

JONAH | THE RELUCTANT PROPHET AND THE READY CITY

INTRO:

We've been in the book of Jonah and if you've been with us you know the story so far. God called a prophet named Jonah to go to Nineveh, Israel's greatest enemy, and Jonah said no with his feet. He ran, God pursued, a storm raged, pagan sailors prayed, and Jonah ended up in the belly of a great fish for three days. It was there in the worst place he'd ever been, that Jonah prayed the most honest prayer of his life. And God answered it.

SCRIPTURE:

Jonah 3 NIV

¹ Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ² "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." ³ Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. ⁶ When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷ This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. ⁸ But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. ⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." ¹⁰ When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

1: JONAH WAS FULLY RESTORED AND RECOMMISSIONED (V1-3)

THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO JONAH A SECOND TIME

- The Lord (word of the Lord) came again to him
 - It's worth noting that in some cases, the second chance doesn't come (King Saul)
 - But in principle and often in scripture, God is a God of second chances (King David)
 - So don't presume upon God's grace and decide to sin, that usually reveals a heart that doesn't fear/love God
- The Lord not only rescued Jonah (from his sin/failure, the storm, the great fish), but he restored and recommissioned him.
 - The story could have ended with Jonah washed up on the beach and sent to the prophetic bench.
 - But that's not what God does, he commands the fish to vomit him ashore and he sends his word again.
 - He was giving Jonah another chance to fulfill his purpose and commission.
 - Remember, Jonah thought that God had abandoned him, but God always had restoration on His mind for Jonah

THIS TIME JONAH OBEYED: AROSE AND WENT TO NINEVEH

- He actually makes good on the opportunity God gives him
- He meant his prayer... He would fulfill his vows to the Lord
- Too many times, too many people waste the second chances God gives them.

2: NINEVEH MATTERED TO GOD (V3)

THE HEBREW TEXT BEHIND THE ESV'S 'EXCEEDING GREAT CITY' IS LITERALLY 'GREAT TO GOD'

- The phrase is a Hebrew idiom expressing the idea of largeness
- The city of Nineveh and its surrounding 'burbs' equated to one of the largest cities of the world at that time.
- But more than that, it was great to God... it mattered to the Lord
- Not stating that it was good or moral—certainly it was not.

JONAH 4:11 CONFIRMS THIS TRUTH

Jonah 4:11 NIV

¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

- Without going down the rabbit hole too far, scholars debate the numbers behind this verse.
 - Was 120,000 the total population
 - Was 120,000 counting only the children who were morally not responsible for themselves yet?
 - If so, the numbers would shoot up dramatically.
 - I've seen the population estimate jump as high as 600,000+
- No matter what, 120,000 people is the population floor... and that's a large city and it was important to God.
 - Even if they were Assyrian pagans.

HERE'S THE BIG PICTURE TRUTH: PEOPLE MATTER TO GOD

- Regardless of their background, their sin, their ethnicity, their worldly status... even if they were Israel's enemies.
- "For God so loved... the world... that He gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have everlasting life."
- Remember that today:
 - Whoever, wherever... God loves them and desires them to be saved.

1 Timothy 2:3-4 NIV

³ This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

- Further, what's important in light of today's passage and context... NO ONE IS BEYOND GOD'S REACH!
 - I'm sure to ancient Israel and to Jonah that the people of Nineveh and the Assyrians were beyond saving and so utterly unworthy of God's mercy.
 - I've heard it said before and I want to show you that the greatest miracle in the book of Jonah

- WASN'T:
 - The storm
 - The calming of the storm
 - The great fish
 - Jonah surviving the great fish for 3 days
- It was the saving of Nineveh (at least that generation who repented and believed)
 - But I also want to show you how God set up that miracle.
 - This city wide repentance was years in the making—It was a city prepared for Jonah and Jonah's message.

3: A PEOPLE AND PROPHET PREPARED (GOD'S PROVIDENCE)

NINEVEH WAS A CITY PREPARED FOR THE MESSAGE (HISTORICAL BACKGROUND)

Setting the Scene: What Was Happening in Nineveh Before Jonah Arrived

- Nineveh wasn't just a big city. It was one of the most important royal cities in the Assyrian Empire—one of the most feared powers on earth.
- The Assyrians were brutal, powerful, and deeply religious and not in a casual way
- They believed 'the gods' were always talking.
 - Through dreams.
 - Through the stars.
 - Through disaster.
 - Through the things that went wrong.
- To the Assyrians, bad things didn't just happen
 - Bad things meant something. And they were always trying to figure out what.

Their Religious World — The Apkallu

- If one were to walk into one of the royal palaces in Nineveh you would see figures carved into the walls at every doorway and entrance.
- These figures were called the apkallu. Fish-robed sages. Half human, robed in the body of a fish.
 - (sidenote: possibly the pagan version/connection to the Bible's Nephilim figures, but that's a study for another day)
- This wasn't decorative. These figures stood guard at thresholds. They lined the throne room. They were present in the most sacred spaces in the city.
- The Assyrians believed these were ancient demigod figures — sent from the divine realm, through the waters, to bring wisdom and knowledge to humanity in the distant past.
- Further, it is believed that when their priests performed their most sacred ceremonies, they wore fish-shaped ritual garments.
- Here's the point. The Assyrian religious imagination already had a category or reference point for a figure who comes from the waters, carrying a message from the divine realm.
- That category wasn't new. It had been carved into their walls for centuries.

Then Everything Started Falling Apart

- Here's where the history gets interesting. And I want you to know this portion isn't coming from the Bible. This is coming from Assyrian records. Their own documents. And they line up with the timeline we know from Scripture regarding Jonah.
- 765 BC. A severe plague hits Nineveh.
 - For a culture that reads everything as a divine message, this stops them cold. Something is wrong. The gods are angry. But which one? And why?
- Then on June 15th, 763 BC the sky goes dark over Nineveh in the middle of the day due to a solar eclipse.
 - Nearly total in coverage. We can confirm this today through astronomical calculation and the Assyrians recorded it themselves in what scholars call the Assyrian Eponym Canon, their royal chronicle.
 - Scholars now also have their omen texts. Documents that spell out what they thought the cosmic events meant. And those texts are clear about how they viewed a solar eclipse over Nineveh. It meant the king would be deposed and the city faced destruction.
- Then the revolts start. Domestic uprisings. Military losses. An empire that had made the whole ancient world shake is suddenly looking fragile.
- 759 BC. Another plague.
- Famine went from 765 all the way to 758 BC.
- Their own records document it. Year after year of compounding catastrophe.
- The most powerful nation on earth is unraveling and they know it. They just don't know why its happening or who is causing it.

Enter Jonah

- Picture the scene and the city that Jonah is walking into.
- Nineveh is not a city at the height of its power. It's a city that has been shaken. Repeatedly. By things they cannot explain and cannot stop.
- A city whose own religious framework has been telling them for years that destruction is on the way.
- A city whose palace walls are lined with images of fish-robed messengers from the divine realm.
- And then a man marked by the sea (possibly bleached by the fish innards) shows up carrying a message (and likely a story): 'Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.'
- He wasn't introducing a brand-new idea. He was naming the dread they'd been living with.
- He was giving an address to the fear their own omens had created. The category for this moment was already carved into their palace walls. The fear was already in their bones. The city was already standing on the edge.

JONAH WAS A PROPHET PROVIDENTIALLY ORDAINED FOR THAT CITY

- Consider Jonah's story and how God chose, called, and redeemed him AND how that story of calling and rescue would be understood to the people of Nineveh.
 - A messenger from the sea, carrying a message from the creator God.

- A message of warning and call to repentance
- We could debate
 - Did God call Jonah to Nineveh with the foreknowledge that he would run and need to rescue him?
 - Did God call Jonah to Nineveh ESPECIALLY because he knew that he would run to Joppa and head to Tarshish?
- **What I want you to take away from this**
 - When God saved us and called us to his purposes (like Jonah)... he FACTORED IN OUR (stupidity) SINFULNESS AND FAILURES
 - He knows how and planned to REDEEM our detours in his GRAND PLAN
 - That's not encouragement to sin (to be very clear)
 - It's a pause and wonder and worship God for His greatness, sovereignty, mercy, grace and love.
 - And a call to surrender and trust God with your past and your failures.
 - Jonah's detour, in God's redemptive plan of salvation from eternity past, actually served God's purpose of ministering to wayward, pagan Nineveh.
 - And only the God of all the universe, time, and space — the creator God — could coordinate such things.
 - Much to the devil's great agony and despair.
 - The devil thought he had Jonah permanently off track or dead.
 - The devil thought he had pagan Nineveh bound in sin, pagan mythology and idolatry...
 - But God...

4: THE MIRACLE OF NINEVEH'S REPENTANCE

- From the least to the greatest, Nineveh believes God (v5)
- The king also hears, repents, and calls all people to repent.
- Jesus affirms the reality of Nineveh's repentance, even if it was only this generation.
 - Which is a lesson to us that we must disciple the next generations, otherwise the revival, the repentance gets lost quick.

5: GOD'S RESPONSE OF MERCY

- When God saw how Nineveh turned away from their wickedness, God turned away from his plan of destruction.
- It's worth noting, as we close, that belief and repentance are closely related ideas in Scripture.
 - God didn't just hear their cries for mercy
 - He saw their fasting
 - He saw their turning away from their wickedness.
 - They stopped and changed their minds and behaviors
- And God relented. He granted them his grace and mercy.

RESPONSE:

3 Ways to Respond This Morning:

- 1) Fulfill your vows, obey God's call, don't waste your second (third, etc) chances that God has called you to.
- 2) Surrender and trust God with your past. Trust that He'll redeem it for the purpose he has for you. God wants to use your story in a way that others have been providentially prepared for. Your story is going to help them believe the Lord—you must go and tell.
- 3) Communion. We're called to remember the Lord's body and blood, broken and shed for us.
 - If you've never given your heart to the Lord and received his salvation... today again, is a day of salvation
 - If you need to recommit your life to the Lord... today is a great day to do that
 - For ALL OF US, its a great day to pause, reflect, and worship the Lord for his great gift of salvation