

Message #1

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Jonah

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## JONAH AND GOD'S LOVE FOR LOST PEOPLE

### JONAH 1:1-2

I.

Those of you who have been around the church for a while will remember Peggy Harry. Peggy had a sister who was part of a missionary team that went to Afghanistan in the 1950s. They all went to that country as tent making missionaries. For the most part they were teachers. One of the effective outreaches that they developed was teaching the blind. They developed an institute for the blind in Kabul. Many of the students became Christians.

Through various political connections these expat Christians were able to have the first Protestant Christian church building constructed in the history of that nation. It was dedicated on May 17, 1970. Unfortunately some Muslim leaders began to object to the presence of this building. Also many blind students were becoming Christians, and some other Afghans were becoming believers through their influence.

So the Afghan government ordered the destruction of the church building. A German Christian businessman went to the mayor of Kabul, who had been educated in Germany, and warned him not to do it. Hans Mohr told the mayor, **"If your Government touches that House of God, God will overthrow your Government."**

On July 17, 1973, the Afghan government completed the destruction of the church in Kabul by digging up its foundation, after hearing rumors about an underground church. That night the monarchy of Afghanistan, which had ruled for 227 years, was overthrown in a coup. It was the judgment of God.

Things looked bleak for the advance of the gospel in Afghanistan. A Communist ruler came into office who brought in the Soviet army to support his rule. The Soviets were ruthless in putting down those who opposed them. The Soviets were ruthless in their treatment of Christians in their own country. They forced a disproportionate number of them into the army and sent many of them to the most dangerous places in Afghanistan. But the grace of God was still at work.

When the Soviets were finally forced out in the 1980s, Western Christians discovered that Christian Soviet soldiers had used their free time to evangelize, give out Christian literature, lead Afghans to Jesus and to form small, secret home meetings. Now our military forces are in the country, and Christian work continues in a low key, quiet fashion. God's grace operates in unusual ways. God wants His people to be instruments of that grace, often with unlikely people and in unlikely places. That is a lesson that He wants us to learn. That is a lesson that He sought to teach Jonah in the Old Testament.

In my preaching I try to go back and forth between the Old Testament and the New Testament and to make sure to cover the various parts of the Bible. We recently finished the New Testament Epistles to the Thessalonians. I thought that we might go back to the Old Testament and look at the prophet Jonah. I have preached on him before. Most of you will probably not remember that. It was quite a long time ago.

I gained some new insights about the historical background of Jonah after encountering a doctoral dissertation about six months ago, written by a Frenchman at the University of Lyons in France. It was delightful to discover a solid evangelical Christian in the academic realm in France. Then also our last Old Testament study involved Elijah and Elisha, and Jonah has a connection with these prophets and with that time period.

## II.

So we are going to begin with a review of THE LOST PEOPLE OF ISRAEL. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE LOST PEOPLE OF ISRAEL) To put this into historical context Abraham lived in roughly 2000 BC. Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land in roughly 1500 BC. After the period of Judges God appointed Saul through the prophet Samuel to be the first king of Israel in roughly 1000 BC. David followed Saul. King Solomon followed David. He expanded the territory of the kingdom to its greatest extent that it has ever reached. But he messed up. When Solomon died, the ten northern tribes rejected Solomon's son as king and separated from the rest of the nation.

## A.

(II. THE LOST... A. THE DIVIDED KINGDOM) In 931 BC the time of THE DIVIDED KINGDOM began. There was a split in the country. (DIVIDED KINGDOM MAP) The northern kingdom kept the name Israel. The southern kingdom became Judah, because Judah was the dominant tribe. Judah absorbed the tribe of Simeon. The tribe of Benjamin also sided with Judah. The capital of Judah was Jerusalem. Eventually the capital of Israel became Samaria. Occasionally in the Old Testament the northern kingdom is called Samaria instead of Israel.

The first king of Israel (DIVIDED KINGDOM MAP 2), Jeroboam, appointed worship sites in Dan in the north and Bethel in the southern part of the country. He did not want his people going down to Jerusalem to worship because of fear that he would lose the loyalty of his people and that the Jews of Judah would try to win them back to following the kings of Judah who descended from David. So Jeroboam set up golden calves in Dan and Bethel as representations of the God of the Bible. Of course, this was a violation of God's commandment not to make and worship idols.

(DIVIDED KINGDOM MAP) In the next 200+ years the northern kingdom of Israel had 19 different kings. In the judgment of the Bible all 19 were bad. None of them followed God in any serious fashion. The Lord sent them a series of prophets to try to get the leaders and the people of Israel to turn back to the true God.

B.

This brings us to ELIJAH AND ELISHA. (II. A. B. ELIJAH AND ELISHA) At the beginning of this year and in the latter part of last year we looked at the lives and ministries of these two prophets. The focus of both of these two prophets was the northern kingdom of Israel. Elijah showed up on the scene in 1 Kings #17 where he had the confrontation with King Ahab on Mt. Carmel. This was roughly 870 BC. Most of you remember the story about how Elijah called down fire on his sacrifice on the altar. The drought ended, and the false prophets of Baal were killed. But Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel would still not turn back to God.

So Elijah had further dealings with King Ahab. Elisha was eventually replaced by Elisha. The two of them were apparently involved in establishing schools of prophets. Such groups are specifically mentioned as being present in a couple of towns in Israel. Elisha went on to have dealings with later kings in Israel. He also had involvement with the kingdom of Syria (DIVIDED KINGDOM MAP), which is to the northeast of Israel. Most of you will remember the incident where Elisha was involved in healing the chief general of the Syrians, Naaman, who had leprosy. Naaman went back to Syria as a believer in the true God of Israel. So Elisha died during the reign of King Joash in roughly 800 BC, using round numbers. The kings were still not following God, and not many of the people were following the true God either. We finished our study of these two prophets in 2 Kings #13.

C.

So we come to JONAH. (II. A. B. C. JONAH) Now Jonah shows up on the scene in 2 Kings #14. He is still dealing with Israelite kings who don't want to follow God and people of the nation who have strayed from the true God and are not following God's laws either. The king that Jonah is dealing with is Jeroboam II, the son of Joash, the king who was in power when Elisha died. This Jeroboam ruled from 793-753 BC.

(2 KINGS 14:25) So in 2 Kings #14 v. 25 we have this one reference to Jonah: **"He [King Jeroboam] restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah [the Dead Sea], according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher."**

Earlier kings had suffered raids and attacks from Syria to the northeast. Over time the Syrians had been pushing their territory into what had formerly been occupied by the people of Israel. Now under Jeroboam II the country has success in pushing back against the Syrians. We saw earlier that Elisha had been involved in saving the Israelite king from capture by the Syrians, and the prophet had predicted some victories over the Syrians just before his death. The Israelite kings were still bad. The people had not turned back to the true God. God was simply gracious to his undeserving people.

The same thing happens here. The prophet who predicted this political and military success was Jonah. It is usually a little easier to bring a positive message to a ruler than a negative one. I suspect that Jeroboam was happy to get this message from Jonah and probably had some appreciation for it, even though Jonah may have been warning the king and his people to turn from their evil ways.

We find out then that Jonah was the son of Amittai. But we know nothing about Amittai. We also know that he was from Gath-hepher. (GATH-HEPHER) This was a small town west of the Sea of Galilee and just a few miles from Nazareth.

Then the only other thing that we learn about Jonah is that he was a prophet. How did he become a prophet? We are not told. But then from our study of Elijah and Elisha you may remember that these two prophets occasionally showed up with these groups that were called schools of prophets. One was at Bethel, and another was at Jericho. Perhaps they were in other towns. Perhaps Jonah came out of one of these groups. Perhaps he had been influenced by Elisha and/or Elijah.

III. A.

(III. THE LOST PEOPLE OF ASSYRIA) We come then to THE LOST PEOPLE OF ASSYRIA. Assyria and its chief city of Nineveh are the object of God's concern in our story. We shall first consider ITS HISTORY. (III. A. ITS HISTORY) Assyria first began to rise to power in the ninth century before Christ, which would be the 800s BC. It was generally in the time period when Ahab was ruling in the northern kingdom of Israel.

(ASSYRIA MAP 2) Originally Assyria occupied a fairly small territory, indicated in the map by dark green. But over several centuries it expanded to include more territory. Eventually the Assyrians would occupy and control most of Israel. Nineveh, the chief city (NINEVEH MAP), was located on the Tigris River. Archaeologists have discovered remains of this city that supposedly date back to 4500 BC, which makes

it considerably older even than the city of Jerusalem. Just across the river today is the modern city of Mosul, which has been much in the news recently. ISIS plundered many of the archaeological remains in ancient Nineveh.

(ASSYRIAN EMPIRE) Assyria would reach the height of its power in the late eighth century and early seventh century BC. It would control most of the Middle East, including Egypt. But a few years later it would be overrun by the Babylonians.

B.

One of the distinguishing features of Assyria was ITS CRUELTY. (III. A. B. ITS CRUELTY) A historian by the name of Olmstead says, "[The Assyrians] were the most hated of all nations of antiquity." Listen to what one Assyrian king said about a city that he captured: **"With the masses of my troops and by my furious battle onset I stormed, I captured the city; 600 of their warriors I put to the sword; 3000 captives I burned with fire; I did not leave a single one among them to serve as a hostage. Hulai, their governor, I captured alive. Their corpses I formed into pillars; their young men and maidens I burned in the fire. Hulai, their governor, I flayed, his skin I spread upon the wall of the city... The city I destroyed, I devastated, I burned with fire."**

Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal describes what he and his forces did in the destruction of another city in the ninth century BC: **"In strife and conflict I besieged [and] conquered the city. I felled 3,000 of their fighting men with the sword.... I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city."** {BAR, Jan./Feb, 1991, pp. 57-58}

Reliefs on palace walls in Assyria and written descriptions tell us that the Assyrians used decapitation, impalement, skinning alive, burning alive and cutting off hands and feet to terrorize their enemies. They were vicious toward the people whom they conquered. We are fortunate that nothing like that happens anymore, aren't we? Except across the river from Nineveh in Mosul ---and in Syria ---and in Libya--- at the hands of ISIS.

IV.

We come then to GOD'S LOVE AND JONAH. (IV. GOD'S LOVE AND JONAH) Let's look at the first two verses of the Book of Jonah. You can find it on p. 774 in the black Bibles under many of the chairs. Verses 1 & 2: **"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.'"**

We can immediately see that this is a short book. It is part of what scholars call the minor prophets. The prophetic books of the Old Testament generally focus upon the message of God for people to repent and turn back to Him. That message is present in this book. But the unique thing is that there is even a greater focus on the prophet himself and what God is seeking to accomplish in his life. In this focus we are going to discover valuable lessons.

In terms of biographical information about Jonah we find out nothing more about his background than what we already learned from 2 Kings #14. The word of the Lord somehow comes to Jonah. Exactly how that happened we are not told. (NINEVEH MAP) But Jonah gets clear direction to head off to Nineveh, which was about 550 miles to the northeast of Samaria, the capital of Israel. Nineveh is described as a "great" city. There was a palace in Nineveh, and sometimes the Assyrian king hung out there, but not always. It was also a large and significant city. It was a religious center and a commercial center.

Nineveh was also an evil place. Verse 2 indicates that it is characterized by wickedness. Jonah is given the mission by God to cry against it. As we shall see, there is a warning of divine judgment that is included in this message. But there is also an opportunity that will be given for the people of this evil city to repent. (PROJECTOR OFF) Why not just have Nineveh wiped out? Certainly the people were deserving of that.

It seems to me that there are at least two reasons. The first is that God is a God of love, and He is concerned about lost people. He earnestly desires lost people everywhere to come to know Him. God wanted Israel to be a witness to nations like Assyria. But since the people of Israel were in no condition spiritually to do that, He sent one of His prophets on a solo mission.

The second reason for God's commissioning of Jonah was His love for Israel. As disobedient and rebellious as this nation was, God loved it. He had chosen Israel, and He would never completely let it go. He had made certain unconditional promises to the descendants of Abraham that He would bless them and eventually give them a kingdom and a Messiah to rule that kingdom. He had promised in Genesis #12 that He would bless those who blessed the descendants of Abraham, and He would curse those who cursed the descendants of Abraham.

There is a fascinating thing to be discovered when one filters through the archaeological evidence concerning the cruelty of the Assyrians. The reports about their greatest cruelty come from the early part of the eighth century and before, and from the beginning of the seventh century and later. During the hundred years in between there is not evidence of the cruelty that marked the behavior of the Assyrians in earlier and later time periods.

Why? As we are going to discover from the Book of Jonah, there was a massive spiritual awakening and time of national repentance that occurred in Nineveh, the chief city of Assyria. Whenever there is such a tremendous spiritual change that occurs where thousands of people from the top of society to the bottom of society turn to the true God, there cannot help but be a change that takes place in behavior. My reading of the situation is that the spiritual change that Jonah sparked in Nineveh produced a generation of Assyrians who were much less cruel than their ancestors and their later descendants.

The other thing that happened perhaps twenty or thirty years after the spiritual transformation of Nineveh was that the Assyrians began to conquer the northern kingdom of Israel. Israel was part of the chosen people of God. It was a people who had been intended by God to be a witness to the rest of the world to the love and righteousness of the one true God. Israel instead had become a rebellious, ungodly nation.

Still God was patient. He sent prophets to warn the people to repent. Some of these prophets began to predict that the country was going to be overrun by the vicious Assyrians. Yet the Israelites still refused to repent. Because God is also a holy God and a God of justice, He finally did bring judgment. But that judgment and discipline was tempered with the love of a compassionate God. Twenty or thirty years earlier the Lord had sent Jonah to the Assyrians, and thousands of them turned away from their sin to the true God. When these Assyrians finally did invade Israel, they were less cruel, less vicious than at other times because they lived in the aftermath of a spiritual awakening.

Being taken captive was never a good experience in the ancient world. It is never a good experience in the modern world. But in one ancient letter that has survived we get a sense of the grace of God that was at work in the discipline that God wrought in His people through the Assyrians. King Tiglath-pileser, who had begun to conquer Israel, says this to an Assyrian official about how sick captives from Israel are to be treated: **"Seven times over you shall not be careless; for that you would die. If there is anyone sick among the captives whom they bring to you, you shall gather [them] together from among [the group]. However many there are, they shall transport [them], [and] place them in your presence until they are fit."** (BAR, Nov./Dec., 2003, p. 66) In earlier and later times Assyrians, if they had taken any captives at all, would have left such captives to die or would have killed them directly. You see, God's love was at work here even in His discipline. Even in discipline God is gracious to His people. Doesn't that kind of God deserve our loyalty?

V. A.

Let's look then at THE APPLICATIONS FOR US. (PROJECTOR ON--- V. THE APPLICATIONS FOR US A. GOD LOVES LOST PEOPLE) The first one is that GOD LOVES LOST PEOPLE. The story of the Bible is largely the history of God seeking out people so that they can come into relationship with Him. God cared about the Assyrians, even though they were the enemies of Israel and evil people. He sent His prophet Jonah to them so that they might hear the message about the true God of the universe.

God even cares about us. In John #3 v. 16 (JOHN 3:16) Jesus is quoted as saying, **"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."** You could be sitting here this morning thinking, "If people knew how bad I really am---what terrible things I have done or said or thought--- they would throw me right out of this building."

If that should be your situation, you have reason for hope. The same God who loved the vicious and cruel Assyrians enough to send them Jonah the prophet loved you enough and loved me enough to send His Son to become a man and to die on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. If we will place our faith in Him, if we will embrace Him as our Savior, we too will receive the gift of eternal life.

God loves even Assyrians. (PROJECTOR OFF) Jacob DeShazer knew what it was like to deal with Assyrians. He was on KP duty in Oregon when Pearl Harbor was attacked. Furious at what the Japanese had done, he resolved to retaliate personally. In April, 1942, he was a bombardier on a bomber that was part of Doolittle's raid on Tokyo. At the end of that flight his plane ran out of fuel, his crew bailed out and he was captured by the Japanese. He spent the next three years as a POW. Three of his fellow fliers were executed and a fourth died of starvation. He hated his oppressors.

During his imprisonment, however, he came to have a Bible, and after ten days of study he asked Christ to forgive his sins. He began to look at his captors in a different way. He began to feel pity for them. He began to regard them as lost people who needed to know the true God.

Jacob DeShazer survived the war. A chaplain learned of his story and helped him put it into a booklet that was circulated in Japan in Japanese in an effort to have the Japanese learn about the love of God. DeShazer himself went back to Japan in 1948 as a missionary, a Jonah to those he formerly hated.

One day in 1948 Mitsuo Fuchida was handed this little booklet while he was standing at a train station. Fuchida was the air wing commander who led the attack on Pearl harbor. He eventually had more flying hours than any other Japanese pilot. Unlike the vast majority of Japanese pilots who were flying at the beginning of the war, he survived WWII.

Seeing that the story was written by an enemy flyer, he read it with great interest. It motivated him to get and read a Bible. In September of 1949 he accepted Christ as his Savior and was baptized on Easter Sunday in 1951. He got connected with the author of that evangelistic tract, and in the following years Jacob DeShazer and Mitsuo Fuchida (PROJECTOR ON--- DESHAZER FUCHIDA) often spoke in meetings together about the God who loves lost people, who seeks out even the enemies of His people. Such is the love of God for lost people.



B.

The second lesson is that GOD WANTS TO USE US TO REACH UNLIKELY PEOPLE. (V. A. B. GOD WANTS US...) God wanted Israel to reach out to the Gentile nations. The Israelites did a lousy job of that. God wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh. As we shall see, he was a reluctant prophet. God wanted the Japanese to hear the gospel, and he used an American POW to win many to Christ.

There are unlikely people whom we in this church have been given the opportunity to reach. A number of us have been involved in prison ministry. Don Moberger is always on the lookout for people who would like to be involved in that outreach. Don Scott is hoping to have enough for a choir this fall. One of the things that he would like to do with them is bring them to the women's prison to do a Christmas concert for them. We are blessed to have a number of people in our church who are products of our prison ministry. Maybe the Lord would have some of you to be involved in this kind of ministry.

Then also we have an opportunity to reach kids from the inner city of Las Vegas. Who would expect a largely older congregation in the suburbs to be involved in a ministry like that? Yet on most Sundays we have a large number of kids who come in the church van to our services. One practical need that we have is more volunteers to help with chaperoning in the van on the way to and from church. Our insurance requires that we have two adults from the church with them. Sometimes I fill in to help out. It would be great if there were a few others who would help out at least occasionally. Maybe God is not calling you to Nineveh, but perhaps He is calling a few of you to Las Vegas once a month.

Jenny is also always on the lookout for volunteers to help with these kids in our children's ministry. Our CE area in the back is getting quite full during church time and during Sunday School. We could use additional help back there, whether on a regular basis or an occasional basis.

C.

Consider a third lesson: GOD WILL DISCIPLINE BELIEVERS WHO GET OUT OF LINE. (V. A. B. C. GOD WILL DISCIPLINE...) Perhaps there is someone here today who feels a bit like Israel. Israel had a relationship with God, but it had rebelled and become disobedient. God warned the nation through his prophets. But still there was no response. God was patient, but eventually judgment and discipline came.

Perhaps you are a Christian, but you have become disobedient. Like Israel you may still be religious, but there is major sin in your life. God will be patient with you. But because He is a perfect father, he will bring discipline to bear if it is needed. Straighten things out with Him before that becomes necessary.

What a loving and powerful God we have! He cares about lost people--- about people who are not religious, about people who live in a way totally contrary to His Word. How powerful He is. He raises up nations and brings them down. He orchestrates events in complicated ways to accomplish His purposes. He uses His people in unusual ways to bring His love to the lost. He wants to use you, He wants to use me, if we are available to Him.