

Chapter Twenty-two God Waits: Jonah, Micah

Probably one of the best known stories in all the Bible is that of Jonah and the fish. Skeptics laugh at the account as one which could not possibly be true, and liberal Bible scholars often regard it as an example of a myth or early legend which was invented to teach a lesson. The book is also known for its reference to Jonah as a jinx or a bad luck person. But all this has obscured the true message of this book. The fact that Jonah was an historical character is confirmed by mention of him in 2 Kings 14:25 where we learn that he lived in Gath-hepher, north of Nazareth in Galilee. Since Jesus referred to him as prefiguring His own resurrection it is impossible to accept the view that Jonah and the fish story are mere legend or even parable.

The book opens with the story of Jonah's commission from the Lord to go to the Assyrian capital of Nineveh and to preach against it, and Jonah's direct refusal to obey that command. Instead he boarded a ship going to Tarshish, in the opposite direction at the extreme west of the Mediterranean, to get as far away from Nineveh as possible. We are not told in the first chapter why Jonah did this, but the key to the book is in seeking the answer to the question: What made Jonah refuse to go to Nineveh?

Chapter 1 completes the story of Jonah's rebellious flight from his duty as a prophet. A great storm arose on the sea and the mariners became fearful that the ship was about to sink. When all their efforts seemed of no avail they cast lots to determine who was being punished by the gods through the instrument of this great storm. The lot fell upon Jonah who at that time was asleep in the inner part of the ship. Jonah confessed that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord and, though the mariners tried to spare him, eventually they felt they had no choice but to cast him into the sea. Immediately upon doing this the storm quieted and the sailors were impressed by the power of Jonah's God and offered sacrifices to Him.

Jonah himself would have drowned but for the fact that a great fish, especially sent by the Lord, swallowed him and carried him in his belly for three days and three nights. Though popular reference almost always refers to the fish as a whale, there is no evidence that such was the case. The Hebrew uses the term fish rather than whale and in other places the word is translated sea monster.

Chapter 2 records the prayer Jonah uttered while in the belly of the fish. It is a compilation of various quotations from the Psalms and indicates both the general knowledge which Jonah had of the Scriptures and also the specific ones that came flashing into his mind as he found himself in the darkness amid the gastric juices of the great fish. The import of the verses he quotes is one of thanksgiving for his relationship to the living God, and a casting of himself upon God's mercy for deliverance. The chapter ends with the brief statement, "And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land" (2:10).

Once again the word of the Lord came to Jonah, commanding him to go to Nineveh and proclaim the message he had been sent to deliver. It is clear that God has changed the prophet's mind by his experience in the fish, but He has not changed His own mind one degree about what He wants Jonah to say to Nineveh. The description given of Nineveh is of "an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth" (3:3). A day's journey was reckoned to be about 12 miles, so a three days' journey would be 36 miles. Nineveh was actually a group of cities, much like Los Angeles, clustered together on the banks of the Tigris River and forming the capital of the Assyrian empire.

The prophet went a day's journey into the city crying monotonously, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" Ordinarily that kind of a message of destruction would not get much of a reception, for the Bible reports that other prophets were sent with messages of warning, but the people paid no attention. But an

amazing thing happens. We are told that "the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them" (3:5). Even the king covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes, uttering a decree to urge the entire population to turn from their evil ways and violence with the hope that God would repent and save the city.

This is surely one of the most remarkable revivals ever recorded in history. That the city's repentance was genuine is indicated by the fact that God saw what they did and turned from the evil which He intended to bring against it, and the city was indeed spared. But another question remains unanswered. What potent factor caused the inhabitants of this great pagan city to repent so quickly and so thoroughly? This would be a continuing mystery were it not for a clue supplied by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. In the Gospel of Luke, He refers to Jonah with these words: "For as Jonah became a sign to the men of Nineveh, so will the Son of man be to this generation" (Luke 11:30). He thus indicated that the prophet himself was the sign to the city which brought about their repentance. In the same manner He indicated he would be a sign to the whole generation of Israel and, beyond them, to the race of mankind.

What did He mean by this? There are Bible scholars who feel that something happened to Jonah in the fish's belly which changed his entire features. It seems highly likely that the prophet's skin was altered in appearance by the gastric juices of the fish. Dr. Harry Rimmer in his book *The Harmony of Science and Scripture* tells of an English sailor who fell overboard and was swallowed by a fish. A day or two later his shipmates saw the fish floating on the surface of the water. They caught it and took it ashore. When they opened it up, the sailors, to their amazement, found their shipmate alive. However, his skin had turned to chalky white and remained so for the rest of his life. Harry Rimmer personally talked with the man and learned from his own lips the details of his experience. There are probably in extant a half dozen accounts of individuals who have been swallowed by marine animals and survived.

It is not difficult to imagine what happened in the city of Nineveh when Jonah preached, if his entire face and body confirmed the remarkable story. The Ninevites would have clear proof that the God who sent Jonah to proclaim, "Yet-forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown," was a God who kept His word. Hence, the city repented to the last man and the judgment of God was stayed.

There have been some who have been troubled over the fact that Scripture says that God repented. This seems to indicate that He changed His mind from what He had previously determined to do. But this idea is difficult to square with the doctrine of God's omniscience and His sovereign determination of all events. We must remember, however, that these events are recorded for our information and instruction and therefore are written from a human point of view. God, of course, knew all the time that the city would repent at the preaching of Jonah under the peculiar circumstances in which he preached. And that also, from the apparent change in the divine actions, men would learn that repentance and contrition are the necessary conditions for a continuing relationship with the living God. Thus human repentance does not change God's mind, but actually carries forward His purpose. This whole story is an exemplification of the divine command "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you" (James 1:8). The city of Nineveh was spared and it was not until a hundred years later that God carried out His judgment on Nineveh and it was destroyed.

In the last chapter of the prophecy, we learn of the reaction of Jonah to God's mercy upon the pagan city. Here also we learn at last the reason why Jonah fled to Tarshish when the command first came to him to preach in Nineveh. The opening words of the chapter tell us that the prophet was angry when he saw the city was spared. In his anger he said: "I pray thee, 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 thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil" (Jonah 4:2).

It is clear from this that Jonah hated the Ninevites and would have liked nothing better than to see them destroyed. There was probably good reason for his hatred for the Ninevites were known throughout the entire world of that day as a cruel and ruthless people. Perhaps Jonah had actually seen several Ninevite invasions of Israel and the raiding and destruction of his people. He may have even suffered the loss of loved ones at the hands of these merciless soldiers, for the Ninevites had found more ingenious ways to be cruel than any other nation that had existed to that time. They were brutal, godless, and sinful, and for this reason the prophet wanted to see Nineveh destroyed.

One would have thought that he would have jumped at the chance to announce to this brutal city that they would meet their comeuppance in 40 days, but Jonah knew God better than that. In effect he says now to God, "I know you too well. If anyone by repenting gives you half a chance to be merciful, you'll change your mind and will not carry out your judgment against them." So to prevent that divine change of mind, Jonah fled to Tarshish.

What a revelation this gives of the character of God and the understanding of that character which these Old Testament prophets had. Critics today sometimes picture the God of the Old Testament as a vengeful, wrathful God, dealing only in black thunderclouds and lightning bolts, but that is not the kind of God Jonah knew. He knew that God was a gracious God, merciful and slow to anger, and abounding in love, quickly turning His judgments aside if there was any sign of repentant hearts.

The prophet was still in hopes that God would destroy the city; so he sat out on the rimrock looking over the city from the east and waited to see what God would do. Evidently he sat there for several days, for enough time elapsed for a gourd to grow and shade him from the hot sun. The prophecy informs us that it was God who appointed the gourd to thus bring relief to the prophet's discomfort. But the next day God also appointed a worm to destroy the plant and then sent a hot east wind to increase the heat and discomfort which Jonah felt.

Once again Jonah becomes angry at God and asks to have his life taken from him. But God responds with a beautiful word: "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (4:10,11).

The reference to persons who do not know their right hand from their left is the Hebrew way of describing children. There were in Nineveh 120,000 little children as well as many animals, all of whom would be innocent victims of the sins of the adults under the avenging hand of God. Again, it is clear that God takes no delight in judgment, but seeks in long-suffering patience to bring individuals and even nations to the place of repentance and change.

The book ends rather abruptly at this point and we are not told whether Jonah learned his lesson or not. From the fact that he himself records this experience for us, it is most likely that he did learn. It is a lesson for all believers in all ages, that God loves the pagan world even if His people do not. How many of us would be delighted if tomorrow morning's paper reported that Moscow lay in smoking ruins? Yet we must never forget that God loves the Russians and the Chinese and any others who at this present time, we call our national enemies.

Further, the lesson of this book is that God has sent us to the unbelieving peoples of the world as he sent Jonah to Nineveh. Around us also are the godless, the lawless, and the disobedient. We often dismiss them by saying, "How revolting! How disgusting! They deserve damnation." But God has sent us to be a sign to this generation. The sign is that of resurrection, as Jesus said it would be with Him. It is the sign of people who once were dead but have been made alive in Jesus Christ. The very skin of our faces should shine with a new brilliance which grace has brought to it, and thus we ought ourselves to be a sign of resurrected life to the hopeless and lost around us. But how like this stubborn prophet we often are, intent upon our own goals and our own comforts, and unconcerned about those who stumble in darkness around us.

MICAH

The prophet Micah came from the city of Moresheth which is near Gath, about 30 miles from Jerusalem. He was a contemporary of Isaiah and his book is of a somewhat similar style. The prophet's name means "who is like God," and this forms the theme of his prophecy well. Micah describes not only what God is like, but how man can be God-like.

The book divides easily into three parts. The first three chapters describe the failure of both Judah and Israel, and predict the judgment that would fall upon each. It is vivid description of the lack of godliness in both nations. This is followed by a wonderful section in chapters 4 and 5, that describe the One who is coming, who is like God in every way. It is a great predictive section that looks forward to the coming of the Messiah. The last three chapters give us the pleading of God to the nation to lay hold of the secret of godliness.

Chapter 1, in striking language, describes the majestic approach of God striding forth in judgment upon His unrepentant people. Both the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions are in view in this passage, and the prophet describes in vivid and striking simile the fate of various cities as the invading forces come upon them. It is impossible to see this in English, but the Hebrew is a series of puns upon the names of the cities. For instance, Micah says, "Tell it not in Gath, weep not at all; in Beth-leaphrah roll yourselves in the dust" (1 :10). The name *Gath* means "weep" and the name *Beth -le -aphrah* means "dust town." Thus the passage would read something like this: "In Weep-town, weep not; in Dust-town, roll yourselves in the dust; in Beauty-town, beauty will be shamed; in Zasnán (which means "march") they will march not forth in Neighbor-town they will end up with useless neighbors; and in Bitter-town they will grieve bitterly."

Chapter 2 goes on to picture vividly the destruction of the people, beginning with their rulers and reaching unto the women and the children. The prophet seems to be interrupted by false prophets who have protested his message, but to this objection Micah answers that God has changed His attitude toward the people because of their change toward Him. He speaks with great indignation against the false prophets who have misled the people.

In chapter 3 we are told the reason for the severity of judgment. Micah has been seeking godliness among the peoples of God and he looks where he might most expect to find it, among 'tine rulers of the nation and the representatives of God. Instead, however, he finds corruption, oppression, bribery, and injustice. Thus Micah exposes the mess in Jerusalem and says that the reason God visits judgment is that those who have been given authority to act in God's stead have forgotten that they are responsible to God.

This touches us also, for whenever we find ourselves in a position of authority, we are told everywhere in Scripture to remember that we also have an Authority over us. The New Testament reminds us that masters are to remember they have a Master in heaven as well, and God holds all authority responsible to Him. The man who forgets this begins to use his power for his own advantage; and that is what had corrupted the nation in Micah's day and corrupts the peoples today. Micah sums this up for us in 3:11: "Its heads give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for hire, its prophets divine for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say, 'Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No evil shall come upon us.'" Here are mentioned all three classes of leaders in the nation--the spiritual rulers, the civil rulers? and the moral rulers. When such remember that they are representatives of God, there is always good government; but when they forget, there is corruption, oppression, bribery, agony and tears.

But in chapters 4 and 5, in a passage of wonderfully exalted vision, the prophet lifts up his eyes and looks across the centuries, past the rise of Assyria and Babylon past the great eastern empire of Greece, past the Roman empire and the days of the Caesars, past the Middle Ages with Martin Luther and the Reformation, past the eighteenth century awakening under John Wesley, and even past our own day to the coming of One who is truly God-like. It is one of the most beautiful messianic passages in Scripture. The passage is almost identical with Isaiah 2:1-4. Since Isaiah and Micah were contemporaries, it is striking to note that they were both given the same vision of the glory that was ultimately to come to Israel. It begins with the exaltation of the Temple as a place of worship for all the nations of earth, and then narrows to a Person: "He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken" (Micah 4:3,4). Clearly that is a scene yet to come in world history. In the meantime, Joel's word must be fulfilled--that the nations beat their pruning hooks into spears and their plowshares into swords. They shall never forget how to make war and never obey this command of God until One comes who knows how to rule in godliness.

But Micah goes on to show that before that beautiful scene can be fulfilled, the nation must be carried away to Babylon, and then be restored at last to their land.

Chapter 5 opens with a new thought: "Now you are walled about with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike upon the cheek the ruler of Israel." The historic fulfillment of this in the Gospels confirms that this is a picture of the Roman rule over Israel, when they would be contained like a city within a wall, and when the ruler of Israel would be struck on the cheek with a rod. When Jesus stood before Mate, a crown of thorns was put upon His head and a robe of purple on Him, and the soldiers bowed before Him and mocked Him, striking Him on the cheek with their rods.

This application is confirmed by the next verse where the prophet sees where this mighty ruler is to come from. It is one of the great predictive passages of the Old Testament: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" (5:2). When the wise men came from the East to Jerusalem they asked the chief priests, "Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" and the chief priests said that He would be found in Bethlehem. How did they know? It was because 700 years before, Micah had predicted that Bethlehem, though little among the cities of Judah, would be honored by being the birthplace of Him who was to be ruler of Israel.

The passage goes on to predict a time when Israel would wander in defeat, without a king, without a temple, without a sacrifice "until the time when she who is in travail has brought forth; then the rest of his brethren shall return to the people of Israel" (5:3). This indicates a gathering of Israel back to the land to join a nation which has already been partially restored.

Then the prophet sees the One who had come out of Bethlehem and describes Him thus: "And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth" (5:4). Looking thousands of years down the corridors of time, Micah clearly perceived One who would rise out of obscurity and fulfill all these predictions. He is the God-man, the only God-like man that ever walked on earth.

In the remaining verses of chapter 5 the prophet describes how this One shall cleanse the peoples of their iniquities and remove their idolatries from them, and execute His anger and wrath upon the nations that had oppressed them during the days of their exile from the land.

In chapters 6 and 7, in a passage of great power and beauty Jehovah pleads with His people to tell Him why they have turned from Him, and to give their reasons for their rejection of His loving ministry. Plaintively the Lord asks what He has done to them that they have rejected Him so, and in what way He has wearied them. In answer, the people sarcastically say: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on High? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (6:6,7). The people are asking, "What more can we do that we have not done? We have brought the required offerings, and still God is not satisfied. What more can we bring? Shall we even do like the pagans around and offer our children? Will that please God?"

To this blasphemous response, the prophet declares: "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8). This is perhaps the most oft-quoted verse from the prophecy of Micah, and is the favorite of many who feel that God's only requirement for salvation is a virtuous life. But that is to ignore the fact that to walk humbly before one's God involves a full acceptance of God's provision for personal redemption and salvation through the sacrifice of Another on our behalf. The way to Godlikeness is to put away our wickedness by confessing our guilt before God, and looking to Him to pardon our iniquities and to cast our sins into the depths of the sea.

Because Israel refused to do this, the prophet goes on in the remainder of chapter 6 and the early part of chapter 7 to resume the theme of judgment, but concludes his message with a marvelous picture of the mercy of God. Notice especially the question with which he begins: "Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and

passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion upon us, he will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. Thou wilt show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as thou hast sworn to our fathers from the days of old" (7:18-20).

From the New Testament we learn that the way to walk humbly before our God is to walk in the light as He is in the light, that is, to walk openly and in honesty. Do not try to hide anything from God. Do not pretend to be something you are not in His presence. Walk in the light as He is in the light and as John assures us: "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). So Micah's question rings in our ears--Who is like God? Well, the only answer is, the God-like person is the one who walks with Jesus Christ--God Himself become man--who imparts to us His own likeness.

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Originated April 2, 1997. Corrections? Email [Lambert Dolphin \(dolphin@best.com\)](mailto:dolphin@best.com)