

Jonah

INTRODUCTION

Jonah was the first of the prophets whose writings have come down to our times. His place is, therefore, unique and pre-eminent. The story of his life was probably written by himself, and the fact that he could write a story with such humiliating disclosures, and yet with such extraordinary candor, goes far to redeem the reputation which he so sadly lost.

Jonah means "a dove." Therefore, it is not unlikely that he was constitutionally timid like Jeremiah in a later age, and for that very reason selected by God for the severest ministries, on the principle that when God has to say anything harsh He never wants a messenger who could color it by any personal severity or unkindness.

A mightier power than Israel was rising on the eastern horizon. It was the kingdom of Assyria, whose splendid capital, Nineveh, had become the most magnificent city of the world. Its stupendous ruins are still the wonder of the student and archaeologist. Already it was evident that this world-wide monarchy was to be a menace of Israel's future, and Jonah naturally in his selfish patriotism had thought of Nineveh with feelings only of hostility and alarm.

What a revelation, therefore, it must have been to him to receive a message bidding him to go to Nineveh as the messenger of Jehovah's mercy. Every fiber in his being rose in protest and rebellion. The idea was intolerable, and hurrying away under the impulse of the hour, he fled from the hateful task, and, as he imagined, from the presence of the Lord. The rest of the story is too familiar to need to be told in detail.

We all know how readily the devil's providences were found awaiting him at Joppa. How easily he sank into insensibility and lay asleep in the hold of the ship. How God's police followed close upon the fugitive until the very heathen were terrified and became his reprovers. How conscience at last awakened him, and compelled him to sit as the judge upon his own case; and condemn himself to a vicarious death to save his innocent companions. We know how mercy was tempered with judgment and the sea monster became his refuge and deliverer. How his deep penitence was at last rewarded by God's forgiving mercy and he came forth from the depths of the sea like a man resurrected from the very grave. How once more the commission was renewed and the prophet was ready to obey. How his ministry in Nineveh was crowned with a success unprecedented in all ages and the greatest revival ever known swept over a heathen empire, from the king on the throne to the very cattle in the stall the land was covered with the sackcloth of repentance. How the mercy of God met the penitent prayer of the people of Nineveh and the threatened judgment was averted. And then how Jonah came back again to his old self-life and once more rebelled against the will of Jehovah. And finally how God met him with longsuffering patience and exhibition of His compassion that has, perhaps, no equal in any Bible scene.

At last the story ends with the strange spectacle of the penitent and angry prophet, blaming God because He had blasted Jonah's reputation by not destroying Nineveh according to His word. Along with this is the loving Father, delighting in mercy and telling His angry child how reasonable it was that He should have compassion upon the little children and the very dumb brutes of the doomed city. The curtain falls with this sad picture of Jonah's disgrace. The only comfort left us is to go behind the scenes and see Jonah himself a little later telling the story of his own shame and magnifying Jehovah's grace. This is somewhat like Simon Peter, who tells us through Mark, in the Gospel left us by that evangelist, his secret in all the humbling details, how he had denied his blessed Master and been loved and forgiven. There is no comment, but the simple telling of the story by Peter is enough to let us know how deeply he repented. The story of Jonah is a companion picture, and we can forgive the prophet when we see the honest candor with which he puts himself in the dust that God may be glorified.

(The Christ in the Bible Commentary, A. B. Simpson)

Jonah 1:1-17

This book of Jonah is the first sample and earnest (done in a deeply sincere way) in the Old Testament of God's purpose, in the fullness of time, to offer to the Gentiles also, as well as to the Jews, "repentance unto life." It brings forth, in vivid contrast to Israel's impenitence, notwithstanding all her religious privileges, the readiness of the heathen to obey the first call of God. As the children hardened their necks against God's loving appeals, He would show them their exceeding guilt by the one instance of Jonah's mission to Nineveh, and its marvelous and immediate effect upon the Ninevites. Surely, if the penitent Assyrians condemned Israel's hardness of heart, much more will the heathen now, being gathered into Christ's fold out of uncivilized lands, rise in judgment against professing Christians who "neglect so great a salvation." Our privileges, being manifold greater than Israel's, bring with them the greater condemnation if neglected or abused.

(Bible Commentary, Jamieson, Fausset & Brown)

Why was Jonah apprehensive to go to Israel's enemies to proclaim the message of grace?

Jonah 2:1-10

The *time* of Jonah's prayer was when the three days and nights were all but passed. Feeling himself still safe, though entombed so long in the fish's belly, he takes his preservation so far as an earnest of God's purpose to grant him final deliverance. Secure that God, who had done so much, would fulfill the rest, he offers thanksgiving as though his prayers were heard, and he already delivered from his living sepulcher. A sense of God's favor restored to us, notwithstanding our transgressions, opens in thanksgivings the heart which had been closed with the fear of His anger.

(Bible Commentary, Jamieson, Fausset & Brown)

What is the significance of the words Jonah used in addressing God before prayer in Jonah 2:2? Did Jonah literally suffer (Jonah 2:3-4) what the Psalmist spiritually experienced in Psalms 42:6-8?

Jonah 3:1-10

An interval seems to have elapsed before Jonah was sent a second time to Nineveh. The gracious purpose of God in allowing this interval was probably to give time for the news of the miracle concerning Jonah to reach Nineveh, whose fate was so intimately connected with that of the prophet.

Jonah, after such contumacy (rebelliousness), might have seemed unworthy to be again accredited as the divine messenger. But the severe discipline which he had undergone was the preparation designed by God to adapt him for a high trust: and the same divine grace which not only restored Peter after his grievous fall, but also entrusted him with the charge to *feed* Christ's *sheep* and *lambs*, qualified Jonah, too, after his restoration, for fulfilling aright the difficult and responsible mission to heathen Nineveh. So entirely can God transform vessels of filthy clay into vessels of honor to His glory.

(Bible Commentary, Jamieson, Fausset & Brown)

Explain how when God repents of the evil (Jonah 3:10) that He said He would do unto men, the change is not really in Him, but in them.

Jonah 4:1-11

How sad a picture of man's fallen nature it is, that what causes joy in the presence of the angels of God often causes grief and displeasure to man! The saying of the hundreds of thousands of sinners in Nineveh, which exhibited the mercy of God in its brightest colors, roused the angry zeal of Jonah. Like many, he would govern God's world better than God himself. He, who had been most of all indebted to the mercy of God, quarrels with the mercy of God, because God showed it towards Israel's enemy, Nineveh. Let us, while we condemn Jonah, remember how often we have indulged in repining against God's providence.

(Bible Commentary, Jamieson, Fausset & Brown)

Jonah's misplaced values became painfully obvious. God challenges him to consider the value of the Ninevites; those "who cannot discern between their right hand and their left" is an idiom indicting that the Ninevites, though not morally innocent, were helpless to know how to escape their plight before God. Without God sending a messenger they would remain trapped in their wickedness. Jonah's journey from his refusal to go to Nineveh to his great concern for the dying

gourd revealed qualities in him that he never realized when going about his normal routine in life. **May we also expect experiences in life that expose our inner motives so that our character may be graciously shaped accordingly?**

Jonah was taught that God is the same gracious, merciful God in relation to the heathen, as He is in relation to Israel. But Jonah is so depressed at this point that he desires to leave this life. **Is Jonah's self-will so blind that it cannot see anything else save its own aims? Is true happiness when we make the will of God our own will?**