

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE MINOR PROPHETS – PART FIVE – THE BOOK OF JONAH

The first four minor prophets have been concerned with salvation and the Christian life – Hosea, redemption; Joel, regeneration; Amos, the impossibility of the Christian life; and Obadiah, how the impossible becomes possible. The next four form a new group around the question of being a witness of Christ. Jonah, the first one, deals with the theme of our call to be a witness of Christ.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND is very scanty. Jonah did not identify his own time of writing except that it was during the time of the Assyrian empire, of which Ninevah was the capital. This empire lasted from 1100BC to 612BC. Assyria was situated in what is now Northern Iraq. Jonah is referred to briefly in II Kings 14:25 as having made a prophecy regarding the growth and prosperity of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II who was king from 785-744BC. Presumably his ministry was during the early years of that reign when Assyria was in a time of temporary uncertainty in leadership and before she rose to the height of her power. She would be likely to have a capital as large as Jonah describes. Assyria by that time was already a threat to Israel and the ruthless brutality with which the Assyrians treated those they defeated would be all too well known to Israelites like Jonah. Jonah was from the village of Gath-Hepher in Zebulun, and so belonged to Israel rather than Judah. His lack of enthusiasm for missionary work in Ninevah was perfectly natural; his feelings would be comparable to those of a Jew asked to visit Berlin in 1940.

HIS NAME means ‘dove’. The first dove mentioned in scripture brings back to Noah the good news of a world outside the ark waiting to be discovered and enjoyed. (Gen.8:11) A dove was an acceptable sacrifice in the temple for those too poor to afford a lamb.(Lev.12:8; Luke 2:24) The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the form of a dove at His baptism by John.(Luke 3:22) A dove in the Bible is one of the symbols of the Holy Spirit, reminding us particularly of His purity and faithfulness, and of His work in empowering us to be witnesses of the good news of Jesus Christ.

NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY is to be found in Matt.12:39-41 where Jesus compares Jonah’s three days and three nights in the sea monster with his own time of burial between death and resurrection. If Jonah is a picture of Jesus this poses two obvious problems with the story. Jonah ran away when first called by God but Jesus did not run away from His God-given task. Jonah was disappointed and sulked when the Ninevites repented and God did not destroy them. Jesus is thrilled when people repented and are forgiven. We should not press a picture of Christ further than the New Testament explanation of the similarity and the extent of the actual comparison allows us to go. Such pictures are for illustration of truth, not to derive new doctrine.

JONAH QUOTED ALL THE PSALMS he could remember from the belly of the whale that had any bearing on his problem! He referred to fragments of 14 different Psalms but particularly from Psalm 18 when David thanked the Lord for delivering him once again from Saul, and from Psalm 69 which also contains a prophecy of the cross, and begins appropriately with the words, ‘Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my soul!’ He used Psalm 22 which Jesus Himself quoted from the cross to express His feelings of utter abandonment, and Psalm 77 which describes so well

the sense of hopelessness of the depressed, until we remember what God can do. The whole of Jonah's prayer could well have been a prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ from the grave in anticipation that the Father would raise Him to life again.

AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK might be as follows:

1:1-3 God's call to witness to Ninevah. Jonah's attempted to escape to Tarshish, (possibly the New Testament Tarsus, from which Saul came) in a very different direction to the one God planned.

1:4-9 God's ultimate control of the world He made. A sleeping Christian was awakened by frightened pagans asking for help.

1:10-14 Jonah was willing to die for others so that they could find peace. They tried to save themselves first and finally looked to him to die for them only as a last resort.

1:15-16 He 'died' for them and so they trusted their lives to God. Our word 'martyr' comes from the Greek word for witness. To witness effectively we must reckon ourselves dead with Christ to a self-run life. In effect to be a witness of Christ we too need to be willing to die for those who do not know Him.

1:17-2:10 Jonah's death was not the end. He recognised that he could not raise himself to life but God could. He thanked Him that He would and made his life available to God for His future programme. He was 'resurrected' out of the whale.

3:1-4 God's call to be a witness was repeated, and this time obeyed. Jonah preached the simple message God gave him of impending judgement.

3:5-9 The whole city, led by the king, turned in repentance to God and showed they really mean it. They sought His forgiveness.

3:10 God forgave them and so they escaped totally His threatened judgement.

4:1-4 Jonah was disgusted. As an Israelite he was looking forward to seeing the Assyrians liquidated. As a prophet his reputation for accuracy was at stake. He did not want his 'resurrection life' anymore.

4:5-11 God spoke to a prophet with the pip through a plant with the worm. What matters most, He asked, our reputation for accuracy as preachers, or the forgiveness of those who hear our message and turn in repentance to God? What do we really care about, our service or the people we are called to serve?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Who else in the Bible tried to run away from God's call? What form does His call to serve take as far as we are concerned? How and why do we try to run away when He calls us? Does God usually send a storm when we do so? If not, what else does He do to gain our attention?

2. What effect did the crisis have on the ship's crew? How does such a reaction give opportunity to a Christian? How can we also be asleep to the search for God of those around us?
3. How does Jonah's request to be thrown into the sea illustrate Rom.6:3-11 and Gal.2:20? What effect did Jonah's supposed death have on the ship's crew? What impact does it have on those around us when we die to self with Jesus?(chapter one)
4. Look up the Psalms which Jonah quoted to see their context. How in each case does the context strengthen the message? What was the overall theme of his prayer? How does Jonah's prayer illustrate how God uses our Bible knowledge in tough times?(chapter two)
5. Why was Jonah now willing to go to Ninevah? What had changed? How can the same change happen for us and with what outcome? Can such a simple message bring such a big response? How do we know the message was genuine?(chapter three)
6. Why was Jonah so unhappy when God forgave Ninevah? Wasn't this the whole purpose of his mission? How can we ourselves be drawn into the same contradictory state? How did God get through to Jonah this time?(chapter four)
7. What were Jonah's thoughts and feelings chapter by chapter through this book? What were the motives behind his attitudes of heart? How and why do we experience the same?
8. How does this book describe both opportunity and wasted opportunity in missionary work? How then does it both encourage and warn us today?