

Jonah: Missionary God

Jonah Chapter 1: “The God of the Nations”

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Please turn with me to the book of Jonah. Let’s read chapter 1.

Jonah is one of the prime examples in the Old Testament of world missions. God’s mission to the world has roots back in the book of Genesis. God told Adam and Eve that the serpent’s head would be crushed by the seed of the woman. He was referring to the tempter, the devil, who in the form of a serpent had led them away from God. Later the Lord told Abraham that through his seed, or descendant, all the nations on earth would be blessed.

Verses 1 and 2 of Jonah chapter 1 tell us that the Word of the Lord came to Jonah telling him to go preach against the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was not an Israelite city. It lay 500 miles to the northeast on the Tigris River. It was the capital of the Assyrian nation, known for its cruelty.

The prophet Nahum closes his prophecy against Nineveh with these words, “Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty” (Nahum 3:19 NIV)?

(In the AV or KJV it reads, “19 There is no healing of thy bruise; thy wound is grievous: all that hear the bruit of thee shall clap the hands over thee: for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?” In place of the word wickedness the translators could have used the word evil, or even hurt.)

It was Assyria that took the northern ten tribes of Israel into captivity.

Aside from what we glean about Israelite-Assyrian relationships in the rest of the Old Testament, God says in verse 1 that the wickedness of Nineveh had come up before him. Maybe it was this wickedness of Nineveh that frightened and repelled Jonah.

Verse 3 tells us Jonah didn’t want to go preach against Nineveh. That’s understandable. It was a large city, it was foreign, it was distant, it was wicked, and it had suspicious ambitions as a world power.

In the early 1960s I was going to high school in northern New Jersey. The youth pastor of our church knew a woman who lived on the lower east side of Manhattan. She ministered amongst the people who were crowded into the area around Houston Street.

We began to make Friday evening trips to witness and work amongst the gang kids. We rented a little storefront. We got an old pool table. We made sandwiches. The kids started coming. We played games, we talked, and we witnessed to them about Jesus Christ, who loved them, died for them and came back from the dead for them.

One evening we were out in front of the storefront talking with some of the guys. They looked a bit nervous and it was hard to get their attention. We asked what was wrong and they finally told us. There was going to be a “rumble” that night. A “rumble” was a gang war. They said it was taking place in about 15 minutes.

That surprised us. We knew it was between their gang and another gang whose “turf” or area was a few blocks over. When we asked them what they were doing standing there, they said; “Oh, we guys aren’t fighting tonight, the girls are fighting!” Two hundred girls, about a hundred from each gang, were taking the streets for a war!

On one of those trips to the lower east side we visited a person in her home. It was January and icicles hung from the windows. It was freezing. The floors of her apartment were bare, just rough cement. There were no curtains on the windows. There were no mattresses on the beds. They were using cement bags for mattresses, sheets and blankets.

She had nine children, almost all by a different man. Another guy was then sort of coming and going. The kids were running around bare foot and some with just tee shirts on. There was no heat in the apartment.

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We responded by asking our parents to give us clothes, sheets, blankets and other things to help her, as well as others living in similar conditions.

Our outreach to Manhattan lasted a couple of years. Praise the Lord for people like David Wilkerson who when called to the City of New York as a country boy did not run away from the Lord. There are other unsung people who quietly work in our inner cities loving, caring and preaching good news to the poor and downtrodden.

Others have gone to temples in other lands to rescue baby girls from religious prostitution. However, it is not easy to give up a certain life style here in America to do this.

Our parents were rather nervous and concerned about our nighttime visits to New York. It helped when young people from the lower east side visited our church in New Jersey and our parents met teens and 20's who had come to know Christ and follow Him.

But lets stop and look at how the book of Jonah is put together.

In Chapter 1 we see the Lord sending Jonah to Nineveh and he runs away. Let's jump over to chapter 3 and verses 1-3. God sends Jonah a second time and he obeys. Let's read chapter 3.

If Jonah had obeyed the Lord with a good attitude from the start, chapters 1, 2 and 4 would never have been written. The book of Jonah would have consisted simply of chapter 3.

However, Jonah had an attitude. But before we point the finger let's try to remember all those times the Lord has asked us to do something and we weren't too keen to obey.

While at Moody Bible Institute, someone invited me to go with OM to Mexico, on an outreach, and I said "No"! Then they asked me to go to a prayer meeting and I went reluctantly. But after praying with them for a month I went to Mexico.

So the book of Jonah starts in chapter 1 and restarts in chapter 3. In chapters 1 and 2 Jonah runs away and God brings him back to his starting point. Notice the fish did not spit Jonah the 500 miles from the Mediterranean into the "Times Square" of Nineveh. God gave Jonah a second chance to obey Him and this time he did, by getting on his feet and traveling to Nineveh.

So in chapter 1 Jonah is with the sailors on board ship in the storm. In chapter 2 he cries out to the Lord from the belly of the fish. His experiences in the storm and in the fish were so horrifying, Jonah decided it was time to obey the Lord and do the job he was called to.

But Jonah's problems didn't end here. After dutifully preaching against Nineveh in chapter 3 he still struggled with an attitude problem. He was upset that Nineveh was saved from destruction. Then he became even more upset when he lost the shade over his head.

God had caused a gourd or vine to grow up and give him shade. Then God sent a worm to eat the gourd, then a scorching east wind, and the sun, to burn down on his head so he felt faint.

So here are the main events in the 4 chapters and we could title the chapters in this way:

Chapter 1	Jonah in the Ship
Chapter 2	Jonah in the Fish
Chapter 3	Jonah in Nineveh
Chapter 4	Jonah in the Shade

Because the book starts at chapter 1 and restarts at chapter 3 lets make a chart of the book like this:

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START	RESTART
Chapter 1 Jonah in the ship (with people)	Chapter 3 Jonah in Nineveh (with people)
Chapter 2 Jonah in the Fish (alone)	Chapter 4 Jonah in the Shade (alone)

Notice too, that in chapters 1 and 3 he is with people and in chapters 2 and 4 he is alone.

Isn't it interesting that, in chapter 1, as Jonah flees from the Lord and Nineveh, the Lord takes him into an alternative situation, which is even more frightening, but where he is forced to give testimony of who the Lord is.

God says, "Oh, you don't want to preach to Nineveh? Well I'll give you another pulpit, the pitching decks of a ship in a storm so powerful the ship will be destroyed. I'll give you an audience, which is just as pagan and serves a pantheon of gods as Nineveh does. I'm going to give you, and may all the good sailors around the world forgive me, a cussin' tattooed, drinkin', womanizin' bunch of sailors as your audience. And after the sermon is over they'll all worship the Lord ... but the preacher, that's you Jonah, is going to get tossed into the sea!"

But don't worry Jonah this is just the first step in your training program of how to preach cross culturally. The second part of boot camp is even tougher. We're going to take this fishing for men literally and you'll be in solitary for 3 days and 3 nights in the inwards of a fish.

But lets go back to chapter 1 and remember that Jonah, a preacher who knew the one true supreme God, was acting like one of the pagan sailors who worshipped lesser, limited, tribal or territorial deities.

Dagon the fish god of the Philistines was supposedly the father of Baal, Lord of Canaan. There were gods of war, of storm and lightning, of harvest and fertility. They lived in families as did the Roman and Greek gods and had their squabbles. They ruled over limited areas. Neptune was god of the sea.

When the Lord sent the storm the sailors cried out, each to his own god. When they found Jonah asleep they reprimanded him and told him to get up and call on his god. Maybe his god would take notice so they didn't all drown. The sailors hoped they'd find that god who ruled over that area of the sea amongst the gods worshipped by the crew and passengers.

But let's not point the finger at those sailors too quickly. While Jonah knew the creator God of all things he was not acting as though he knew Him. How in the world did Jonah think he could run away from the Supreme Almighty God in the first place.

Jonah had been thinking like a pagan. "Jehovah rules over Israel here in Canaan; if I go to the opposite end of the sea to Tarshish, ancient Spain, Jehovah won't bother me there." I'll get so far from God He won't be able to tell me to go to Nineveh."

How foolish, David cried out in the Psalms, "Where can I go from your Spirit?" If I go into the heavens you are there, if I hide in the depths of the sea you are there, if I go to the most distant shore, you are there. Maybe we should say, "Here is a prophet who was not faithfully reading his Bible!"

The sailors cast lots and it falls on Jonah. They ask him 5 questions in chapter 1, verse 8. Jonah gives his testimony in verse 9. They are terrified when they hear about his connections with the Supreme God of Heaven who made the sea and the land! They worshipped territorial gods; the Supreme Being was distant to them. That's true of many peoples in the world even today. Lesser gods get between them and the Creator.

I was told, that in a certain country in Africa, Shango, a ruler who became a god, is an important figure in their pantheon. Olodumare is the Creator, but one Yoruba friend told me that he has been replaced in their hearts by this lesser god Shango. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba_religion, accessed March3, 2016.)

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This has happened in Christendom. Lesser beings than the eternal Son of God have come between us and him, virgins, saints and even preachers who have made themselves demigods.

When the sailors threw Jonah into the sea God calmed the storm. Then the sailors greatly feared the Lord and they offered sacrifices to the Lord and made vows to Him.

Until the storm Jonah acted like the prophet of a lesser deity. Through the storm he gave his testimony of the supreme deity. His audience, the sailors, followers of lesser deities, came to worship and make commitments to the true God, the Creator of all things. This first chapter tells us that Jehovah, the Lord, is not a tribal god. He is the God of all nations, of the cosmos.

Jesus continued that tradition. He told his followers to make disciples of all nations. He said that the Holy Spirit would empower them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

You may have heard of the 10/40 Window. It is a window over the Mediterranean, Middle East, the Asian subcontinent, on out to Japan and the Philippines. Here live 97% of the unreached people groups of the world. Over 80% of our world's poor live there.

Have you ever heard of the Baluchis? As a kid I enjoyed reading about those ancient extinct animals, like the mammoths, and one was the beast of Baluchistan. Real people live in Baluchistan, in southern Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is no church amongst them yet.

Are we, or are we not, at least partly responsible to reach them? Yes, we are.

One of my jobs is to keep informing and challenging the Latin church to help reach all these people who have no Bible, gospel and church. So many in the Latin church are willing to reach their own people, as well as go to the Muslim world.

What holds them back? One thing amongst others is finances, that hold them back. They need finance from their own churches and people. What a challenge to think that we, in N. America, have the privilege of sending our own missionaries as well as helping to send their missionaries.

Our part of the church can go, send and help send others. God has blessed us with human and financial potential. Let's send our North American "Jonahs" and let's help send our Latin Jonahs, our Filipino, Indian and African "Jonahs".

May the Lord help us to go to the Nineveh to which He has sent us, whether it is our neighbor on our street or to the Baluchis in southern Pakistan, or the folk from Western Sahara, to whom we gave 600 Bibles in the summer of 1996 in the Canary Islands.

Jonah chapters 2, 3 and 4 look at three other subjects. "Personal salvation" is the topic of chapter. 2. "Whole people group salvation" is found in chapter. 3. "What is of more concern to me, my material possessions or lost people?" is that of chapter 4.

May the Lord richly bless you as you reach out to people of other nations here and across the world.