

BIBLE STUDIES

*“Men From The Past With A Message For The Present”***JONAH: THE BIGGEST BIGOT IN THE BIBLE!**
Jonah 1-4

The story in the book of Jonah may sound fishy, but it is a true story. Jesus confirmed it when He said, *“As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”* (Marr.12:40)

My wife is a retired educator. She has a children’s book titled “Alexander And The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day,” written by Judith Viorst in 1972. The Jonah story could be given the same title: “Jonah And The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day” written in about 800 B.C!

The Jonah story is told in the Bible book by the same name. It is a small book of only four chapters but it has a large message for all. One of the most common outlines of the book, originator unknown, is:

- Chapter one, Jonah Running Away From God;
- Chapter two, Jonah Running To God;
- Chapter three, Jonah Running For God;
- Chapter four, Jonah Running Ahead of God.

However, I will develop this message in a totally different manner, attempting to put the emphasis upon the main message that is in the book. It is certainly not allegorical and not only historical but theological. I will divide the drama into the five following divisions with the major emphasis upon the last division. The divisions are:

- The Missional Element in The Narrative;
- The Geographical Element in The Narrative;
- The Nautical Element in The Narrative;
- The Carnal Element in The Narrative;
- The Theological Element in The Narrative.

Let us consider the first four divisions briefly for the major point of the story and the climax is unfolded in the fifth last division. God saves the “punch-line” until the last. Now, let us review an old story from a somewhat new perspective.

THE MISSIONAL ELEMENT IN THE NARRATIVE.

“The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’” (Jonah 1:1)

Please do not forget that this entire episode began with the calling of a man to be a foreign missionary! The very first words of the story get lost upon the average reader the instant the second verse is read, which says, *“But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.”* The story begins with the focus upon foreign missions. The real purpose of the

story gets lost to the mind of the average reader because of the dramatic events between Jonah's commission and the culmination of his mission.

God called and commissioned Jonah to be a foreign missionary. He was to be God's Jewish emissary appointed to go to the Gentile city of Nineveh and give God's message to the heathen Assyrian inhabitants. But because of his prejudice against the Assyrians, he rebelled against God and went in the opposite direction. God used a most unusual experience to turn him around.

When reviewing some comments on the book, one gets the impression that the message of the book is only about a run-away prophet, a terrible storm and a big fish. These aspects of the story are incidental to the main message of the book which is about a sovereign God of grace, compassion, love and mercy Who is "*Not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*" (II Peter 3:9) God said, "Go!" and Jonah said "No!" and now the plot of the story must be fleshed out in the remainder of the book.

Jonah had a mission to accomplish. He is told to: "*go preach*"; he had a message to deliver: "*Repent or else!*" However, Jonah was racist, bigoted and prejudiced. He hated the Assyrians – they were the enemy of Israel. So to escape this unpleasant assignment he went in the opposite direction. Jonah was willing to prophesy in Israel but he rebelled at the idea of becoming a foreign missionary to people for whom he had an extreme dislike.

God does not give us the prerogative of deciding who is worthy to be a candidate for His salvation and who is not. Bigoted believers, like Jonah, do not have the right to withhold the life-giving message from anyone who is "*dead in trespasses and in sins.*" (Eph. 2:1) God's mercy and salvation is for everyone, not just those we think deserve Him. If only those that deserved His love got it, we all would be forever lost.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL ELEMENT IN THE NARRATIVE.

Three countries and three cities are in view in the story: Joppa, in Israel; Nineveh, in Assyria and Tarshish, in Spain.

Nineveh, No!

Nineveh was located on the Tigris River, in what is today Iraq, near the present day city of Mosul. It flourished from about 800 to 610 B.C. as the capital of the Assyrian empire which was the most powerful and dominating empire on earth in Jonah's day. Its population was about 600,000 including 120,000 children. The circumference of the city was 60 miles.

Today, Nineveh is just a vast stretch of ancient ruins. My brother is an archeologist and has been to Nineveh on two occasions. He informs me that Nineveh is located "as the crow flies, 550 miles from Joppa. By road from Joppa to Nineveh is 700 miles."

Assyria was a powerful, evil nation and Israel's most dreaded enemy. The Assyrians had committed terrible atrocities against the people of Israel. During its time of power, the Assyrian empire conquered the northern Israelite kingdom of Israel, with their capital at Samaria, and transported them away into captivity. Traveling into their midst would have

been frightening.

Nineveh was most likely the largest city in the entire world at that point in time. It was enemy territory. The inhabitants were a foreign, fierce and faithless Gentile people. The Living Bible paraphrases the last part of verse 2 by saying that the wickedness of Nineveh was such that "it smells to highest heaven." The Assyrian Empire was well known in all of the ancient world for its wickedness and cruelty.

Joppa Jump-off.

Joppa is about 30 miles north-west from Jerusalem between Caesarea and Gaza. Its harbor naturally made it the main port of Jerusalem. Here Jonah "*took ship to flee from the presence of the Lord.*"

It is one of the oldest towns in Asia. The wood cut in Lebanon by Hiram's men for Solomon was brought in floats to Joppa (2 Chr. 2:16); here also, the material for the building of the second temple was unloaded. (Ezra 3:7) It was at Joppa, at the house of Simon the tanner that Peter took a vacation and while there he had his vision about tolerance. (Acts 9:36-43) Jonah could have benefited from such a vision!

Today it is known as Jaffa. The city now comprises the southern part of the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality. Its present population is said to be about 500,000. I have had the privilege of visiting that area on several occasions and always think of Jonah's departure from that harbor and his subsequent submersion excursion.

Tarshish Tour.

Instead of going to Nineveh which was 700 miles east of Jerusalem, he decides to go sailing 2000 miles west of Jerusalem. He heads for Tarshish, which was the farthest point known to him. It was a Phoenician outpost near Gibraltar, in southwest Spain, at the very edge of the Mediterranean world.

God told Jonah to go east to Nineveh and which direction did he go? West. When he got to Joppa there just happened to be a boat bound for Tarshish. To reach it would require a journey of approximately a year. Do you think it was a coincidence that there just happened to be a ship heading in the opposite direction from Nineveh at that time? I don't, because the devil always makes it convenient for us to disobey God.

THE NAUTICAL ELEMENT IN THE NARRATIVE.

Three sea-scenarios are seen in this dramatic story: the ship and the storm; the ship and the seamen and the ship and the sea creature.

The ship and the storm.

"But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD." (1:3)

When Jonah arrived at the sea port in Joppa, he paid the fare and went on board. He paid the fare all right, but the short trip was going to be more expensive than he could ever

imagine. Soon after the ship departed from Joppa a severe storm struck. That was no coincidence for *“The LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up.”* (1:4)

The ship and the seamen.

“Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep. So the captain came to him, and said to him, “What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish.” (1:5,6)

Most seamen are a superstitious sort. These sailors thought it strange that Jonah could sleep in such a storm and set about to question him. *“Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?”* So he said to them, *“I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, “Why have you done this?”* For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.” (1:8-10)

Notice what Jonah said to the seamen: *“I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven...”* I would have said, “Oh yeah! If you fear the Lord why don’t you obey Him! Nineveh is East, we’re headed West!”

The ship and the sea creature.

Jonah told them to *“Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me.”* (1:12) They did and *“The LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”* (1:17) It could be said that Jonah was the first sub-mariner. We always get into deep trouble when we disobey God!

God then ordered the fish to vomit Jonah out on the shore probably at Joppa or somewhere on the coast near Joppa, the same place he caught the ship bound for Tarshish three or four days earlier. In other words, Jonah is right back where he started.

Jonah got into hot water right from the beginning. First, he went from Jerusalem down to the water at Joppa; then he was on the water in the ship; next he was in the water when the sailors threw him overboard; then he was under the water when the fish swallowed him! When God went fishing for His wayward, water-soaked prophet, He knew exactly where to find him.

Then, *“The word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.”* So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.” (Jonah 3:1-3)

Jonah had a long journey ahead of him. As we have noted, it was about a 700 mile trip from the Joppa area to Nineveh so that it probably took him several weeks to get there. Instead of traveling upon the sea, for which he no doubt was glad, he was now trudging through sand!

He had plenty of time to re-think his errant escapade of escape from doing the will of God.

We can run from God but we cannot hide from God. He knows exactly where we are at any given moment! David knew that truth and said, *“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall fall on me,” Even the night shall be light about me; Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, But the night shines as the day; The darkness and the light are both alike to You.”* (Psalm 139:7-12)

THE CARNAL ELEMENT IN THE NARRATIVE.

“So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” (3:3,4) The city was so large that normally it was a three day walk from one side to the other. Jonah walked and warned beginning the first day he entered the city.

The result? *“So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them..... and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.”* (3:5,10)

That last verse in chapter three pushed Jonah over the edge. Therefore, Jonah was not happy because he did not like the Assyrians because of all of the harm that they had inflicted upon Israel. He was hoping that they would refuse to repent so that God would destroy them.

He may well have been the only prophet in history that hoped that his ministry would fail! He was greatly displeased, became angry and said to the LORD, *“O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish.”* (Jonah 4:1) His attempt at self-justification fell flat upon God’s ears.

Jonah’s temperament and God’s tenderness stand out in stark contrast in the dialog that takes place between the two. He was obstinate, quarrelsome, sullen, petulant, peevish, insolent, pessimistic and annoyed. It is surprising that Jonah had so soon forgotten the smelly belly of the fish! What a knuckle head! It is surprising how brazen Jonah was in speaking belligerently to God after the experience in the fish’s belly! How soon we forget God’s chastenings. Jonah was hard-hearted and hard-headed!

Jonah, a Jew, wanted to see this Gentile city destroyed by God. After reluctantly preaching the message God told him preach, he went camping on a hilltop outside the city to watch, hopefully, that God would yet destroy these horrible enemies of Israel. He was not a happy camper!

He built himself a little shelter against the sun and the hot wind. God is gracious to him and we are told that God *“provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine.”* (4:5) But he was about to get steamed again!

THE THEOLOGICAL ELEMENT IN THE NARRATIVE.

When we come to the last part of chapter four, God is putting Jonah through a post-graduate course in practical theology. Jonah knew more about God than he was practicing. Notice:

“But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.” But God said to Jonah, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?” “I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die.” But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (4:6-11)

The only thing that most people take away from this book is that a man was swallowed by a large fish. Actually, only three of the forty-eight verses in the book of Jonah talk about the fish. There is so much more to this book! G. Campbell Morgan correctly said, “Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God!”

On the surface this story is about Jonah, but a closer look reveals a deeper meaning. The book of Jonah is the story of God's great love for all the world, His plan to reach all the world, and one man's reluctance to be a part of that plan. The main thrust of the story is about the very heart of God. We must guard against relegating God to a secondary theme in the book.

The theological element overshadows the entire episode from the very first verse of the book to the very last verse. The first verse says, *“The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’”* (Jonah 1:1) And the last statement in the book reads, *“Should I not be concerned about that great city?”*

Summarizing the story from God’s perspective we learn that: Jonah was God’s missionary, on God’s Mission, to deliver God’s Message, accompanied by God’s Miracles; it was God’s Mercy that spared Nineveh, now, at the end, it was God’s Mentoring of which Jonah was the recipient. Who, then, is the principle Person in the whole scenario? God!

When we come to the over-arching theme of the whole story, it is about the big heart of God, not about the bigoted heart of Jonah. God cared about the people of Nineveh. By the lesson of the vine God was showing the value of the heathen in His sight. Jonah did not care about them. Jonah said to God, *“I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”* (Jonah 4:2,3)

He knew God to be sovereign, good, loving, compassionate and merciful. He knew that if he preached repentance to the Ninevites, they would repent and God would spare them. So, Nineveh is spared and Jonah walks away from the situation mad at God. He thinks that God should have destroyed the Ninevites. He is angry that God has given the gift of salvation to a

nation that Jonah finds undeserving. He felt that it was wrong for Jews to be sharing their God with people they considered heathen. So angry is Jonah that he says he'd rather die than live!

It may seem foolish to us that Jonah got mad at God for saving the Ninevites. Think about this, though. Are there people that you resent and would like to see lost forever? Are there those who have wronged you and you'd like to get revenge on them? This is just what Jonah wanted. He didn't want the Ninevites getting God's mercy; he wanted them to suffer! What a short memory Jonah had. He forgot the desperate situation out of which the Lord had delivered him. He should have been sensitive to the plight of the Ninevites, which was not an eternity in a fish's belly but in the depths of hell!

Jonah never does grasp this. He continues to whine about his own condition but feels no pity, compassion or mercy for the Ninevites. And that is the way the book ends. The way the book abruptly ends would give one the impression that God intends and expects us to write the ending. It ends with this question: "*Should I not be concerned about that great city?*" (4:11 niv)

How would you answer the question? There are those today, I suspect, who would rather see their enemies experience eternal suffering than eternal salvation. Do we believe and practice what Jesus said: "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you?*" (Matt.5:44)

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the Romans, said essentially what God said to Jonah: "*I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.*" (Rom.9:15) Jonah just didn't seem to get it. Do we?

Some lessons we can learn from this small book about our great God:

1. No one is fast enough to outrun God;
2. We cannot go far enough to get away from God;
3. We cannot hide from God;
4. God is sovereign;
5. God's plan for our lives cannot be negotiated, avoided or abridged;
6. The price of sin is high;
7. Christians also can be callous.
8. God is compassionate and longsuffering, "not willing that any should perish."

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