

JONAH 1:1-3

Jonah's Commission and Disobedience

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Book of Jonah is not a fish story. The fish is not the hero or the villain. The fish is merely an incidental but the essentials of the book are the dealings of Jehovah with Jonah and the dealings of Jehovah with men.
- B. The Book of Jonah is practical, and, while written by a prophet, has no prophecy in it because it deals with a believer's struggle to be obedient to his God.
- C. The Book of Jonah deals with foreign missions and the call of God to His servant for missions.

II. JONAH'S COMMISSION 1:1-2

A. "And the word of the Lord (Jehovah) came to Jonah, the son of Amittai" -- Jonah was a prophet and his home was in Gath-hepher (II Kings 14:25). Jonah means "dove" and he was of the house of Amittai which means "my truth." As a prophet, Jonah was to be as gentle as a dove in proclaiming God's truth to men. Jonah received his call from God and not from man. NOTE: Jonah was a real historical character and the Book of Jonah is not legend or myth but based on historical fact. Christ Himself on two occasions recognized the historicity of the Book of Jonah (Luke 11:30; Matt. 12:39-41).

B. "Arise; go to Nineveh, that great city." — Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. Conservative scholars place the writing of the Book of Jonah before 745 B.C. Students of history will recognize this as the period when Nineveh was flourishing and the nation of Assyria was in her zenith. Some have estimated that Nineveh from its center spread out over a 12-mile radius and probably had over a million inhabitants. This city was great because it was powerful and rich.

C. And cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me."

1. Jonah was to preach against this Gentile city and call it to repentance, for it was a wicked city. He was to declare a threatening message, for they were to repent or be destroyed. The Ninevites were rank idolaters, filled with pride (Is. 10:5-19), cruel oppressors of those they conquered, often transporting a whole population of the vanquished to places near Nineveh where they could be used as slaves (II Kings 15:29; 17:6; Is. 36:16-17) and inhumane in warfare, for the Assyrian army was brutal and cruel. J. Finegan says,

The merciless cruelty of his campaigns is the constant boast of Ashurnasirpal II. "I stormed the mountain peaks and took them. In the midst of the mighty mountains I slaughtered them; with their blood I dyed the

mountain red like wool. With the rest of them I darkened the gullies and precipices of the mountains. I carried off their spoil and their possessions. The heads of their warriors I cut off, and I formed them into a pillar over against their city; their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire! . . . I built a pillar over against the city gates, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up with the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar!" (Light from the Ancient Past).

2. Jonah was to call this city to repentance towards God, for they were exceedingly sinful before Jehovah. NOTE: God saves sinners, not good people. Anyone can work out a plan to save good people but only God has a plan with which to save sinners (Rom. 5:8).

III. JONAH'S DISOBEDIENCE 1:3

A. "But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord (Jehovah)"

1. God called Jonah to go East to Nineveh but he deliberately and willfully went west (the opposite direction) to Tarshish, an ancient Phoenician city in what is now Spain. He rose up, not as other prophets to obey, but to disobey. Jonah knew he could not flee from God's presence for God is omnipresent (Ps. 139:7, 9-10). In the Old Testament, to stand in the presence of someone is often used in the sense of acting as one's official minister (Gen. 41:46; Deut. 1:38; I Sam. 16:21; I Kings 17:1). Therefore, when Jonah fled from God's presence he was refusing to serve Him in his office as a prophet. He did not hide himself from the omnipresence of God but withdrew from the service of Jehovah, the God-King of Israel.
2. Why this strange behavior on the part of Jonah? Jonah was guilty of Jewish nationalism and religious isolationism. He hated the Assyrians for their brutality and godlessness. Jonah, either directly or indirectly, felt the wrath of these cruel people when they would invade the land of Palestine. He wanted to see Nineveh destroyed, sacked, burning and in ruin. This is why he took up his place of observation on the east side of the city of Nineveh. From this vantage point, he hoped to see the destruction of the city (cf. Jonah 4:5). Jonah had no love for these people and did not want them to repent and turn to God, and he said this was the reason he did not want to go to Nineveh (cf. Jonah 4:2). He was not afraid of the Assyrians, for he was willing to confront them with the message of God. He, however, shrank back from his office, as believing, not doubting the might of God. He knew that God would be merciful to the Gentiles in Nineveh and he did not want this at all. He was afraid that the conversion of this many Gentiles would be a threat to his own nation politically and religiously. NOTE: When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh on an errand of mercy, it was too high a hurdle for Jonah. In bitterness of soul, he got out of fellowship with God who wanted to extend

mercy to the wicked in Nineveh. Jonah had a serious attitude problem. All rebellion to God begins with a wrong attitude. Jonah fled with bitterness of soul and hatred in his heart. By removing himself geographically to Tarshish in the extreme west, he hoped to make it impossible to serve God as His prophet, as His official minister in the far east. NOTE: God had more difficulty in getting His servant back into fellowship than He did in saving a city. NOTE: The best of God's servants can get out of the revealed will of God because of wrong attitudes and inflexibility due to cultural backgrounds. NOTE: It is wrong to question God's wisdom. If He chooses to save an enemy, it is for a definite purpose and will work all things for good.

B. "And went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord." — Up to this point in the story, one might conclude that Jonah had "put one over" on God. On arriving at the sea coast of Joppa, he found a ship ready to sail for Tarshish on which he booked passage. All this would indicate favorable circumstances which might lead one to conclude that God was not going to bother with Jonah. But this was the calm before the storm, for God will punish Jonah and bring him to repentance. NOTE: Favorable circumstances are not always an indication of the Lord's blessing. It may be the calm before the storm that is ready to break upon the backsliding servant of God. It is normal for God's servants to encounter difficulty as they seek to be obedient to His will (Heb. 11:36-38). When everything is going very well, with no complications or problems, this may indicate that we are not really doing the will of God.