

Jonah-A Study In Serving God

Chapter One

Introduction

The book of Jonah is one of the twelve minor prophets and takes its name from the principal character, "*Jonah the son of Amittai*" (1:1). Both Jonah and Amittai are mentioned only once more outside of this narrative in 2 Kings 14:25, which says, "*Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher;*" apart from this nothing is known of Amittai. Gath-hepher (which means "winepress of the pit"), was a town in lower Galilee near Nazareth (2 Kgs 14:25). The town has been identified with the modern village of el-Meshhed, where the tomb of Jonah is still shown. Gath-hepher was within the tribal territory given to Zebulun (see Josh. 19:10, 13), so it is likely Jonah belonged to that tribe. Jonah ministered during the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (793–753 B.C.; 2 Kgs 14:23–25). God's message to the town of Nineveh which is found in this book is assumed to have been written down by Jonah or another scribe after these events occurred which, based on 2 Kings 14:25, would place these events around the middle of the eighth century. Although no conclusive date for the writing of this book can be established it seems likely that it was written before the destruction of Nineveh in 612 B.C.

The background for Jonah's story is set during the reign of Jeroboam II, who was one of the strongest military leaders in the history of the northern kingdom of Israel restoring Israel's northern frontier to where it was in the days of Solomon (1 Kings 8:65). Both Jeroboam and the Judean king Azariah (also known as Uzziah, 792-740 B.C.) brought about a period of peace and prosperity for Israel. Jonah's contemporaries were the prophets Hosea (Hosea 1:1), and Amos (Amos 1:1), who both spoke out against Israel while Jonah was sent to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. When the Pharisees asked Jesus for a miraculous sign He told them that the only sign they would receive would be "*the sign of the prophet Jonah*" (Matt. 12:39-42), and there are several comparisons we can make between Jesus and Jonah. Both preached a message of repentance (Jon. 3:4-5; Mark 1:14-15). Both reappeared alive after three days. Both were engaged in a mission of deliverance for repentant Gentiles and destruction for unrepentant Jews (Jon. 3; Matt. 12:41-42). Both offered their lives as a substitutionary sacrifice to save others (Jon. 1:11-16; Mark 10:45). It may be that some or all of these comparisons make up "*the sign of Jonah.*" the message of Jonah finds its fruition in the person and work of Jesus. The kingdom of God that came through the advent of Jesus now includes both Jews and Gentiles and will stretch to the ends of the earth.

Chapter One Vs.1-6

"*Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah...*" These words appear approx. 112 times in varying forms in the O.T. and they describe God's divine message to His prophet. God calls Jonah (which means 'dove') to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach God's message of repentance to the people. In Jonah's day the city of Nineveh had grown dramatically in size, grandeur and fame under the reign of King Sennacherib (704 - 681) who made Nineveh the capital of his Assyrian empire. He built great walls around the city with fifteen gates, created public parks and gardens, aqueducts, irrigation ditches, canals, and greatly expanded and improved the structures of the city. His palace had eighty rooms and he proclaimed it to be "the palace without rival". The historian Gwendolyn Leick notes, "Nineveh, with its diverse population of people from throughout the Assyrian Empire, was one of the most beautiful cities in the Near East, with its gardens, temples, and splendid palaces" and she goes on to cite Nineveh as having a carefully planned and executed series of canals and aqueducts to ensure a steady supply of water not only for human consumption but also to keep the public parks and gardens irrigated; This was an aspect of urban life not every city attended to with as much care and planning. Recent scholars claim that the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon were actually located at Nineveh and were constructed under Sennacherib's reign. So it's clear to see that this city was not only vast with a thriving population, but it was also pagan and God was ready to deal with "*their evil*" (Vs.2). But instead of obeying God Jonah chooses to run away from his calling for reasons that are only revealed when we get to chapter four.

One reason for Jonah's reluctance could be that Assyria was a feared enemies of the Israelites and Jonah may have feared for his life if he went there as a prophet to pronounce the judgement of God. Whatever his reasons Jonah sets his mind on going "*away from the presence of the Lord*" (Vs.3). In his futile attempt to get away (see Ps. 139:7), Jonah secures passage on a ship heading for Tarshish. It is believed that Tarshish was located in southern Spain which was directly the opposite way to Nineveh. Once aboard the ship we can assume that Jonah is relieved because he settles down and goes to sleep (Vs.5). But God has other plans and hurls a "*great wind*" and causes not just a storm, but a tempest which is a violent storm, so violent in fact, that it threatens to break the ship apart. The Gentile sailors are understandably frightened by this storm and in their desperation cry out to their gods. In their desperation they throw all the cargo into the sea in an bid to lighten the ship, meanwhile, Jonah, unbelievably is still asleep below decks! The captain can't believe what he sees when he finds Jonah asleep and wakes him up telling him to, "*call out to your god!*" The captain is eager to enlist the help of any god who will help them through this dilemma.

Verses 7-16

The casting of lots was a common device used in the ancient world to discover the will of the gods. It is also a device that is acceptable to the true God for discerning His Will throughout the Bible (see Lev. 16:8-10; Num. 26:55; 1 Sam.10:19-21; Acts 1:24-26). It was not forbidden because God's rule is sovereign, even over lots, and this lot fell upon Jonah. We see from Vs.10, that Jonah had already shared his reasons for wanting to run to Tarshish, it was to try and get away from God! Knowing this and now seeing as the lot has fallen on Jonah the sailors want to know more. They demand answers from Jonah in their efforts to understand why Jonah has brought them into his struggle with his God. Jonah responds by calling himself a "*Hebrew*" which was an ethnic term used by the Israelites to identify themselves as foreigners (see Gen. 40:15; Ex. 1:19, 3:18, 10:3). Jonah goes on to identify his God as the supreme and sovereign Creator of all things and not just a local or national deity that the sailors worship. After learning who Jonah's God is the sailors ask Jonah what they need to do in order to placate God and Jonah takes responsibility for his actions in bringing them into danger and is willing to sacrifice himself in order to save their lives and tells them to "*hurl me into the sea.*" However, it seems that human sacrifice is not a part of the sailors religious system and in their reluctance to kill Jonah they try to row the ship back to land. God stops them by increasing the violence of the storm, making it impossible for them to row. Finally the sailors give in and turn to God. Realising that Jonah was right they submit to God's Will and throw Jonah overboard into the sea, but not before seeking God's forgiveness for their act. Because of their obedience God instantly calms the sea. Now these sailors know who God is and have witnessed His power and sovereignty over the sea and they turn to Him and offer Him their worship. This gives us very interesting points of view from all the parties concerned. From God's perspective He obviously knew and orchestrated the outcome of Jonah's fate. From the sailors perspective they had looked to their gods and tried to save a fellow passenger but instead have encountered the one true God through the confession of faith expressed by Jonah. From Jonah's perspective he probably thought death was better than having to go to Nineveh, and it would serve as a means of escape from the calling God had placed on him.

Verse 17

If we look carefully at this last verse we see the truly miraculous power of God. In His foreknowledge of events God has appointed (some translations use "*prepared*"), a fish to swallow Jonah. This display of God's sovereignty should not be overlooked. It is possible that God may have created this fish specifically for this task because we will read the same kind of language in chapter four verses 4-6. As we have seen in previous sessions this is a unique situation that has never been recorded since and shows us the grace, compassion, foresight and sovereign power of our God.