

The Minor Prophets #18

Jonah

by: Ronald L. Dart

Once upon a time there was a man name Jonah. I am sure you heard of him he was the son of a man named Amittai and we know he was an active prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II king of Israel. In those years Israel was riding high, height in prosperity, height in military power and so was Assyria in the east with its great city Nineveh a power. Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai and said, get up go to Nineveh that great city and cry against it for its wickedness has come up before me. What's interesting about Nineveh according to the Holman Bible Dictionary it's the greatest of the capitals of the ancient Assyrian empire and that empire flourished from about 800BC to 612BC. It was located on the left bank of the Tigris River and the Tigris occasional makes its way into our news. Actually the old Assyrian empire Nineveh was just across the river from Mosel in Iraq. Its remains are represented by two mounds one of them named in English many sheep and another one in Arabic nebeunis which means the prophet Jonah. The Assyrian's are called one place in the Bible, the rod of God's anger and elsewhere they're called his sword. There are suggestions that God was less than happy with Nineveh probably because of the excess of violence's there which show up later in, for example Zachariah had an angel talking to him and the angel said.

NIV Zachariah 1 Verse 14, 15: **Proclaim this word: This is what the LORD almighty says: I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion, and I am very angry with the nations that feel secure, I was only a little angry** but they added to the calamity.

What he is saying is this, he expected them to give Israel bad times but they went far beyond anything that was intended. Isaiah speaks of this area also in Isaiah

KJV Chapter 10 Verse 5: God says the Assyrian is called **the rod of mine anger and the staff in their hands is my indignation. I will send him against a hypocritical nation, against the people of my anger will I give him a charge to take the spoils, to take the prey and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.**

So the Assyrian's were going to be used by God to chastise Israel, who really had it richly coming. However, God said of him, he doesn't really quite mean what's going to happen, **neither does his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few.**

Then he recounts all the conquests of all the nations around about and he thought. Well I'm going to do to Samaria and her idols just like I've done to Jerusalem and her idols.

So says the prophet, Verse 12: **Wherefore it shall come to pass that when the LORD has performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria and the glory of his high looks. For he said, by the strength of my hand I have done it and by my wisdom; for I am prudent: and I have removed the bounds of the people and have robbed their treasures and I have put down the inhabitants like a valiant man.** Oh he just got a little too big for his britches. And God says: **Shall the axe boast itself against him that cuts with it? Shall the saw magnify himself against him that shapes with it? As if a rod should shake itself against them that pick it up or a staff should lift itself up as if it weren't wood. Therefore shall the Lord the Lord of hosts send among his fat ones leanness; and under his glory he shall kindle a burning like the burning of a fire.** Now here come all kinds of judgments upon the Assyrians.

Verse 18, 19: He said that the fire is going **to consume the glory of his forest and his fruitful field;** they shall be such that **the rest of his trees of his forest shall be so few that a child could write them down.**

Now precisely where Jonah falls in all this history is open to question. But there came a point in time where if God was prepared to act against Nineveh he had an obligation to say so to them.

It hadn't been so long ago in this series that we talked about the prophet Amos who said; **surely the LORD God will do nothing except he reveal his secrets to his servants the prophet.**

So he called Jonah to go to Nineveh tell that great city what's going to happen, so what did Jonah do?

Jonah 1 Verse 3: **he rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD he went down to Joppa and he found a ship going west so he paid the fare and went down to go with them into Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.**

I want to get away from God, God's in Israel so I want to go somewhere else. This is going to Tarshish in Spain or Tarshish in Asia Minor.

But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea so that the ship was like to be broken.

It's a little difficult for us to get our mind around this but if you ever been out on the sea when it's getting up and it's becoming somewhat boisterous you can begin to understand.

The problem is even more so if you understand how small these ships were and how unseaworthy they were compared to the things we take to the sea today.

I remember some the fellows who race in the Gulf of Mexico and one who had a fifty foot yacht which is what he called an ultra light. That boat was strong it was light, very sparse and carefully built and if a man sailed it properly he could handle it in almost anything that was in the Gulf of Mexico except a hurricane and it wouldn't break.

I remember going down to Jamestown in Virginia the site of that first settlement down there. They had replicas of some of the boats that used to bring people across from England to Jamestown. I got on that boat I walked back and forth, I looked at it and I thought good grief I wouldn't want to sail this across the bay and these people came across the Atlantic on this boat. The guide told us that what they like to do is get a group of people on here and get them on one side of the boat, we have them walk quickly to the other side of the boat and it unbalances to such an extent that it impress upon their minds how fragile these little crafts were. It wouldn't take that much in the way of great seas to break one of those boats and those boats compared to what was being sailed in the Mediterranean when this was going on were pretty advanced to tell the truth.

But the LORD sent a great wind out into the sea and there was a mighty tempest, so that the ship was like to be broken. Then the mariners were afraid, and they cried every man to his god, and cast forth the wares in the ship into the sea to lighten it up.

I presume that they didn't need any more ballast the problem they had was with it being so overloaded toward the top or maybe it was sitting so low in the water it was shifting weight way too much.

Jonah, ah well he had **gone down to the side of the ship and he lay and was fast asleep** in this storm. **So the shipmaster came to him and said to him, what are you doing sleeper get up call upon your God if so be that God will think upon us so we don't perish. And they said everyone to his brother, come lets cast lots so we may know who's caused this evil is upon us.** I don't know exactly the means they used for casting lots but it would have appeared to be just at random just like drawing straws. **So they cast lots and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then they said to him tell us for who cause this evil upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What's your country? What's your people are you?** They didn't just throw him over the side they inquired, I don't know how much faith they had in their process of casting lots but at least they thought they would ask. **He said to them I'm a Hebrew; I fear Jehovah the God of heaven which has made the sea and the dry land. Then were the men exceedingly afraid and they said why have you done this? For the men did know that he had fled from the presence of the LORD because he had told them. Then they said why did you bring this thing on us. What shall we to do with you so that the sea may be calm to us? For the sea wrought and was tempestuous. And he said, take me up and cast me into the sea; so shall the sea be calm**

unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you. And it's a great credit to the men on that ship. **Nevertheless they rowed hard to bring it to the land but they couldn't get it there.** They did not want to throw him over the side but they were going to lose it all anyway. **Wherefore they cried to Jehovah, we beseech you O LORD, we beseech you, let us not perish for this man's life, don't lay not upon us innocent blood: for you O LORD, has done as it pleased you.** They started out praying every man to his God and if there were twenty men on the ship there might have been twenty God's. This time they prayed to the real thing and **they took up Jonah and cast him into the sea and the sea ceased from her raging.** You might wonder if Jonah felt that as he did, why he didn't cast himself into the sea. Well that would have been suicide and Jonah would have felt that suicide was wrong. And when he hit the water the whole sea calmed it ceased it's raging the wind calmed. **Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.** One product of this event was the conversion of the entire ship's crew, but what happened to Jonah.

Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah and when he went over the side of the ship it grabbed him. **Jonah was in the belly of the fish days and three nights.**

Now that in itself is an interesting thing, the fish I suppose God could have arranged it, he could have probably spit Jonah up on the dry land in one day and one night but he was three days and three nights establishing a precedent for the Messiah for they would say of Jesus he would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth just like Jonah was in the fish three days and three nights.

Thus he poses a problem for generations of scholars ever since to try to resolve this issue, what did he mean, three days and three nights. How on earth do you get three days and three nights between Friday evening at sundown and Sunday morning at sunrise? Normally Friday night would be one night, Saturday would be one day, and Saturday night would be one night. So you got one day and two nights and that's the sum total of the time most of Christianity believe Jesus was in the grave, but he said he would be there three days and three nights just like Jonah was in the belly of the great fish. Now if you want to know how we get three days and three nights from between Friday at sunset and Sunday morning drop us a line and we'll send you our explanation which will possible differ a little bit from what you have heard before.

Jonah Chapter 2: **Jonah prayed to the LORD his God out of the fish's belly and he said, I cried by reason of mine affliction to the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell I cried, and you heard my voice. For you had cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all your billows and your waves passed over me.**

Now you might want to know that as the Old Testament use the word hell the Hebrew word sheol simply mean the place of the dead, it does not mean gehenna, place of fiery

torment, ah people upside down, holes of steam, it doesn't mean that at all in the Old Testament hell means where the dead people are, usually the grave yard.

So I said I am cast out of your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about; the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains. I guess thinking in terms of the mountains that extend on down into the seas, it sounds like he got all the way to the bottom wherever they were before that fish took him. **The earth with her bars was about me forever, I was gone, but you have brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God. When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto you, into your holy temple. They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy. But I will sacrifice unto you with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD. And the LORD spoke unto the fish and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.**

He said all these things, the Lord spoke to the fish and it spit him out on the dry land. When he says I will pay what I have vowed he means I will pay what I absolutely knew I was obligated to do when I became a prophet. The obligation to God once he was spit up by this fish had not gone away.

Chapter 3 of Jonah: **The word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid you.**

Now Nineveh was a very old city, the book of Genesis recorded that it was founded by Nimrod himself and that was not that long after Noah's flood. Estimates suggest by this time in Jonah's day a population of around 600 thousand. The areas within the city walls they think would not have contain more than 175 thousand but that doesn't conflict because walled cities in the ancient world were commonly surrounded by large communities of farmers and people living outside the walls who in the event of war could flee inside the walls for protection.

So Jonah arose and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days journey.

Now a lot of commentator have played all sorts of games with this question of a three day journey one of the more common explanation is it would take you three days to walk from one side of the city to the other. Now it would be especially true if you were a prophet trying to get the message out and probably running into people all along the way, who either wanted to challenge you, or hear you more carefully and would slow you down walking through the town hard to say. And also would it only include the walled city or would it include all the communities that surrounded the city as well.

Well Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey and he cried and said, yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

Let's take a moment just to focus on this, God told him to go to Nineveh and say yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown. Now that's an ironclad prophecy of God it's not a conditional prophecy it is not a maybe it is a Hey folks Nineveh going to be overthrown within forty days. Should have got everybody attention you would think if people paid any attention to him at all. I can't imagine if he were to show up walking through Dallas like day by day saying in forty days Dallas will be overthrown if anybody would give him the least bit of attention.

The people of Nineveh believed God and proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least. The word came to the king of Nineveh and he got up from his throne and he laid his robe away and covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles and said this. Let neither man nor beast herd nor flock taste any thing: let them not feed nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God.

You know I read this and I think the poor cattle were neither fed nor water and they threw sackcloth over them, I expect among all the cries of the people were also the cries of all the cattle that were not being fed and not being water. He said, **cry mightily to God; yea, let them turn everyone from his evil way and from the violence that is in their hands.** And I'm struck by the fact that the scripture actually tell us that the reason why Sodom was destroyed was because of violence. Now we learn that what was about to happen to Nineveh is because of the violence in their hands.

Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger that we perish not? And God saw their works that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, he had said that he would do to them; and he did it not. Now right here lies one of the greatest lesson to be found anywhere in the Bible and it's this, the future is not inevitable. God himself could have sent a prophet and prophesied disaster for you but the disaster is not inevitable it can be rescued it can be trashed. Whichever way it goes you can actually live through this or you can die in it, this case it was up to the people. You have to think this through very carefully, Jonah prophecy was not conditional, it was clear it was definite it was final so what does this tell you about the nature of the future. There is a common perception I've run into on this discussion fairly often. The future actually is history, prophecy is history written in advance, that is the future is out there the future is determined. Whenever God gives us a prophecy it's because he knows what's going to happen, so then you have to ask this question, was he lying to Nineveh when he said yet in forty day you would be overthrown when he knew that it would not be because they would repent, or was the future placed entirely in their hands. I think what God saw and told Jonah to say to Nineveh, he saw the future of an unrepentant Nineveh and there aren't many possible futures ahead for you and me and they depend on the choices we are making day by day. The future or the past exist right now all that exist, is this moment in which we are deciding our fate, either by faith or by stupidity. Now all this is good news right, happy income right Well, not entirely.

So well I presume, that God let Jonah know that he changed his mind and, **it displeased Jonah exceedingly he was very angry. He prayed to the LORD and said I pray thee O LORD didn't I say this when I was still at home? Bbefore therefore I fled to Tarshish I knew you that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and great kindness.** I knew you would decide not to do this, I knew you would relent I just knew it so what was the point in sending me over here. God's got, he's got a major problem right here, it's a good thing for him that God's not the kind of God he was looking for if he had been he would probably swat him a big fly swatter about this time. He went on and said, **therefore now O LORD, take, I beseech you, take my life from me, for it's better for me to die than to live. Then the LORD said you do well to be angry?** Jonah didn't even bothering answering he decided rather on a major Pout, **so he went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city and he made him a booth and he sat in it under the shadow till he might see what might become of the city.** Well, never let it be said that God doesn't have a sense of humor, **God prepared a plant like a gourd and it came up, quickly overnight over Jonah head and he gave him a shadow to deliver him from his grief. And Jonah was exceeding glad of that gourd.** He really was grateful for the shade that kept that Middle Eastern sun off his back, so the LORD prepared this made it cover him. **And the LORD prepared a worm, for when the morning rose the next day that it smote the gourd and it died. And it came to pass when the sun rose God decided to send a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on the head of Jonah that he fainted, and wished in himself to die and he said Oh no this is no good it is better for me to die than to live. And God said to Jonah, it do you well to be angry for the gourd? And Jonah this time did answer. And he said I do well to be angry even unto death, even if it kills me. Then said the LORD, you had pity on the gourd, for which you didn't labor you didn't make it grow, it came up in the night and it perished in the night, you were sorry for it. Shouldn't I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein there are more than sixscore thousand, that six times twenty that's, one hundred and twenty thousand, people that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, their kids and that many cattle?**

And thus the abrupt end of the book of Jonah. And God said and you're sorry for this plant and you expect me not to be sorry and despair, there are one hundred and twenty thousand kids in this city and you want me to kill them all, when the city has repented and turned away. This is really fascinating about what happen and really what didn't happen to the city of Nineveh. Because the future was not written in advance there's not a time line laid out before them, this is the way it's going to be and there's isn't going to be any other outcome. I've asked this question before and let me ask it again. Why on earth should God ever send a prophet to tell a people what's going to happen to them? Who cares? There's only one possible reason and that is so people can change the outcome so we can change the future that's why prophet's come. Not to satisfy our curiosity not to give us some kind of chart on the wall so we know what's coming and know when it's coming, it's so we can change ourselves and thus change the outcome of the whole thing.

One of the greatest example of this that you'll ever find, it's in the Bible it's in the 18 Chapter of Jeremiah.

The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah from the LORD said get up and go down to the potter's house I want to show you something down there so he went, he got there and the potter was making a work on the wheel, and as he worked on it, it was marred and so he broke it down and made another one.

God said can't I do with you as this potter does. Understand this at the moment I speak concerning a nation and a kingdom. I'm going to pluck it up and pull it down to destroy it, if it changes, if it repents, if it turns from the evil then I will not do the evil that I said I would do. I think we can be all very grateful for that. The final reference is in the Old Testament concerning Nineveh come from Nahum who prophecies the over through of what he called the bloody city by the attack of the Mead's and the Chaldean's which came about 612BC later the prophet words, Nineveh is laid waste, were echoed by the Greek historian Herodotus who spoke about the Tigris on which the river on which the town of Nineveh formally stood. Until next time.

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