

The Prophets

Lesson #6

Introduction To Jonah

I. **Structure Of Jonah**

- A. The book begins with God's call to Jonah to preach in the great city of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire. As staunch political enemies of the Israelites and as worshipers of false gods, the Assyrians also were shunned as pagans and outcasts. Yet God's call to Jonah showed clearly that He had not given up on Assyria. The prophet was to call Nineveh to repentance, warning the nation of its approaching doom unless it turned to God.
- B. Instead of obeying God's command and heading to Nineveh, Jonah caught a ship traveling in the opposite direction. Tarshish was located in southwestern Spain. At sea a great storm arose, and Jonah was tossed overboard by the superstitious sailors in an attempt to appease the prophet's God. Jonah escaped unharmed when he was swallowed by a great fish and was miraculously deposited on shore. Two pillars near Alexandretta, north of Antioch on the coast of Syria, mark the spot where, according to Arab tradition, Jonah was vomited out on dry land. This time he obeyed God's command and traveled to Nineveh to carry out his preaching assignment. One can only imagine with what glee Jonah yelled out, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (3:4). The reluctant prophet was not prepared for the results of his message. The entire city repented and Jonah sulked in anger because Nineveh escaped God's punishment. Jonah felt that God was losing an opportunity to destroy a godless people, and as a consequence, his own people would be sooner or later doomed to destruction.
- C. To teach the prophet a lesson, God raised up a plant, perhaps a gourd vine, to shade Jonah from the sun, then allowed a worm to cut it down. A hot wind from the east added to Jonah's misery, and he whined and complained about the missing plant. Then God reminded Jonah that He was a God of compassion who had the right to love and forgive the pagan Assyrians or any other people who turned to Him in obedience and faith. Jonah had been fretting about a plant, while God had turned His attention to a much more important matter -- the worth and salvation of people. Jonah's religion resided in the realm of emotion rather than in the sphere of Divine will. Jesus, in contrast, wept over Jerusalem!

II. **Authorship And Date**

- A. The traditional view is that the prophet Jonah wrote this book. The name Jonah means "Dove." This would place its writing at about 760

B.C., since this prophet -- "the son of Amittai" (1:1) -- is the same Jonah who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel, from 793 to 753 B.C. (2 Kings 14:25). This would place his prophecy just before Amos. The only other thing we know about Jonah is that he was a native of the village of Gath Hopher in Galilee, approximately four miles north of Nazareth.

- B. Some scholars insist the book was not written until about three centuries later by an unknown author. According to this theory, the writer composed the story of Jonah and his prophecy to combat the narrow-minded views of the Jewish people after their return to Jerusalem following their years of captivity in Babylon. It is true that the Israelites went to extremes during these years as they tried to cast off all foreign influences and preserve the unique heritage of their faith. Jonah certainly is a book that emphasizes the universal love of God; hence the fact that he is considered "the prophet of universality," but the evidence put forth to support this theory is weak and inconclusive. There is no real reason to reject the traditional view that the prophet Jonah himself wrote the book after his visit to Nineveh about 760 B.C.

III. ***Historical Setting***

- A. From about 885 to 625 B.C., the Assyrians dominated the ancient world. However, from shortly before 800 until 745 B.C., the time of Tiglath-pileser's accession to the throne, Assyria was torn with internal strife and by wars with revolting provinces. Not only were there revolts from within the empire but also the nation was at war with a powerful country (Urartu) near the Caspian Sea. No doubt this depressed state of Assyria contributed much to the readiness of the people to hear Jonah as he began to preach to them.
- B. The prophet's disposition may be somewhat defended (at least excused) when one realizes that he knew of the suffering which had been inflicted by the Assyrians on the people of the world of that day and knew that this suffering would be imposed eventually on his own people by that great ruthless power. Numerous passages in the Old Testament report advances of Assyrian military forces against the neighboring kingdoms of Judah and Israel during these years. As early as 841 B.C., Jehu, king of Israel, was forced to pay tribute to the Assyrian ruler Shalmaneser III.
- C. This kind of harassment continued for over a century until Israel finally fell to Assyrian forces about 722 B.C. No wonder Jonah was reluctant to go to Nineveh; God had called him to visit the very heartland of enemy territory and to give the hated Assyrians a chance to repent! It was a radical order that would have taxed the obedience of any

prophet. Jonah's grudging attitude should not blind us to the fact that he did carry out God's command.

IV. **Scriptural Contribution**

- A. One of the great truths emphasized by this book is that God can use people who do not want to be used by Him. Jonah was practically driven to Nineveh against his will, but his grudging message still struck a responsive chord in the Assyrians. Not only did Jonah's actions make a deep impression upon the people of Nineveh, but they also affected the seamen. They were caused to fear God, offer sacrifices and make vows to Him. George L. Robinson states, "When one sets out to baffle God, there is bound to be a storm."
- B. The greatest insight of the book is that God desires to show mercy and grace to all the peoples of the world. No one nation or group can claim exclusive rights to His love. The task of the nation of Israel was to preach this message about God's universal love to all the world (Genesis 12:1-3). However, they forgot this missionary purpose and eventually claimed God and His blessings as theirs alone.
- C. The book of Jonah cries out against this narrow-minded interpretation of God and His purpose. In the last verse of the book, God makes it plain to Jonah that His mercy and compassion is as wide as the world itself: "And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?" (4:11). This strikes a wonderful contrast between the infinite love of heaven and the selfish coldness of man.

V. **Special Considerations**

- A. One must distinguish between an "act of God" and a "miracle." A miracle is an effect or deed in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is therefore ascribed to supernatural agency or intervention. Neither the raising of a great wind on the Mediterranean Sea nor its ceasing would necessarily be a miracle; nor would the appearing of a fish of sufficient size to swallow a man be a miracle. The preserving of the life of a man in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights and the ejecting of him upon the land would be a miracle. The growth of a vine to cover a shelter would not be a miracle, but the growth of such a vine in a night would be a miracle. The coming of a worm might or might not be a miracle. The appearance of miracles in the Bible should cause no particular problem to anyone who does not assume that they are impossible.
- B. Too much attention has been focused on the "great fish" (1:17) that swallowed Jonah and then spat him out on the shore. We solve nothing.

ing by debating whether a fish could swallow a man or whether a person could remain alive for three days in the stomach of such a creature. The point of this part of the story is that God worked a miracle to preserve the life of His prophet so He could get to Nineveh to carry out God's orders. The text states that God "prepared" this fish specifically for that purpose (1:17). Other miracles that God "prepared" to teach Jonah His purpose for the city of Nineveh were the plant (4:6), the worm that cut the plant down (4:7) and the hot east wind that added to Jonah's misery (4:8).

- C. The book of Jonah differs from all other books of the prophets. It is written primarily from the historical point of view -- the history of a man, a nation and God. There are three interpretations of the book taken by various writers: the mythical, allegorical and historical. The mythical view assumes that the story is a myth that grew up around some incident in the history of Israel. The allegorical view assumes that the story is an allegory of Israel's captivity, repentance and restoration to its land. The historical view accepts the position that Jonah lived as a prophet of God, went to Nineveh, preached to the people of that city and that God spared the nation.
- D. The historical approach is to be preferred because it accepts Jesus' own literal interpretation of Jonah. In speaking of His death and resurrection, Jesus declared, "For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40; Luke 11:29-32). Therefore, the book shows forth the foreshadowing of the coming of Christ and the manifestation of God's love and desire to save all men. The death and resurrection of Christ are typified in the three days spent by Jonah in the belly of the great fish, from which he came forth in a new relation to his work with the Lord. The book of Jonah is much more than a fish story. It is a beautiful account of God's grace that lifts our sights to the greatest love story of all -- the death of His Son Jesus Christ for the sins of the world.