

Jonah: *The Call to Nineveh*

Jonah 1:1-3

We're on our third week looking at the short story of Jonah, but thus far we have been looking mostly at the historical and biblical context surrounding this famous book of the Bible. This morning we shall begin to work our way through the text, albeit at a painfully slow pace! Let us stand and once again read Jonah 1:1-3:

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”³ But Jonah rose 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, away from the presence of the LORD.

This message will fall under 4 subheadings: 1) The Word of the Lord; 2) That Great City; 3) The Divine Imperative; and 4) The Nature of True Love.

I. The Word of the Lord

Our story begins with a Hebrew phrase found over a hundred times in the Old Testament, “Now the word of the Lord came to...”

The great thinker and pastor, Sinclair Ferguson, writes: This phrase (the word of the Lord came to...) indicates what it meant to be a prophet. It meant to be the recipient of a communication from God, a ‘word’ which contained a message. It meant to have a clear, fresh light shed upon oneself, or society, or the nations, by the living God. It meant to be drawn into God’s presence to see things from His perspective.¹

Church, when God chose a prophet, it was a big deal. That prophet was given very special access to the council of God. For example, when Elijah confronts King Ahab, he states in 1 Kings 17:1, “As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.”

The picture here is that the prophet of God stands before the presence of God, and it is from the presence of God that the prophet receives “the word of the Lord”. Notice that when Jonah sets out for Tarshish, the text states twice that he was running away from “the presence of the LORD.” We’ll touch on this more next week, but when Jonah flees from “the presence of the LORD”, he is literally quitting his job as a prophet.

Now, we should acknowledge the uniqueness of Jonah’s narrative as compared to the other prophetic narratives we find in scripture. Jonah is unique in that there is no previous narrative that helps us to get to know Jonah. Many scholars have commented on this unusual beginning, and all agree that whoever wrote this story assumed that the readers already knew Jonah to be a prophet of the Lord. It’s as though we are picking up in the middle of a story rather than at the beginning. We’re left to assume that Jonah was a faithful prophet of God right up to the point where this story begins, so it’s shocking to discover that “the word of the LORD came

¹ Sinclair B Ferguson, Man Overboard! The Story of Jonah, p 11.

to Jonah”, but Jonah does not obey the word of the LORD. We have no other record of a prophet completely disobeying the word of the LORD.

Notice also that Jonah is called to prophesy to those outside of Israel. What is more, Jonah is called by God to directly confront the pagan, Gentile country who was, at the time, Israel’s worst enemy and greatest threat. There is no precedent for this kind of prophetic call. Some prophets wrote oracles against the Gentile countries, but no other prophet was ever called to leave Israel and prophesy against another people group in person. Jonah is very unique in that sense.

Now, let us consider the question of “when” Jonah received this call from the LORD.

According to the history we looked at in 2 Kings 14, the word of the Lord came to Jonah during the reign of King Jeroboam II (786-746 BC). And remember that, speaking through Jonah, God moved King Jeroboam II to reclaim some of the border towns that had been captured by the Assyrians, thus strengthening their northern border. We covered this a few weeks ago, but it’s important to remember this short but very important reference in 2 Kings 14:25: He (King Jeroboam II) 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.

Now, what we don’t know is if God’s command for Jonah to go to Nineveh came before or after the information we have about Jonah in 2 Kings 14. Is this episode in the book of Jonah about his early career as a prophet, or did this story happen much later? Did Jonah’s call to Nineveh take place during the reign of Jeroboam II? Does Nineveh’s repentance have anything to do with why Jeroboam II was able to reestablish and refortify the northern border? We really don’t know, but it’s fascinating to consider the possibility that Jonah’s call to Nineveh, and Nineveh’s consequent repentance, may be the means by which God preserved Israel in a time when the Assyrians were experiencing the pinnacle of their military successes throughout the ancient Middle East. We’ll come back to that question later, but here’s what we do know: “The word of the LORD came to Jonah,” and God called Jonah, the prophet of Yahweh, to go to Nineveh...that great city.

II. That Great City

God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and cry out against them because “their evil has come up before me.”

So, what do we know about Nineveh? Why is Jonah called to go there? What was so evil that God would see the need to send His prophet to cry against them? You are asking very good questions.

First, let us identify where ancient Nineveh was so that you can get an idea of the geography (show map).² Nineveh was located about 670 miles northeast of Jonah’s hometown of Gath-hepher. The ruins of ancient Nineveh lie directly across the river from the modern city of

² <https://www.gantshellurc.co.uk/uploads/1/2/5/1/125104906/782168487.jpg>

Mosul, in Iraq (show map)³. As you can see, Nineveh was more than just a city. It was indeed “an exceedingly great city, three days journey in breadth” as is recorded in Jonah 3:3. We’ll come back to that later, but you must imagine a sprawling area equal to the Kansas City Metro or even larger. It was huge!

Now, you should also know that, as biblical history goes, there are very few cities in the world older than Nineveh. We first hear of Nineveh in Genesis 10:11: “From that land he (Nimrod) went into Assyria and built Nineveh...” The ESV attributes the origin of Nineveh to Nimrod, the great-grandson of Noah⁴ who was “a mighty hunter before the Lord.” Assuming that every ancient city was destroyed by a world-wide flood in the days of Noah, Nineveh would have been one of the first cities to be built after the flood...so that is a VERY old city, indeed! Nineveh was a leading city in the country of Assyria, and eventually became the capital country of the Assyrian Empire. The country of Assyria was named for the regional god, Asshur, which was also the name of the nation’s capital city until King Sennacherib relocated the capital to Nineveh sometime in the late 8th century BC.

Biblically speaking, we hear of Nineveh in Genesis 10 but then don’t hear of Nineveh again until some brief references in 2 Kings 19 and Isaiah 37, and both references simply affirm that Nineveh was a city in Assyria where Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, resided. The only other place that we learn much about Nineveh in the Bible is through the prophet Nahum. Most scholars date Nahum as written a hundred years after Jonah served as a prophet⁵. Nahum predicts the fall of Nineveh due to God’s pending justice, and Nineveh did indeed fall in 612 BC at the hand of the Babylonians.

In Nahum we learn a bit about the reputation of Nineveh. Nahum writes in Nahum 3:
Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder—no end to the prey! The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over the bodies! And all who look at you will shrink from you and say, “Wasted is Nineveh; who will grieve for her?”

³ https://images.csmonitor.com/csmarchives/2009/03/OLONGER_g1_L.gif?alias=standard_900x600nc

⁴ Some translations attribute the origin of Nineveh to Ashur, the son of Shem. I think that is unlikely. Ashur is not mentioned until several verses later (Genesis 10:22) when the writer of Genesis begins to name the sons of Shem. Nineveh is clearly credited to a son of Cush, and Nimrod, the son of Cush, is mentioned in vs. 9 and is the last name prior to vs. 11 where we read, “From that land he went into Assyria (Ashur) and built Nineveh...” The Hebrew word for Ashur and Assyria is the same, but it seems reasonable that *asshur* should be translated as the region known as Assyria, as that is where Nineveh is located.

⁵ In his book, *The Prodigal Prophet*, Dr. Timothy Keller makes a case that Nahum preceded Jonah. In his endnotes he references an *Expository Times* article and states that “the majority of scholars date Nahum as preceding Jonah.” In my research, I did not find any source that dated Nahum before Jonah. All the resources I could find pointed to “the fall of Thebes” that is referenced in Nahum 3:8-10 as an event that happened in 663 BC, thus requiring Nahum to be written after 663 BC. Given that Jeroboam II ruled from 786-746 and Jonah was his contemporary, I think it most likely that Nahum was written well after Jonah’s time of service. That said, we have no idea when the book of Jonah was written, so it is still possible that the story of Jonah was written after the prophecy of Nahum was published.

Now, in addition to biblical history, we know quite a bit about ancient Assyria, and particularly Nineveh, from other sources. The ancient records of the Assyrian Empire are comprised of written scrolls, stone pillars, tablets, engravings, and wall hangings that still exist to this day. In fact, according to the excavator of Nineveh, Austen Henry Layard, the reliefs from the palace of King Sennacherib in ancient Nineveh, if lined up in a row, would stretch almost two miles! The Assyrians were a very proud and vicious people, and their kings loved to brag about their conquests. If you are up for some stomach-turning reading, I encourage you to Google an article called “Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death,” by Erika Bleibtreu. The article is very well written and includes several pictures of the actual tablets and engravings from the 9th and 8th centuries BC. Because there are children in the room, I will limit my examples to just a few, but it’s important for us to understand the horrific practices of torture afflicted upon those conquered by the Assyrians.

In the years immediately preceding Jonah’s tenure as a prophet of Israel, the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser III, achieved many victories in the ancient Middle East. He had his conquests recorded on bronze bands that decorated a massive pair of wooden gates of a temple near modern Mosul. I’ve seen pictures of these bands, and on one of them you see images of soldiers cutting off the hands and feet of their captives, and there are hands and feet lying all over the ground. In another we find a pyramid of heads stacked outside the city walls. Another Assyrian king, Ashurnasirpal writes, “I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me and draped their skins over the pile of corpses...” He goes on to write, “I cut off the heads of their fighters and built a tower before their city. I burnt their adolescent boys and girls.” In still another account he writes, “I captured many troops alive: I cut off some of 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.”

Trust me, it gets worse, but I’ll stop there. You get the picture. The Assyrians were famous. They were a ruthless people who showed no mercy towards those they conquered.

The Jewish writer Hayyim Lewis writes:

The Assyrians were the Nazi-storm troopers of the ancient world. They were a pitiless power-crazed foe. They showed no quarter in battle, uprooting entire peoples in their fury for conquest. They extinguished the Northern Kingdom of Israel...For Jonah, Nineveh, then, was no ordinary city; it carried doom-laden, tragic memories; it stood as a symbol of evil incarnate.⁶

Another writer states: “To go to Nineveh means, for Jonah, to go to hell.”⁷

We must keep these thoughts and images in our minds when Jonah decides to head for Tarshish. Clearly Nineveh was the last place on planet earth that he would ever want to go.

OK, let us now consider Jonah’s assignment.

⁶ Quoted by Rosemary Nixon in [The Message of Jonah](#), p 63.

⁷ Ibid.

III. The Divine Imperative

God's instruction to Jonah is clear, urgent, and succinct: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."

The Divine Imperative begins with a sense of urgency. The Hebrew word here is "GET UP!" There is no time to waste...now is the time that God desires for Jonah to stop whatever he is doing, get up, and head northeast to Nineveh.

And what is his assignment? Jonah is to call out against the people of Nineveh. Now, what does that mean? Well, we know what Jonah eventually said to the people when we skip ahead to 3:4, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

So, if Jonah's messaging is correct, we can assume his assignment was to warn the people of Nineveh that destruction was imminent. The prophetic word was one of warning. God wanted Jonah to communicate on His behalf that God would not look away from the evil of that city. God's justice was coming, and God's justice would be devastating.

Now...why would God send Jonah to Nineveh? Why would God have Jonah call out against the Ninevites?

There can be only one reason, right? God sent Jonah to call out against the Ninevites so that the people of Nineveh would have the opportunity to repent. The goal of this mission...for God anyways...is to hopefully spare the people of Nineveh from the justice they deserve (due to their evil) if only they will repent.

Church, can you feel that? Can you feel the tension between God's commitment to justice and God's commitment to mercy?

One last question: what do you think motivated God's commission to Jonah? We know God's motivation because God reveals it at the end of the story in 4:11. God had pity on Nineveh. God had compassion for those people, albeit an evil and brutal people, because they were people who "did not know their right hand from their left." They were lost people...they were ignorant people...they were people who were slaves to sin, subject to the tyranny of gods who were not gods.

Church, God's love for sinful people was the cause for Jonah's mission. Keep that in mind, and we'll pick up here next Sunday.

IV. The Nature of True Love

Now, as we get ready to close, it wouldn't be right if I didn't say a few words about true love since next Wednesday is Valentine's Day. That is, after all, why we're all wearing red today, right? It has nothing to do with a football game I can assure you.

When we speak about the nature of True Love, it is always appropriate to look to God. The Apostle John writes in 1 John 4:16, “God is love.” Nobody loves if God does not first love. God is the origin of love, and God is perfect love. So, what does perfect love look like in our text so far?

Well, that depends on whose perspective you are taking, right? If you live in Nineveh, true love looks like a messenger sent from God who has come to warn us of God’s uncompromising justice against those who commit evil deeds.

If you are Jonah, God’s love looks like an impossible assignment that likely means certain torture and death.

That’s how we typically evaluate love...we think of love from our own, earthly perspective and experience. But let me ask you another question: how do you think true love looks from God’s perspective in this story so far?

Is God less than loving by commanding his prophet Jonah to go to Nineveh? No. God loves Jonah, but God has every right to call His servant to be His mouthpiece to a hostile nation. Is God less than loving if Jonah suffers persecution, torture, or death as a result of this assignment? No...God is never less than loving in anything God does because God IS love. But that’s a hard pill to swallow, particularly if you are Jonah. We’ll revisit this tension again as we continue on together.

Next question: Is God less than loving by having his prophet proclaim a message of justice and pending doom for those who have done evil and refuse to repent? No. In fact, we might conclude that God would be less than loving if He did not send His messenger to warn the Ninevites of their pending doom.

Is God less than loving should He punish those who do evil and refuse to repent? No. True love requires justice just as much as it requires mercy. God is love, and God is perfectly just and perfectly merciful.

So Church, keep these things in mind as we enter into our week. God is still in the business of calling His people to do hard things. God still has a heart for those who are perishing. God still has mercy for those who don’t know their right hand from their left.

But make no mistake: our perfectly loving God will still wreak justice upon those who do evil and refuse to repent. That is the truth.

You see, it’s not unloving to tell people the truth, even when it’s costly. True love tells the truth.

So, allow me to conclude this message with a loving word from the LORD: repent. Turn from evil; and turn back to the Lord. God is merciful to those who will repent; but God will not spare

the justice that is due upon those who refuse to repent. The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus made forgiveness possible through His sacrificial atonement on the cross, but that amazing, unmerited grace and mercy only applies to those who will repent. Jesus said in Luke 13:5, “Unless you repent, you will all perish.” God loves you enough to warn you of His justice. I love you enough to warn you of God’s justice. And Jesus loved you so much that He suffered God’s justice on your behalf so that, should you repent and place your faith in Him, you will be forgiven...you will be spared the justice that you deserve.

True love tells the truth, amen? So, who else needs to know the truth of God’s justice and God’s mercy? Who else needs to know the good news of the Gospel? Arise...get up...and go to those people. Tell the truth, Church, whatever the cost. This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Pray with me.