

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL PROPHETS AND KINGS GOD THE PURSUER *God Pursues the Ninevites*

Our study is chronological; however, keep in mind that at this point we are studying parallel events in both the divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Today, we take a detour to the Gentile Kingdom of Assyria where the reluctant Northern Kingdom prophet Jonah was sent. We recently studied how the Assyrians' mighty army came to the gates of Jerusalem during the reign of Judah's King Hezekiah. The Assyrians were outside the gates preparing to take over the city of Jerusalem and suddenly the next day 185,000 Assyrians were dead outside the Jerusalem gates as the Angel of the LORD passed over their encampment. **2 Kings 19:36 (ESV)** ³⁶ *Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went home and lived at Nineveh.* This miraculous salvation of Judah occurred approximately 20 years **after** Jonah's ministry to Assyria's capital city of Nineveh.

I must admit Jonah is not my favorite Bible character. **Hebrews 4:12 (ESV)** ¹² *For the word of God is living and active... and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.* I believe the reason Jonah does not make my list of favorites is because when I look at Jonah I see myself and I don't like what I see.

As we consider God's pursuit of the Ninevites, understand that the life and ministry of Jonah is a picture of the nation of Israel. Just as Jonah was called to give God's message to a condemned Gentile city, so Israel was called to share the Good News with the Gentiles. From the beginning, God's purpose was the redemption of the entire world – not just the Jews. After the disobedience of Adam and Eve, God made His first promise of a coming Redeemer in **Genesis 3:15**. As civilization declined morally, God chose to spare the life of Noah and his family during a worldwide flood so that the human race would not be totally lost. Later God called a man of faith named Abraham to keep God's name alive. The LORD designated Abraham's descendents (the nation of Israel) as the channel through which the Promised Redeemer of the world would come. Jonah is a picture of how that nation continually refused to point others to God. Even after the Son of God – Jesus died and rose from the grave, the Jewish people as a whole continue to refuse to accept Him as Savior and tell His story to the nations.

Jonah's lifetime was much like ours. His nation of Israel was disobedient, depraved, and disgusting. Judgment was on the horizon for Israel itself. God would eventually make Assyria the rod of His anger by having the Assyrians take the nation of Israel captive sometime AFTER Jonah's missionary trip into Nineveh. Nineveh was located in what is modern-day Iraq.

Read Jonah 1:1-5 (ESV) ¹ *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. ⁴ But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.

Some like to believe that Jonah was a character in an allegory or parable. However, God's Word confirms that Jonah was indeed a 'real person.' Jesus mentioned him in the New Testament. Jonah is named in **2 Kings 14:25** as being the prophet who predicted the restoration of the land of Israel to its ancient boundaries under the evil Israelite King Jeroboam II. Undoubtedly, Jonah found himself in good standing among the Israelites because of that prophecy. However, God was now giving Jonah a message he did not like to a people he did not like. The Ninevites were enemies of both Israel and Judah.

Assyrian history reveals why Jonah would not relish welcoming the Assyrians into the kingdom of God. I will give just one example of their cruelty. When Assyrian King Ashurbanipal described his treatment of a captured leader, he wrote, "I pierced his chin with my keen hand dagger. Through his jaw I passed a rope, put a dog chain upon him and made him occupy a kennel." Bringing a message of judgment might have been fearful to Jonah since these people were so wicked; however, we will learn later, there was a much deeper reason why Jonah ran.

In this story we find a beautiful picture of God's pursuing love for an often heartless, evil people group. And we also see God's pursuit of one individual, Jonah, who chose to move in the opposite direction of Nineveh when God called. Sadly that move took him away from the Presence of the LORD.

There has been much discussion over the locality of Tarshish, the place where Jonah headed. Tarshish was the name of a port in Spain. However, the phrase "ships of Tarshish" was also an expression used for ships on a long voyage. In reality, Tarshish can be a different place for each of us where we run from God's will. And, the road back from Tarshish is often a long lonely road. But, then a parable of Jesus comes to my mind. It is the story of the prodigal son. You remember that long road as the son was walking home to his father. **Luke 15:20 (ESV)** ²⁰ *And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.* No matter where we've been, no matter what we've done, our Father is always there with open arms ready to welcome us.

Jonah wound up on a ship in a storm and eventually told the crew that they should throw him overboard because he was the reason for the storm. Not every 'storm' in a person's life is because he or she is outside of the will of God. We still go through storms even when we are following the path of God. We live in a fallen world where life is filled with both gladness and sorrow. However, the storm for Jonah came because he moved away from the Presence of God.

The Israelites were called to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth but when the Israelites got out of the will of God they brought trouble instead of blessing. Because he moved away from the LORD's presence, Jonah lost his spiritual energy. He was sleeping in the bottom of the boat while the ship's crew was praying to their gods to be delivered from the storm. Jonah knew the storm was because of him and he told the sailors what to do.

Read Jonah 1:15-17 (ESV) ¹⁵ *So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.* ¹⁶ *Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.* ¹⁷ *And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*

There has been much speculation regarding the *great fish*. Was it a whale? We don't know. Jonah probably did not know either. He was INSIDE the fish and when he was eventually vomited out, I doubt that he bothered to look backward! However, Jonah being in the depths of the great fish is another biblical picture. Do not forget that it is the three days of Jonah in the belly of the great fish that Jesus used to predict His own resurrection after three days in the grave. There would have been no 'portals of light' inside this fish. As we go through our darkest times, we can take comfort in knowing that God moves in darkness. **Genesis 1:2 (ESV)** ² *The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.* Let's read a portion of the prayer that Jonah's prayed from the depths of his despair.

Read Jonah 2:7-10 (ESV) ⁷ *When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.* ⁸ *Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love.* ⁹ *But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!* ¹⁰ *And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.*

When King Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, he asked God for special favor. **1 Kings 8:38-39 (ESV)** ³⁸ *whatever prayer, whatever plea is made by any man or by all your people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart and stretching out his hands toward this house,* ³⁹ *then hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways (for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind),* Jonah referenced the holy temple and said: *When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD.* Jonah knew God's covenant promises and he claimed them picturing how we can do the same. The LORD answered Jonah's prayer; however, that did not change God's mission for Jonah.

Read Jonah -3:1-5 (ESV) ¹ *Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,* ² *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you."* ³ *So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth.* ⁴ *Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet*

forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

Often skeptics like to bring up other people groups who do not worship Jesus as Savior. They question why God would send people to hell for not believing in Him when they have never heard the Good News. Jonah’s story is a picture of how God pursues people who have not heard about Him but do have a heart to believe. God’s pursuit of people who do not know the Lord involves using people who do!

History indicates that Assyria did not totally become a godly nation. The Assyrians continued as a cruel and pagan people. Nevertheless, Jesus presented the Ninevites’ repentant response to Jonah’s message of coming judgment as a contrast to the Pharisees’ stubbornness. **Matthew 12:41 (ESV)**⁴¹ *The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*

Jonah preached a message of judgment and when the Ninevites’ repentance caused God to show mercy and forgiveness in place of judgment, Jonah didn’t like it!

Read Jonah 4:1-4 (ESV)¹ *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.*² *And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”*³ *Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”*⁴ *And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?”*

Wiersbe comments, “If this book had ended at the last verse of chapter 3, history would have portrayed Jonah as the greatest of the prophets” But, here is chapter 4 we find what Jonah really thought about God’s forgiveness of the Ninevites – Jonah didn’t like it. God was working and Jonah was mad. His prayer lets us in on the secret of why Jonah tried to run away in the first place. Jonah knew the attributes of God. **Psalm 145:8 (ESV)**⁸ *The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.* He knew from the first day that God would forgive the Ninevites if they repented.

Jonah was more concerned about his reputation that he was about souls being saved. When Jonah's friends found out that he had been the means of saving Israel’s enemy, Nineveh, from God's wrath, they would consider him a traitor. The Jews – generation after generation forgot their original purpose – to be a blessing to the rest of the world by sharing God’s message with everyone. (**Genesis 22:18**) It was Jonah’s opinion that God should not freely give his great salvation to a wicked pagan nation. Yet this was and is precisely God’s plan. **Romans 5:8 (ESV)**⁸ *but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*