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GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING FROM GOD— THE COMMISSION OF JONAH

TEXT: 1:1-2

- 1 Now the word of Jehovah came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,
- 2 Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.

QUERIES

- a. Who was Jonah—where did he live—when did he live?
- b. Why send a Jewish prophet to a Gentile city?

PARAPHRASE

And now at Jehovah's appointed time in the course of events the word of Jehovah was communicated to Jonah, the son of Amittai. Jehovah said to Jonah, Arise and go with haste to that great Gentile city of Nineveh, in Assyria, and preach My sentence of judgment against it; for the wickedness of the people is great and it has come up before Me.

SUMMARY

Jehovah's righteous judgment is about to fall upon Nineveh but He commissions Jonah to go with a final message of repentance, which, if heeded, will bring salvation from the impending judgment.

JONAH
COMMENT

v. 1-2 . . . THE WORD OF JEHOVAH CAME SAYING . . . GO TO NINEVAH . . . AND CRY AGAINST IT . . . The story of Jonah, beginning with the conjunction *vav*, unites with all the preceding history of God's scheme of redemption and thus becomes "one more pearl of great price" fitted to the whole string of pearls which form the priceless revelation of God's grace to man. It has a specific purpose to serve, it is not incongruous. It reminds the Jews of their election to be a witness to the nations; it proclaims God's sovereignty over all peoples; it typifies the Messiah's humiliation and glorification; and it prophesies Israel's chastening to come. It is God's trumpet blast warning both Jew and Gentile of their responsibilities toward Him at a critical time in the scheme of redemption.

The city of Nineveh, according to Diodorus, was the greatest city of antiquity. It had a population of about 600,000 and was some 80 miles in circumference. Upon its walls, 100 feet high, flanked with 1500 towers, each 200 feet high, four chariots could drive abreast. It filled, together with the adjoining suburbs, the whole space between the rivers Tigris, Khoer, the Upper or Great Zab, the Gasr Su, and the mountainous boundary of the valley of the Tigris on the east. This great metropolis occupied an area of about 18 square miles.

The first mention of Nineveh is in Gen. 10:11 where it is stated that Nimrod (or Asshur) went out into Assyria, and builded Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen, adding, "the same is the great city." It is very probable that the Nineveh of Jonah's day consisted of all these cities in one "great city." The first king of any greatness in Nineveh was Assur-nasipal II (885-860 B.C.) who was warlike and cruel but who welded Assyria into the best fighting machine of the ancient world. Shalmaneser II (860-825 B.C.) was the first Assyrian king to come in conflict with Israel. Ahab fought him and Jehu paid him tribute. Then came Shansi-adad (825-808 B.C.) and then Adad-nirari (808-783 B.C.). Adad-nirari is undoubtedly the person who was king when Jonah went to "cry against" that great city. There are archaeological records to indicate that Adad-Nirari made reforms in his empire similar to those of Amenophis IV in Egypt. And, under the reigns of the three kings following Adad-Nirari (Shalmaneser III, 783-771 B.C.; Assur-dayan, 771-753 B.C.; Assur-lush, 753-747 B.C.) there was a let-up in Assyrian conquests. In this period Israel recovered lost territory, II Kings 14:25. These are hints that Jonah's influence on Nineveh was profound.

About 100 years later, under Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.) Nineveh blossomed into beauty and splendor that she had never known. Sennacherib built his palace which covered 8 acres and was elevated on a brick platform 90 feet above the city level. Flights of marble steps led up all four sides of the palace and each entrance was flanked by five pairs of human headed beasts, lions and other figures. These palace ruins show numerous halls, rooms and passages, many of which were faced with slabs of coarse alabaster, sculptured in relief with military operations, hunting-scenes, mythological figures, etc.

Assur-banipal (668-626), one of Assyria's last, but greatest kings, built one of the ancient world's greatest libraries. It contained originally over 100,000 volumes. It was thoroughly cataloged and indexed and specific volumes were easily referred to. Archaeologists have found magnifying glasses supplied to read the many texts which, because of voluminous amount of material, had to be written in small characters. Among these volumes were such works as grammars, dictionaries, interlinear translations, works on astronomy relating observations of eclipses and the like, religious texts, legal texts including the code of Hammurabi, scientific works in taxonomy, geography and medicine, poetry, epics on the great Deluge and the Creation, fiscal documents relating to collection of taxes and works of various other natures.

About 612 B.C. Nineveh was destroyed by a coalition of armies from the Babylonians and Medes. It happened exactly as Nahum, the prophet, predicted it. Its destruction was so complete that even its site was forgotten. When Xenophon and his 10,000 passed by 200 years later he thought the mounds were the ruins of some Parthian city. When Alexander the Great fought the famous battle of Arbela, 331 B.C., near the site of Nineveh, he did not know there had ever been a city there.

To this cruel, cold-blooded, profligate, power-worshipping, materialistic, animistic metropolis God sent Jonah. Jonah was commanded to "preach against" that great city. Their wickedness cried out to the whole earth and God saw it just as He had seen it before (Gen. 6:5; 18: 20-21). The wickedness of every man and every nation is a "cry against God." But God has, by sending His Word, "cried out against all wickedness" (cf Rom. 1:18ff). Who will win in this struggle? Men cry their rebellions against God—God cries His judgments upon men. Whose voice shall be finally heard? The Bible says God's cry will prevail and history confirms it!

But why send Jonah to a foreign nation? Did he not have enough to do in preaching to his own people? No doubt he had preached

to Israel time and time again of God's judgment to come upon them because of their materialism, rebellion and unbelief. But his preaching had fallen upon sin-deafened ears. Nothing he said, however scathing, could turn them from their headlong plunge into heathenism. But look again at Nineveh. Its power and security, its prolificacy and licentiousness had become a by-word throughout the whole world. It was the subject upon every lip—the fear in every heart. Whatever might be achieved there by God through His prophet would not be "as a thing done in a corner!" The report of whatever should be accomplished there at Jonah's preaching would be reported throughout the world!

If by this one call to repentance Jonah should effect the repentance of this Gentile city, what a lesson that would be to the sin-calloused hearts of Israel. It should reveal to Israel the perverseness and foolishness of her behaviour toward her loving God—it should make her ashamed. If it did not so shame her into repentance then there was nothing left for God to do but cast Israel out as one no longer worthy to be called a child and receive and honor the recovered and penitent prodigal, Nineveh. This is precisely the use Jesus made of the preaching of Jonah at Nineveh and its results. Jesus told the Jews of His own generation that the people of Nineveh would rise up in the judgment to condemn them, because *they* had repented at Jonah's preaching; while He, a greater than Jonah, spoke only to cold and unconcerned hearts. The lesson to be learned from the response of the Gentiles should be even more graphic to the Jews of Jonah's day. The Ninevites surrendered to the call of God and ceased from their sins while the covenant people despised God's word and His prophet and hardened their hearts fearing Him not. Israel then could only learn that repentance, such as expressed by Nineveh, would bring salvation. The only other alternative was certain, sure and just retribution from the God they insisted upon spurning.

This is a principle common to all ages. Jesus used it over and over again (Matt. 8:10-12; 22:1-14; 21:33-41); Paul reiterated it again and again both by example and precept (Acts 13:46-47; 28:24-28; Romans 11, etc.). This principle is: God is not now nor was He ever a respecter of persons, "But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34). When God chose the seed of Abraham He intended to bless not simply the physical offspring of Abraham but the spiritual seed of Abraham. The people of Israel in Jonah's day were in very real danger of

forgetting this truth. Jonah is merely illustrating by an object-lesson this great truth which Hosea would later prophesy (Hosea 1:10; 2:23) and which Paul would quote in Romans 9:19-26. When God judged and redeemed Israel it was a revelation—a lesson—to all mankind at large. Just as Israel, in apostatizing, became as the heathen falling under the judgment of God, so Israel in being redeemed upon her repentance was equally a promise to all Gentiles of their redemption if they should repent. In the case of Jonah's preaching to the Gentiles and bringing about their repentance and salvation it was this same lesson *in reverse*—teaching the principle which those who should have known it best had so readily forgotten!

This was why Jonah was sent. God would use the repentance and salvation of Nineveh as a last effort of a loving Father to provoke a recalcitrant child (Israel) to shame and to a jealousy that would penitently seek the favor of its Father (cf. Rom. 10:19). But Jonah, so intent upon his own opinion as how to best accomplish Israel's repentance (which would be by a catastrophic display of God's wrath upon the sin of Nineveh), was found "running ahead of God."

Another prophet, enamored of his own ideas as to how best bring about the purposes of God, was also found "running ahead of God" in a similar way and received a similar rebuke (cf. I Kings 19:9-14). The Jewish concept of the Messiah was one of a mighty military despot who would come to bring the retribution of God upon the Gentiles thus calling Israel to repentance but the Messiah came with the "still small voice" and the Jews, having already formed their concepts, rejected Him. We shall have more to say of this later.

QUIZ

1. How does this singularly unique book of Jonah fit into the whole revelation of God?
2. How "great" was the city of Nineveh—population, area, militarily?
3. Who was the king of Assyria when Jonah preached "against" its capitol city?
4. What was the eventual fate of the city of Nineveh?
5. Why was Jonah sent to a Gentile city to preach "against" it?
6. Are there any illustrations of other ages and other people of God's purpose in Jonah's commission? Name some!

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING FROM GOD— THE CONTRARIETY OF JONAH

TEXT: 1:3-10

- 3 But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of Jehovah; and he went down to Joppa, and 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 Jehovah.
- 4 But Jehovah sent out a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.
- 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god; and they cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it unto them. But Jonah was gone down into the innermost parts of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep.
- 6 So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us that we perish not.
- 7 And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.
- 8 Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; what is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou?
- 9 And he said unto them, I am a Hebrew; and I fear Jehovah, the God of heaven, who hath made the sea and the dry land.
- 10 Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, What is this that thou hast done? For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of Jehovah, because he had told them.

QUERIES

- a. How did Jonah think he could flee "from the presence of Jehovah?"
- b. How could Jonah sleep through the storm upon the sea?
- c. Why did the mariners want to know so much about Jonah?

PARAPHRASE

But Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh so he decided to go far, far away to Tarshish hoping thereby to relieve himself of the obligation of serving God in this special task. He went down to the great seaport of Joppa and finding a ship there bound for Tarshish, he

paid his fare and went aboard and climbed down into the inner-most part of the ship and sailed with them in order to be free of the responsibility of this particular task God had given him. But God sent one of His servants to bring a great wind upon the sea and there was a mighty tempest on the sea which threatened to break the ship apart. Fearing for their lives, the desperate sailors cried to their gods for help and threw the cargo overboard in order to lighten the ship. All this time Jonah was sound asleep down in the hold of the ship. So the captain went down after him. What do you mean sleeping at a time like this? he said. Get up and cry to your god and perhaps he will have mercy upon us and keep us from perishing. Then the crew decided to cast lots to see which one of them had offended the gods and caused this terrible storm; and the lot fell upon Jonah. You, who have brought this displeasure of the gods upon us, tell us, they said, Who are you? What is your occupation? Where are you from? What is your country—and your nationality? Jonah replied, I am a Hebrew; I worship Jehovah, the God of heaven, who made the earth and the sea. Then the sailors were terrified and yelled at him, Why have you done this? They knew that he was fleeing from the presence of Jehovah, because he had told them.

SUMMARY

Jonah, thinking to relieve himself of the prophetic responsibility if he gets away from the place where this commission was given, flees toward Tarshish. But God arrests him in the middle of the ocean by a storm and the falling of a lot upon him. Jonah then confesses his failure to the ship's crew.

COMMENT

v. 3 JONAH ROSE UP TO FLEE UNTO TARSHISH FROM THE PRESENCE OF JEHOVAH . . . Was Jonah foolish enough to think that he could hide from God? Destructive liberal critics of the Bible say that the phrase "from the presence of Jehovah" indicates a "tribal concept of God." That is, the liberal critics think the Hebrews of Jonah's day had the same concept of their God as the heathen did of theirs—each ethnic group of people had their own localized gods—and when they got away from their homeland the local gods had no power over them. This attack upon the supernatural character of the Bible is too absurd to be given much credence by anyone who has ever read the Bible at all. Long before Jonah ever lived the Hebrew people knew that Jehovah God was the Only True God and that He was Creator and Sus-

tainer of the whole universe—that His presence was everywhere (cf. Psa. 139:7ff). What then is the meaning of this phrase “from the presence of Jehovah?” The Jewish commentator, Kimchi, says, “He imagined that if he went out of the land of Israel, the Spirit of prophecy would not rest upon him.’ In other words, Jonah was simply trying to rid himself of the responsibilities of his official status in this one particular task of going to Nineveh. The phrase “. . . presence of Jehovah” is often used to indicate some official capacity (cf. Gen. 41:46; Deut. 10:8; I Kings 17:1; 18:15; II Kings 3:14; Lk. 1:19). Jonah’s intention was not to hide himself from the omnipotent God, but to withdraw from the service of Jehovah. So Jonah acted, as men often do today who do not like God’s call upon their lives to special service, by removing themselves as far as possible from being under the influence of God, and from the place where he *could* fulfill God’s command. All the circumstances which weighed upon Jonah’s soul causing such disobedience we are not told. However, he gives us one reason himself near the end of the book (4:2). Fairbairn supposes Jonah to have rationalized thus: “Alas! what can I hope to accomplish as the bearer of God’s message against the crying sins and abominations of Nineveh? I, a solitary individual, a poor and unknown stranger, in the midst of a proud, overgrown city, revelling in wealth and wantonness! What success have I had at home even among the people of my own tongue and nation? Here, with every advantage on my side, I have borne the testimony of God in vain, and have seen the hand of the Lord stretched out to save from impending ruin, with no other effect among the people at large than of giving new wings to profligacy and corruption. My soul is already sick with looking at the things which have been proceeding around me; my hands hang down nerveless and enfeebled; and yet I am the man to be sent to deal with that mighty mass of pride and unrestrained wickedness! Is there the least likelihood of their listening to my voice? . . . And, whatever success might attend my labors when transferred to that distant field, will not He who has so long spared Israel under so many provocations, much more spare them? Why may not matters, then, be allowed to take their course? Or, if the call to repentance must be proclaimed, let it be at least committed to one better prepared for the toils and difficulties of the undertaking.” Discouragement, the devil’s sharpest knife, has stabbed the heart of Jonah and many a preacher of God since, weakening their faith and prodding them into “fleeing from the presence of Jehovah.” Jonah had seen no visible “success” from his ministry and so he was ready to quit. He had seen enough in the past to believe that all his preaching to Nineveh would not bring

the judgment of God upon them but mercy which would be but another failure. His faith was not strong enough yet to accept at all times that the ways of men are not always the ways of God (Isa. 55:8). When Isaiah was warned many years later that his preaching would not be listened to, Isaiah cried out, "How long, O Lord?" The Lord answered Isaiah and all preachers who have ever asked the same question, "Until cities be waste without inhabitant, and houses without man, and the land become utterly waste . . ." (Isa. 6:9ff). Lack of apparent success, unresponsive listeners, discouragement blinded the eyes of Jonah to the power of God and he went with haste to the city of Joppa, one of Israel's greatest seaports, and paid his fare on a ship bound for Tarshish.

Tarshish is probably Tartessus, in Spain, about 2000 miles west of Palestine, and one of the most western points of all the Phoenician trade. Jonah was fleeing in as opposite a direction from Nineveh as he could go, as Nineveh is almost directly east of Palestine about 500 miles. Joppa is the city where Peter was when God called him to take the Gospel to the Gentile army captain, Cornelius (Acts 10:5ff).

v. 4-5 BUT JEHOVAH SENT OUT A GREAT WIND UPON THE SEA . . . THEN THE MARINERS WERE AFRAID . . . BUT JONAH . . . WAS FAST ASLEEP. His going out from the presence of the Lord did not ensure his escape from the government of the Lord. All the forces of nature are at the command of God, and are pressed into His service when need requires. The ship started on course, but God sent out a wind (cf. Psa. 104:4; Heb. 1:7). The mariners were heathen—they were polytheists—men who worshipped many gods. This tempest was so severe that even these experienced seamen were terrified. When prayer to each one's deity did not avail they hurled their cargo overboard, but even this did not help. The ship was groaning and creaking, tossed about, and in immediate danger of breaking apart. And Jonah was fast asleep! It is hardly justifiable to attribute his ability to sleep through the storm to a perverse stupified, seared conscience. He was probably so exhausted from the long trip from Gath-hepher to Joppa (a distance of some 60-70 miles) and from the psychological wrestling with his soul (which causes physical exhaustion) that he simply fell into a deep sleep which the rocking and rolling of the ship might even have helped, as we ourselves have experienced drowsiness induced by the rolling of a ship under our feet.

v. 6-7 . . . WHAT MEANEST THOU, O SLEEPER? . . . COME, AND LET US CAST LOTS . . . AND THE LOT FELL UPON JONAH.

The "chief-sailor" (shipmaster) remembered the passenger who had boarded at Joppa and probably had been informed that he was asleep down in the hold. Jonah had told them (exactly when, we are not told) that his purpose for buying passage was to flee from the presence of Jehovah (v. 10). So the chief "rope-puller" (the literal word for "sailor") awakened Jonah shouting, over the noise of the storm and in incredulity that he could sleep, "What do you mean sleeping at a time like this? Get up and call upon your God in hope that he will look with favor upon us all that we do not perish." These polytheists had tried calling upon every god represented by every other man on board all to no avail. They had thrown the cargo overboard. Now, they will try Jonah's god. The record does not indicate whether Jonah prayed then or not, but the crew decided to take further action as a last resort. These sailors were at their wits' end when it occurred to them that this violent storm was the expression of the gods' anger with someone on board. Although many of the ancient and contemporary heathenistic concepts of God and natural phenomena are utterly false yet the Bible reveals very plainly that there is a relationship between man's sin and natural calamity (see our comments on Joel and Special Studies on Prophetic Philosophy of History and The Day of Jehovah).

The Arabic word which corresponds to the Hebrew word "lot" is translated "stone, pebble, etc." Stones, pebbles, dice, colored balls, pieces of wood of different lengths, and so on, were used for the "casting of lots." Because men of old believed that the will of the powers which ruled over man's destiny could be known in this way, it was a common practice to cast lots for important decisions. We also read that individual Israelites and the entire nation made use quite frequently of some sort of "lot." The Urim and Thummim, placed into the breastplate fastened to the ephod worn by the high priest in his official duties served to reveal God's will, the exact manner of such revelation being unknown to us (cf. Ex. 28:30; Num. 27:21; Josh. 9:14; I Sam. 22:10, 13, 15; 23:6-13; 30:7ff; Neh. 7:65). The Lord commanded the casting of lots only in important matters (Lev. 16:8; Num. 26:53ff; 33:54; 34:13; Josh. 7:13ff; chs. 14-21). Saul's use of the lot (I Sam. 14:37-45) was an act of a king rejected by God (I Sam. 13:13ff), an example illustrating Prov. 13:33, without giving permission to resort to casting the lot. In the New Testament there is no divine command to cast lots and only one example of such being done (Acts 1:26). Neither the deacons (Acts 6:1-6), nor Paul and Barnabas as missionaries to the heathen (Acts 13:1ff), nor the delegation sent to Antioch by the congregation at Jerusalem (Acts

155:22ff), nor the evangelists placed in the newly planted congregations (I Tim. 4:14; Titus 1:5) were chosen by casting lots. We do not think it would be sinful if a congregation or individual Christians resorted to the lot in order to decide certain details in carrying out a work in which they are agreed in general. But the outcome of the lot is not to be regarded as a divine decree. God has made know His will through which "he has granted unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through a knowledge of Him (Christ)" (II Pet. 1:3ff). God has given us minds to make intelligent decisions and when our decisions are in accord with His revealed word we do not need to cast lots.

In the Old Testament times God revealed His will in "divers portions and divers manners" (Heb. 1:1). In the case of Jonah here it is very evident that God controlled the outcome of the casting of the lots. The lot fell upon Jonah. It was God's way of saying, "Thou art the man!"

v. 8-9 . . . WHAT IS THINE OCCUPATION? AND WHENCE COMEST THOU? . . . I AM A HEBREW; AND I FEAR JEHOVAH . . . They inquired about his occupation, because it might be a disreputable one, and one which excited the wrath of the gods; also about his parentage, and especially about the land and people from which he sprang, in order that they might deal with him according to his position, or influential friendships. They would not want to deal severely with a man whose influence might get them into trouble later.

We cannot but admire the frankness of Jonah's confession of guilt, and his willing surrender to the claims of justice, when he was tempted sorely to take an opposite course. This certainly shows that Jonah's conscience was not seared over. He answers their questions truthfully and at the same time finds an opportunity to bear witness to the One True God. His testimony resembles a great deal that made by the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 14:14-18; 17:22-31).

v. 10 . . . WHAT IS THIS THAT THOU HAST DONE? Now if Jonah's claims were true, it was Jonah's God who had sent the storm. How then could Jonah rebel against such a god? The sailors were amazed by what Jonah had told them. It was as if they said, "Jonah, if your god is the god of heaven, sea, and land, how could you dare disobey him and run away from his command to you?" They also wanted to know why he had involved them in his troubles with his god!

QUIZ

1. Was Jonah foolish enough to think he could hide from God?
2. What does the phrase "... from the presence of Jehovah" mean?
3. Why did Jonah "flee from the presence of Jehovah?"
4. Where is Tarshish?
5. Why was Jonah asleep?
6. Should we try to determine God's will by casting lots?
7. Why did the sailors question Jonah about his occupation, country, etc.?

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING FROM GOD— THE CHASTENING OF JEHOVAH

TEXT: 1:11-17

- 11 Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea grew more and more tempestuous.
- 12 And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.
- 13 Nevertheless the men rowed hard to get back to the land; but they could not: for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.
- 14 Wherefore they cried unto Jehovah, and said, We beseech thee, O Jehovah, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood; for thou, O Jehovah, hast done as it pleased thee.
- 15 So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.
- 16 Then the men feared Jehovah exceedingly; and they offered a sacrifice unto Jehovah, and made vows.
- 17 And Jehovah prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

QUERIES

- a. How did Jonah know God wanted him thrown into the sea?
- b. Would God hear the prayers of these heathen?
- c. What sort of fish swallowed Jonah?

PARAPHRASE

Then the mariners said, Either you pronounce your own sentence or tell us what your god would have us do to you that this stormy sea may be calmed—we are not going to be responsible for guessing

at what should be done. The sea and the storm grew worse and worse. Then Jonah, knowing from God's revelations of the severity of His justice, said, Throw me out into the sea and then the sea will become calm again. I know that this terrible storm has come because of my rebellion and I deserve to die for it. But the mariners do not at once throw Jonah into the sea and try harder to row the boat to the land and safety but they are not able to do so because the storm grew even more fierce than before. Then they raised a prayerful cry to Jehovah, Jonah's God; O Jehovah, do not make us die for this man's sin—do not hold us responsible for his death. In the sending of the storm and the falling of the lot upon him, you have ordained that we must cast him into the sea—it is your doing and not ours. Then they picked up Jonah and threw him overboard into the raging sea—and the storm stopped suddenly! The seamen were gripped with fear of Jehovah and they immediately offered a sacrifice and made vows to Jehovah. As for Jonah, the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow him; and Jonah was in the belly of this fish for three days and three nights.

SUMMARY

Jonah knows that this raging storm is God's chastening hand against him. He surrenders to God's justice and commits himself to death for his rebellion. As he is cast into the sea, the storm ceases, and he is swallowed by God's providentially prepared fish.

COMMENT

v. 11-12 . . . WHAT SHALL WE DO UNTO THEE . . . TAKE ME UP, AND CAST ME FORTH INTO THE SEA . . . The "lot" having fallen upon Jonah, coupled with Jonah's confession of fleeing from the presence of Jehovah, the men correctly conclude that Jonah must somehow be made to atone for his sin. They have seen enough and Jonah has told them enough to make them very reluctant in presuming to pronounce sentence upon this Hebrew themselves. They know Jonah is a prophet of his God and so they ask him what shall be done.

Jonah's reply is that he should be cast into the raging sea "*because I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.*" K & D say, "He pronounces this sentence, not by virtue of any prophetic inspiration (direct revelation from God), but as a believing Israelite who is well acquainted with the severity of the justice of the holy God, both from the law and from the history of his nation." This

is correct. Every Hebrew would know from such historic incidents as Achan, Uzzah, Korah and others of the severity of the justice of the holy God. Pusey says, "In that he says, *I know*, he marks that he had a revelation; . . ." Whichever be the case, the subsequent calm of the storm shows Jonah's pronouncement to be God's will.

v. 13 NEVERTHELESS THE MEN ROWED HARD TO GET THEM BACK TO THE LAND; Even though Jonah asked the crew to throw him overboard, they were reluctant to do so. Not because of any feeling of mercy towards Jonah, but probably they hesitated to lay hold of a man after whom a god would chase and raise such a storm. This Hebrew was a chosen servant of a most powerful god. They may have reasoned that this powerful god would be more pleased if they could deliver the runaway prophet safe to the land. But row as hard as they might, the storm only increased in fury. This would be a final demonstration to them that only the life of Jonah would satisfy his god.

v. 14-15 . . . WE BESEECH THEE, LET US NOT PERISH FOR THIS MAN'S LIFE, AND LAY NOT UPON US INNOCENT BLOOD . . . SO THEY TOOK UP JONAH, AND CAST HIM FORTH INTO THE SEA These heathen seamen saw that there was no possibility of rowing to land against this storm whose raging increased by the moment, so they began to shout a prayerful cry to Jonah's god. If, as the circumstances seemed to dictate, Jonah must be cast into the sea, they wanted to be sure it was all right with Jonah's god. They did not want to be found in rebellion against such a god as this. If such a god could pursue a reluctant prophet to the middle of the sea and bring on such a storm as this, what might he do to these sailors who had never even prayed to him before? Their prayer contained two requests. First they prayed, Do not let us perish along with and because of this man. Secondly they prayed, Do not hold us guilty of willful murder in the case of this man—we are innocent of his blood. It is all between this man and his god—we are innocent bystanders. We had no control over Jonah—he did what he did of his own free will; we had no control over the falling of the lot upon him and we are not therefore guilty when we throw him overboard. The circumstances leading to the present predicament were not of their own choosing, but, rather, Jonah's god had done as it pleased him. As Calvin suggests, "We see, therefore, that although they had never enjoyed the teaching of the law, they had been so taught by nature, that they knew very well that the blood of man was dear to God, and precious in His sight." All heathen races have enough of the

revelation of God's character through Nature to condemn them under sin (cf. Rom. 1:18-32; 2:11-16). What they now need is God's special revelation in Jesus Christ in the New Testament to save them by His grace! This revelation they can never know unless it be preached to them, and how shall preachers go to them except the churches send them (cf. Rom. 10:13-17).

Having prayed to Jonah's god, the seaman lifted Jonah up and hurled him into the sea. Repentance was beginning to have its way in Jonah's heart. He did not resist. He surrendered to God's will and God's way. And with fearful, awe-inspiring suddenness, the sea ceased its tossing and churning and became calm! It was a miracle! This, among other things, is one of the unique characteristics of the book of Jonah.

- a. Jonah is the only minor prophet in whose career the miraculous plays a prominent role.
- b. Jonah is the only minor prophet whose major activity is on foreign soil.
- c. The only minor prophet who preaches exclusively to a foreign people.
- d. The book is the only latter prophet cast in narrative form.
- e. Jonah is the only Old Testament character represented as taking a trip on the Mediterranean.
- f. Jonah is also the only minor prophet mentioned by Jesus by name.
- g. Jonah is the only Old Testament character likened by the Lord to Himself.
- h. The book stresses universalism more than any other minor prophet.

v. 16-17 . . . THEY OFFERED A SACRIFICE UNTO JEHOVAH, AND MADE VOWS . . . AND JEHOVAH PREPARED A GREAT FISH TO SWALLOW UP JONAH, AND JONAH WAS IN THE BELLY OF THE FISH THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS The sudden calming of the sea proved conclusively to the sailors that the storm had come on Jonah's account and that they had not shed innocent blood by casting him into the sea and that Jonah's god had been pleased with their actions. So they sacrificed. Perhaps they had retained an animal or two on board during the storm for just such an occasion. They not only worshipped Jonah's god then but made vows, presumably to do so at a later date also. Pusey thinks these heathen sailors were converted and became, "perhaps . . . the first preachers among the heathen, and their account of their own wonderful deliverance prepared the way for Jonah's mission to Nineveh." W. L. Banks in his book, "Jonah, The Reluctant Prophet," is skeptical and says, "Fear is a great inventor. Many things are done and many vows are made under stress and

strain which, when conditions become more favorable, are soon forgotten. This characteristic of human nature creates doubt in our minds that these men abandoned their own gods to fully serve Jehovah, the God of Jonah and Israel." On the other hand, remember the conversion of a great heathen king, Nebuchadnezzar, who experienced the mighty hand of God (cf. Dan. 4:28-37).

Be that as it may, the significant portion of this section is verse 17 concerning the great fish and the three days and three nights. First, let us take a look at the "fish story." The word in Hebrew is *dag gadol* ("fish, great"). *Dag* may be a fish of any species, including the whale (cf. Gen. 9:2; Num. 11:22; Neh. 13:16). The continuous debate over whether there are fish in the Mediterranean, or any other ocean, that could swallow a man is actually *beside the point* since it is said that the *Lord prepared* the fish. There are certain species of sharks in the Mediterranean capable of swallowing a man. K & D, Lange, Pusey and others have documented evidence that these sharks (*squalus carcharias*) have swallowed horses later found whole, inside them. In the year 1758, according to Muller, "a sailor fell overboard from a frigate in very stormy weather, into the Mediterranean Sea, and was immediately taken into the jaws of a great fish and disappeared. The captain, however, ordered a gun, which was standing on the deck, to be discharged at the shark, and the cannon-ball struck it, so that it vomited up again the sailor that it had swallowed, who was then taken up alive, and very little hurt . . ." The miracle is not so much the fact that there was a fish large enough to swallow a man but in the fact that the fish was at the right place at the right time and in the fact that Jonah survived for "three days and three nights." The event is unequivocally, a miracle. Besides, the issue is not taken to be decided on a basis of whether it is possible or not—but on a basis of did it actually happen or not—are there enough witnesses to the veracity of the book to establish it as a record of an actual event or not! See our Introduction to this book for proof of its historicity and veracity.

Now, let us deal with the phrase, "three days and three nights." Jesus, we know, used this incident to refer to His own death and resurrection as a sign (Matt. 12:40). Jesus' use of this incident form what is alleged to be a contradiction in view of the fact that Jesus, being crucified and buried late on Friday and resurrected on Sunday morning early could not have been in the tomb 72 hours. Lange says, "Three days and three nights is a Hebrew expression, which does not describe, with chronological exactness, the space of seventy-two hours, but corresponds to our mode of designating time by such

phrases as 'the day after to-morrow,' 'the day before yesterday.' (I Sam. 30:1; I Sam. 30:12; Esth. 4:16)." K & D say, "The three days and three nights are not to be regarded as fully three times twenty (four) hours, but are to be interpreted according to Hebrew usage, as signifying that Jonah was vomited up again on the third day after he had been swallowed (cf. Esth. 4:16 with v. 1 and Tob. 3:12, 13)." McGarvey, in "Jesus and Jonah," says, "It was the invariable custom of Hebrew writers to count a fraction of a year, or a day, at the beginning of a series and at the end of it, as each a year, or a day. This can be demonstrated by many examples . . . (I Kings 15:1, 2, 8, 9; 15:25, 28; 15:33; 16:6, 8, for years, and cf. Gen. 42:17-18; Esth. 4:16; 4:1; Acts 10:3, 7, 8, 9, 23, 24, 30; Matt. 27:63, 64 for days)." McGarvey points out that "After three days," and "on the third day," were simply equivalent colloquialisms of the Hebrew people (cf. Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:34 with Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Lk. 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 46). If, then, Jesus could at one time say in strict compliance with Jewish usage, that he would rise *after three days*, He could with precisely the same meaning say that He would be in the grave *three days and three nights*. Neither assertion, says Mr. McGarvey, would be true according to modern usage, but both would be strictly true according to the usage of the Hebrews. For more study on this question see *The Gospel of John, Vol. II*, pg. 405-408, by Paul T. Butler, pub. College Press.

QUIZ

1. Where did Jonah get the idea that he should be cast into the sea?
2. Why didn't the seamen thus throw Jonah into the sea immediately?
3. What finally persuaded the seamen to throw him into the sea?
4. Make a list of the unique characteristics of the book of Jonah.
5. What did the sudden calming of the sea prove to the sailors?
6. Is the account of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish incredible? if not, why not?
7. What is the meaning of the phrase "three days and three nights?"

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING TO GOD— THE PRAYER OF JONAH

TEXT: 2:1-6

- 1 Then Jonah prayed unto Jehovah his God out of the fish's belly.
- 2 And he said, I called by reason of mine affliction unto Jehovah, And he answered me; Out of the belly of Sheol cried I, And thou heardest my voice.