

JONAH

David C F Wright

Introduction and Chapter One

Jonah is the only one of the so-called minor prophets that the Lord Jesus referred to . There is an indirect reference in John 7.54. Both the Lord and Jonah came from Galilee.

There is also a direct reference in Matthew 12. 40, known as the sign of Jonah, where the Lord says that as Jonah was three days and nights in the whale's belly so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth referring to Christ's death and resurrection.

We must be wary of typology by which some say that Old Testament characters are types of Christ. No one can be that. Jonah was reluctant to do God's Will; the Lord Jesus was not. See such verses as Isaiah 46. 5. No one can compare with the Lord and no one should.

God spoke to Jonah for him to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, to preach to them to repent of their evil ways and great wickedness.

This prophet was the son of Amittai who is referred to in 2 Kings 14. 25 and he prophesied mercy upon Israel which prophecy was fulfilled in the reign of Jeroboam II (791-753 BC). The name Amittai means truth and the name Jonah means dove.

As in the book of Amos, God shows his interest in other nations and not just in Israel and Judah. Other prophets had spoken against Assyria but the Lord instructs Jonah to get up and go to Nineveh, the great city situated on the east bank of the river Tigris near modern Mosul about 500 miles from Joppa.

But Jonah, sometimes called the reluctant missionary, ran away from the presence of the Lord and choose to go to Tarshish which most scholars believe was on the west coast of Spain or Portugal. Arriving at the port of Joppa, he found a ship bound for Tarshish and paid his fare for a journey which may have been over 2,500 miles away if this place was in Spain or Portugal. Some have said it might have been in Sardinia.

Tarshish was a place rich in silver, tin, iron and lead (Ezekiel 27. 12, Jeremiah 10. 9) where jobs were probably readily available.

He was running away and in the completely opposite direction. Why did he run away?

It may have been due to the knowledge that Nineveh was both a cruel and hostile city.

Or the rabbis may have suggested that Jonah foresaw the repentance of Nineveh and this could reflect adversely upon the Israelites who, despite many warnings, had not repented of their own evil ways and idolatry. Jonah would not be willing to see mercy shown to Israel's enemies.

It could be that Jonah would lose face if his words were not fulfilled.

A severe storm broke out on the voyage and the pagan sailors were afraid, although they would be used to storms at sea . They tried to row the ship to land. They cast lots to determine who was responsible for this tempest, after they had thrown goods overboard to lighten the vessel. Jonah was fast asleep below decks.

The lot fell upon Jonah who was asked why this potential disaster had occurred. In verse 9, Jonah

admits that he was a Hebrew who feared the Lord who made the sea and the dry land. The sailors understood that Jonah was running away from the Lord because the prophet had indicated this. They asked Jonah, “What shall we do with you? How can we make the waters calm?”.

Jonah shows his concern for the sailors and requests that they cast him into the sea . Was this also a plea for suicide? Was it Jonah’s way out of his dilemma? If this was done, what assurance was there that the sea would be at peace and the sailors safe?

There is a lesson here. In the UK and the West, we may have the idea that God is not interested in pagan nations and, as a consequence, we do not have any interest either and do not care.

What was the great fish? The Hebrews were not a seafaring nation and even today some people describe air-breathing mammals as fish. Jonah was swallowed by a great fish to save him from drowning, to discipline him and to foreshadow the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus who also came from Galilee. It may also look forward to the swallowing of the Jews by the Babylonians.

What was Jonah’s psychological state ? Some have said that he was giving his life to save the sailors from drowning. Others liken this to the death and resurrection of Jonah since Jonah was three days and nights inside the great fish and so this is compared with the Lord Jesus. Some have opined that Jonah was unconscious all, or some of the time in the belly of the great fish.

Chapter Two

Jonah prayed to God from inside the great fish. He cried to the Lord because of His circumstances and affliction and God heard Him. Jonah laments that God has cast him in the sea and the flood of waters and the billows overcame him but the prophet also believes that God had cast him out of His Holy Presence. He now sets his own sight on the holy temple since he has remembered the Lord as a result of having been at the bottoms of the mountains with the bars of the earth around him. Some said that the bars that surrounded Jonah were the ribs of the great fish and that weeds also surrounded him.

It is interesting to note that he quotes from the Psalms. He knew the Scriptures.

In verse 8, the prophet speaks of vanities which is translated as vain idols and that those who practise idolatry forsake the possibility of mercy. However, Jonah will sacrifice with thanksgiving in his heart and honour his vows. He also makes the statement that salvation is of the Lord.

There are those who preach that salvation is in the church or in the rituals of the church and there are denominations that claim that salvation is only available in their teachings and the adherence to those teachings.

The chapter ends with God speaking to the great fish who vomits Jonah on to dry land.

Chapter Three

We do not know where Jonah landed. The journey throughout this great city of Nineveh would take three days where Jonah was to have first hand experience of ‘ foreigners ‘.

The word of the Lord had come to him the second time and the message was the same. His message was for the city to repent within forty days or the city would be overthrown. The city did repent and they believed God and all the people wore sackcloth and ashes, outward signs of humbling before God. Even animals were draped with sackcloth and there was a universal fast.

Now there is no historical account of such repentance in Assyrian records but the people were to turn from all their evil ways and God would turn from His fierce anger and not perform His intended punishment upon these people.

The unanswered question is why did these cruel and hostile people repent ? Had they seen Divine punishment on other nations ? Was Jonah a mighty preacher? Did Nineveh want a fresh start ? Did the city already have a group of people who wanted reform?

Chapter Four

Jonah's response to Nineveh's repentance made him very angry and he asks the Lord to take his life. He criticises God for His mercy and kindness and for withdrawing the intended Divine punishment on this wicked city. Jonah is here disputing God's Lordship and power. He has forgotten the grace that the Lord had shown to him.

Jonah feared the possible consequences upon Israel following Nineveh's repentance. God had shown mercy to Israel's enemies who had been spared death. Jonah had an attitude problem and reminds us that he wanted to flee to Tarshish. The Lord poses the rhetorical question to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry "

The prophet makes himself a booth, where he can sit and watch what would happen in Nineveh. The Lord made a gourd grow and give him shelter which calmed him down somewhat. This plant was known for its rapid growth. But God also prepared a worm which later attacked the plant so that it withered. Now the fierce sun beat down upon Jonah and there was also a vehement east wind and Jonah again expresses his wish to die. God asks Jonah if he is angry about the gourd and the reply is that he had very right to be angry.

The lesson is clear . It is one thing to be angry over a plant which was not spared, but it is another thing that one hundred and twenty thousand people had been spared in Nineveh and at a time when these people did not know their left hand from their right hand.

Perhaps we should comment briefly upon Jonah's state. He was depressed and suicidal.

Depression can affect Christians and loneliness is one of the most frequent causes. I know of people who live in areas where there is no assembly of believers who faithfully adhere to the Scriptures and, consequently, they are isolated and alone. A famous hymn writer, William Cowper, suffered from severe mental illness and was twice confined. Elijah and Jeremiah, two fine men of God, suffered from such things and I have heard Christians in the medical profession say that no Christian should experience such trauma. I have a dear friend who has suffered greatly because a Pentecostal church said she was not saved because she has not spoken in tongues. She now hates Christianity.

In the days in which we live, Christian virtue is dismissed and secularism has taken over. Even some Christians can be cruel and false. Some self-promote and are proud; they can be judgemental, gossip since they are nosy and want to know all about you and they call this fellowship! ...and some wreck the lives of others; they invent new doctrines which are astray from the Bible. All of this can be depressing and true believers can, understandingly, be distressed.

Depression and other mental conditions are illnesses just as cancer and heart disease are.

How are we to consider Jonah's attitude to Nineveh and for us today?

The verses in Luke 6.27 apply. We are to love, or respect our enemies and do good to those that hurt

us, to bless those who curse us spitefully and to pray for them.. We may all have ‘people from Nineveh’ in our lives.

(1803)

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