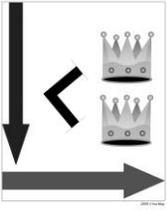


## Week Twenty-five: A Prophet and A Foreign Nation - Jonah 1-4



### Overview

During the reign of Jeroboam II, God raised up a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel to preach to his own people and to send abroad for His own purposes. Jonah (“dove” in Hebrew) spoke in the name of the LORD God of Israel to the king, announcing that God would restore the territory of Israel (2 Kings 14:25). While the specific prophecy is not recorded, Jonah’s larger story is found in the book that bears his name.

Jonah’s story, perhaps one of the most familiar in the Bible, stands as a true prophetic word, even though secular scholars call the book an allegory or a parable (because they reject the supernatural in the Scripture). The Lord Jesus affirms the cardinal truths of the book—that Jonah was a prophet, that he was in the belly of the great fish, and that the Ninevites repented at his preaching—in His teaching (Matt. 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32).

Jonah’s story falls into four chapters that also define the outline of the lesson. Chapter one records God’s call to Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach His message to the Assyrians, as well as Jonah’s subsequent attempt to run from the LORD. Chapter two expresses his repentance toward God from the belly of the great fish. Chapter three records his preaching and the revival that takes place in Nineveh, while the last chapter discloses Jonah’s resentment toward God for His grace to Nineveh.

### Lesson Objective:

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will understand God’s love for all peoples and His desire that His own people obey His call to take His message of salvation or judgment to all the nations of the world.

### Key Truths

*Running from God is costly, damaging to our testimony before others, and futile.*

*Returning to God always restores us to the path of usefulness in His purposes.*

*God allows even the most hard-hearted people to repent for His glory; no one knows how God is working in the hearts of those to whom He sends us as His witnesses.*

*God loves all people and cares about the ends of the earth, even to the point of numbering the souls in the cities who do not know Him.*

## Lesson Outline

### 1. Running from God - Jonah 1:1-17

The story of Jonah begins as God speaks to the prophet in the comfortable confines of his home in Gath Hopher, a town in the tribal lot of Zebulun in the region of Galilee. The LORD speaks to Jonah abruptly (the book opens in Hebrew with “Now” even though many translations omit it), “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me” (1:2). God seeks to send him on a 550-mile journey to Nineveh to preach “against” some of the most vicious people on earth. Ninevite kings boasted of their atrocities in their records; they were famous for impaling their victims alive on stakes, skinning their living bodies to cover the city walls, mutilating their captives with unspeakable cruelties, and practicing gross idolatry. Jonah immediately arises, but that act ends his obedience to the call of the LORD; the rest of the chapter documents his disobedience. The story details his disobedience and its price.

v. 3—Jonah flees to Tarshish, a city about 2500 miles away in Spain (about as far the other way as he could go). The text tells us that “he paid the fare” and went down into the ship to go “from the presence of the LORD.” Jonah’s motivation may be hatred born of love for his country, fear of the Ninevites, or a combination of these two emotions; sadly, however, his plan reveals that running is costly (he pays a fare and loses the money) and futile. Jonah holds a weak and local view of God—he actually believes that fleeing the borders of Israel will free him from the consequences of his disobedience.

v. 4—God’s power is not limited to Israel’s borders, however, and He sends out a “great wind” on the sea, creating a storm that terrifies even the hardened seamen into crying out to their gods (v. 5). God has ways of getting the attention of even the most closed hearts.

v. 5—Jonah, sadly, is down in the hold of the ship, asleep even as his travel companions are crying out to God in terror; the captain has to rouse him from his slumber with a rebuke to get Jonah to call on his God (v. 6). Like many believers today, Jonah is asleep while those around him perish.

v. 7—When the LORD exposes Jonah through the lot, he finally confesses that he is the cause of their trouble (v. 9-10). They discover that the LORD (the covenant name for God) is not merely a local deity, but rather the God who made the sea. Their fear is real; even today, many peoples of the world hold the idea that all misfortune comes from some offense to a deity. When they seek to make the situation right, Jonah chooses to be thrown into the sea rather than to ask them to take him back to his home (11-12). Though they try to return anyway, God simply stirs up the sea so that they must do as he asks (v. 13).

v. 14—The mariners throw Jonah into the water; immediately the storm abates, and they turn to the LORD, offering sacrifices to the God of Israel and making vows to Him. God in mercy rescues these mariners from the storm and shows them His power so that they look to Him as the true God. He has another plan in store for Jonah,

however; death eludes him, but the consequences of his running are about to swallow him up (literally). God has a great fish prepared to swallow him (v. 17). Jonah spends three

days and nights in the fish's belly. Various suggestions have been put forward as to the identity of the great fish, and several fish and whales are large enough to swallow a human; but this creature has been "prepared" by God, so it obviously fulfills His plan.

## **2. Repenting toward God - Jonah 2:1-10**

Jonah has not yet called on the LORD in the entire trial of his rebellion and running. The ship captain orders him to call on the name of his God, but the text does not say that he does. In the belly of the great fish, however, he finally finds his voice and calls on God. v. 2—Jonah cries out because of his affliction; he had not cared about the affliction of the Ninevites or the affliction of the mariners, but his own distress awakens him to prayer. How often God uses our own trouble to cause us to pray to Him, especially when we do not often care about or pray for the trials of others.

v. 3—Jonah realizes the seriousness of his condition; he is in the deep waters, physically and spiritually, and he feels far away from God (v. 4). He's surrounded by trouble and even banished from God's presence.

v. 4—Jonah remembers the promise of God through Solomon, "When [Your people] sin against You (for there is no one who does not sin), and You become angry with them and deliver them to the enemy, . . . when they come to themselves in the land where they were carried captive, and repent, and make supplication to You . . . and when they return to You with all their heart and with all their soul . . . and pray to You toward the land which You gave to their fathers, and the city which You have chosen and the temple which I have built for Your name; then hear" (1 Kings 8:46-49a). Jonah turns toward the temple of God and prays, claiming God's promise.

vv. 5-7—In the belly of the fish, Jonah comes right up to the precipice of death, but God answers him in time, hearing his prayer and sparing his life. He does not die, for dead men do not pray. God allows him to experience the fear of death and the sensation of drowning so that he may empathize with the people of Nineveh.

vv. 8-9—Jonah realizes that God is showing him mercy and grace, promises to fulfill his calling from the LORD, and declares that salvation is of the LORD. God graciously speaks to the great fish to spit Jonah up (just as He commanded ravens to give up food that they would normally eat to feed the prophet Elijah), and Jonah is deposited once again on the shore. Unlike Jonah, the fish needs only that the LORD speak, and it obeys.

## **3. Revival from God - Jonah 3**

Jonah's reprieve is short-lived; the word of the LORD comes to him a second time, "Arise go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you" (3:2). Gloriously, God gives a second chance to His servant; without second chances, no person could ever live fully in God's will. God is not obligated to use Jonah; this second chance is a precious gift.

v. 3—Jonah arises, goes to Nineveh, and begins preaching. The city is called a “great city” (in fact, the words “great” and “greatly” are used frequently in the book); the idea of a three-day journey probably does not mean simply to walk around it, but rather to proclaim the message of the LORD to every area of the city. The city was laid out in a great square with twelve gates. If Jonah went to each gate and proclaimed the word, the time to meet and gather a crowd, as well as in the marketplaces and other areas of the city, could have easily been a three-day journey.

v. 4—Jonah’s message is both brief and harsh; “In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown.” He offers no grace, promises no deliverance, and proclaims a word of swift and impending judgment. Perhaps his appearance (three days and nights in a great fish would perhaps render his appearance quite frightening) or his obedience lent seriousness to his words.

v. 5—Jonah’s message actually accomplishes more than Jonah hopes for. The entire city believes this message and repents in sackcloth and ashes. Why this tremendous citywide response? Obviously God has been preparing the city for this harvest for His own purposes; He has been working in the hearts of the people. Scholars suggest that some ways that He may have gotten their attention include two famines, their own religious practices that assume all evil comes from offending a deity, a threatened invasion from the north, and a total solar eclipse that occurred on June 15, 763 BC (just before Jonah may have come). Whatever circumstances God used, their hearts were ready to hear this message of judgment, and they repented.

vv. 6-9—Jonah’s message reaches to the king (in Jonah’s day, Nineveh was not the capitol of Assyria, but many kings lived there); he responded by rising from his throne, repenting in sackcloth and ashes, and even issuing a decree to his people that they too should repent. Jonah’s message promised no mercy, but the king of Nineveh looked to the God of heaven for mercy, “Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we may not perish?” (3:9) His words echo King David’s hopeful heart from centuries earlier, after his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:22).

v. 10—In response to this repentance, God turns from His plan of destruction and spares the city. Nineveh’s turning to God spares the city from destruction for 150 years, until the time of the prophet Nahum (around 612 BC); this repentance also spares Israel, for this entire generation of Ninevites does not invade Israel again for thirty-seven years. Had Jonah come with a different heart and a desire to instruct the Ninevites in the ways of the true God, His message might have spread through several generations and spared Israel for a much longer time.

#### **4. Resentment toward God - Jonah 4**

The story closes surprisingly; Jonah expresses resentment rather than joy at the repentance of the Ninevites. He goes out of the city to watch what will become of it, hoping for God’s judgment. Instead, God chooses to be gracious to the Ninevites.

v. 1—Jonah’s anger results from God’s mercy. Knowing God’s mercy and grace, His lovingkindness and His patience, Jonah now explains his initial reluctance to go (v. 2).

Jonah knows that the only reason God had pronounced judgment was to move the Ninevites to repentance.

v. 3—Jonah asks for the LORD to take his life rather than have him witness God's grace toward the city. God responds with a question to His servant (v. 4), and then gives him two pictures of His grace toward Jonah.

vv. 5-8—God miraculously prepares (same word as with the fish) a plant to shade him in the heat; Jonah "rejoices with great joy" over the plant. As soon as the sun rises, however, God also prepares a scorching east wind and a worm to kill the plant. Jonah reacts to these discomforts with a desire to die, birthed from another bout of anger at God.

vv. 9-11—God exposes Jonah's self-pity disguised as pity for a plant that grows up and dies in a day, even though he himself neither planted it nor cared for it. He then reveals His care for Nineveh. He counts souls, knowing that there are "more than 120,000 persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?" (4:11) God cares about the children of this city—He counts their number and sends someone to bring the Word to their door. He pities a cruel people because all belong to Him by virtue of creation, and because He is a God of love and grace, as Jonah remembers. Jonah learns what God wants all of His servants to learn—He cares for the nations; He knows their location, their number, their spiritual emptiness, and their spiritual interest.

**Application** - What does this lesson teach us about God? Man? Sin? Redemption?

- God's heart for his prophet Jonah to learn obedience is revealed by His orchestrating a storm and a fish to interrupt his disobedience. Love for God is revealed by obedience.
- God's heart for the nations is revealed by His reaching out to and His acceptance of a people who repent. Love for truth is revealed by repentance.
- God's heart was for the Ninevites, but, unless they heard and repented, they were doomed. God's heart is for the nations, but His plan is to use the witness of those who belong to Him. Love for neighbor is revealed by evangelism.

## Summary

*God speaks* to the prophet two times to send him to the cruel Assyrian city of Nineveh to preach against it.

*God acts* by preparing a great fish, a plant, a wind, and a worm to get Jonah's attention.

*God reveals* His power in the obedience of His creatures, His judgment on sin by His servants, and His love by His pity on a wicked city.

## Discussion Questions

What second chances has God given to you?

Why do we wait until we have trouble to pray? Why does the trouble others experience not burden us to pray?

In what ways do God's providence and sovereignty show up in this story?

What peoples would we rather God destroy than save? Do we see any of Jonah's attitudes in our midst?

How do we as individuals and as churches respond to God's missionary heart for the nations around us? How could our obedience with the gospel change those nations' attitude toward us?