

JONAH-DEAD OR ALIVE

By

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LECTURE 1-

THE FISH IS NOT THE HERO

"That is a Jonah," replied a fine Christian businessman to a fantastic story to which he had just listened.

Everyone laughed.

They understood what he meant.

He questioned the accuracy of the fantastic story.

It was his whimsical way of declaring that he did not believe the story.

Of course, this Christian businessman did not mean that he doubted the Book of Jonah; on the contrary, he had no misgivings about it. He accepted it, as all Christians do, as the very Word of GOD. Nevertheless, he was adopting the vernacular of the mob; thoughtlessly, he was using the idiom of the day. Unconsciously he was lowering his sights and was dropping down to the common colloquialism of the street level.

Many Christians thoughtlessly cast aspersions upon this important Book in the Canon of the Scripture without realizing that they are playing into the hands of the critics and innocently becoming the dupes of the skeptics.

In warfare the tactics of the enemy are to feel out the weak spots in the line of the opposition and to center his attack at that vantage point. Judging from this criterion, many critics deduce that the Book of Jonah is the vulnerable part of the Divine Record. Surely this is the spot where the enemy has leveled his heaviest artillery. As a result, the average Christian feels that this is the weakest link in the sixty-six links of the chain of Scripture. If this link gives way, the chain is broken.

Is the Book of Jonah the "Achilles heel" of the Bible? It is, if we are to accept the ridiculous explanations of the critics. The translators of the Septuagint were the first to question its reasonableness. They set the pattern for the avalanche of criticism which was to follow. The

ancient method of modernism is to allegorize the Book and to classify it with "Robinson Crusoe" and "Gulliver's Travels."

Some of the extravagant theories of the critics are more far-fetched and fantastic than they even concede the Book of Jonah to be:

1. Some say, without a scrap of evidence to support such a claim, that Jonah was the son of the widow of Zarephath.
2. Some put forth the theory that Jonah had a dream in the ship while he was asleep during the storm and that the Book of Jonah is the account of the dream.
3. Some relate the Book of Jonah to the Phoenician myth of Hercules and the sea monster.
4. Some claim that Jonah was picked up after the storm and shipwreck by a boat that had a fish for the figurehead and that this gave support for the record in the Book of Jonah.
5. Others resort to the wild claim that a dead fish was floating around and that Jonah took refuge in it during the storm.

The producers of these speculations claim that the Book of Jonah is unreasonable, and they bring forth these theories to give credence to the story. It would be interesting indeed to have Jonah's reaction to their very reasonable explanations. We must dismiss them all as having no basis of fact, no vestige of proof from a historical standpoint, and only in existence in the imagination of the critics. Jonah was a real person, the record has been validated and the message of the Book is vital for this atomic age.

It can be established that Jonah was a historical person and not a character from mythology. It can be ascertained on good authority that the account is accurate. It can be shown that the message of the Book is of utmost significance for this crucial time.

JONAH WAS A HISTORICAL CHARACTER

Jonah was a historical character, and this is clear by the simple process of examining the evidence with an honest mind. The historical record of the kings of Israel and Judah is accepted as reliable. In other words, no one denies that these kings were real persons. David, Josiah and Hezekiah stand on the pages of history as real kings.

It is among the historical records of these kings that we find the first mention of Jonah.

Speaking of Jeroboam, the son of Joash, the historian writes:

"He restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, which was of Gath-hepher."

Jeroboam was a real person; Israel was a real nation; Hamath was a real place, and it is unlikely that Jonah, the son of Amittai, was a figment of the imagination. It is begging the point to say that this is another Jonah. It is not reasonable to believe that there were two Jonahs whose fathers were named Amittai and whose offices were prophets. This is especially evident when it is observed that the name, Jonah, was not a common name. After all, the name, Jonah, is not Jones. The only times that the name occurs in the Bible are in this reference in II Kings, in the Book of Jonah and in the references in the New Testament to that Book. There is only one Jonah in the Bible, and he is a historical person.

The fact that the question has been raised concerning the authenticity of Jonah's record is all the more startling when a contrast is made with one of the other Minor Prophets. Look at Habakkuk for a moment. There is no reference to him in any historical book, and he is never mentioned by name in the New Testament. In spite of this, there is no concerted effort to put him among the gods on Mt. Olympus as merely a mythological character. It is reasonable to conclude that Jonah was a real person of flesh and blood. Of course, the real reason for getting rid of Jonah is to get rid of the miraculous experience which he records concerning himself.

Authorities on the Book of Jonah

Since it is clear that the critics were not eye-witnesses to any part of the record, any evidence which they present cannot be in the nature of witnesses, but rather as speculators. The entire case revolves around the question of authority. Whom do you consider the greatest authority on the Book of Jonah? There is one authority whom the writer considers above all others, and His statement is submitted as final. Listen to Him:

"For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall the Son of man be to this generation" (Luke 11:30)

" But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here" (Matthew 12:39-41).

Surely the LORD JESUS CHRIST considered Jonah a real person, and He accepted the record of the Book of Jonah as true. When you reject the Book of Jonah, you are not merely saying that you cannot accept the record as reasonable, but you are saying that you do not believe that JESUS was acquainted with the facts of the case. You break with JESUS when you deny the Book of Jonah. There is no other alternative in spite of all the hedging which is done by the skeptical ministry.

It might not be inappropriate to conclude this section in which we have attempted to meet the objections of the critics by giving the general statement of Mr. Winston Churchill with reference to the inspiration of Scripture:

"We reject with scorn all those learned and laboured myths that Moses was but a legendary figure upon whom the priesthood and the people hung their essential social, moral and religious ordinances. We believe that the most scientific view, the most up-to-date and rationalistic conception, will find its fullest satisfaction in taking the Bible story literally, and in identifying one of the greatest of human beings with the most decisive leap forward ever discernible in the human story. We remain unmoved by the tomes of Professor Gradgrind and Dr. Dryasdust. We may be sure that all these things happened just as they are set out according to Holy Writ."

The Book of Jonah Is an Experience, Not Prophecy

Now, let us turn to the Book of Jonah and examine it. It contains the personal record of an experience which Jonah had, and he evidently was the writer. Properly speaking, the brief brochure is not a prophecy, and it seems to be out of step among the Minor Prophets. The book contains no prophecy although Jonah was a prophet. It is the personal account of a major event in the life of Jonah.

As the narrator, he told of his experience, which was a sign of the greatest event in the history of the world, **THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST.**

The Book of Jonah is not a fish story which disturbs a "gainsaying" world, but it is a throne in the midst of which "**stood a Lamb as it had been slain.**" This LAMB is a resurrected LAMB, and a Christ-rejecting world will some day cry out, "**...Hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb**" (Revelation 6:16).

Sometimes the literary excellence of this brief brochure is lost in the din made by the carping critics. It is well to recall the tribute paid by Charles Reade, the English literary critic and author, who wrote, "Jonah is the most beautiful story ever written in so small a compass." It is well to keep in mind that we have before us a literary gem and not a fish story.

The Fish is not the Hero of the Story

There is another salient point to keep before us as we begin this book: The fish is not the hero of the story, neither is it the villain. The book is not even about a fish. The chief difficulty is in keeping a correct perspective. The fish is merely window-dressing and cake-trimming. The fish is among the property man's equipment and does not occupy the star's dressing-room. Let us distinguish between what Dr. G. Campbell Morgan calls the essentials and the incidentals. The incidentals are the fish, the gourd, the east wind, the boat and Nineveh. The essentials are JEHOVAH and Jonah, GOD and man.

Conservative scholars place the writing of this book before 745 B.C. The incidents took place about that time. Some even place it as early as 860 B.C. It seems best to place it between 800 and 750 B.C. Students of history will recognize this as the period when Nineveh was in its heyday. The nation of Assyria was at its zenith at this time, too. Assyria was a great nation under King Pul by 770 B.C. It was destroyed by 606 B.C. By the time of Herodotus, the city of

Nimrod had ceased to exist. When Xenophon passed the city, it was deserted but he testifies that the wall still stood and they were one hundred and fifty feet high.

Two Approaches to the Study of Jonah

Let me suggest two approaches to the study of this book which will enable the reader to understand the contents:

1. Striking Resemblance Between Jonah and Paul.

Both Paul and Jonah were missionaries to the Gentiles; both were shipwrecked; both were witnesses to the sailors on board the boat, and both were used to deliver these sailors from death. There are other striking comparisons which a careful study will reveal. Paul made three missionary journeys, and with his trip to Rome, there were four. The four chapters of the Book of Jonah may be divided into four missionary journeys of Jonah. The first journey was into the fish; the second was out on to dry land; the third was to Nineveh; and the fourth brought him to the heart of GOD.

2. The Timetable Approach.

There is another approach to this splendid story which is the one that will be followed in these studies, and that is the timetable approach. Did you ever go into a railroad station and consult the timetable? If so, there were three important factors which you noted in particular:

- First, the destination of the train;
- Second, the time the train was to leave;
- Third, the time the train was to arrive.

It is possible to construct the four brief chapters of this book into the form of a timetable. Let me suggest that you do this, using the following pattern which will prove helpful:

Timetable of the Book of Jonah

LEAVE...DESTINATION..ARRIVE

Chapter 1 - Israel - Nineveh - Fish

(Samaria or Gath-Hepher)

Chapter 2 - Fish - Nineveh - Dry land

Chapter 3 - Dry land Nineveh - Nineveh

Chapter 4 - Nineveh -Gourd Vine - Heart of God

However, before considering the contents of the book, there is another item of introduction which I wish to mention. The brevity of the Book of Jonah is apt to lead the casual reader to the conclusion that there is nothing of particular significance here except the diatribe about the whale that swallowed Jonah.

Six Significant Subjects

There are six significant subjects which are suggested and developed in this brochure of brevity. Since each will be discussed at length in its proper place, it will suffice here just to mention each with a word of comment.

1. This is the one book of the Old Testament which sets forth the resurrection. Those who assert that the resurrection is not found in the Old Testament surely are not versed in the magnificent message of Jonah. When a wicked and adulterous generation was seeking after a sign, JESUS referred them to the Book of Jonah for the message. "As Jonah. . . so Jesus" is the fine comparison made by our LORD. This will be given adequate treatment when we come to the second chapter of Jonah.

2. Salvation is not by works. Salvation is by faith which leads to repentance. The Book of Jonah is read by the orthodox Jews on the Great Day of Atonement - Yom Kippur. There was one great truth which was self-evident from the ritual of this day. The way into GOD was not by "**works of righteousness which we have done**" but by the blood of a substitutionary sacrifice provided by the LORD. Probably the most significant statement in the entire book is found in the second chapter and the ninth verse, "**Salvation is of the Lord.**"

3. GOD'S purpose of grace cannot be frustrated. The question is sometimes asked if Jonah had refused to go to Nineveh the second time, would GOD have destroyed the city? It is difficult to answer a question which involves a probability which did not come to pass, but it is safe here to say that GOD would not have been limited by the refusal of His servant to go for Him. If Jonah had refused to go, GOD would have raised up another instrument. However, it is more likely that, had Jonah refused to go the second time, there would have been another fish ready to give him the green signal toward Nineveh. The book shows GOD's determination to get His message of salvation to a people who will hear and accept it.

4. God will not cast us aside for faithlessness When Jonah failed the first time, GOD did not cast him aside. The most encouraging words which a faltering and failing child of GOD can hear are, "**And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time.**"

5. GOD is good and gracious. Read the second verse of the fourth chapter for the most penetrating picture of GOD in the entire Bible.

"And he prayed unto the Lord, and said, I pray thee, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil."

It is wrong to say that the Old Testament reveals a GOD of wrath and the New Testament reveals a GOD of love. He is no vengeful deity in the book of Jonah.

6. GOD is the GOD of the Gentiles. Some Bible teachers have suggested that we write Romans 3:29 over this book, "**Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the**

Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also." Why not? The Book of Jonah is the answer to those critics who declaim that the Old Testament presents a local and limited deity, one who is nothing more than a tribal deity. The book of Jonah is a great book on missions, and the book has a world vision.

These are some of the featured facts about this little book. Surely there is much in little here.

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