

INTRODUCTION TO 32ND BIBLEBOOK

JONAH (783-743 B.C.)(3rd)

A. THE WRITER, RECIPIENTS AND DATE OF THE BOOK OF JONAH.

Jonah is the fifth of the twelve Minor Prophets. 'Jonah' means ...

The Bible does not tell us who wrote the book that tells the story of Jonah. It is possible that Jonah himself wrote it, because his prayer is recorded in the first person. But it is equally possible that another unknown, but inspired person recorded it. He lived in a town in Galilee, which means that the statement of the Pharisees in John 7:52, that there never was *a prophet who came from Galilee*, was not true!

Jonah was commissioned to proclaim God's Word to Nineveh. This was the capital of the great Assyrian Empire, which at that time was beginning to expand its boundaries to the West, until a half a century later it destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel (721 B.C.). Thus, *like Amos, Jonah was another missionary prophet*. His task was also not easy, because he had to proclaim his message to the most powerful nation at that time of history, to people with a different language and culture and to people who had no background knowledge of the living God. Jonah disliked the task that God had given him, probably because he feared that God would transfer his love from Israel to Assyria. So he boarded a ship and sailed in the opposite direction of Nineveh.

But even a prophet cannot escape from the living God. A storm overtook the ship and Jonah realised that it happened because he was fleeing from God. Jonah confessed his sin to God and was eventually thrown overboard in order to save the ship. He was swallowed up by a great fish. In the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed a stirring prayer to God. Finally he was vomited out on dry land. *Jonah was given a second chance and he was once more commissioned to proclaim God's Word to Nineveh.*

This time, Jonah obeyed and he preached, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The people of Nineveh repented. However, Jonah had not expected this to happen and their repentance greatly disturbed him. He became angry, because he had secretly hoped that they would not repent and consequently be destroyed. Jonah built a shelter outside the city, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen (4:5). God caused a vine to spring up by itself and it gave shade to Jonah. Jonah was pleased with the vine. But when God sent a worm to destroy the vine, Jonah was very angry. This showed that Jonah was inconsistent and utterly selfish. He was angry that God did not destroy Nineveh and he was angry because God destroyed the vine. God rebuked Jonah, because he was more concerned with a vine than with a great city with 120 000 people!

The book of Jonah is not a myth, nor an allegory. What is written in the book really happened. Miracles like being swallowed up by a large fish and being vomited out on dry land belong to *history* and not to allegories. The Lord Jesus Christ himself teaches in Matthew 12:39-40 that Jonah was *a historical person* and what happened to him was *a real historical event*.

2 Kings 14:25 says that Jonah lived and prophesied just before or during the reign of Jeroboam II, that is, during the years **783-743 B.C.**

B. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF THE BOOK OF JONAH.

1. God's mercy is not limited to one nation, namely Israel.

Not only the New Testament, but also the Old Testament teaches that *God is concerned with all the nations* that he created in the world. Already in Genesis 12:3, God promised that in one descendant of Abraham, he would bless all the families of people on earth! In the book of Jonah, God is gracious to the seamen and to the foreign nation of Assyria. These facts point to the New Testament revelation of God's plan.

2. God's people have the duty to make God known to other people.

God sent Jonah to the Assyrian Empire so that they may know about the living God. 1 Peter 2:9-10 teaches that people, who previously did not belong to God's people and afterwards joined God's people, should declare the praises of God who called them out of their previous darkness into his present wonderful light.

3. God's plan for people cannot fail.

God's *first plan* for Jonah was to go and proclaim a message to Nineveh. Jonah disobeyed and failed to accomplish this plan.

But according to Jonah 3:1, God had a *second plan* for Jonah, namely, to nevertheless go and proclaim his message to Nineveh. Jonah obeyed and God's plan was accomplished. *God does not just have one plan for our lives. If we fail to accomplish his first plan for our lives, he has a second plan ready that is as good as his first plan!* When we repent of our disobedience to his first plan, then God will have compassion, forgive us and give us another chance to serve him in his second plan.

To put this in another way, the Sovereign God has the means to bring a person to the accomplishment of his plans. Because God is the Sovereign God in the universe, no one and nothing can cause him to fail to accomplish his plans on earth. In Isaiah 14:24,27 God says, “Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand. For the Lord Almighty has purposed and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?”

4. God is gracious.

God's patience with sinners like Jonah and his patience with sinful nations like the Assyrians when they repent, *is contrasted with Jonah's impatience* when he desires to see God's destruction of wicked people. Jonah even got angry with God's patience! But God's patience is an expression of his love that wants to lead people to repentance.

Jonah 2:8 says that people, who cling to worthless idols, will forfeit God's grace. But Jonah 4:2 says that people, who cling to the living God, will never forfeit God's grace. God's grace forgave the disobedience of Jonah and also forgave the past idolatry of the people of Nineveh.

Nevertheless, *repentance in one generation of people does not guarantee salvation in the next generation!* God forgave the people of Nineveh of that generation because they repented. But about a hundred years later, the prophet Nahum (chapter 3) prophesied the imminent destruction of Nineveh, because of the sins of another generation living in Nineveh.

5. Jonah himself is a type of Jesus Christ.

The only sign that Jesus gave to the unbelieving Pharisees and teachers of the law was the sign of Jonah¹. As Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days before he was rescued, likewise Jesus Christ would be resurrected from the dead on the third day².

C. THE DIVISION OF THE BOOK OF JONAH.

The book of Jonah may be given the title, '*God's patience and love contrasted with Jonah's impatience and anger*'.

It has four parts:

- **Jonah 1.** Jonah's disobedience to God's commission and its results.
- **Jonah 2.** Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish and his release.
- **Jonah 3.** Jonah's preaching to the people of Nineveh and their repentance.
- **Jonah 4.** God's patience and love contrasted with Jonah's impatience and anger.

¹ Matthew 12:39-41

² Matthew 16:21