

SESSION #38

JONAH (part 1)

1. Setting

Now we reach one of the most famous stories in the Bible, Jonah and the great fish. But before we get to that, let's see the setting for Jonah's ministry.

On the timeline chart, you can see that Jonah is close to the time of Amos. It's a good possibility that Jonah was a disciple of Elisha, with a ministry following Elisha's timeline. As you may remember, Elijah and then Elisha established a series of Bible colleges throughout Israel and Judah. Numerous prophets were trained in these schools and Jonah could have been one of them. We don't know for sure.

We do know that he came from a little town called Gath Hepher which was a short distance northeast of Nazareth. The fact that he lived in that particular area close to Galilee and virtually at the northeast corner of the nation of Israel is a significant factor in terms of his own response to the situation in which God puts him. We'll come back to this just a little later.

Jonah is called a prophet of God to Israel, but there isn't much of a record of his ministry to Israel.

What he is famous for, of course, was his memorable experience with the fish in the Mediterranean Sea and eventual ministry to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria.

Nevertheless, he was a prophet sent to Israel as well as to Assyria. He's mentioned in the book of 2 Kings chapter 14 so we know he had a ministry to his own people but we don't know just exactly what that was. And of course a great deal of his ministry even to his own people would have been just the fact that he had been the missionary to Nineveh.

2. Message

His major story is that of an evangelistic outreach to a foreign nation. There aren't many such stories in the OT so Jonah is an exception. It's an exception because Israel,

although they were supposed to showcase God's life and love to nations all around them, failed miserably in doing that. So Jonah, who does get this special opportunity to be a missionary-evangelist, is an unusual case in the OT but it should have been much more the norm.

He was called to the most wicked nation on earth at that time, notorious for their cruelty to other people. God, in calling Jonah to take His message to the Ninevites, shows something of the enormous love and mercy that God has for all people. If God could love a people who were as horrible as the Ninevites, then surely He loves everybody.

There is a sense in which Jonah's story and his ministry could be compared with that of Amos and Hosea. Amos was the prophet of a broken law; Hosea was the prophet of a broken heart. Jonah is a prophet with a broken element as well, but his element is ministry. What should have been a straightforward ministry to Nineveh gets broken by his disobedience as he tries to run away from God and His call.

His message, and the story that's recorded of it in the book of Jonah, shows three things especially. One is that God's people of all ages and places have a responsibility to deliver the message of salvation to all people. We are 'Jonahs'. We know God. We have God's truth. God has called us in the Great Commission in the NT given to us by the Lord Jesus Christ. And we, like Jonah, have a responsibility to tell others about the God we serve.

Secondly, his story clearly shows us that God honors repentance for sin. As the Ninevites responded to the message from God through Jonah with repentance God honored that repentance. He always does. And it's a major lesson of the story of Jonah.

And then thirdly, because of that incident with the great fish, Jonah in a very unusual way prefigures Christ's death and resurrection.

You might know that the most common Christian symbol which was scratched into the walls of the catacombs in Rome during the early years of the Church was the symbol of a fish. Sometimes it contained the Greek letters for the word "fish", ICHTHYS. These letters also form an acrostic standing for "Jesus the Christ, Son of God, Savior". In our day, you can still find this symbol showing up in jewelry and bumper stickers, etc.

Why did early Christians living in those difficult, desperate times in the caves of the catacombs carve the symbol of a fish into the walls? Well it wasn't because Peter, James and John were fishermen. The reason they carved this symbol was as a remembrance of this prophet Jonah and his encounter with a fish. Jonah, by his own experience, as testified by none other than the Lord Jesus Christ, was a living symbol of what death and resurrection are all about.

Jesus said in Matthew 12:40, "*Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of that great fish, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the belly of the earth.*"

Jonah was a picture before Christ came of what would happen to Christ in His own death and resurrection. And as the Roman believers buried their dead in those catacomb caves, and wrote that symbol on the wall, they were testifying of their hope in the resurrection for their loved ones.

So Jonah, as the man 'resurrected' out of that OT experience, is a wonderful source of hope to people of God of all the ages that there is such a thing as the resurrection, and that God will raise His people back from the dead to life again.

3. The Story

Let's take a closer look now at the story of Jonah. He is so well known, of course, in the beginning of his story because when God called him to be a missionary to Nineveh, he refused to go. He became a famous fugitive, a prophet with a problem.

From where he was living the direction to Nineveh would have been northeast. But instead of going northeast, Jonah turned around and headed southwest in the opposite direction, to the port city of Joppa. He got a ticket for a boat heading off to Tarshish, a city in Spain at the other end of the Mediterranean, the edge of the world according to some in those days.

Why did he flee in the opposite direction to that of God's calling? That has been a subject of debate for many generations. Perhaps the most common idea that is usually raised is that Jonah was afraid of those people, or had a prejudice against them, or

various other reasons. But the real reason for why he fled instead of obeying God is – strangely enough – not something we need to debate or wonder about because Jonah himself tells us why he went in the opposite direction. It wasn't because of fear, it wasn't because of prejudice.

Chapter 4:2 tells us that Jonah did what he did because he was an ardent nationalist: *"Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm."*

He was an Israelite who loved his own people of Israel. And the reasoning that went through Jonah's mind was like this: he had grown up on the northeast edge of the nation of Israel in northern Galilee. At the time he was growing up, the Assyrians made rapid and frequent incursions into northern Israel, not with a full army but small bands of soldiers who would raid and plunder, rape and murder people in those areas. No doubt Jonah had some experience of what those Assyrians were like. And, of course, for all the people of Israel the threat of those Assyrians and their ferocious army was always at the background of national events of Jonah's day.

Jonah therefore felt that if he went to Nineveh and gave God's message of love and mercy, then God being who He is would spare those wicked people. If they turn to Him, He will forgive them. And then what will happen to Israel? Ah! he's worried that if those Assyrians are not utterly wiped out they will eventually wipe out his people.

So in order to make sure that the right nation gets wiped out, Jonah – waving his little nationalist Israeli flag – decides to go the other direction. That's why Jonah did what he did. We'll come back to this shortly.

4. Structure

Let's look at the overall structure of the book. Four short chapters.

Chapter 1 focusses on the storm – Jonah fleeing from God encounters a tremendous storm. He is a disobedient prophet in chapter 1, saying in effect, "*God called me, but I won't go.*"

In chapter 2 he encounters that great fish and in doing so Jonah is the disciplined prophet. Following this experience of three days and nights encased in the belly of the great fish and then vomited out on the shore, Jonah now says, "*I will go!*"

And after having been disciplined and rescued by God, Jonah has a change of mind and goes to Nineveh. In chapter 3 he gets to this great city and becomes a dynamic prophet as we see in the record of his ministry there. Basically, he is saying, "*I'm here – and here's God message to you.*" And the Ninevites respond in an amazing way.

In chapter 4 it's Jonah and the Lord, the disappointed prophet. Here he is saying, "*I shouldn't have come!*" And he gets extremely disappointed by what happens, and what doesn't happen.

In the next session, we'll review Jonah's story again in order to discover some valuable applications.
