

God's Amazing Plan

Jonah 1:1-2

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When you recall those biblical accounts that so enthralled you and amazed you as a child (and even as an adult), among those at the top of the list would likely be that of Jonah (and particularly his being swallowed alive by the whale or great fish, and surviving within the belly of this enormous creature for three days and three nights before being released from his watery grave). The power of God in preserving a rebellious Jonah from utter destruction is indeed a great comfort to our struggling and weak faith when we (like frail Jonah) find it so difficult to follow the Lord in loving obedience to His revealed will. And though we shall consider such personal applications to our own Christian lives from a study of the life of Jonah, we shall miss the most amazing plan of God and the most striking truth of the life of Jonah if we only consider the more individualized picture of the account of Jonah revealed in the Bible. However, dear ones, as we open our eyes to view with wonder the worldwide picture and amazing plan of God for Israel and the nations of this world which are dramatically portrayed before our mind's eye in the Book of Jonah, we cannot but be greatly humbled before our most sovereign and gracious God that He would teach us such undeniable truths through the actual and historical events of one of His prophets. For I submit to you that the theme of this inspired Book of Jonah is nothing less than this: God's Amazing Plan to Save the Nations of this World through Jesus Christ. Dear ones, if we miss this truth, we miss the main thrust of the Spirit of God in giving to us this inspired book of the Bible.

There are two main points upon which I would like to focus in the sermon this Lord's Day: (1) The Life and Times of Jonah the Prophet (Jonah 1:1); (2) The Divine Call to Jonah the Prophet (Jonah 1:2).

I. The Life and Times of Jonah the Prophet (Jonah 1:1).

A. Who was Jonah?

1. The prophetic word of the Lord came by way of inspired revelation to an Israelite by the name of Jonah. Jonah, like the prophets Elijah and Elisha, was called by God to be a prophet to the idolatrous kingdom of Israel (consisting of the 10 tribes that left the royal line of David in Judah at the time of Rehoboam, and made Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, to be their king). Jeroboam soon realized that in order to maintain the loyalty of the 10 tribes, he would have to prevent them from regularly attending God's appointed worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, Jeroboam established a new denomination (if you will) of Jehovah worship, consisting of a new holy place in Samaria, a new priesthood, new feasts and festivals, along with two golden calves as representations of Jehovah in Bethel and Dan. The list of those kings of Israel whom God did not know or appoint as lawful rulers (according to Hosea 8:4) have a familiar refrain in Scripture attached to their reign: "and _____ (the particular king of Israel) did evil in the sight of the LORD and walked in the way of Jeroboam, and in his sin wherewith he made Israel to sin" (1 Kings 15:26,34; 1 Kings 16:19; 1 Kings 22:52; 2 Kings 13:2,11; 2 Kings 14:24; 2 Kings 15:9,18,24,28). In other words, the kings of Israel, one after the other, perpetuated the idolatry and man-appointed worship of Jeroboam (and eventually added the worship of Baal to that of Jehovah in its worship as we see with Ahab—a kind of religious pluralism, 1 Kings 16:30-33).

2. In response to this backsliding from the faithful and true religion revealed in Scripture, the Lord sent His prophets to testify against these and other sins, pointing the backslidden people time and time again to their covenant-keeping God who would freely pardon them if they would but turn to Him in faith and repentance. The Lord did bring warring nations against Israel in judgment, but always with an eye to the

mercy of God in Christ Jesus (in turning them to Himself). And it was this same merciful God who heard the cries of this unfaithful kingdom and church and who even delivered them at times from oppressing nations, like Syria (in 2 Kings 13:3-6). And, in fact, it is with such a gracious prophetic utterance on his lips from God that we first meet with Jonah the prophet in 2 Kings 14:23-27 (Gath-hepher was situated in the tribe of Zebulun). This, dear ones, is the amazing mercy shown to undeserving Israel. The Lord not only brings judgment, but also brings merciful deliverance to Israel in spite of how Israel showed such contempt for the God who graciously called them to be His people out of all the nations of the earth. This is a historical example of the goodness of God that ought to lead either an individual or a nation to repentance (Romans 2:4). Thus, when we hear in Jonah 1:1 that “the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai”, we are to understand that Jonah had already been ministering as God’s prophet to Israel for some time. He was an established and seasoned prophet when the call to go to Nineveh came to him from God, and not a novice called out of nowhere.

B. When did Jonah minister as God’s prophet?

1. Clearly, Jonah’s ministry began at least by the time that Jeroboam II began to reign (according to 2 Kings 14:23-25), i.e. at least by the year 793 b.c. The reign of wicked Jeroboam II of Israel roughly overlapped with the reign of faithful king Uzziah of Judah. In fact, the ministry of Jonah may have overlapped with that of the prophet Elisha in Israel who died sometime during the reign of wicked Joash, king of Israel (the immediate predecessor to Jeroboam II). If Jonah did not personally know Elisha, the ministry of Elisha no doubt did cast a very huge shadow over the prophets of Israel that immediately followed in his footsteps. If Jonah was not **directly** under the godly influence of Elisha, he would have surely been **indirectly** under the godly influence of that faithful prophet of the Lord who was used by the Lord to perform amazing miracles and

to faithfully obey the Lord in speaking to the unfaithful kings of Israel with great courage. Jonah was not so isolated at his time in having the opportunity for some degree of fellowship with and some degree of influence by faithful prophets of the Lord (contrary to that of Elijah who thought himself alone in faithfully following in the covenanted ways of the Lord according to 1 Kings 19:10). In fact, “the sons of the prophets” (which were prophets and ministers in training) were essentially schools (or seminaries) which especially flourished during the time of Elisha (and perhaps Jonah himself was the product of one of these schools or at least benefitted from them in some ways, 1 Kings 20:35; 2 Kings 2:3,5,7,15; 2 Kings 4:1,38; 2 Kings 5:22; 2 Kings 6:1).

2. At the time of Jonah’s ministry, Assyria (with its capital at Nineveh) was the ever growing world empire that posed the greatest threat to the nations of Asia and the Middle East.

3. Before moving on to the next main point, however, I would like to point out that the Book of Jonah is historical narrative. It is not myth, it is not legend; it is history. For in demonstration of the historical nature of the Book of Jonah (and in particular, Jonah’s three-day stay in the belly of the whale) the Lord Jesus Christ Himself cites this very historical event from the Book of Jonah as a historical parallel from the past that He would only remain for that same period of time within the grave before He was raised from the dead (Matthew 12:40). If Jonah’s three-day stay in the belly of the whale never happened, Christ would be basing His bodily resurrection upon an event that was pure fiction. That would hardly be a sound reason to appeal to Jonah to corroborate His own historical resurrection after 3 days in the tomb. The very trustworthiness of Christ Himself is then put forward as corroborating testimony that all of the events in the Book of Jonah are historical narrative inspired by the Holy Spirit. But, dear ones, if the Book of Jonah is ONLY historical narrative, why is it found among the prophetic books of the Old Testament rather than among the historical books of the

Old Testament? I submit for the simple reason that the events of Jonah's life are prophetic and typical (as types) of even greater events to come. What events to come?

a. Jonah's rebellion and severe correction is prophetic and typical (as a type) of Israel's rebellion against the word of the Lord and the severe correction she would receive for not heeding the word of the Lord to her.

b. Jonah's watery grave and resurrection is prophetic and typical (as a type) of Christ's bodily death and resurrection.

c. Jonah's going forth to proclaim the word of the Lord to Nineveh and Nineveh's repentance is prophetic and typical (as a type) of the powerful work of Christ in going forth through His faithful ministers in the future millennial period to turn the hearts of the nations to faith and repentance in Jesus Christ.

d. Jonah's turning from proclaiming God's word to Israel (who has stubbornly resisted the mercy of God in turning from sin to salvation) and rather (in obedience to God) turning to the Gentiles in Nineveh is prophetic and typical (as a type) that through the fall of Israel, salvation has come to the Gentiles in order to provoke Israel to jealousy with the result that all Israel as a nation will yet be saved (Romans 11:11,25,26).

e. Dear ones, these I submit are the reasons why the Book of Jonah providentially finds its place among the Books of the Prophets, and these truths just mentioned are the primary thrust of God's message to both Israel and the nations of the world. God's amazing plan is to judge Israel with blindness for a time, to bring in the fullness of the nations to Christ, and to provoke Israel as a nation to jealousy so that she turns in faith to Christ in that future time of millennial blessing. What is portrayed in the historical account of Jonah is simply the realization of the promised blessing to Abraham (Genesis 22:18), to Christ (Psalm 2:8), to David (Psalm 67:2), to Solomon (Psalm 72:11); to Isaiah (Isaiah 2:2), to

the apostles and ministers of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20), to Paul (Romans 11:25-26), and to John (Revelation 15:4). Dear ones, this is the scarlet thread that is woven throughout the tapestry of God's amazing plan for this world: nothing less than all nations and the leaders of those nations covenanting with Christ to be His people, ruling according to God's Moral Law, and establishing biblical Christianity as the national religion of all nations (including the nation of Israel). Dear ones, that is the prophetic and certain hope portrayed in the historical Book of Jonah.

II. The Divine Call to Jonah the Prophet (Jonah 1:2).

A. There are three aspects to God's call to Jonah that I would like to emphasize.

1. **God is Sovereign in His Call.** The Lord does not ask for Jonah's advice or anyone else's. The Lord doesn't wait for Jonah to consent or to rubber stamp His call. As sovereign Creator of all men and as sovereign Governor of all nations, He has an undisputed and unrivaled right to call Jonah to preach to the capital city of the greatest Gentile nation of that time. Jonah may not like that particular call of God upon his life. Jonah may find that call to be very uncomfortable, and even frightening to say the least. Jonah may question why God would even care at all about the ungodly Gentiles in Nineveh (after all, "we're the children at the table, they are the dogs"). Jonah may feel completely inadequate and helpless to fulfill the call and task God has given to him, but it is God who sovereignly calls, and it is Jonah that is to lovingly obey the revealed will of God. Oh, dear ones, it is not only Jonah that needed to heed the call of a Sovereign God, but it is all of us that need to humble ourselves before our Sovereign God and to stop playing games with Him, to stop pretending we do not hear Him speaking to us in His read and preached Word, and to stop making excuses (even if we are shaking in our boots) for why we cannot obey Him, when our duty is made clear to us from His Moral Law. For it is a firm and settled promise to us all, who

are trusting in Christ alone for our eternal salvation, that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). We can do nothing without Him (John 15:5), but we can do all things through Him. It is so often ministers who really need to heed this message, because it is ministers who often question the call of God when it comes to leaving an unfaithful church (over unsound doctrine, corrupt worship, unbiblical church government, and backsliding from the gospel of Christ and law of God that was previously professed and practiced) in order to unite with a faithful church. “What will happen to my salary?” “What will happen to my pension and financial security?” “I have put so much money and time into my house, how could I now move to take another job?” Those questions (and many more like them) may not be completely irrelevant, but they are misplaced. For the first and foremost question that must be answered is this: What is the revealed will and call of God upon my ministry in regard to faithfully preaching and teaching sound doctrine and practicing pure worship and faithful church government? And then the only right response to that question must be, “God is sovereign, and His call and revealed will are first; my comforts in this life and financial support are second.”

2. **God is Righteous in His Call.** If God were only sovereign in His call to Jonah, Jonah would have no assurance that what God sovereignly called him to do was morally right, upright, and holy. But the Psalmist declares, “The LORD is righteous in all His ways, and holy in all His works” (Psalm 145:17). Thus, we observe that the Lord sends His prophet to cry against the wickedness of that great city Nineveh, whose wickedness has been brought before the very tribunal of God for His judgment. Here we see that the righteous God has a controversy with Nineveh, the chief capital of the Gentile nations. Though the specific sins against which Jonah is to preach are not enumerated in the Book of Jonah, carefully note in the Book of Nahum (which is a prophecy against Nineveh given to Nahum in a subsequent generation) that Nineveh is first

accused of sins of idolatry against the First Table Commandments of God's Moral Law (according to Nahum 1:14), and then accused of sins of murder, lies, and robbery against the Second Table Commandments of God's Moral Law (according to Nahum 3:1). You see, dear ones, it is righteous of God who is Governor among the nations and the King of the nations (Psalm 22:8; Psalm 47:7-8; Jeremiah 10:7) to judge Gentile nations who are wantonly guilty of idolatry and false worship as well as kingdoms who are guilty of murder, harlotry, and sodomy. How is it that Christians have so often been quick to mention official toleration and promotion of the murder of unborn children and sodomy as causes for God's wrath against this nation in which we live, but have failed to mention the official toleration and promotion of idolatry and false religion as the greater sin committed directly against the righteous Lord God Himself? Dear ones, the righteous God (who is Governor of all nations) and His Righteous Christ (who is the Prince of the kings of the earth) do not have a selective memory when it comes to the Ten Commandments and the judgment brought against nations for their violation of the Ten Commandments. The constitutional toleration and promotion of public idolatry, false religion, heresy, and blasphemy of any nation reaches the righteous bar of God's tribunal. And when there is delay of judgment for such crimes of treason committed against this Righteous King of all nations, it is not a delay of approbation and approval, but a delay of mercy that might lead that nation to repentance (Romans 2:4) as faithful ministers proclaim the righteous claims of God's justice and yet the mercy of God that comes to that nation that turns in faith and repentance to Christ Jesus (and to that man, woman, or child that embraces Jesus Christ and His righteousness as his/her only hope of eternal salvation).

3. **God is Gracious in His Call.** God was gracious in two specific ways in His call to Jonah to go and preach against the sins of Nineveh.

a. First, God was gracious in sending an ordained minister to preach against the sins of Nineveh in that God could have justly and righteously brought total destruction against Nineveh immediately without any warning (by sending fire and brimstone upon her as He did upon Sodom and Gomorrah). Preaching (even the preaching of judgment), dear ones, is a precious means of conversion to all who hear and respond in faith to the Lord. Preaching a deserved judgment is the means that God ordinarily uses to shake a people from their own self-confidence and self-righteousness to see what they justly deserve from a righteous God. And it is precisely at that point that a desperate people who see their own helpless and hopeless estate will eye the mercy of God in Christ Jesus and turn in faith to Him who alone can save and rescue from that deserved judgment of a holy God. Even though Jonah was sent to preach God's righteous judgment against Nineveh for her gross crimes against the Most High God, he knew that God was "gracious, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness" (according to Jonah 4:2) toward even the chief of sinners and even shows mercy where He had previously announced judgment. For where sin did abound, grace did much more abound. Thus, the first way in which God was gracious in sending Jonah was a grace extended to Nineveh itself (which as I said earlier is also a foretaste of the salvation of all nations who will be made willing in the day of God's great power when the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, Revelation 11:15). Dear ones, never ever doubt the power of God to change lives and even nations through faithful preaching.

b. The second way in which God was most gracious in sending Jonah to preach against the sins of Nineveh was in provoking Israel to jealousy by means of God's prophet being sent to the capital of the greatest Gentile city of the world at that time. For you see, the Lord had already told Israel back in **Deuteronomy 32:21** that God would provoke Israel to jealousy by turning to Gentile nations. Yes, the Lord was

in judgment turning His back upon Israel for her own gross idolatry when He turned to the idolatrous Ninevites. But it was a judgment that had in view a gracious purpose to provoke Israel to jealousy when she saw God's gracious blessings being enjoyed by Gentile nations. Israel would then realize that salvation neither rested in circumcision (though it was a means of grace in pointing to Christ who alone can circumcise the heart of man) nor did salvation rest in any other work of man. But as Jonah testified, "Salvation is of the LORD" (Jonah 2:10). From beginning to end, "Salvation is of the LORD" and not of works lest any man should boast (Ephesians 2:5,6). Though the northern kingdom of Israel was not provoked to jealousy at the time of Jonah so that she turned in faith to Jesus Christ, Israel as a nation will yet be provoked to jealousy so that she will turn in faith to Christ in the time of millennial blessing as she sees the Gentile nations of the world covenanting to be the Lord's people (in fulfillment of Romans 11:11).

Dear ones, the truth of the matter and application to us is that the Lord will likewise turn away from us and turn to others as He did with Israel of old, if we become haughty and self-righteous in our own endowments, in our own attainments of outward reformation, in our own knowledge, or in our own history and covenantal succession. God does not need us. None of us are indispensable. That should not come as a surprise to any who know that God is absolutely sovereign. He can raise up faithful covenanters from stones if He so chooses (Matthew 3:9), or he can call others to be His faithful witnesses. Therefore, in our speech and conduct, may we always seek to exalt the glory and grace of God in saving undeserving sinners like you and me.

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