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## A message of life

*Please read Jonah 1; 2 Kings 14:23–27; Luke 11:29–32*

*“The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” (Jonah 1:1–2).*

**W**hat was the purpose of Jonah’s mission? Why did God want him to go to Nineveh and preach to the very people who, some forty years on, would be responsible for the total destruction of Israel? An assessment of the content of the book, in its context and in the light of the insights of the New Testament, suggests three main purposes of the prophecy of Jonah: the first was to stir up the people of God; the second to declare the message of salvation to the nations beyond Israel; and the third, and most fundamental, to foreshadow something of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ in a very specific way.

### **Stirring up the people of God**

God planned to shake up his wayward people. He planned to

declare his dissatisfaction with their backslidings in a novel, spectacular and unmistakable way. His basic approach had already been revealed in that beautiful, but often enigmatic, passage called the Song of Moses:

‘They made me jealous by what is no god,  
and angered me with their worthless idols.  
I will make them envious by those who are not a people;  
I will make them angry by a nation that has no understanding.  
For a fire has been kindled by my wrath ...’

(Deuteronomy 32:21–22).

God would bless the heathen in such a way as to put his own people to shame! Let Israel realize, in shame, how careless she had been of her blessings and privileges! Let Israel repent and turn again to her God! This is a theme that recurs again and again in the history of God’s people. Two hundred years after Jonah, Jeremiah would bring before God’s people in Judah the example of the Rechabites (Jeremiah 35:1–19). They were faithful to their forefather, Jonadab the son of Rechab, who commanded them not to drink wine, build houses or raise crops. If they could do this, how much more should God’s people obey the Lord? A little later, Ezekiel is told by God that if he were to be sent to ‘a people of obscure speech and difficult language’ they would listen to him. Instead, he must go to ‘the house of Israel’ and they will not listen to him, because they will not listen to *God*. This is revealed by God, of course, to show his people that they ought to be ashamed of their hardness of heart (Ezekiel 3:5–6).

In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus Christ pronounces a curse upon some of the towns in which he had preached and he makes a very unflattering comparison with Gentile cities. Speaking of Capernaum, he says, ‘If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable

for Sodom on the day of judgement than for you' (Matthew 11:20-24).

The apostle Paul tells the Christians in Rome, 'Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them' (Romans 11:13-14).

Does this not happen today in the Lord's dealings with his church? Does he not shame our spiritual lethargy by raising up people of deep devotion and fresh and fiery zeal in our midst? Many a congregation has been awakened from its sleep by one or two people—converts from the 'world'—coming into the fellowship. Then they see that God really does save sinners! Hope is reborn. Goals are re-established and a new liveliness begins to infect the whole body of Christ in that place. With Israel this did not happen. But, in terms of the essentially gracious purpose that lay at the heart of God's message to Nineveh, it should have happened!

### **New life for the nations of the world**

The second major purpose of Jonah's ministry to Nineveh is to demonstrate God's intention to extend his grace to the nations of the world. The spiritual pride of the Hebrews was probably as legendary in those days as it was in the time of our Lord and remains to the present day. They regarded the nations as the 'Gentile dogs'. Had not God passed them by? Was it not proper, in any case, to avoid contact with them as much as possible? To be sure, the children of Israel were often not careful to avoid God-honouring separation from the heathen. That, however, did not make them less enthusiastic about feeling superior to them. But God has a purpose for these Gentile nations and it is a purpose of grace. It is true that the initial motive for sending Jonah to Nineveh, as it is stated in the text, is for them to be told of God's anger with their heathen wickedness: '*Go to the*

*great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me'* (Jonah 1:2). Later on, however, we are told that Jonah told God that he had fled to Tarshish because he suspected that God meant to save the Ninevites rather than bring destruction upon them. Jonah was, of course, *complaining* about this. And that is why it is so revealing. Jonah said, 'I knew that you are a compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity' (Jonah 4:2).

The declaration of divine wrath had in it a purpose of redemption! Jonah knew it, because he knew what God was like. But it did not sit well with him because he could not see past his unbiblical prejudices against the Gentiles. That is why he ran away from God.

Whether he knew it or not, Jonah was actually being used by God to take a step forward towards the fulfilment of a blessing promised to Abraham. God had told Abraham that through him 'all peoples on earth will be blessed' (Genesis 12:3). And think of it from the Assyrian point of view. Here is Jonah, the premier prophet of Israel and a proven oracle of God, who prophesied Israel's prosperity and expansion. He has fled from this task that God gave him. He has been swallowed by a great fish. He has been miraculously delivered from what otherwise would have been certain death. He is a visible symbol of the power of his God and, not least, of the redemptive love of his God. Now he turns up in Nineveh with a message of judgement to come! How ripe for the harvest these Assyrians must have been! They had been prepared by God for the hearing of Jonah's message. And they do hear ... and repent and, as we are told in Luke 11:32, they 'will stand up at the judgement with this generation [the generation of Jesus' time] and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here'.

Coincident with the decline of Israel, then, there is an

intimation that God's kingdom upon earth has a glorious future. A time is coming when, in the words of Isaiah, "The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance"" (Isaiah 19:25).

The message of God's saving grace is going out to the whole world!

### **Foreshadowing the Lord Jesus Christ**

We cannot understand the significance of Jonah's mission without seeing that it is essentially Christ-centred. This anticipates the discussion of Jonah 1:17–2:10, to which we shall devote a later chapter. Suffice it to say, in the words of Hugh Martin, that Jonah's mission is not to be regarded 'as an isolated and merely romantic incident in sacred history'. Rather, writes the same author, 'It becomes one of the grandest events in the history of redemption, from the Exodus of Israel to the advent of Messiah and the calling of the Gentiles.'<sup>1</sup> Our Lord himself made this crystal clear in that encounter with the Pharisees in which they asked him for a miraculous sign to substantiate his claims. Jesus answered, 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth' (Matthew 12:39–41).

Jonah was a sign to the sailors, to the Ninevites and to all who heard of his deliverance. He was a sign that there is a God who raises sinners from the dead. Whether Jonah actually died in the fish, or, as is more likely, was miraculously preserved alive, is beside the point. His arrival in Nineveh was a resurrection from the dead that proclaimed to all a life-giving Saviour. This is what is made clear to us in the full light of the New Testament. It speaks of Christ, whose resurrection is the proof of his power to save his people and raise them from the dead also. Jonah's

mission was an acted prophecy. It pointed to Christ who gave himself to death for sinners and who rose on the third day to be the risen Saviour of all who trust in him for salvation, repenting of their sins. The central meaning of the book of Jonah is not even in its missionary teaching about a message of life for all nations. As E. J. Young has put it, 'It is rather to show that Jonah being cast into the depths of Sheol and yet brought up alive is an illustration of the death of the Messiah for sins not His own and of the Messiah's resurrection.'<sup>2</sup>

Jesus Christ is the heart of the message of life in the book of Jonah. We are given a glorious vista of God's redemptive love as he reaches out to a fallen world. It is life for the spiritually dead. It is eternal life. It is, in the fulness of New Testament revelation, life in Jesus Christ.