

THE PROPHECY OF JONAH

Family Camp – August 20-21, 1997

The Division of the English Bible – 39 books:

The Law – five books.

History – twelve books.

Poetry – five books.

Prophecy – 17 books:

Major prophets – five books, four writers.

Minor prophets – twelve books.

The prophets have been designated “major” and “minor” not because of their importance, but because of their size – the major prophets were the larger books.

The prophets were mainly preachers, not men who predicted the future (although prediction of the future was often involved). And so for a long time Bible teachers have said that the OT prophets were:

Forthtellers. This was their primary ministry.

Foretellers.

The prophets of the OT have been called “God’s emergency men.” They were raised up in times of special need to bring people back to God. There were non-writing prophets (like Elijah and Elisha), but there were the writing prophets whose books we have in the OT. They spoke under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and the messages of those who wrote did so under the inspiration of the Spirit of God. The fact that they have been preserved for us is evidence of the lasting importance of their messages. The church and the world today need the messages of the OT prophets. Perhaps one of the main reasons for the low level of spiritual life among the Lord’s people today is because we have neglected the reading and study of the prophets of the OT.

Generally speaking, the date of the prophets fell between a little before 800 years B.C. to the ministry of Malachi which is placed at around 400 years before Christ. And so they cover approximately four hundred years.

I want to take up with you today and tomorrow, in these four hours, the four chapters of the prophecy of Jonah.

This first mention of Jonah in the Bible is in 2 Kings 14:25. He prophesied in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. Dates vary for the prophets among teachers of the Word, but this placed Jonah’s ministry a little more at approximately somewhere about 800 or the late 700’s B.C. He was from Gath-hepher in Zebulun.
Read 2 Kings 23-27.

Jonah was probably a contemporary of Hosea and Amos.

The book of Jonah has been one of the most attacked books of the OT because of the account of Jonah being swallowed by the “great fish.” However, we have the testimony of the Lord Jesus to the effect that that experience of Jonah was truly a historical fact. We have three times in the Gospels where we are told that our Lord referred to Jonah:

Matt. 12:38-41;

Matt. 16:1-4;

Luke 11:29-30, 32.

This would make Jonah a type of Christ. The Lord called the experience of Jonah a “sign.” This means that what happened to Jonah was a *proof*, or a *seal*, of that which our Lord would eventually do: die, be buried, and

rise again on the third day. I believe I am right in saying that Jonah is the only minor prophet referred to by our Lord, and the only OT person the Lord spoke of, likening him to Himself. This would make the prophecy of Jonah one of the most important books of the OT.

Illus: The Salvation Army lassie who was reading her Bible on a train, and was asked if she believed the Bible, and then if she believed the story of Jonah and the whale. How could she prove it? She would ask Jonah when she got to heaven. What if Jonah were not in heaven? Then the man could ask him.

There have been many things said about the book of Jonah to show its importance in Scripture. It is easy for us to get occupied with Jonah, but that is not the most important part of his prophecy. It foretold God's plan to extend salvation to the Gentiles. And yet even that is not the main message of the book. The main message is what it tells us about God: His will, His power (sovereign, providential power both over Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and over Jonah, His servant), His grace and His mercy and His righteousness (both to Jonah and to Nineveh). It shows us the importance of using the Word of God in prayer.

The book of Jonah is easily divided following the four chapters. I have always like George L. Robinson's simple outline of the book:

Chapter 1: Jonah running from God.

Chapter 2: Jonah running to God.

Chapter 3: Jonah running with God.

Chapter 4: Jonah running ahead of God. Or we might say, Jonah running against God.

Another outline I have followed is:

Chapter 1: Jonah's perversity.

Chapter 2: Jonah's prayer.

Chapter 3: Jonah's preaching.

Chapter 4: Jonah's problem.

Notice Jonah's emphasis upon what God "prepared":

A great fish (1:17)

A gourd (4:6).

A worm (4:7).

A vehement east wind (4:8).

Jonah also used the word "great" repeatedly:

"Great city" referring to Nineveh in 1:2; 3:2-3; 4:11.

"A great wind" (1:4).

A "great tempest" (1:12).

"A great fish" (1:17).

And the only time he changed the word for "great," although it means essentially the same: 4:2.

But, turning to the emphasis upon God, we see the sovereignty of God in chapter 1 as well as an emphasis upon God's omnipresence. We see that God answers prayer in chapter 2, even the prayer of a disobedient but repentant servant. We see the power of the Gospel of God in chapter 3. We see the amazing patience of God as He continued to deal graciously with Jonah in chapter 4.

JONAH 1 – The Call of God and the Disobedience of Jonah.

The call of God is given in verses 1 and 2. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. Assyria was the world power at that time, and they were known for their extreme cruelty and all other forms of wickedness. Notice the way the call is stated. Jonah was not in any doubt as to what the Lord wanted him to do. He was to “cry against” Nineveh which, humanly speaking, would have been a very risky business for the prophet to be engaged in.

We see in these first two verses that God is well aware of what is taking place on the earth. That was emphasized in the days just before the flood, and it was apparent also in connection with the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah. Cf. Gen. 6:5. And these are the words that we read about Sodom and Gomorrah when the Lord was visiting Abraham and revealed His intention to tell Abraham what He intended to do. Cf. Gen. 18:20-21:

20 And the LORD said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous;

21 I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know.

Solomon said in Proverbs 15:3, “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.” It often seems to us, as it did to the writers of Scripture, that wicked people are getting away with their wickedness, but that is never the case. Nothing escapes the eye of God. But it is interesting that God’s grace was being extended to that cruel city. That story could be told over and over again, more than we could ever imagine. It is true today. People everywhere and in all generations are “without excuse.” How we should marvel at the patience and mercy and grace of God. God’s first response to man’s sin is not judgment, but it is one of amazing patience and mercy.

What was Jonah’s reaction to the call of God? See 1:3. It was one of immediate rejection! Tarshish was a port in Spain. It was in the opposite direction from Nineveh. One writer has said, “It was the farthest limit of the western world as known to the Hebrews” (ISBE, IV, p. 2775-1).

But why did Jonah reject the call of God? It seems that it was because he was a Jewish patriot. He knew that God was a gracious God and that He would forgive them if they repented, and he did not want them to be forgiven. It probably seemed to him that God’s blessing upon Nineveh would only make things worse for the people of Israel.

Will you notice how circumstances seemed to indicate that he was doing the will of God? He went down to Joppa. There was a ship going to Tarshish, and Jonah had the money to pay for his ticket. But the Word of God had indicated that the will of God for Jonah was otherwise. How often we support our decisions by favorable circumstances simply because we can do what we want to do. Be careful about being guided primarily by circumstances, or by circumstances alone. Our first concern in guidance needs to be the Word!

Verse 3 indicates that Jonah not only wanted to go to Tarshish, but that he wanted to leave the presence of the Lord. He surely knew better than that. David had already written Psalm 139:1-6. But it is amazing how sin blinds us to the impossibility of what we are trying to do.

From verse 4 on down to the end of the chapter we see the consequences of Jonah’s disobedience to the Lord. And one thing that stands out, which we need to remember, is the way in which his sin affected others. This is always the case, just as it is the case that when we are walking in fellowship with the Lord, our lives will be a blessing to others.

Remember how Abraham and Sarah’s sin affected Hagar. Remember how the sin of Joseph’s brothers affected their father, as well as Joseph. Remember how the sin of Achan affected the whole nation of Israel when they

were defeated at Ai. And on and on we could go with the illustrations.

The first thing that happened was an act of God, not of “Mother Nature.” The Lord sent a great wind which became a mighty tempest. Notice how those pagan mariners cried to their gods. They could see what they called a divine intervention in their trip to Tarshish. But one amazing thing was that Jonah was sleeping through all of the trouble. The shipmaster woke him up, and told him to call upon his God. What an rebuke it was for heathen men to tell a prophet of God that he needed to pray!

But then they decided to cast lots to find out who was responsible for the storm. And the hand of the Lord was in this as well. “And the lot fell upon Jonah.” So they started to ask Jonah the questions that we find in verse 8.

THE PROPHECY OF JONAH

Chapter 2

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Humanly speaking, the life of Jonah should have ended when he was cast out of the ship and into the sea by the mariners. We would not have been surprised if that had been the result of his rebellion against God. Plus, we often here it said that if we don't do what the Lord wants us to do, He will get someone else. That is what we might have thought of in the case of Moses. And surely this should have been the judgment that David faced because of his sins. And who of us would have been inclined to go on with Peter in the face of Peter's intense and profane denial that he even knew the Lord. But it is clear from the Scriptures that failure does not necessarily mean that we will be replaced. Instead, we need to think in terms of Phil. 1:6. That was true in NT times, but it was also true in OT times, and it is still true today. It is true, as Mordecai told Esther when she expressed her fear that the king might not hold out his golden scepter to her if she came into his presence without being asked,

13 Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.

14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this? (Esther 4:13-14).

The Lord is going to accomplish His will regardless of the obstacles that may stand in his way, but instead of seeking a replacement, His usual plan is to work with the servants He has chosen until they become willing and useful instruments in his hands.

It is impossible for us to overestimate the importance of prayer in our lives. There is no record in chapter 1 that Jonah prayed about his decision to go to Tarshish. There is no record that Moses prayed before he killed the Egyptian, and hid his body in the sand. There is no record that David prayed before he committed adultery with Bathsheba, or before he had her husband put in the front of the battle where he would be killed. And we have definite evidence that Peter did not pray before his denial of the Lord. He and James and John slept in the Garden of Gethsemane when the Lord had asked them to watch with Him in prayer.

So we all need to be very careful not to let times of prayerlessness enter into our lives. It is one of the first indicators of spiritual decline when we don't pray, or when we don't realize how much we need to pray, or even when our times of prayer get crowded out because of the busyness of our lives. This is one thing we need to guard against at camp. Our normal schedule gets set aside. We are with people from the time we get up until we go to bed at night. And so it is easy for us to neglect our times with the Lord. It is not always the amount of time we spend, but the quality of the time we give to the Lord. There are times when we need to pray more than we normally do, but the important point I am making, and it is surely made in Scripture, is that we pray! Our Lord prayed faithfully and He prayed much, sometimes spending whole nights in prayer. And, as many have recognized, if He needed to pray, how much more do we need it.

We can tell from Jonah's prayer that he was not a stranger to prayer. We can tell also from his prayer that he was not a stranger to the Word of God because most of his prayer has its roots in Scripture, especially the Psalms. He was a man well acquainted with the Word of God, and I am sure that if we had known Jonah, we would have been amazed that he was capable of such flagrant rebellion against the will of God. By the way, there is no indication, as I have said that Jonah prayed about his decision. But neither is there any indication that he had talked with some other believer about his dilemma. We need to do both: pray, and seek counsel from people whose spiritual judgment we trust. Jonah has most certainly read those words of Solomon in

which he said, “Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety” (Prov. 11:14).

When we fail to pray, the Lord often brings us into circumstances where we realize very keenly that only the Lord can help us in our need. That is what he did with Jonah. And so when he prayed, his prayer was a pouring out of the Word from his heart as he sought the blessing of the Lord. Let me trace for you how he did it.

Looking at verse 2, listen to the way David prayed in Psa.18:5-6:

5 The sorrows of hell compassed me about: the snares of death prevented me.

6 In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears.

Or Psa. 22:24,

For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard.

Also Psa. 120:1: “In my distress I cried unto the LORD, and he heard me.”

It obviously was an encouragement to Jonah to know that the Lord had heard and answered others who were afflicted and in distress. And this should be an encouragement to all of us too.

Let us move on to verse 3.

How interesting and how good it was that Jonah looked beyond the men who reluctantly had cast him overboard, and he saw the hand of the Lord in what had been done. He was a strong believer in the sovereignty of God. Notice in the last part of verse 3: Jonah said, “Thy (the Lord’s) billows and Thy (the Lord’s) waves passed over me.” As Dr. Feinberg said in his commentary on Jonah,

It was God Who had cast him into the sea. The sailors were only executing the punishment God had designed for him. Paul never called himself a prisoner of Nero or Rome..., but of Jesus Christ. It is blessed to be enabled to push beyond circumstances and see the mighty loving hand of God in all the affairs and changes in our lives (p. 24).

In verse 4 we see that Jonah did not really want what he had said that he wanted, “to flee...from the presence of the Lord.” Here in verse 4 he was lamenting the fact that it seemed from the fish’s belly that he was out of the Lord’s sight. So we can see how Jonah’s emotions were fluctuating—up and then down. Isn’t that the way it often is with us? Perhaps as Jonah concluded this verse he was thinking of Psa. 5:7:

But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy: and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple.

Jonah could not go to the temple, but in his heart he could return to the Lord’s house where the presence of the Lord was manifested to his people. And Jonah had enough knowledge of the truth to know that even then it was not a person’s geographical location that determined his fellowship with God, but it was what was going on in his own heart.

He was like Daniel in the words describing what he did when no man was to pray to God nor to ask any request from any man except Nebuchadnezzar for thirty days:

Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime (Dan. 6:10).

And we can add to this verse (4) Solomon’s prayer for the people of God at the dedication of the temple:

37 If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, blasting, mildew, locust, or if there be caterpillar; if their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities; whatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be;

38 What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house:

39 Then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest; (for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men;)

40 That they may fear thee all the days that they live in the land which thou gavest unto our fathers (1 Kings 8:37-40).

When Jonah had decided to go to Tarshish, he was leaving behind the land, the temple, and had hoped that he was leaving the Lord behind, too. But in his trial he saw immediately that if he did not have the Lord and His blessing, he had nothing that was really sufficient for him.

In verses 5 and 6 we see the dire circumstances of Jonah. He had gone down to the bottom of the sea. He felt that he was going to die. The weeds which grew at the bottom trapped him so that he could not set himself free. It is a completely hopeless picture. Some expositors feel that Jonah actually died, and that he was resurrected from the dead. But it is not necessary to believe that in order for the figure of Christ in His death and resurrection. I think it is more accurate to say that he was near death, and that his rescue was just like a resurrection from the dead. At this point he must have been thinking of David's Psalm, 16. It was prophetic of our Lord, but it was also an expression of deliverance(s) which David had experienced in which he had been delivered from death. You probably know this passage very well, found in Psa. 16:8-10:

8 I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope.

10 For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.

In Psa. 30:3 we also find these words:

O LORD, thou hast brought up my soul from the grave: thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit.

It is interesting that the word translated "corruption" in verse 6 is actually the Hebrew word for "pit." (Re-read the verse above.)

And then in verse 7 we find some more ties with the Word of God. (Read.)

Here Jonah could have been thinking about Psa. 143:4-6:

4 Therefore is my spirit overwhelmed within me; my heart within me is desolate.

5 I remember the days of old; I meditate on all thy works; I muse on the work of thy hands.

6 I stretch forth my hands unto thee: my soul thirsteth after thee, as a thirsty land. Selah.

The word "overwhelmed" means *fainted*, as Jonah said in verse 7. Jonah had wanted to leave his prophetic ministry. He had wanted to leave the Lord behind. But it took a fainting soul for him to remember the Lord and all of the blessings that he had had in the Lord. And when he remembered the Lord, then he prayed again. Remember we are reading here the prayer of a prophet of God, a man called of God to proclaim the Word to his generation. If such declension can take place in the life of a prophet, it can happen to any of us. How said it is when the Lord has to take such measures to bring us back to himself. To have a *fainting soul* is not a happy experience, and we need to avoid it like a plague (because that is what it is).

In verse 8 Jonah looked on what he had done in a new light.

What are "lying vanities"? This is an expression for idols, worshiping other gods besides the true God. If

Jonah left the Lord, there was no other place to go except to “lying vanities.” Jonah realized, as Matthew Henry pointed out, that such people “stand in their own light; they turn their back upon their own happiness, and go quite out of the way of all good” (Vol. IV, p. 1290). But “lying vanities” could also be what Jonah had done, turning his back on the Lord, giving up the precious calling which God had given him to be a messenger of blessing to the people in his generation who had never known the joy in the Lord that he had known. To pursue “lying vanities” is like chasing a cloud that is going to disappear. Jonah could see that at this point better than he had ever seen it before, *and this led him to the conclusion which he stated in verse 9*, which is the end of his prayer.

The thoughts expressed in verse 9 surely had their roots in Psa. 50. Listen to these two verses from that Psalm: “Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High” (Psa. 50:14). And the other verse is Psa. 50:23: “Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God.”

In my Bible the margin in the Bible indicates that Heb. 13:15 is a quotation from Jonah 2:9. Heb. 13:15 says this:

By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.

Jonah was in a place where he could not get to the temple, nor could he offer the sacrifices which he must have offered many times before, but there is one sacrifice he could bring to the Lord, a sacrifice which he had neglected to bring for longer than we know. It is the sacrifice of thanksgiving, the sacrifice of praise. Wouldn't you love to know how Jonah praised the Lord?

But he did more than praise the Lord; he made a vow, or vows, to the Lord. What is a vow? It is a promise. It would be interesting to know what promises Jonah made to the Lord, but the Spirit of God has concealed this from us just as you don't know about my promises to the Lord, and I don't know about yours. These vows are between us and the Lord. But they are worth anything unless the Lord enables us to keep them.

Before Jonah's day Solomon wrote this message about vows:

4 When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.

5 Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay (Ecc. 5:4-5).

And then Jonah concluded with one of the grandest statements in all of Scripture: “Salvation is of the Lord.”

Obviously this had to do with Jonah's deliverance from the whale. Only the Lord could save him. The Lord had prepared a big fish two swallow him and to keep him from drowning. He had also kept the whale from digesting Jonah. The stomach of the whale was turned into a prayer room where God was dealing with His servant, restoring him to fellowship, bringing him back to his work.

So “salvation is of the Lord” was also a reference to the Gospel. Just as the Lord saved Jonah from drowning, and He was the only One Who could do that, so the Lord is the only One Who can save souls from eternal judgment. It is “of the Lord”—and to add the words of Paul at the end of Romans 11, it is *through the Lord*, and it is *to Him*. See Rom. 11:36. The Lord is the One Who determined that there would be a salvation. He determined Who would be the Savior. He determined what the cost of the salvation of sinners would be. And we know that He has even chosen those whom He intends to save.

How thankful we should be that God has included us in this glorious salvation, just as He did Jonah. Jonah

was saved through the Redeemer Who was coming. We are saved through the same Savior, but we know now that He has come. This was the message that Jonah was to carry to Nineveh, the simple message that sinners need to be saved, and that the Lord is that Savior.

What was the result of all of this?

The Lord spoke to the fish, and the fish obeyed the Lord more readily than Jonah did. The fish didn't dump Jonah into the sea, but he vomited him out on dry land, and the prophet was safely back in the land.

What are some of the lessons for us?

THE PROPHECY OF JONAH

Chapter 3

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Jonah chapter 3 has to be one of the greatest chapters in all of Scripture because of the demonstration that we have here of the mighty power of God manifested in Nineveh through the preaching of the Gospel. One writer has said,

Nowhere do we read in the Bible or outside of it that one message from a servant of God was used of God to so great an extent. For the whole city of Nineveh believed God! Nothing remotely approximating this has ever taken place in the history of revivals (Feinberg, p. 35).

Chapter 3 begins in almost the same way as chapter 1 with the addition of the words, “the second time.” We know nothing of the period of time that passed between the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3, but I believe we can be sure that it was relatively short. God had been urgent about Jonah’s mission in chapter 1, and He showed that same urgency in chapter 3. The will of God was the same. The need in the city of Nineveh was the same. The great change in chapter 3 was in Jonah. God had worked in his heart. He had taken Jonah through experiences which no man had ever had, before or since. He had been a testimony to the grace of God before he had been cast into the sea, but now he was much more a testimony to that grace. He had been a man who had wanted to forget about God, to forget about the people of God, and to forget about the Gospel of the grace of God. It is startling to see a prophet of God so removed from God in his heart, and then to see how God brought him back, not just geographically, but spiritually. This is not a different call. The call was the same. The difference was in the prophet of God. The purpose of God toward Nineveh had not changed. The need of the Ninevites had not changed. No had the message changed. God’s original call had been that Jonah should go and cry against Nineveh because of her wickedness. What the Lord said here at the beginning of chapter 3 was that Jonah was to preach the message that God had ordered that he should preach.

Jonah’s message would not have been more acceptable in Nineveh than it was anyplace else. But he was not to be concerned about making the message pleasing to the people of Nineveh. It was foolishness and always has been foolishness to those who are perishing in their sins, but as Paul told the Corinthians many years later, it is to those who are called, “the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). The message has never changed. It does not need to be “dressed up” by a lot of additional ways to make it acceptable to people. The simple God of the grace of God in Christ Jesus is “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom. 1:16).

It cannot be emphasized too strongly in our day that it is the simple preaching of the Gospel which God uses. There is no indication that Jonah had a team of workers who preceded him into Nineveh. Nothing is said of any musicians who “performed” before the preaching began. As far as the record is concerned, Jonah went there by himself. He had not rented an auditorium or a stadium. He simply entered the city and began preaching the message which is given in its abbreviated form in verse 4, “Ye forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” This was the main substance of his message. He went to a city which was already under the judgment of God. It was like our Lord explained years later to Nicodemus when He said,

He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:18).

The preacher of the Gospel must always be moved with a great urgency in his heart. No one knows what a day may bring forth (Prov. 27:1). We are not promised tomorrow. But in the case of Nineveh the Lord revealed to them through Jonah that they had only “forty days” left before Nineveh would be destroyed. The word “overthrown” in verse 4 is the same word that the Lord used in Genesis 19 for the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. So it would mean that there would be nothing left of this city, nor of its people, nor

even of their animals. See verses 7 and 8. What a difference it would make upon the hearts of people if those of us who have the Gospel message would preach with the same urgency that Jonah did, knowing the certainty and the imminency of the judgment of God. The Ninevites

In 1:3 Jonah “rose up” and began his journey, not to Nineveh, but to Tarshish. Here in chapter 4, verse 3, he “arose, and went unto Nineveh.” At last Jonah was doing what the Lord originally had told him to do.

The reference to Nineveh being “an exceeding great city of three days’ journey” has been explained in more than one way. Some say that it would have taken three days to walk around the city because it was sixty miles in circumference. Others say that it means that it would take three days to go through all the streets of the city. I am inclined to believe that it has to do with the circumference of the city. One historian (Diodorus Siculus tells us up to that time there was no city that was comparable in its greatness to Nineveh. It was larger than Babylon. A wall a hundred feet tall surrounded the city. The wall was thick enough for three chariots to ride abreast on it. On the wall were 1500 towers. The city was truly magnificent! It must have been an overwhelming experience for Jonah, a lone man, to enter such a place to proclaim a message of impending judgment.

Verse 4 tells us that Jonah “began to enter into the city a day’s journey.” He did not go in to get settled first in one of their inns, but upon arrival he began his preaching. And to go “a day’s journey” means that the first day he walked from one side of the city to the other proclaiming his message. Here we see Jonah the preacher. He did not make up his own message. He did not try to embellish it with words which would make it more acceptable to the people. Obviously he would have said more in his preaching than just what we have in verse 4, but this was that which attracted the attention of the people.

Now when we talk about the miracles that God performed in Jonah’s lifetime, nothing could possibly compare with what Jonah experienced in Nineveh. There was an immediate and favorable response from the people. They “believed God.” This is an interesting statement, isn’t it? You would think that we would read that the people *believe Jonah!* But that is not what Jonah recorded for us. And it evidently means that Jonah impressed the people that heard him that he did not come with his own message, but he had come to them with the Word of God.. They believed that Jonah had been sent to them from God. They believed that what Jonah had come to tell them was the truth, and that there was no possibility that they had more than forty days!

But let us not give the credit to Jonah, nor to the people of Nineveh. We know from the words of our Lord Jesus Christ that, as He said, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (John 6:44). So what we are told in verse 5 is a testimony to the power of God and to the power of the Gospel message. God draws people through His Word, through the Gospel of Christ. It is not the personality of the preacher that makes the difference. Nor is it the gift, or the gifts, of the preacher. It is the message that God uses to draw people to Himself and to His Son. Nobody has ever come to Christ “on his own.” It is always the result of the irresistible grace of God.

And so we see that as a result of what God was doing through the preaching of Jonah, the people “proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least,” to express their faith and their repentance because of their sins. And all of this was done before the message ever got to the king.

But when the message got to the king, the king took off his royal robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. What a picture of a city under conviction. As I have already mentioned, nothing like this had ever been seen before, and nothing like it has ever taken place since. People have been skeptical about the story of Jonah and the whale; why wouldn’t we all be even more inclined to reject what we read about here in chapter

3? This is truly amazing.

Many years ago I ceased being impressed with the reports that come out of evangelistic campaigns. The reports are always greater than what has actually taken place. In fact, I have heard that the leading evangelist in our day has said that he is thankful if 10% of the professions of faith are genuine. What Jonah saw was not 10%, nor 25%, nor 50%, nor 75%, *but 100%*! I have a title that we can very justly give to the city of Nineveh. You all know that Portland is called “the city of roses.” Other cities around our country have their names. The only title that could fittingly describe Nineveh is that it was “the elect city!” No such title could even be given to the city of Jerusalem. Portland is not an elect city, never has been, and never will be. No other city that has ever existed deserves this title. The Lord told Paul about Corinth that He had “much people” in Corinth, but the Lord did not say that *all* Corinthians were his people. Listen to what the Lord told Paul:

9 Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace:

10 For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city (Acts 18:9-10).

However, with Nineveh, they all were the chosen people of God. It is truly amazing, wouldn't you say?

But let me point this out which makes what happened in Nineveh even more dumbfounding. Do you think that anyone who knew the Lord in those days would possibly have conceived that such a thing was possible? We can tell even from Jonah's behavior in Jonah 1, and again in Jonah 4, that he had not been praying that God would save even *some* of the Ninevites. With their cruel wickedness people were surely praying that God would protect them from the Ninevites, but no one could possibly have imagined what the will of God was for that city.

But there are many other illustrations in Scripture of miraculous works that God did in the hearts of people which were totally unexpected by those who knew the Lord. What about Saul of Tarsus? Do you think that anyone was praying that he might be saved? People were praying that God would spare them from what Saul was doing in persecuting the church, but I doubt if anyone were praying for his salvation. What about Matthew, the publican? What about Zacchaeus the publican? Or what about Nicodemus? Do you think that any one of the spies who went into the land was thinking that there might be a Rahab there in whose heart God was already working?

Who would you consider among people who are living today as “the most unlikely candidate for heaven”? Ungodliness is sweeping over our land with a force which to us is uncontrollable. Who are we praying for? The Bible is full of stories in which we see the grace of God winning the hearts of people you would never expect to be saved. The story of what happened in Nineveh is a story which shows us how mighty is God, and how even the most wicked of cities is turned to righteousness if this is the will of God.

Now look at verses 7 through 9 and what they tell us about what the king did.

It shows the way of man. We like to make our proclamations, don't we? We feel that to get people to do what we want them to do, or what they need to do, we need a proclamation. Read what the king proclaimed according to verses 7 through 9.

It is good to read that there was such a proclamation, but, you know, when God is at work, no proclamation is needed. The people were already repenting before the king ever heard Jonah's message. But one thing the proclamation does is to show us how convinced the king was of the truth of Jonah's message, and that he firmly believed that the only way their city would be spared was for the people to turn once and for all from

their evil ways and “from the violence that is in their hands.” The king was not talking about a gradual change, but an immediate and permanent change in the hearts and lives of the people.

But let me ask this question: *Where does repentance come from?* Is this man’s part in salvation? Are we to praise the people of Nineveh because they had the sense to repent after they heard the preaching of Jonah? Many people feel that way. We are inclined to praise Jonah because he preached the Word of God, and then we are inclined to praise the Ninevites because they repented of their sins and believed the Word of God. But is this what we should do? *Where does repentance come from?*

The Apostle Paul gave us the answer to that question in his second epistle to Timothy. This is what he said about preaching the Gospel and the repentance which is such a necessary part of true faith:

- 24 And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,
 25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;
 26 And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

Another passage which tells us where repentance come from is found in Acts 5, verses 29 through 31, where Peter was responding to the authorities who had told him and the other apostles that they were to quit preaching the Gospel. This is what Peter said:

- 29 Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.
 30 The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree.
 31 Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:29-31).

When Peter was explaining to his brethren about his ministry to the Gentiles in the home of Cornelius, this was the response that the brethren gave to Peter:

- When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life (Acts 11:18).

The same is true of faith; it is a gift from God. Cf. Eph. 2:8, 9; Rom. 10:17; Heb. 12:2.

Jonah preached the message, but it was God Who used it to accomplish His purposes in Nineveh. The king made his proclamation, but it was God Who put repentance into the hearts of the Ninevites. And it was God Who gave them the faith that they exercised in response to Jonah’s preaching. So “to God be the glory; great things He hath done. As Jonah said while he was still in the belly of the whale: “Salvation is of the Lord.” And we can add, “from start to finish.” Remember Isa. 55:10-11,

- 10 For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:
 11 So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

Verse 10 gives us God’s response. (Read.)

This does not mean that God changed. It has always been His way that when people truly repent of their sins, He forgives and cleanses and forgets. God worked in the hearts of the people of Nineveh, gave them repentance, and then reward them by sparing their lives as though it were something which they had done. In the last chapter we will get into an estimate of the population of the city of Nineveh, but let me anticipate that

by saying that the estimates run from 600,000 to 1,000,000. Probably the lower number is more accurate. But think of it! There were hundreds of thousands of Ninevites who through the preaching of the Word of God by one man, were drawn into the kingdom of God. Jonah's Savior became their Savior, and their Savior is our Savior.

What lessons can we learn from this third chapter of Jonah?

We learn about the amazing grace of God to the Ninevites, as well as to Jonah.

We learn the importance and the great effectiveness of the simple preaching of the Gospel of God's grace.

We learn about the mighty power of God Who turned a whole city to Himself, and to His Son. Cf. Acts 4:12.

So let us not be pulled in to man's ways. The Spirit of God despises our drums and our music which is brought in from the world, our glorification of men. Let the world go its way, but let us learn the ways of the Lord which are so evident here in the book of Jonah, and let us do His will for His glory. Then watch to see how He works. It is our responsibility to preach the Word; the Lord determines when and how His Word will be used.

THE PROPHECY OF JONAH

Chapter 4

Family Camp – August 21, 1997

Probably all of us would have liked this Prophecy of Jonah if the story had ended with chapter 3. There we had the opportunity of seeing how Jonah had been restored to fellowship with the Lord, and how he had obediently gone to Nineveh. There he saw what surely must be the greatest movement of the Spirit of God ever. Even on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 there were only 3,000 saved. I say “only” even though I have been stirred to the depths in my own heart many times as I have read that account of the coming of the Spirit, and the blessing that followed. But 3,000 is very small by comparison with a possible 600,000 who were saved in Nineveh. Judgment upon that wicked city of Nineveh was averted as the prophet preached, and as God manifested His saving grace and power in transforming cruel, wicked Ninevites, into the children of God. If the book had ended with chapter 3 we would have put it down feeling that at last all was well.

But all was not well. Jonah had come back to the Lord, but the attitude in his heart had not changed even though it was evident that God had done a mighty work in many hearts. And so instead of learning that Jonah was going to stay in Nineveh for a time to make sure that the new converts were well established in the truth, that he was teaching them how to pray and how to walk with God, we see to the contrary a very angry prophet! He was not only “very angry,” but he was “displeased...exceedingly.” These words clearly indicate that Jonah was *furious*—furious with God! All of the hatred that had been in his heart toward the Ninevites was still there. He was not a true missionary. He was not a true evangelist. He is the example of a man who was outwardly obedient, and whose message was true, but whose heart was not right. We could not see that in chapter 3, but the Lord Who is never ignorant of anything, knew that there was yet more work to do in the heart of his servant.

Isn't this often the case with us that most things are right in our relationship with the Lord, but not everything. God wants everything to be right. Jonah had experienced the grace of God in chapter 2, but he needed to drink more deeply of that grace. In fact, he had to be grateful for the grace that God exercised toward him, but he deeply resented what God in His grace had done for the Ninevites. Many expositors have recognized that Jonah was similar to the unjust servant the Lord told about in Matt.18:23-35. His master forgave him 10,000 talents, but he would not forgive his fellow servant who owed him 100 pence.

But in his anger we do see that Jonah turned to the Lord in prayer. He seemed to justify the feelings he had back in chapter 1, and also to justify his attempt to get to Tarshish, at the same time in his “hot” anger he was practically charging God with doing the wrong thing in forgiving the Ninevites. We want the grace of God for ourselves, but somehow we feel differently when God is gracious to those we may not like. If it had not been for the attributes which Jonah rehearsed before the Lord, the situation with Jonah would have been very different.

Look at the way Jonah described God.

He is “a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger (which Jonah was not), and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.” How thankful we can all be that God is the kind of a God He is. If God did not possess these glorious attributes, there would be no hope for any sinner. But instead of rejoicing in what God is, Jonah made his request in verse 3. (Read.) How pathetic was the condition of this servant of the Lord. He had so much to rejoice about, but he was robbing himself of that blessing because of the hardness of his own heart.

If the Lord had struck Jonah dead on the spot, we probably would not be very surprised. Just like when you

read the account of the children of Israel in their journey from Egypt to Canaan, we all have to marvel that God did not destroy the whole nation and start over with Moses, as He said on one occasion He was going to do. But then, when we look at our own lives we see many reasons to marvel at the Lord's patience and His grace with each one of us. Sometimes we have reason to be thankful that the Lord does not answer our prayers. God didn't answer this request for Job, and neither did He answer this request for Elijah.

In the case of Jonah, what did the Lord do? He asked Jonah a simple, but very heart-searching question: "Doest thou well to be angry?"

There are times when it is wrong not to be angry. There are even times when God is angry. But it is not "well" to be angry when God transforms the lives of sinners. Jonah's heart was so full of prejudice against the Ninevites that he could not see the benefit which even Israel would experience because of what God had done in Nineveh. We are not told that Jonah answered the question, but we can be sure that it made him think. And possibly it even calmed him down from the anger that is described in verse 1 of this chapter. Instead Jonah left the city of Nineveh where he had expressed himself so strongly to God, made himself a shelter, and looked to see what might become of the city.

This seems to indicate that Jonah thought that even after all that had taken place, the Lord might still destroy the city. Expositors argue about whether or not this was before or after the forty days. It seems to me that it would fit in better if it were during the forty days. But that is beside the point. Perhaps Jonah had put his own interpretation upon the question that the Lord had asked him, and had taken it to mean, "Why are you angry when I still intend to destroy the city?"

However that may be, the Lord exercised his grace toward Jonah and He sovereignly "prepared a gourd." I don't think we are to assume that Jonah knew that this was something that the Lord did especially for him. But we are to assume that the Lord did this in just the same way that the Lord had "prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah" at the end of chapter 1. It was not just by chance that that fish came by and swallowed Jonah. The Lord sent the fish at just the right time to save Jonah from drowning. And with all of the controversy that has raged through the years about that "great fish," and whether or not a whale is capable of swallowing a man, the word "prepared" might very well indicate that the Lord made a special edition of a "great fish" which was capable of swallowing Jonah.

In the same way, this gourd did not just grow right there by Jonah's shelter at that particular time; God planted it. This was a plant called a *palma-christi* which is sometimes called a castor oil plant. It grows rapidly to eight to ten feet. There is only one leaf on each branch, but the leaves are usually a foot across. And so a grown plant can provide good shelter from the heat. However, it dies quickly when it is injured in any way. Jonah's gracious God was being very gracious to him. And it is very likely that when we read that "the Lord God made it to come up over Jonah," that this, too, was another miracle which the Lord performed for the benefit of Jonah. Needless to say, now Jonah was "exceeding glad," just as he had been exceedingly angry. But the text does not indicate that he recognized the hand of the Lord in this, or that God had done something special for him.

All of this was to teach Jonah a lesson.

The next day a worm which the Lord had "prepared," attacked the plant, and killed it. At the same time "God prepared a vehement east wind" (another special act of God), and Jonah who had been so comfortable as he waited to see what God might do to the city, now became so miserable that he wanted to die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." And then another question came from the Lord.

The question that the Lord asked this time was, “Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?” This meant that Jonah was now angry on behalf of the gourd because the worm had attacked it, and killed it, and then the east wind came up to make Jonah’s discomfort greater than it had been before the gourd grew up. *In other words, Jonah was exercising compassion toward the gourd!*

Jonah was not about to admit his folly, but said, “I do well to be angry, even unto death.” This led to question #3. (Read verses 10 and 11.)

Jonah had shown compassion for the gourd. But he had not planted it, nor watered it, nor nourished it. It came up one night, and was gone the next. And Jonah, amazingly, how shown more compassion for that plant, which he had nothing to do with, than he had manifested toward all of the living beings in Nineveh. You talk about majoring in minors, that is what Jonah had done. *Blinded by his own prejudice a plant meant more to him than a person!* Jonah needed to have his thinking straightened out. He needed to have his mind renewed!

Now for the question. (Read verse 11.)

In contrast with Jonah’s relationship with the gourd (which was nothing), the Lord had brought those Ninevites into existence. He had provided for them. He had made them the great city that they were, and, although He was not responsible for their sin, we know that they achieved their greatness only by His blessing (which they did not recognize). But more than this, since God had done a saving work in their hearts, this would mean that they had been chosen to be saved before the foundation of the world. In a special sense, a redemptive sense, although they were not Jews, they were the people of God. And the Lord had brought them to Himself through the preaching of Jonah.

Besides, notice the reference to the numbers here: “Sixscore thousand persons.” A score is twenty. Sixscore then is 120, and so “sixscore thousand persons” means 120,000 persons. What about these persons he was speaking about? The Lord said that they could not “discern between their right hand and their left.”

Do you remember how old you were when you could tell your parents what was your right hand, and what was your left hand? I thought we might get some of our younger children up here and ask them to show us their right hand and their left hand, but I will let you parents who have young children run that experiment yourselves. Generally this is taken to mean children 3 and under. Now if your child is a little older, and still does not know which hand is which, don’t worry. They will learn that in due time. *But do you see what God was saying?”*

He was saying that there were in the city of Nineveh a large number of children who did not have the discernment to tell their right hand from their left. They, too, were sinners. They were born in sin, but they had not yet come to the place where they were involved in the sins which their parents were known for. I don’t think that the Lord was speaking of what is sometimes called “the age of accountability,” but He was speaking about the importance of reaching the children while they are still very young and before their lives have become corrupted by the sin that is in their own hearts. What a passage this is for evangelizing children! Those of us who have had parents who knew the Lord, and who taught us, and prayed for us, and told us about our need for a Saviour, have very, very much to be thankful for because of God’s grace to us. And it is based upon this number of young children that expositors and theologians have come up with the figure that there had to be more than a half a million people in Nineveh, and so probably 600,000 is a good estimate!

Have you notice (I’m sure you have) that sin is making its way into the lives of children at younger and younger ages? Children who are not even in their teens are engaging in sexual immorality. It is because as a

nation we have turned against the Lord, and we are reaping the harvest of our godlessness in many ways. But one of the most tragic ways is in the way it is affecting the lives of our children.

And so the Lord was saying to Jonah, “If you can’t rejoice because of what I have done in the hearts of those formerly wicked Ninevite adults and young people, think of what it will mean in their lives of their children who may never be guilty of the sins of their parents because their parents have heard the Gospel from your mouth, and their lives have forever been changed. Once they were godless and wicked and cruel; now they have become children of God by the grace of God..”

The prophecy ends with, “and also much cattle.” Those of you who were here this morning notice, I hope, that when the king of Nineveh issued his edict, it included not only the people, but also their animals. Their animals were a vital part of their wealth as well as of their livelihood. For the animals to be brought expressed the total dedication of the people to the Lord. And here at the end of the prophecy the Lord was indicating to Jonah that when people come to the Lord, even their animals benefit from it.

I am not saying that animals are to be saved like we are, but I am saying that all of creation has felt the dreadful effects of sin. This is what the Apostle Paul was speaking about when he wrote the eighth chapter of Romans where we have these words:

Rom 8:18-25

18 For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

19 For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.

20 For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope,

21 Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

22 For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.

23 And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.

24 For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?

25 But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.

Now let me summarize the main lessons for Jonah chapter 4.