

## A PROPHET WHO DID NOT WANT TO SUCCEED

Jonah, the son of Smittai, was probably born about four miles north of Nazareth, and not far from Cana of Galilee. In II Kings 14:25 the writer stated that Jonah lived in the days of Jeroboam II in Israel, which was about 800 B. C. In that era times were prosperous, money plentiful, and the spirit of nationalism and patriotism were running high. The kingdom of Israel had been expanded and the people were proud and confident. They were not disposed to think in friendly terms of any of their neighbors. An ugly, narrow, selfish nationalism had developed in their hearts. As a patriotic Hebrew Jonah wanted to see his nation kept as the favored of God. He was astute enough to see the danger in the growing Assyrian empire and wanted to see it broken up. He saw that if they continued their conquests that Israel would lose her independence and become simply an Assyrian province.

### I. Running Away From God. Jonah 1.

To this man Jonah God spoke and made known His holy will and purpose. He called him to the strange and unwelcome task of going to Nineveh as a foreign missionary. He commanded him to go to Nineveh, the chief city and the capital of Assyria, and to proclaim the destruction of that great city unless the inhabitants thereof did repent of their sins. God was sending a prophet to Nineveh because of the wickedness that prevailed there. The people residing there needed to turn from their wickedness.

In spite of the wickedness in Nineveh, it was a great city in many respects. It was of great antiquity. It was great in size, probably sixty miles in circumference. It was great in population, probably 600,000 people resided within her walls. It was great in wealth. It was great in power. Rich, corrupt, and godless, it was a center of evil. It was a great city, but especially great in sin. However, it was also great in need and in possibilities.

Besides, Assyria was the most ruthless nation of the ancient eastern world, and the bitterest enemy that Israel ever had. For two hundred years their brutal and blood-thirsty kings had ground her under their iron heels. And now Israel's prophet was called to go to this relentless and hated foe with the message of forgiveness and love. Was Jonah going? Not if he could avoid it. That was too much for him. He did not want to go.

Jonah did not want to see Nineveh repent. He fully believed that if her citizens did repent, God in His mercy would spare them. He wanted them destroyed so that they would no longer be a menace to his people. He failed to understand that the best way to protect themselves from Assyria was to bring her people to know God and His holy law. Jonah was like some twentieth century church members whose patriotism and racial prejudices are stronger than their care for the command of God and the souls of men. Not wanting to undertake the task to which God called him, Jonah simply refused to obey the divine command. He had such an antisocial mind that he was unwilling to see good come to an enemy whom he and his people hated.

Of what was Jonah afraid? He was afraid of success. He was afraid that the people of Nineveh would repent. He was afraid that when they repented they would become

as dear to the heart of God as he and his fellow Jews were. That, he felt, would be disastrous. He was sure that in building up the people of Nineveh he would be tearing down his own people. He was equally sure that in tearing down others he was building up himself and his own. Many people still have that stupid idea.

When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and to preach there, the task was so distasteful and repugnant to him that he made up his mind that whatever it might cost him he would not obey. Instead, he arose to flee "from the presence of the Lord." Jonah 1:3. Why didn't he stay where he was, if he was determined not to go to Nineveh? Because that voice was sounding in his ears, "Arise, go to Nineveh." Disobedience to that voice made him uneasy and unhappy. That is true not only of Jonah, but also of you and me. When His voice commands and we refuse, we try to forget the voice and get away from the presence of the Lord in the pleasures and in the business of the world.

Jonah only meant to escape from service. Before he arose his mind was made up to disobey. He is an illustration of the fact that people sin in thought, in will, and in resolution before they take a single step in the wrong direction. Ordered to go east to Nineveh, Jonah started to go west to Tarshish, the most distant point that the Hebrew world knew anything about. Doubtless, he thought that if he could get that far from his duty that somehow God would forget him and not trouble him any more. There were only two cities on Jonah's map. There was Nineveh, the city to which he might have gone in fellowship of God and within the circle of the will of God for him. Then, there was Tarshish, the city that lay at the end of the rebel's road, the city whose streets, if ever he walked them at all, he would have to walk without the fellowship of the God Whom he had disobeyed. And there are the same two cities on your map-- the Nineveh of obedience and the Tarshish of disobedience. And you are going to the one or the other.

Visualize Jonah walking along the wharf and looking for the ship which was bound for Tarshish, the remotest point known to the navigators. With eagerness and haste he boarded the ship, paid the fare gladly, went down into her lowest compartment, heaved a sigh of relief, believing that he would soon be far away from the repugnant duty. Jonah's attempt to run away from God was a foolish and sinful one, all must admit; but, there is one thing that was said about him that was definitely to his credit, namely, he "paid his fare." He did not try to go as a dead-head. He went on his way like a man. It must be remembered, however, that he paid his fare in a very expensive sense. After all, disobedience to God is always expensive. It cost Jonah his peace of mind, the approval of his conscience, his official honor, and the risk of his life.

Soon after the ship on which Jonah was sailing had left port, God hurled a great storm into the sea. When anybody sets out to baffle God, there is bound to be a storm. As the storm raged, the sailors prayed, each to his own god; but the storm continued. The captain of the ship found Jonah fast asleep, gave him a vigorous shaking, awakened him, and shouted: "What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not." That shake and that message got Jonah awake. He sprang out of his berth and rushed to the deck. And the sight that met him there made a new man out of him. It changed him from a provincial Jew into a world citizen and a missionary. When he looked into the pale faces of those death-threatened men about him, he forgot all about them being heathen, and he remembered only that they were one with him in their common danger and their common need. They were all threatened with death. They all needed somebody to save them.

Imagining that unusual calamity is proof of unusual guilt, those seamen jumped to the conclusion that their peril was due to the presence of some flagrant wrong-doer. They thought that, by means of the lot, the culprit might be detected. The lot fell on Jonah. In this very unlikely manner his sin had found him out. The boatmen learned that he was seeking to run away from God and thus evaded a divine commission. Jonah made a frank and full confession, telling them that he was the cause of their distress. He furthermore stated that if they would cast him overboard their troubles would be at an end. How true it is that one man's folly may bring disaster upon many! No one lives to himself. Every time we sin, we not only sin against God and ourselves, but we sin against others. Then, the boatmen cast Jonah overboard, and found it to be as he had said, their danger was at an end.

## II. Running To God. Jonah 2.

"Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." Jonah 1:17. Jonah had slept in the ship, but he was awake in the fish. He felt his misery; he realized his sin; he prayed. In the terrible darkness of adversity he longed for the light of the Lord. He was far from the light of day, from human voices, and from human sympathy. Yet there he could pray. We can pray anywhere. His prayer was one of faith; one of thankfulness; and one of utter dependence on God. How natural it is to run to God in seasons of distress!

What a pity that so many have turned from the winsome wealth of the matchless book of Jonah and given themselves to the unedifying task of measuring the size of the throat of the fish that swallowed Jonah! The question is not whether a fish can be found that is large enough to swallow a man without mutilation. Giant white sharks and the sperm whale have been found which can swallow objects much larger than a man. For example, that one captured off Knight's Key, Florida, in 1912, and now on exhibition in the Smithsonian Institute at Washington, D. C., measured forty-five feet in length, had a mouth thirty-eight inches wide, and weighed 30,000 pounds, and had in its stomach at the time of capture a black fish which weighed approximately 1,500 pounds.

Jonah was in that big fish so long that apart from God's sustaining power he was dead and beyond the possibility of human resuscitation. This book portrays Jonah's preservation from death, or return to normal life, as supernatural. "And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land." Jonah 2:10.

## III. Running With God. Jonah 3.

In God's own time and way, Jonah was restored to dry land. "And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee." Jonah 3:1-2. Now Jonah must have rejoiced over that second chance! He was again commissioned to preach to this great city, and that was a man's task. Having learned by experience that disobedience brings trouble, Jonah went to preach to the detested Assyrians. He went up and down Nineveh's winding streets announcing the impending doom of her citizens, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." That was his cry to the beggars at the gates of the city, to the traders and traffickers at the market-places and bazaars, to the soldiers as they rolled by in their chariots, to the ladies and princesses in their gardens, to the priests at their bloody rites in the temples, and to the king upon his throne.

God wanted to save the pagan Ninevites; wanted to life them out of their brutality and ignorance, but Jonah did not want them spared. He wanted these foes of his country

destroyed, because of what they had done to his country. Jonah's attitude shows us what a difficult task God has always had to get His love and His truth through the minds of men to the world.

But the preaching of Jonah had surprising effects. It was a declaration of coming judgment, just the sort of thing some people would call crude and heartless, but it stirred the people in Nineveh. So fiercely did he proclaim their imminent and inevitable doom that the whole city was profoundly stirred. From the least to the greatest, the people repented. No preaching before or since ever produced such results. That revival was one of the most spectacular in all history.

#### IV. Running Ahead of God. Jonah 4.

But the repentance of the people was little to Jonah's liking. That was one time when a preacher preferred not to succeed. He had asked the people of Nineveh to choose between repentance and destruction, and the people had chosen in such a way to please God, but not in such a way as to please Jonah. Now that the people had repented, Jonah was afraid that God would spare them for he knew Him to be a God of love, mercy, and forgiveness. At any rate, the preacher who will do just what God tells him will not be held accountable for success or failure; in fact, the one who obeys God has already succeeded.

So, God gently reasoned with the agitated prophet. He dealt with him tenderly, but frankly. He had caused a gourd to spring up and shelter Jonah from the burning sun. This gave Jonah comfort and greatly pleased him. It helped allay his anger and calm his agitated soul. But during the night a worm bit off the gourd, and very suddenly Jonah's nice shade was spoiled. The hot east wind blew upon the prophet and the tropical sun beat upon his head and he fainted. In self-pity he cried: "My lovely fount is withered in an hour! I droop, I faint beneath the scorching sun." He was much displeased and again desired to die. He scolded God for allowing his shade to be destroyed.

This book of four chapters teaches us many fine lessons.

1. The folly of resisting the will of God.
2. The path of self-will is always downward.
3. God loves all men.
4. One runs into a storm when he seeks to run away from God.
5. It is utterly impossible to escape from God.
6. The futility of trying to have peace apart from doing one's duty.
7. No divinely given task may be regarded lightly.
8. True repentance may avert the catastrophe that has been threatened.