

An exposition of

THE BOOK OF JONAH

***Out of the Belly of a Great Fish,
Into the Heart of a Great God.***

By Jim D. Gables

THE AUTHOR'S INDEBTEDNESS

In addition to my own thoughts on the book, I wish to acknowledge the helps that I have gleaned from the following authors:

J. Sidlow Baxter - *Explore The Book*
John Calvin - *Commentary on Jonah*
John Gill - *Commentary on Jonah*
Matthew Henry - *Commentary on Jonah*
Hugh Martin - *The Prophet Jonah*
James Orr - *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
E. B. Pusey - *Minor Prophets.*

Texts are quoted from the New King James Version (NKJV)

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me." But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. Jonah 1:1-3

The Book of Jonah is one of the twelve books known as the Minor Prophets. The Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. The Minor Prophets are named such, not because they are of lesser importance, but because their writings are shorter in comparison to those of the Major Prophets. While the Book of Jonah is placed in the midst of the prophetic books, it is actually a history rather than a prophecy. It contains only one line of prediction, and that is: ***"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*** (3:4). The remainder of the book is a historical account of a wayward prophet who was given a commission from God, his subsequent disobedience, and the events that surrounded that disobedience. This was followed by his ultimate obedience unto the Lord and his dissatisfaction with what the Lord brought to pass. In the process, he would be delivered out of the belly of a great fish and placed into the heart of a great God who loves to pardon sinners.

In the midst of some mysterious and complex books of prophecy comes this little plain and pleasant story that is easy to read and provides "milk for babes." In it are many lessons for us to learn, such as (1) the character of God, (2) the nature of man, (3) the nature of repentance, (4) the call and life of a prophet of God, (5) the results of backsliding, (6) the providence of God, and many others.

THE HISTORICAL PERSON OF JONAH

His background and prophetic ministry - II Kings 14:23-27

We will begin our journey into this marvelous little book by first looking into the historical person of Jonah. The story of Jonah in the Bible was not just a "made-up" story to teach us a moral lesson. The Bible teaches us that Jonah was a real person. No believer in the inspiration and authority of the Bible can doubt that Jonah was a real person. We are not dealing in the realms of allegory, parable, or

myth. The opening verse of the book introduces us to his background and prophetic ministry. The book identifies him and his father when it says, "**Jonah the son of Amittai.**" Also, we read that "**The word of the Lord came to Jonah,**" thus denoting that he was a Hebrew prophet. Therefore, he had a physical father and held the office of a prophet to the Hebrew people.

There is only one other reference to Jonah in the Old Testament found in the historical book of II Kings 14:23-27. "**In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria, and reigned forty-one years.**" From this passage we learn a great deal. We are informed of the historical fact that the kingdom of Israel had become divided politically. It had split, and the ten tribes known as Israel settled in the North and Jeroboam was the king at that time. Meanwhile the Southern section became known as Judah with Amaziah reigning as king. We are particularly interested in Jeroboam. In verses 24 and 25 we are told that "**he did evil in the sight of the Lord; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin. He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah.**" Through military victories, Jeroboam (this is actually Jeroboam the second) reclaimed some of the land that the surrounding nations had captured. It could be likened to that which is taking place in the Middle East today. The Jews will control a section of the land for a period of time; the then Arabs will take it away; then the Jews embark on a military effort and recapture the land again.

In verses 25 through 27 we encounter a powerful piece of evidence as it pertains to the historicity of Jonah.

He restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath Hopher. For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter; and whether bond or free, there was no helper for Israel. And the Lord did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven; but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.

In this brief passage of scripture, we learn much about our character named Jonah. First, Jonah's

father is confirmed as the same person mentioned in the Book of Jonah where it is quoted, "**Jonah, the son of Amittai.**" In the Book of II Kings it is also quoted, "**Jonah the son of Amittai.**"

Secondly, we learn that Jonah lived and labored during the reign of Jeroboam II, which we can identify as taking place from 790-750 B.C. It is also stated that Jonah was from the area known as Gath-hepher, which belonged to the tribe of Zebulum according to Joshua 19:10-16. Extra-biblical evidence has identified this little village of Gath-hepher as modern-day El Meshod located just a few miles north of Nazareth, the famous city with which our Lord was so often identified. Also, there is a firm tradition dating back to the time of Jerome (one of the church fathers) that Jonah's tomb is located in this little village, and visitors can go to that tomb even to this present day. The reason we are emphasizing this point is to show that Jonah was not a fictitious character but a real historical person.

The text in II Kings also tells us that Jonah lived in a time of apostasy and spiritual declension in Israel. Under the reign of King Jeroboam II, there was a great declension. In II Kings 14:24 we are told that he made Israel to sin. During this time, Jonah was a prophet to the ten tribes of the northern kingdom in Samaria but not to the southern kingdom of Judah. Verse 25 records a prophecy God gave to Jonah wherein under the military direction of Jeroboam God would show mercy to the undeserving people of Israel and enable them to regain much of the land that had been seized by the bordering nations. It is through this prophecy that Jonah was enlightened regarding the nature of God's mercy to the wicked. Israel did not deserve the mercy they received. They were living in sin, but God enabled them through Jeroboam to recover a large portion of the land that had been taken away. Thus Jonah learned that God shows mercy and unmerited favor toward sinners. Why is that important? We need to explain at the outset why Jonah would flee from God to avoid going to Nineveh. We are not left to the speculations of men. The second verse of the fourth chapter gives us a first-hand explanation by the prophet himself. When Jonah saw that Nineveh had repented, it states, "**it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. So he prayed to the Lord, and said, 'Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country?**" (that is,

preaching to the Israelites)? ***Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, One who relents from doing harm.***" (4:2). Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh because he did not want to see the Ninevites converted, and he knew from the way God had dealt with the Israelites in their sin, that God is a gracious and merciful God to sinners. This is the main lesson we should learn from the Book of Jonah, and it is what the book is designed to teach, that God is a gracious and merciful God even to the greatest of sinners. Jonah did not want to see these pagan sinners saved. It would have been alright if they were Jews, God's chosen people, but he did not want to go to the Gentile City of Nineveh. We will see a little later why that is the case. Jonah had learned his lesson about God's great mercy from his previous prophecy of how God would show mercy to the undeserving Israel nation. Thus, he was afraid that God might even show mercy toward the Gentiles in Nineveh.

We also learn from II Kings that the content of this prophecy of the recovery of the land under Jeroboam, would have made Jonah a very popular prophet in Israel. He predicted that God was going to do something wonderful for Israel. Many of the other prophets were not popular because they were given messages that were not positive. Jeremiah, as a spokesman of God, proclaimed that God was going to bring Israel into captivity, and he ended up in the dungeon. People like positive messages, not negative ones. If you happen to be assigned by God to deliver a positive message, you will gain the reputation as a positive and a popular preacher. However, if you are sent with a negative message, your response might be one of rejection and suspicion. Jonah would have been a very popular prophet in Israel because of his prediction that God would restore a large segment of the land to the Israelites. This is important to help us understand why Jonah would object to God sparing Nineveh, a bitter enemy of Israel. We will see later in our study that several prophets preceding Jonah had predicted that Israel would be overthrown and taken into captivity by Assyria, the country of which Nineveh was the very capitol. Jonah then perceives that if God does not destroy the City of Nineveh, the prediction would come true that his own people and relatives, the Israelites, would be taken into captivity. He would then perhaps see his own grandchildren and great grandchildren

skinned alive, as the Ninevites were known for such tortuous methods. Therefore, when the word came to Jonah to go and preach to that city and in forty days it is going to be destroyed, Jonah reasoned, "Okay, if God is going to destroy Nineveh in forty days, I will just refuse to preach to them to guarantee that God will destroy this enemy of Israel." Are you beginning to get the picture as to why this prophet does not want to go to Nineveh?

His Ministry to a Gentile City

Now having seen Jonah's background and information regarding his prophetic ministry, let us look at his ministry to a Gentile city. We discover that Jonah received a command to preach to Nineveh, the most renowned, wicked and violent city of heathendom on the face of the earth at that time. Instead of obeying that command, he fled in the opposite direction to escape the task of proclaiming God's message to this great, evil city. He was then caught in a storm at sea, and at his own request was hurled into the sea, and swallowed by a great fish. He remained alive in the belly of the fish for three days. Upon his release from the body of the fish, God repeated His command to go to Nineveh. Jonah obeyed and announced the overthrow of the wicked city. When the men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of the prophet, God repented of the evil He had threatened to bring upon them. Jonah was grieved that the oppressing city should be spared and he camped out and waited in the vicinity close to the city to see what would be the final outcome. Formulate in your imagination a vision of Jonah who knew what God had done to Sodom and Gomorrah in exploding and blowing up that city so that he just got far enough away from Nineveh on a little mountain range to wait and see what God would do. As an intense patriot, Jonah wished for the destruction of the people that threatened to swallow up Israel. He thought that God was too merciful to the heathen oppressors, and he became very bitter when God did not destroy the city. It was through the lesson of the gourd that he was taught the value of the heathen in the sight of God Almighty. If Jonah could love the gourd, a little temporal plant that is here today and gone tomorrow, could not God delight in showing mercy to a pagan city?

The Lord's testimony to Jonah

On two different occasions, our Lord referred to the sign of Jonah the prophet, and these are recorded in Matthew 12:38-41, Matthew 16:4, and Luke 11:29-32. Jesus speaks of Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish as being parallel with His own approaching entombment for three days and three nights. On another occasion, Jesus cites the repentance of the Ninevites as a rebuke to the unbelieving men of His own generation. He told them that the Ninevites had repented under the preaching of Jonah, but now **"A greater than Jonah is here,"** (Matthew 12:41) and you are not repenting. On the day of judgment, the generation of the Ninevites who repented would rise up and condemn those who had personally heard the message of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord speaks both of the physical miracle of the preservation of Jonah in the body of the fish and the moral miracle of the repentance of the Ninevites. Repentance is not a natural act. It requires a supernatural act of God to bring about Biblical repentance. Our Lord speaks about this account of Jonah without the slightest hint that He regarded the story as allegory or fiction. We cannot contradict the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. He believed that Jonah was a real, historical person and that he preached to a real, historical city. Jesus was contrasting the peoples' repentance under Jonah's ministry with the peoples' un-repentance under His own ministry. If Jonah is a fictitious person, how could a generation in Jonah's day rise up on the final judgment in the resurrection and condemn those who rejected Jesus in His generation? The very fact that Jonah was a real, historical person involves the trustworthiness of the character of Jesus Christ and the authority of Scripture. If Jesus is who He claimed to be, the infallible Lord who knows all things, then Jonah is a real, historical person.

THE SURVEY OF THE BOOK'S CONTENTS

Jonah's Disobedience - 1:1-3: Now let us examine the survey of the contents of the Book of Jonah. In verses 1 through 3 of the first chapter we have Jonah's disobedience to God. When the call came to Jonah to preach to Nineveh, he fled in the opposite direction, hoping to escape the unpleasant task. He was afraid that the merciful God would forgive the oppressive heathen city if it should repent at his preaching. Jonah was a narrow-minded patriot who feared that Assyria would one day swallow

up his own little nation. Therefore, he wished to do nothing that might lead to the preservation of the wicked city of Nineveh. Jonah was willing to preach to Israel, God's chosen people, but he refused to become a foreign missionary to those who were of another race. We need to learn a lesson from this that the God who has a chosen people, has chosen them out of every kindred, tribe and nation.

Jonah's Punishment - 1:4-1: In verses 4 through 16 in the first chapter, we see Jonah's punishment. The ship Jonah had boarded was overtaken by a great storm. The heathen sailors believed that some god must be angry with some person on board, and they cast lots to discover the guilty party. When the lot fell on Jonah, he made a complete confession and bravely suggested that they cast him overboard. The sailors rowed desperately to get back to land but made no progress against the powerful storm. They then prayed to God that He would not charge innocent blood upon them and proceeded to cast Jonah into the sea. The storm promptly subsided, and the sailors offered a sacrifice to God vowing that they would serve the God of Jonah.

Jonah's Miraculous Preservation - 1:17-2:10: In chapter 1:17 through 2:10, we have the account of Jonah's miraculous preservation in the belly of the great fish. God had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah and to bear him in its body for three days and nights. To his surprise and his amazement, Jonah found himself alive and conscious in the body of the fish. There in the fish's belly, Jonah prayed to His God. We will see as we get to that prayer that there is not one line of petition in the prayer. Jonah does not ask God for anything. He does not ask God to get him out of the fish's belly, and he makes not one petition unto God. Why? Because Jonah realized that God had not let him drown in the waters, but had preserved him in the belly of the whale. Jonah, in faith, began to speak of his danger as a past experience and his deliverance as being at hand. He said "**I will yet live to worship you again and, I will look again toward Your holy temple.**" The entire prayer consists of thanksgiving unto God. He believed that God was going to get him out of there and put him back on dry land again. He was thanking God in advance for his deliverance. The God who would save him from drowning in the depths of the sea would permit him once more to worship in His holy temple

with thanksgiving. When Jonah finished that prayer, at the command of God, the fish proceeds to vomit Jonah upon the dry land.

Jonah's Ministry in Nineveh - 3:1-4: In Jonah 3:1-4, we find Jonah's ministry in the City of Nineveh. Upon the renewal of the command to go to Nineveh, Jonah obeyed and proclaimed through the streets of Nineveh, "**Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!**" It is said that it would take three days' journey to walk from one side to the other of the great City of Nineveh. If the news of Jonah's deliverance from the sea somehow preceded him into the city, perhaps from the voice of the sailors who threw him overboard, the effect of the prophetic message would be greatly highlighted to the people of Nineveh. That is, if they knew what had happened to Jonah, and how God showed mercy to him in delivering him out of the belly of the fish, then they might understand how this God could show mercy toward Nineveh as well.

The Repentance of the Ninevites - 3:5-10: In Jonah 3:5-10 we read of the repentance of the Ninevites. The people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah and manifested it by fasting and prayer. So great was the anxiety of the people that even the animals were clothed with sackcloth. The repentance was so thorough that even the King on the throne gave forth a decree to all bow down and acknowledge the God of Jonah. After the people of Nineveh turned from their violent acts to seek the forgiveness of an angry God, He proceeded to spare the city because of its repentance.

A Narrow Prophet vs. a Merciful God - 4:1-11: In Jonah 4:1-11, we have a situation that places a narrow-minded prophet against a merciful God. When Jonah sees that the city is going to be spared, God comes to him and says, "What are you so mad about? Why are you pouting?" Then Jonah breaks out in a loud and bitter complaint when he learns that Nineveh is to be spared. He decides to camp out near the city to see what will become of it, all the while hoping that it may yet be overthrown. He was hoping that maybe Nineveh would recant and commit some sin causing God to

destroy them as He had originally said. God uses a gourd vine to teach the prophet a great lesson. If such a lowly and perishable plant could have a real value in the eyes of a sullen prophet, what value should be put on the lives of thousands of innocent children (120,000 to be exact) and the helpless cattle in the great City of Nineveh. These were of greater value in the eyes of God than the vine was to Jonah.

The unusual closing found in Jonah 4:11 does not tell us what happened to Jonah. The purpose of the book is not to focus on Jonah, but on Jonah's God.

The Lord said, "You have had pity on the gourd for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand much livestock?"

In other words, God said, "Jonah, if your gourd means that much to you and you value it so highly, do you not think that I, the Creator, have a right to highly value all of these young ones in this city that would be destroyed along with the cattle?"

When God destroyed the people in the days of the flood, the cattle and the young ones were not spared. They all perished under the judgment of God. If God is going to send fire down, He is not going to spare the cattle or the children. They would all experience the effects of His judgment upon sin.

THE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY AIMS OF THE BOOK

The primary aim is to show God's readiness to pardon sin and save even the greatest of sinners if they will but repent and seek His mercy. It is to reveal to us the character of our God that there is a readiness upon His part to show mercy unto repentant sinners. If you are in need of escaping the wrath of God, you need a message wherein this true God reveals Himself to you as more than ready to pardon your sin if you repent, acknowledge your sin and believe the truth of who God is in Christ Jesus. It is my desire to emphasize this primary aim throughout this book. It is not necessary for you to wait on some direct revelation by the Spirit whether you are elect or not or whether God would

pardon you if you called upon Him. You are exhorted to come to a God who delights in showing mercy, even to the greatest of sinners. Election is a secret decree known only to God and is manifested when a person repents and believes the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It then becomes evident he or she is one of the elect. However, you are not authorized to sit back and wait to determine whether you are one of the elect or not before you repent and believe. You are duty-bound before God to come and bow before Him today and discover that God delights in showing mercy to whomever will repent and believe. God's mercy is just not something that is confined to Israel or something that is shut up in a secret decree. If you are not a Christian, your need of mercy is immense. You are under the wrath of God, and are not promised that you have forty days left to repent. Today is the day of salvation. You may ask, "I do not know whether God would save me or not if I came to Him?" Then you need to learn the lesson taught in the Book of Jonah that God takes delight in showing His mercy, and His grace and loving kindness. Oh, but you may say, "I must wait until I get better." No, no, no! You must come God's way, acknowledging your sinner-hood. There is mercy for sinners, and in Isaiah chapter 55 we are shown this attribute of the character of God.

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance. Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you . . . Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:1-7)

Our God delights in showing mercy and in pardoning sin. However, pardon of sin follows repentance; it does not precede it. The elect of God, be they Jew or Gentile, are not pardoned until they are brought to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Men may spend much time theorizing upon the eternal decrees of God and the mind of God, but God has made it clear in His revealed will that sinners are to come to Christ. It is then that they find mercy, not before. They must repent and believe that they will be pardoned. They are

not pardoned prior to their repentance and faith. They are under a state of condemnation, under the wrath of God--yes, even the elect of God, until they are brought into living vital union with the Lord Jesus Christ. Through a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, their natures are quickened to mourn over their sin and see Christ as the only remedy for sin. Then and there they are justified by saving faith in Jesus Christ. God is a delightful God who shows mercy unto the greatest of sinners. Do not sit back and try to determine whether or not you are one of the elect of God. You need mercy, and you need it today, not forty days from now. Your need is now, you cannot wait! You say, "I thought I read in the Bible that one cannot repent and believe until the Spirit gives a new heart, so I will just wait." That is a Biblical truth, but a wrong deduction. The same Bible says, "**Get yourselves a new heart,**" (Ezekiel 18:31) and come to Christ today. Come now! Come now! "**Now is the day of salvation.**" (II Corinthians 6:2) "**Harden not your hearts as in the day of rebellion.**" (Hebrews 3:8). You will never discover your election until you come to Jesus Christ and make it sure. It is then you will discover your election, but you must come and repent and believe. "**He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.**" (John 5:24) The condemnation is lifted, not prior to faith, but at the point of saving faith. Eternal life is confirmed upon individuals when the Spirit of God joins them to saving faith in Jesus Christ and not before.

The second and subordinate aim of the Book of Jonah is to enlarge the compassion of Israel and to lead the chosen people to undertake the great missionary task of proclaiming the truth of God to a heathen world. Israel was chosen to serve God and become a source of blessing to mankind. They were not chosen to be an end unto themselves, but to be a means to promote the knowledge of God to all the nations. The same is true of the church of Jesus Christ. We are saved to serve others and promote the glory of God. Let us get on with the task, lest we repeat the way of the prophet Jonah. Let us enter into the great heart of God.