

NO ESCAPE

Jonah 1:15-2-10

Jonah is a familiar Bible character that is frequently used in sermons and in children's Bible lessons. It's a story that has a lot of visual stimulation that can stir our imaginations. There is a ship that gets caught in a storm and Jonah volunteers to be thrown overboard since God sent the storm to prevent him from getting away from what God told him to do. The large fish that swallowed Jonah and the idea that Jonah was alive and in the belly of the fish certainly create a lot of questions and vivid pictures that we imagine as we hear the account. Being vomited out on a beach and making his way 400 miles inland to a large city to pronounce God's judgment against the heathen residents followed by their repentance makes us think of miracles and we have happy thoughts because many cruelly sinful people turned from such bad behavior. We can somewhat identify with the feelings of Jonah who was disappointed and angry that the pagans were spared from God's judgment.

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. The Assyrians were a decadent and warlike people. The goddess of the Assyrians was Ishtar, goddess of sexual love and war. The society of the Assyrians was influenced by what they considered to be their deity. They were a promiscuous people who fought with nearly everyone. Their values were such that the wickedness of their society was like a foul odor that came up to heaven. You've heard of something that stinks to high heaven – this was Nineveh.

Jonah is a great story and many have thought of several morals of the account ranging from truths such as we cannot run away nor hide from God. There are lessons that we could learn such as evil-behaving people might stop being evil if they were confronted with the impending judgment of God that eventually follows sinful actions. Another "take away" from the story is that even when we have a negative reaction to what God does to show His love to those who persecute His people, God still looks out for our well-being.

Jonah was a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II around the year 760 BC. He is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 regarding a prophecy that the borders of Israel would be restored by Jeroboam II. From this account we learn that Jonah was from a small town near Nazareth in Israel. We also learn that Israel (as a nation) was still under God's redemptive protection since "the Lord had not (yet) proclaimed (as He did through Hosea) that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven" as we see in verse twenty-seven. Even though Jeroboam II was not a righteous person, God used him to make Israel great again (by blessing them) in an effort to get their attention so they would repent and come back to Him. During this period of prosperity, there was a time of relative peace since their main enemy Assyria had become much less aggressive. It is likely that this "less aggressive time" was directly related to what happened in the major city of Assyria (Nineveh) following the prophecy of pending judgment by the God of Israel that is written about in the book of Jonah.

The account which we know as the book of Jonah was not written by Jonah but was written about Jonah. The time when the account of Jonah was written is somewhere between 500 and 300 BC. In other words, it was written after the Jews returned to Judah following the exile period in Babylon. This would have been several centuries after the fall and dispersal of the people of the ten tribes from Israel that happened in 722 BC. We know a lot regarding the facts of the "account" of Jonah, but the important thing we need to discover is the "message" that is in the account.

God Calms – 1:15-17

¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. ¹⁷ And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Jonah 1:15–17 (ESV)

Now that we've jumped into the midst of an ongoing account, we find what might seem like a strange sequence of events that need an explanation. We are familiar with the account that the word of the Lord came to Jonah that instructed him to go to Nineveh and call out a message of God's judgment that the city would be overthrown. We remember that Jonah chose to go to the ends of the earth to avoid doing anything that might benefit the mortal enemy of his country. God's sovereign will was that the people of Assyria be warned of impending judgment and it was Jonah's free will to disobey and do just the opposite of what God wanted done. However, the lesson of such a conflict is that there is a price to pay if we choose to disobey what we know is the will of God.

The price that Jonah wound up paying was that God sent a storm into his life that messed up his plans so that he was not going to get to his destination that was 2500 miles away at the western end of the Mediterranean Sea. Do you think that Jonah had any concerns about anyone other than himself and the hated Assyrians? Probably not. However, his plan did not work out the way he imagined it would. The storm God sent to change what Jonah was doing impacted all the people on the ship he was on as well as any other ships in that area of the Mediterranean. He was oblivious that his disobedience impacted hundreds of other people. He was literally asleep.

Do you see that Jonah is the epitome of the nation of Israel? Jonah was chosen by God to be instrumental in calling the Assyrians back from their evil ways which would begin with a warning of judgment. Just as Jonah failed to follow the clear instructions of God, the nation of Israel did just the opposite of what God wanted them to do. In their elect status as the people of the Most High God, they had a low opinion of everyone else. Such strong negative feelings can prevent people from doing God's will or doing what we know to be the right thing to do. The nation of Israel was highly nationalistic which could be described as "patriotism on steroids."

Did not God send storms and other natural disasters to Israel to get their attention just as He did to get the attention of Jonah? Those storms that Israel encountered had about as much effect on them as the storm on the sea initially had on Jonah. It was as if Israel was asleep and failed to make any connection with the disastrous troubles they were having with their failure to follow God rather than following the ways of the world.

Apparently, the sailors aboard the ship were more spiritually sensitive than was Jonah who was a prophet of God. These sailors took on the role of what a prophet should do in that they prayed to their gods in the midst of the storm and they challenged Jonah to also pray to his God. Finally, (when the symptoms did not go away) they ask for help in determining the "root cause" of the problems they were having. These pagan sailors had already worked hard to treat the symptoms such as sacrificially throwing cargo overboard and doing all they could with the oars of the boat. Their divination (casting lots) pointed to Jonah as being the source of the storm. As we remember, Jonah confessed that he was the problem and offered himself to be sacrificed so the others on the ship would be saved. We could conclude from Jonah's willingness to sacrifice his own life for the benefit of others that he responded in same way as Jesus described the idea of the "greatest expression of love" in John 15:13.

Reluctantly, the sailors did as Jonah had instructed them and the storm ceased. In what happened to Jonah we can see that his being tossed into the sea was a prophetic allegory of what would happen to Israel in that they (both the northern and southern kingdoms) would be cast into the "sea of nations" in the dispersion of the northern group and the exile of the southern group.

We don't know a lot about the immediate impact of this event on the ten northern tribes but we do know that the seven decades of exile had a calming effect on the Jews and it taught them many valuable lessons especially regarding idol worship and the need to not neglect the word of God.

If Jonah represents all the Israelite being tossed overboard into the sea of all humanity, then we might argue that the "great fish" was the Babylonian nation that provided a degree of protection for the remnant of the Jews so that they maintained their identity and were eventually returned to their own land so they could prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

God Hears – 2:1-4

¹ Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ² saying, "I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. ³ For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. ⁴ Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.' Jonah 2:1-4 (ESV)

As we examine the prayer of Jonah in the belly of the fish, we see that immediately after he was in the water, he realized that he was in serious trouble. He was many miles from land and the logical outcome was that he would die. In that serious situation in which he found himself, he did the right thing in putting his trust in God by calling upon the Lord to save him. In the ancient literature, the watery expanse of sea was associated with the abode of the dead or what they called Sheol. In an interesting play on words, Jonah went from the "belly" of the abode of the dead to the "belly" of the great fish that was his salvation from physical death.

When Jonah was in the actual watery sea, his initial thoughts were that he was so far removed from the place of the living that he was out of God's sight. While that was not true since God sees all and sees everywhere, he was allowed to experience (in a very frightful way) what he thought he would accomplish by hiding and running away from God. As he experienced this sense of hopelessness and helplessness, he immediately wanted to get back in close proximity to God as one might experience by going to His temple. This same kind of hopelessness and helplessness was the emotion the people of the northern kingdom of Israel would experience when they were removed from their land forty years after the time of Jonah. The Jews would have experienced this also as they were being taken captive by the Babylonians two centuries later. In both cases the people had little association with God except in routine rites and rituals before they were confronted with the trauma of being removed from their homeland as God had promised would happen in Deuteronomy 28. When they realized their situation of actually being removed from the land, they (suddenly) wanted to see God's temple and be close to God.

God Saves – 2:5-10

⁵ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head ⁶ at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. ⁷ When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. ⁸ Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. ⁹ But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!" ¹⁰ And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. Jonah 2:5-10 (ESV)

We can see similarities of Jonah's prayer to the prayers of the Jews while they were in Babylonian exile which was their "belly of the fish." The longing of Jonah to be restored to a right relationship with God was similar to what the Jews in exile sensed. Both wanted to be able to actually see the temple of God since (for them) it represented the presence of God. Apparently, Jonah at least had some hope (while he was in the belly of the fish) that he would

make it back to his homeland. Many of the Jews in exile maintained a hope of returning to the Promised Land which they eventually did and rebuilt the Temple which had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

In his prayer, Jonah mentioned the trauma of the near-death experience while he was in the waters of the sea. Jonah went from being able to make choices in life to being at the mercy of the sea. He was totally surrounded and had no control. Even the sea weeds were hindrances to his survival. He had come to the very bottom (the root of the mountains) and those very mountains were an obstacle (like prison bars) to his even getting close to dry land. It was as if he were already dead and then (finally) he called upon the Lord from whom he had been trying to escape. God had already prepared a rescue for Jonah and it was as if he had been removed from the grave (commonly called the pit).

Starting in verse seven, we see that Jonah came to the point of agreeing to do what God told him to do. He prayed to God even in his sense of being removed from God's presence and (eventually) realized that God heard him. He also came to a realization that it was not his (Jonah's) privilege to decide who was worthy to be saved – salvation belongs to God. Then he promised that he would actually do what God had instructed him to carry out and then the ordeal of the sea and the belly of the fish ended.

What are the lessons for us? The consequence of national unfaithfulness will lead to being inundated by the roaring waves of the sea of nations. It may be that the people of the nation are not relocated but that the "waters of the sea" pour into the land where they are living. When a nation realizes that death or destruction is imminent, then the realization of that calamity should transform their thinking and result in acknowledging the sins for which God was judging them and then genuinely repent. The history of Israel was typified in Jonah, and the lessons it teaches are for all God's children for all time. If we ignore what God has called us to do, then our unfaithfulness will be our ruin. The storm will come and the only hope is in yielding to the chastisement and consenting to be punished, and then being obedient to God and His word.