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A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLE

Reading: Jonah 1:1-3, 4:1-31

33. THE BOOK OF JONAH

Who has not heard of Jonah ? Nahum, Obadiah and Habakkuk are hardly names you might find in the latest edition of “ Choosing a name for your Baby.” Ask the man on the street who these men are and you may hear him reply, *“ I haven’t a clue. I would not know them if I met them.”* Even among Christians there is a general ignorance among these twelve preaching prophets whose writings are found in one of the most neglected areas of the Bible. However, there is one name that does stand out among these ancient worthies, not because of his preaching but because of his association with the most criticized fish in the Mediterranean. I mean we have all heard of Jonah. *Now this book of Jonah is one of the strangest books in the Bible. Jonah was a prophet, yet there is no prophecy in his book except the one sentence that he preached in Nineveh. He was a missionary, but he did not want to go to the mission field. He saw a great revival yet he was so unhappy that the revival came.*

Who was this man ? When did he live ? Was he for real ? The name Jonah mean *“ dove,”* and his father’s name *“ Amittai,”* means *“ truthful.”* Nothing is known about Jonah apart from this book and the historical statement in

2 Kings 14:25 where it says that Jeroboam *“ restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet which was of Gath-hepher.”* This village was located about three miles north east of Nazareth, the hometown of the Lord Jesus. So Jonah lived during the reign of King Jeroboam the Second who ruled the Northern Kingdom of Israel from 790 to 750 B.C. Now before we launch into this book it may help us to understand a little about,

Jonah and His Cities:

Nineveh: was then the capital of Assyria and located in what we now know as Northern Iraq. It was rated the greatest city of the ancient Near East, surrounded by massive walls 100 feet high, and wide enough to take three chariots abreast. It was 500 miles north-east of where Jonah lived, so even getting there would have meant a long and dangerous journey. But Nineveh was renowned for its paganism, idolatry, immorality and violence and its vicious leaders thought nothing of cutting off the fingers, lips and noses of those who opposed them.

Tarshish: was far from Israel located in what is now known as Spain.

Joppa: then a seaport is now called Jaffa and is a thriving town in the state of Israel.

Jonah and His Contemporaries:

You see, Elisha was Jonah's predecessor. In fact Jonah may have been one of Elisha's disciples learning much from this "*man of God.*" (2 Kings 13:14-20) Amos, Hosea and Isaiah were all Jonah's successors.

Jonah and His Critic's:

You see, the book of Jonah is one of three Old Book especially hated by Satan. These are,

Genesis: which predicts the incarnation of Christ as the seed of the woman. (Gen 3:15)

Daniel: which predicts the glorious second coming of Christ to destroy His enemies. (Dan 7:9-12)

Jonah: which predicts in type form the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Matt 12:38-41)

There is no question about it. Jonah was a real person and a genuine prophet. Listen to what the Saviour says, "*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.*" (Matt 12:40) My The main reason we believe in a literal Jonah is that our Lord Jesus believed in the historicity of Jonah. You see, Christ related Jonah to his own resurrection and if Jonah's experience was not historical such an association would not have made sense. Was Christ deceitful ? Did the Saviour tell us a lie when He said that Jonah was a in a fish's belly three days and three nights ? Of course not. Jesus Christ is the "*Truth,*" and His Word cannot be broken. You see, if the story of Jonah is fiction so is the gospel. For the Saviour said, "*For as Jonah so shall*

the Son of Man be." (Matt 12:40) Some Christians might say, "*What does it matter ?*" It matters a lot. The Psalmist posed a question many years ago. "*If the foundations be destroyed what can the righteous do ?*" The Bible's account about Jonah is not incidental to our faith it is fundamental. If the book of Jonah is not true then what confidence can we have in the gospel records ? Deny the historical authenticity of Jonah and you will deny the authenticity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Criticisms of the story of Jonah remind me of the young girl in elementary school who was studying about the oceans. The teacher tried to reassure the class, "*I don't want you ever to be afraid of going out into the sea because there are no sea creatures that can swallow you whole.*" The little girl raised her hand and said, "*I learned in church that a great fish swallowed Jonah whole.*" The teacher scoffed at and said, "*That could never happen. Its impossible.*" The girl answered "*When I get to heaven I'll ask Jonah myself and find out if it was true.*"

The teacher asked, "*What if Jonah didn't get to heaven ?*" To this the little girl said, "*Then you can ask him.*" Actually, the book of Jonah is not simply about a *great fish* mentioned only four times, or a *great city* mentioned nine times or even about a reluctant prophet who is mentioned about eighteen times. Its primarily about a *great God* who is mentioned thirty eight times in these 4 short chapters. If you eliminate God from this book the story does not make sense. For this book is all about the will of God and how we respond to it, its about the love of God and how we share it. Now there are four

movements in the book corresponding to the four chapters.

In Ch1: Jonah and the Storm:

In Ch 2: Jonah and the Fish:

In Ch 3: Jonah and the City:

In Ch 4 Jonah and the Lord:

(1)Running FROM God: Jonah Protesting

O. Palmer Robertson says, “ *Trying to get away from God is like trying to get away from air.*” Instead of going to Nineveh Jonah ran in the opposite direction. Do you see what (1:3) says ? Three times in the first ten verses we read the phrase “ *fled from the presence of the Lord,*” which is impossible. Jonah knew that he could not escape the omnipresence of God, for there is no place where God was not. (Psalm 139) This simply means that Jonah resigned his prophetic office. It means that he was determined not only to ensure that he did not undertake this responsibility, but that he would not be available in the future for any other such undertaking. Thus he became a backslidden prophet. Its as if Jonah said, “ *Here am I send him, I’m on my way to Tarshish.*”

My what a contrast that was to Isaiah. For when God asked, “ *Who shall I send ? And who will go for us ?*” Isaiah’s response was “ *Here am I send me.*” (Is 6:8) My are you like Isaiah or Jonah ? It may be that Nineveh for some is reconciliation, to other believers it may be repentance. Still others may be called to the Nineveh of restitution. My where are you headed ?

There are really only two roads in the Christian life. One leads to Nineveh, the other to Tarshish. The way to Nineveh is the way to revival, the way to Tarshish is the way to ruin. One road is the will of God, the other is disobedience to His will. Now what was,

(a) THE CAUSE OF HIS BACKSLIDING:

For we read “ *But Jonah rose up to flee from the presence of the Lord,*” (1:3) Why ? He was God’s man with God’s message why should he run from God ? Was it the unknown ? Think about it. What if the Lord called you to go to Brazil how would you feel ? With the people and the culture so different. Perhaps Jonah was afraid that he become unpopular ? After all he was popular in Israel, because his prediction had been fulfilled that the nation would regain her lost territory from her enemies. (2 Kings 14:25) I wonder are you running away from God’s will because you are afraid of being unpopular ? Perhaps Jonah was unconcerned. History tells us that the Assyrians were a cruel and heartless people who thought nothing of burying their enemies alive, skinning them alive, or impaling them on sharp poles under the hot sun.

“ *If the city of Nineveh is going to be overthrown, then let it be overthrown,*” argued Jonah. “ *I would rather disobey God than see my enemies saved from defeat.*” My it was Jonah’s attitude that was wrong. Look at what he says after the revival in Nineveh ? (4:2) Nineveh was the capital city of an enemy nation and Jonah had a sneaking suspicion that God might pardon it, and in that case Israel’s enemy might be able to strike. It was his sense of

patriotism for his own country and prejudice against another country that made Jonah flee. My what's the reason for your disobedience ? Do you feel inadequate ? Are you fearful ? Are you prejudiced ? My when we stand before the Saviour and look with undimmed eye upon that brow was pierced ? Those hands and feet that were marred ? What excuses will you make for not giving His message of redeeming love to a lost world ? (a)

(b) *THE COURSE OF HIS BACKSLIDING:*

Did you notice that it was downward ? It's both perilous and ominous were a Christian starts going down. Do you see Jonah's steps downward ? Down to Joppa, down into the ship, (1:3) down into the sea (1:5) and down into the great fish. (2:2) My disobedience always leads downward. Any journey that is away from God is always downward and to go down is easy and hard. Easy because no self-effort is required but hard because of the consequences. Now things seemed to work out for Jonah even in his backslidden state. My Satan can make disobedience very convenient and very easy. You see, Jonah had the money for the fare, a ship was waiting for him and he seemed to be at peace for he was able to sleep in the storm. *It seems that when you are trying to run away from God you can always find a ship that is willing to take you.*

Some believers think that because they "*find a ship*," it is providential and therefore must be all right. It's amazing how skilful the devil is in his manipulative powers and subtle ways. Sometimes you hear one spouse say to

another, "*We need to separate for a time for I need some space.*" That almost always means that there is someone else involved. In other words "*they find a ship going to Tarshish.*" Sometimes a young Christian girl marries an unsaved man. The boys just seemed to come along and it seemed the right thing to do. She just found "*a ship going to Tarshish.*" A man gets into financial trouble because he found a ship going to Tarshish. The truth is this. Any time we want to run away from the will of God, we will find a ship and the devil will make sure it is running on time. Do you see,

(c) *THE CONSEQUENCE OF HIS BACKSLIDING:*

Charles Spurgeon said that God never allows His children to sin successfully, and Jonah is the proof of that statement. "*For the Lord loveth he chasteneth and scourgeth every son he receiveth.*" (Heb 12:6) Spurgeon also said "*it may hard going forward but it is harder going back.*" Donald Grey Barnhouse commented, "*When you run away from the Lord you never get where you are going and you always pay your own fare.*" My running away from the Lord is always a costly business. Do you see what Jonah lost here ? He lost God's voice for the Lord now speaks in thunder and lightening. He lost his *power in prayer* and even his desire to pray. The heathen were praying but Jonah was sleeping. He lost *his testimony* with the men on the ship. He lost *his influence* for good, because he was the cause of the storm. And he almost lost his life. My we always paid dearly when we flee from the Lord. Ask the girl who married the unsaved man. He was lying when he said he would never

abandon their marriage. Ask the teenage girls who have fled home. Ask the man whom the Lord called to preach and, instead of going attempted to head for some distant Tarshish. Jeremy Taylor the 17th century English preacher said, “ *God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy.*” He was referring to being happy with God’s will for our lives. It cost Jonah spiritual peace, joy and contentment. My what is it costing you ? Will you say with Jonah, “ *here am I send him ?*” Or will you say with Isaiah “ *here am I send me.*”

**Mine are the hands to do the work
My feet shall run for Thee
My lips shall sound the glorious news
Lord, here am I send me**

(2) Running TO God: Jonah Praying

Now numerous stories of men being swallowed by whales and surviving the ordeal have been validated. In (Matt 12:40) the A.V. translates the Greek word (ketous) “ *whale,*” but the word really means “ *a sea monster,*” or “ *a great fish.*” It may have been a whale, it does not really matter. You see, the point of the story is not so much the *great fish, but the great God. For too much discussion about the great fish turns into a red herring.* Why is it that we always think we have to explain the miraculous ? What happened to Jonah was a miracle. Take away the miraculous from Jonah and you destroy the miraculous of the gospel, the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now let’s be honest. One would have thought that after all the problems Jonah had

caused and had brought upon himself, the sailors, and ultimately the Lord, you would have thought that God would have let him go or finished him off. But no. Jonah had gone down of his own accord. Down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the sides of the ship, three steps down, God had brought him down into the sea, then down into the fish, and now God brings him down further still.

“ *I went down to the bottoms of the mountains.*” (2:6) Now old Jonah was down about as far as he could go. In that beautiful Psalm 116 the psalmist says, “ *I was brought low and He saved me.*” (Ps 116:6) Jonah was brought low, brought down, then he was brought up in more senses than one. Look if you will at (2:10)

Now when Jonah was writing this story he was looking back and attempting to put himself into the situation to show us how he really felt. Can you imagine what it must have been like ? Can you imagine a place more filthy ? More horrible ? More depressing than the one where Jonah was in the belly of a fish, in the dreadful sea, all alone cast away from mankind yet it was there that Jonah was motivated at last to pray. “ *Then Jonah prayed ...,*” (2:1) ***When did Jonah pray ? Why did Jonah pray ? What happened when Jonah prayed ?***

(a) WHEN did Jonah RETURN to Prayer ?

Well, look at (2:1) But why didn’t Jonah pray before this ? Well, because he was out of the habit of praying. You see, his act of disobedience (1:3) resulted in Jonah getting out of the habit of praying. The Psalmist said, “ *If I regard iniquity*” (Ps 66:19) “ *If I cherish a life of*

disobedience then when I pray, the Lord doesn't hear me, so I give up." John Bunyan says, " *Prayer will make a man cease from sin or sin will entice a man to cease from prayer.*" Have you got out of the habit of praying ? Is it because of sin in your life ? " *Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish's belly, and said I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord and he heard me.*" (2:1-2) My are we not all a bit like Jonah ? Which of us has not tried to manage his own affairs until everything began to go wrong ? Then we were at our wits end, with no way of escape we " *remembered the Lord.*" (2:7)

Then we prayed. Isn't it amazing that some of us wait until we are in a " *fish's belly,*" before we call out to the Lord ? Is that where you are ? In a fish's belly ? Are you in a confusing situation ? Does there seem to be no way out ? Are you saying " *what will I do ? My hopes are dashed, my life is ruined.*" My Take encouragement from Jonah this ! " *I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord and he heard me.*"

(b) WHY did Jonah RESORT to Prayer ?

What was the reason for his prayer ? Well look at (2:3) Jonah recognised the chastening hand of the Lord. Who sent out the " *great wind,*" ? (1:4) The Lord. Who appointed the " *great fish,*" ? (1:17) The Lord. The adversity God sent moved the lips of Jonah. Can you not recall incidents and situations in your life which made you desperate for God to intervene ? When nothing else causes us to call upon the Lord adversity has a way of stimulating our lips and bending our knees in prayer. It was affliction

that made Jonah pray. The Psalmist also learned this same painful lesson. " *Before I was afflicted I went astray but now I have kept thy word.*" (Ps 119:67) (a) (b)

(c) WHAT did Jonah RECEIVE in Prayer ?

An answer. " *And he heard me.*" Now look at Jonah. Jonah disobeyed the Lord, he disregarded the Lord, but the Lord not only listened to his voice but responded to his prayer. (2:10) It's interesting that in this prayer Jonah,

Recalled God's Word:

I mean the whole of this chapter is a selection of verses from the Psalms. Jonah simply prayed the Word of God. (2:2 Ps 18:6 2:3 Ps 42:7) Do you know God's Word well enough to recall when you are in dark circumstances ?

Remembered God's Mercy:

Look at (2:4) Jonah looked to the place of mercy. (1 Kings 8:38-39) I wonder do we need to say, " *I will look again.*" (2:4) Here is a man renouncing his sin (2:8) remembering his vow and re-consecrating his life to the Lord. (2:8-9)

Recognised God's Sovereignty:

For he cries, " *Salvation is of the Lord.*" (2:9) Certainly Jonah could not save himself but the Lord spoke to the

fish and the fish spewed Jonah on the shore “ *And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time,*” (3:1) So do you see the third picture ?

(3) Running FOR God: Jonah Preaching

“ *The victorious Christian life,*” said George H. Morrison is a “ *series of new beginnings.*” When we fail the enemy wants us to believe that our ministry is ended and there’s no hope of recovery but our God is the God of the second chance. “ *And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time.*” Now there are two very graphic pictures that are brought before us in this passage.

(a) *THE PEDESTRIAN PREACHER:*

Can you see him ? Walking up and down like a street vendor, Jonah begins to declare the destruction of the city. “ *Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown,*” (3:4) The word “ *overthrown,*” literally means “ *overturned.*” Nineveh would be turned upside down. It simply meant that Nineveh would be totally destroyed just like Sodom and Gormorrah. (Gen 19:25) My this message was short, simple, searching and startling. Was this all Jonah said ? We are not sure. Did he spend time telling the people about the true and living God for we’re told “ *the people of Nineveh believed God.*” (3:5) They would have to know something about this God of Israel in order to exercise sincere faith. (Acts 17:22) Did Jonah expose the folly of their idolatry ? Did he recount his personal history to show them that His God was sovereign and powerful. We are not sure. What we do know is. Jonah obeyed God

went to Nineveh declared the message that God gave him and God did the rest. Do you see this prophet ? (2 Kings 14:25) There was,

1. A Fidelity about his Preaching:

God said to Jonah “ *preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee,*” “ *And he cried and said Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown*” He made no attempt to spin God’s Word into something the Ninevites might find more user friendly. No, here was a man who sensed his obligation to be faithful to the Word of God and warn the people. What an example Jonah is for all preachers. You see, we live in age when society and the pew tends to dictate to the preacher. Social pressures attempt to mould the servant of God, but the true servant of Christ must always “ *preach the Word.*” (2 Tim 4:2) Some of the congregation may not like that but then we preach not what will please but what is before us in this Bible. Our attitude should be that of Paul, “ *if I pleased men I should not be the servant of Christ.*” (Gal 1:10) And as the servant of Christ you are to preach the Word of God faithfully.

Was this not Jonah’s brief ? Is this not your brief ? Jonah had been to the other side of the precipice. *Some scholars believed that he actually died and was raised but now he returned as a warning sign to the Ninevites, that if they went over that spiritual precipice on which they stood there was no way back.* Now do we believe that ? Have we grasp that ? Do you believe that there is no way back

for that loved one of yours if they go over the precipice into hell ? Are you therefore marked by fidelity ?

2. An Expectancy about His Preaching:

Somehow I don't think it surprised Jonah when after he preached, "*the people of Nineveh believed God.*" (3:5 4:2) They looked at Jonah a horrifying sight to behold "*God punishes sin,*" they said. "*Look at the man he is discoloured.*" But the fact that Jonah was alive at all caused them to say, "*God pardons sinners.*" You see, Jonah was preaching out of personal experience about the reality of God's judgment. He had experienced it. No wonder he preached expecting God to work. A young student came to C.H. Spurgeon one occasion and said, "*Mr. Spurgeon I have been preaching around the countryside for some time now but I don't see souls saved like you.*" Spurgeon looked at the young man and said, "*Do you expect to see souls saved every time you preach ?*" He replied, "*Why no Sir.*" Spurgeon said, "*Well that's why you don't see them saved.*" Do you know what our problem is ? We go around not expecting anything to happen. Do you see what happened here ?

(b) *THE PENTITENT PEOPLE:*

For the people "*believed God,*" and proved their faith by their works of contrition. And God forgive them. This was undoubtedly one of the greatest revivals in history. Isn't it amazing what happened when one man got right with God ? When one man corrected his ways he changed his world. Can you see it ? One sentence and Nineveh was

brought to its knees. J. Edwin Orr tells that in 1859 a schoolboy in Coleraine was under deep conviction of sin. Not being able to continue his studies his teacher sent home in the company of another boy. One their way home the two boys noticed an empty house and they entered it to pray. At last the unsaved boy got saved and immediately returned to the classroom to tell his teacher. "*I am so happy I have the Lord Jesus in my heart,*" he said. That simple testimony had its effect on the class and boy after boy stepped outside. The teacher looking out of the window noticed the boys kneeling in prayer around the schoolyard. The teacher was overcome so he asked the converted schoolboy to comfort them. Soon the school was in strange disorder and ministers of the gospel were sent for and remained all day dealing with sinners. Pupils, teachers, parents and neighbours were converted and the school was occupied until eleven o'clock that night. "*One sentence empowered by the Spirit of God and Coleraine was awakened.*" May it please God to do it again.

Now if you or I had been writing this story we would probably have closed it at (Ch 3) You see, we all like to have a happy ending but Jonah adds this last chapter to show himself "warts and all." Here we see Jonah,

(4) Running AGAINST God: Jonah Pouting:

Instead of rejoicing, Jonah is resenting, instead of singing he is sulking. You see if in (Ch 1) Jonah is like the Prodigal Son, doing his own thing and going his own way. Then in (Ch 4) he's like the Prodigal Son's elder brother

critical, selfish, sullen, angry and unhappy with what was going on. Can you see Jonah,

(a) LAMENTING OVER A CITY:

Now geographically, Jonah was outside Nineveh, chronologically he was days of revival, but spiritually he was almost back to square one again. “ But it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was very angry.” (4:1) With whom was he very angry ? Sad to say with the Lord Himself ? Why was he so displeased and angry ? Because the Lord had not destroyed the city of Nineveh, because the Lord had shown mercy to repenting sinners. (Deut 18:22) You see, Jonah was thoroughly a Jew and the very idea that the Gentiles, especially wicked Nineveh were to experience the saving grace of God was repugnant to him. (4:2-3) He could not stand the blessing of God resting on others. I wonder, are there prejudices we need to sacrifice ? Can we rejoice when God is blessing others ? Other lands, other Christians, other churches, other circles than yours, do you rejoice ?

Do you see Jonah now ? As he comes before the Lord and says, “ *I knew it would turn out like this.* ” (4:2) Warren Wiersbe says, “ *It took God longer to prepare His servant and get him to obey His will than it did for the entire godless city of Nineveh to repent.* ” Things have not changed much have they ? It takes God longer to get believers right than it does to get sinners to repent. How patient God is with us, how patient He was with Jonah, for now we see Jonah,

(b) LEARNING FROM A GOURD:

What was a gourd ? Some think it was a castor oil plant. Certainly Jonah needed a good dose of castor oil. It was probably a fast growing perennial plant which reached a height of some 8-10 feet. It looked like a palm tree with large leaves and it protected Jonah from the sun. But look at (4:7 -11) What a stark contrast between Jonah and God. Jonah was concerned about a *Plant*, God was concerned about a *People*. (Nineveh) Jonah was concerned over something for which he had *not laboured*. God was concerned over *His Creation*. Jonah was concerned about something which is *Temporal* (night) God was concerned about souls which are *Eternal*. (2 Cor 4:18 Matt 25:46) My the truth was Jonah seemed to care about plants than about people !

Could the same be said of you, of me ? Do we care more about the items in our gardens, the produce in our fields, the contents in our homes, the stock in our business, than we do about never-dying souls and the spread of the gospel to them ? Do you what God is concerned about ? Souls: “ *And should I not spare Nineveh ?* ” (4:11) Souls in Great Cities: “ *That great city,* ” of 1 million. Souls in Great Cities “ *that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand,* ” little children “ *for Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.* ” (Matt 19:14) Oh, how compassionate is our God. What about us ? What about you ? Will you seek to labour for Christ in your Nineveh that on that future day, you might be able to say, “ ***Lord here am I and the children that you have given me.*** ”

