

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.