jesus referred to Jonah several times as a historical person, not a parable (see Matt. 12:38–44; 16:4; Luke 11:29–32).

2. Why did God care about what happened to Nineveh?

That was precisely Jonah's question. He certainly did not care about Nineveh. He hoped and prayed that God would carry out His intention to overthrow the city. But Jonah also knew that God usually gives warnings as opportunities. Jonah did not want Nineveh to have another chance.

Jonah hated Nineveh and its reputation. He resented the suffering that had befallen his own people through the rulers of Nineveh. He failed to identify with the people of Nineveh, seeing them simply as a faceless enemy. God offered Jonah a priceless lesson in compassion. He stirred up Jonah's sense of outrage through a plant and then explained to the prophet that He had the divine right to exercise compassion on the many thousands in Nineveh who were ignorant of their own condition (4:1–11).