LIFE-STUDY OF JONAH

MESSAGE ONE

JEHOVAH'S CARE AND SALVATION TO THE MOST EVIL CITY OF THE GENTILES

Scripture Reading: Jonah 1—4

In this message we will consider the book of Jonah. Among the books of the Minor Prophets, Jonah stands alone.

I. THE INTRODUCTORY WORD

Jonah 1:1-2 is the introductory word to this book.

A. The Meaning of the Name Jonah

Jonah in Hebrew means "dove" (v. 1). This signifies that God wanted Jonah to go out as a dove to preach the gospel of peace.

B. The Time of Jonah's Ministry

The time of Jonah's ministry was about 862 B.C., at the time of the prophet Elisha (896-838 B.C.).

C. The Object of His Ministry

The object of his ministry was the people of the great city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria.

D. The Place of His Ministry

The place of his ministry also was Nineveh.

E. The Subject of His Ministry

The subject of Jonah's ministry was that Jehovah's salvation reached even to the Gentile city Nineveh.

F. The Central Thought

The central thought of the book of Jonah is that God cared

for and saved even the most evil Gentiles in His pity on men and cattle.

G. The Revelation concerning Christ

In the book of Jonah, the revelation concerning Christ is in Jonah's being a type of Christ.

1. In Jonah's Typifying Christ Preaching the Gospel of Peace to the Gentiles

Christ is revealed in Jonah's typifying Christ preaching the gospel of peace to the Gentiles (3:2; Matt. 12:41). Jonah was a prophet who turned from Israel to the Gentiles. In this he was a type of Christ, who turned from Israel to the Gentiles (Luke 4:25-27; Matt. 21:43).

2. In Jonah's Staying in the Great Fish Three Days and Three Nights

Christ is revealed also in the type of Jonah's staying in the great fish three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17). This typifies Christ's staying in the heart of the earth three days and three nights (Matt. 12:40). Christ died and entered into the heart of the earth. He came forth from there in resurrection, and in resurrection He became the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45b) for the preaching, the spreading, of the gospel to all the Gentile nations, as seen in the book of Acts.

H. The Sections

The book of Jonah has five sections: the introductory word (1:1-2); Jonah's fleeing from Jehovah's commission (1:2-17); Jonah's repenting (ch. 2); Jonah's preaching (ch. 3); and Jonah's prejudice (ch. 4).

II. JONAH'S FLEEING FROM JEHOVAH'S COMMISSION

A. Jehovah's Commission

Jehovah's commission was for Jonah to go and cry out against the evil of Nineveh (1:2). God intended to judge Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, but He also intended to extend His salvation of love to that evil Gentile city. For this reason

He commissioned Jonah to go to Nineveh to cry out against the city.

B. Jonah's Fleeing to Tarshish from the Presence of Jehovah

Jonah did not agree with God. Jonah knew that God was "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and great in lovingkindness and repentant of evil" (4:2) and that God would change His mind and not judge Nineveh if the city repented. Anticipating this, Jonah rose up to flee by ship to Tarshish from the presence of Jehovah (1:3).

C. Jehovah's Interruption

In verses 4 through 17 we see Jehovah's interruption. As the sovereign God, He raised up a storm. He caused a great tempest on the sea, and the ship was about to be broken up (v. 4). Jonah had gone down into the innermost part of the vessel and had lain down and had fallen fast asleep (v. 5b). Eventually, it was found out by the casting of lots that Jonah was responsible for the storm (vv. 7-14). At Jonah's request, the mariners cast him into the sea (vv. 15-16). Jehovah prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah up, and he was in the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights (v. 17).

D. The Type of Christ

As we have pointed out, Jonah here was a type of Christ, who was sent by God to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, with Jonah's staying in the great fish three days and three nights typifying Christ's staying in the heart of the earth three days and three nights.

III. JONAH'S REPENTING

After three days and three nights in the stomach of the fish, Jonah prayed and repented to Jehovah. Chapter two is the record of Jonah's repenting.

A. Jonah's Prayer to Jehovah

Verses 2 through 9 are Jonah's prayer to Jehovah. Jonah prayed in a very strange way, saying such things as this:

"Water encompassed me, even to my soul; / The deep surrounded me; / Seaweed was wrapped about my head" (v. 5).

B. Jehovah Commanding the Fish

Jehovah commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah out onto the dry land (v. 10).

IV. JONAH'S PREACHING

Chapter three covers the matter of Jonah's preaching.

A. Jehovah's Commission to Jonah the Second Time, and Jonah's Preaching to the Great City Nineveh

After Jonah was adjusted, corrected, and subdued, he was willing to go along with God and take His commission. "Then the word of Jehovah came to Jonah a second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city; and proclaim to it the proclamation that I will speak to you" (3:1-2). Jonah arose, went to Nineveh according to the word of Jehovah, and preached, crying out and saying, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overturned" (vv. 3-4).

B. The People and the King of Nineveh Believing God, Proclaiming a Fast, and Repenting

The people and the king of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and repented (vv. 5-9). In his proclamation the king declared, "Let man and beast be covered in sackcloth, and let them call to God strongly. And let each turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows whether God will turn and repent and will turn from His burning anger so that we do not perish?" (vv. 8-9).

C. God Repenting and Not Doing the Evil to Them

God saw their deeds, repented, and would not do the evil to them (v. 10). As a result, the whole city was saved.

V. JONAH'S PREJUDICE

Chapter four of this book exposes Jonah's prejudice. When God changed His mind and forgave the people of Nineveh, Jonah was angry.

A. Jehovah's Turning from Doing Evil to Nineveh Displeasing Jonah Greatly, and Jonah Praying to Jehovah in His Anger

Jehovah's turning from doing evil to Nineveh displeased Jonah greatly, and Jonah prayed to Jehovah in his anger (4:1-4). As he prayed, Jonah said, "Ah, Jehovah, was this not what I said when I was still in my land? Therefore I anticipated it by fleeing to Tarshish, for I know that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and great in lovingkindness and repentant of evil" (v. 2). Jonah could not tolerate the fact that, after charging him to preach that the city of Nineveh would be overthrown, God changed His mind. Jonah could not go along with God in this, but was actually angry with God because of it.

How could a man dare to be angry with God? Jonah should have said, "God is sovereign, and what happens to Nineveh is up to Him. He said that He would destroy Nineveh, but whether or not Nineveh is destroyed is up to Him. It does not matter to me if He repents, if He changes His mind." However, instead of having such an attitude, Jonah was so angry that he said, "Jehovah, take my life, I pray, from me, for it is better for me to die than to live" (v. 3). When he said this, Jehovah replied, "Do you do well to be angry?" (v. 4).

B. The Lesson of the Castor-oil Tree

In verses 5 through 11 we have the lesson of the castor-oil tree. Jonah went out from the city, made a booth for himself, and sat under it in the shade to see what would happen to the city. Then God prepared a castor-oil tree, and it came up over Jonah to be a shade over his head. Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the tree. But God prepared a worm, and it struck the tree so that it withered. Furthermore, when the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind. The sun beat down on Jonah's head, and he requested that he might die. When God asked Jonah if he did well in being angry about the tree, Jonah said that he did well to be angry unto death. Then Jehovah said to him, "You had pity on the tree that you did not labor for nor cause to grow, which came into being

overnight and perished overnight; and I, should I not have pity on Nineveh, the great city, in which are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people, who cannot discern between their right hand and their left, and many cattle?" (vv. 10-11).

C. God's Pity on the Most Evil City of the Gentiles

In verse 11 we see God's pity on the most evil city of the Gentiles; He cared even for their cattle. Nineveh was built by the evil man Nimrod in Assyria (Gen. 10:8-11). Assyria was the country that invaded and insulted Israel about 713 B.C. (Isa. 36), after the time of Jonah. God had pity on such an evil city.

In Matthew 12:40 the Lord Jesus told the Pharisees, a group of "Jonahs," that He would be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights, just as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish, for the extending of God's salvation from the Jews to the Gentiles. This indicates that God is not only the God of the Jews but also the God of all the nations. The Jews thought that they were the unique people of God. They considered themselves the firstborn son (Luke 15:25-32) with the right to be the first to enjoy all that is of God. But because the Jews responded to God wrongly, the Gentiles, not the Jews, became the first to enjoy God in His salvation.

The book of Jonah indicates particularly that God is not the God of only a certain people; He is the God of all peoples. After Christ's resurrection and ascension and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, in Acts 13 God told Paul and Barnabas to go to the Gentiles (vv. 46-47). They were not like Jonah; rather, they took God's commission and went and preached the gospel throughout Asia Minor. Then the Spirit led them to go from Asia to Europe, to Macedonia (16:6-10). The book of Jonah shows us that while God was angry with Assyria, He would still be gracious and compassionate toward a great and sinful city such as Nineveh. This indicates that God's economy is to do things through these two factors—the consuming factor and the suffering factor—to extend His salvation to all the peoples on earth.

God's economy to manifest Christ implies the extending of His salvation in Christ to reach even the distant, great, evil cities of the Gentiles. I consider Russia as today's Nineveh. What we are doing in Russia is altogether under the span of God's economy. I believe that we will receive much blessing because this is according to God's economy. Thus, the consuming locusts are still consuming, the suffering Israel is still suffering, and the Lord is still going on in His recovery.