

## **Jonah's story**

### **Introduction.**

To understand the book of Jonah, we need to understand the role of a prophet and also have some understanding of the empire of the Assyrian, of which Nineveh was a major city.

#### 1. Role of a prophet?

The **primary role** of the prophets in the Bible was to **speak with the people** about the **words** and **will** of God in their specific situations. GOD ALWAYS PROVIDES THE WORDS TO SPEAK.

**God defines the role:-**

#### ***Deut 18:18-19***

*I will raise up for them (Israel) a prophet like you (talking to Moses) from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything **I command him**.*

**Role - speak the words of God to the people!**

So, was Jonah a Prophet? What had he been doing up until this call from God?

#### **SLIDE**

#### **2 Kings 14:24-25**

*He (King Jeroboam II) did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, had spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the **prophet** from Gath Hopher.*

He had been prophesying during the time of King Jeroboam II, that the borders of Israel would be increased (Israel would be conquering - victorious). What prophet would not love to preach that message? So Jonah was not new to being a prophet.

#### 2. History of Nineveh in Jonah's time

**Nineveh** is one of the major royal cities of Assyria.

It's situated on the eastern bank of the Tigris river some 70 kilometres from its mouth and 300 kilometres north of Babylon.

The city of **Nineveh** was **well fortified**. The Bible tells us it was so large that it took three days to cross it. According to **archaeological** findings it had walls **a hundred feet high** and so **broad** that **three chariots** could run abreast around them. The **population** was also quite large - it had **120,000 children** (people who could not tell the difference between their right hand or their left Jonah 4:11). Within the city walls were also gardens and even fields for cattle.

It's founder was Nimrod. In Gen 10:11 Nimrod is described as extending his kingdom from the land of Shinar or Babylonia, in the south, to Assyria in the north and founding four cities, of which the most famous was Nineveh.

### **Assyrians reputation:**

The following description is taken from a book "Nineveh the wicked city".

*" The Assyrian Empire, at its greatest under Ashurbanipal, (this was the time of Jonah) reached from **Egypt** to **south eastern Turkey to Iran**, including all the fertile river valleys of the **Nile**, the **Jordan**, the **Tigris** and **Euphrates Rivers**. This was the largest empire yet seen in the world; and it got there using a new military weapon: **terror!** The Assyrian army was notorious for its brutality, and the Assyrians themselves made sure their enemies knew about their reputation. Prisoners were either skinned alive, stabbed, beheaded, impaled on poles, their hands or feet or tongues chopped off, or their eyes put out. Those who survived were forced to leave the city - they would be marched to Nineveh on foot and those who were still strong, would be drafted into the Assyrian army to conquer other lands." – **These were the Assyrians who inhabited Nineveh.***

OK, so we have a little more understanding of the Role of a Prophet & the history of the Assyrians and the city of Nineveh,

### **ENTER JONAH!**

The interesting thing about the book of Jonah, is that the whole book is **about Jonah** – very little about **the job** he has been called to do. This tells us something very important, the commission to go to Nineveh is **secondary**, the **primary** point of the book is the lesson Jonah has to learn! And I believe this lesson is there for us to learn as well.

God at this point has called Jonah to a **ministry of reconciliation** to the city of the Assyrian empire, Nineveh.

Jonah 1:1-2 "The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."

But Jonah **disagreed** with that calling and **disobeyed** God, running in the opposite direction. Now we understand from reading 2 Kings 14 that Jonah had enjoyed a successful prophetic ministry to his own nation of Israel. He knew what a prophet had to do.

However, Nineveh, was an evil, violent city filled with cruelty, and it was also had an idolatrous city, which showed a blatant disregard for Israel's God; and Jonah hated the Ninevites. He was convinced that these people were fully deserving of any **wrath, punishment, or judgment** that God could throw at them.

Jonah wanted no part of preaching against their wickedness, because there was the strong possibility that if he did preach judgment, the people would **repent** of their sin and be **forgiven** by God.

From the beginning of the story Jonah admitted that he **didn't want the Ninevites to experience God's salvation** – and we read this in 4:2

*Jonah 4:2 "Is not this what I said when I was yet in my own country (back in Gath-Hepheh)? 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 knew God.

Jonah lived in **Gath-Hepher**, which was a city near Nazareth. **Joppa**, 50 km south-west of **Jerusalem** is Jerusalem's sea port.

The disobedient prophet traveled some **70km** to buy a passage on a ship headed for **Tarshish**, on the **south coast of Spain**. It was located about as far from Nineveh, as one could conceive of going in Jonah's day. Jonah was one scared prophet – in effect, Jonah said to God "I resign!" "This job is not for me – find someone else."

What was Jonah's problem? Jonah had heard all the stories of the atrocities which had been committed by the city Nineveh. Jonah hated the Ninevites, he hated what they stood for, the atrocities they had committed and in his mind they didn't deserve **mercy, grace, compassion**, all the things that God **is and wanted to extend** – **THEY DID NOT DESERVE!**

And Jonah **was not** going to be instrumental in bringing **peace & forgiveness** to such an evil and cruel people.

When we're **trying to run away from God**, Satan will always provides a way for us to get away from Him.

- There was a ship at Joppa going to the farthest port Jonah could probably think of going to.
- He also just happened to have the exact fare to make it a possibility.

Let's have a look at ourselves for a minute.

Do we have people to whom we are not willing to extend God's mercy, compassion, grace or love to? People we don't want to extend the ministry of reconciliation to?

We all have our prejudices. **DISCUSS PROGRAM "Brain game"**.

- Person dressed well, falls in busy shopping centre – many help
- Same person still dressed well, but with paper bag around a can of soft drink and nobody helps.

How people dress, speak, look – is their hair unkempt? do they wear makeup or not? do they look disheveled? do they drink too much? do they smoke? do they eat too much? etc. all these things will influence our decisions.

We all have our prejudices. A good example being the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

None of us are any different to Jonah. You see until Jonah was asked to do this job – he would have been wholeheartedly into his job as a prophet. He was speaking the Word of God to his people – they understood who God was and they had respect for him and his office.

Now God is asking him to go to a people who were the exact opposite – tell them of the judgment and ask them to repent. And to make it worse, God will probably forgive them – **and that is what Jonah could not handle!**

Let's discuss what's going on the world today – in particular a proud, cruel, sadistic group who are inflicting pain, suffering and fear into this world – ISIS, the Taliban and all the other evil fanatical groups. We see & hear a lot about their cruelty, the beheadings, the shootings, the raping, etc. These are a cruel, fanatical people – They are doing this in the name of their god.

Enter God – “Arise, ‘Eric, John, Roland, Naomi’, ... go to ISIS, those evil people, and cry against them; for their wickedness has come up before me”.

What is our reaction? We know God – same as Jonah.

In chapter 4:1 we read:

***“...But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.”***

Let’s stop here – what does

**Is 55:7-9** say?

*Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, For He will abundantly pardon. **“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.***

### **Jonah 4:2-3**

*He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a **gracious and compassionate** God, **slow to anger and abounding in love**, a God who **relents from sending calamity**. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”*

So God set about to help Jonah see his problems a little clearer.

Remember, Jonah, buys his ticket, sets sail on the ship headed for Tarshish – about as far away as he could get. Along comes a storm, Jonah admits it is his fault, gets thrown overboard, goes down, down, down and is finally swallowed up by a large fish. Wow. Wouldn’t you think that this would be a good time to repent and tell God how sorry you are and ask him to get you out of there?

Well not our friend Jonah. Look at what the scripture says:

### **Jonah 2:10**

*(this is at the end of Jonah’s prayer - “And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land”.*

What day was this – it had to be day 3, because– do you think God waited 3 days after Jonah prayed before getting him out of there? Or 2 days or 1 day. No, after Jonah’s prayer, God commanded the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land. So if he spent 3 days and 3 nights in the belly of this fish, then it

stands to reason that it took him that long before he prayed. Let's have a quick look at Jonah's prayer – he is finally learning something, but it is taking time.

*Jonah's prayer*

***Jonah 2:1-9***

*"In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me.*

*From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.*

*You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.*

*I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.' (he understood he would be rescued)*

*The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.*

*To the roots of the mountains I sank down; (it is known that the major part of a mountain lies beneath the sea) the earth beneath barred me in forever.*

*But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit.*

*"When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.*

*"Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.*

*But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you.*

*What I have vowed I will make good.*

*I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'"*

So slowly Jonah is coming to understand that God is SOVEREIGN and he, Jonah, did not have the right to get angry with God's plan.

I love this story of Jonah and I feel very privileged that we are able to share in Jonah's struggle, that we are able to watch as he gradually gives up territory, inch by inch, to the Lord, as he slowly comes to a greater understanding of who God is and that **God alone is sovereign. God alone decides to whom he will show mercy, on whom He will have compassion and whom He will save**, and Jonah is learning that he does not have the right to pick and choose the recipients of God's grace, mercy and love. You know I'm so glad that God is not writing a modern day Bible with our stories in it – because we get these life stories warts and all.

OK, let's get back to Jonah. We left him, after his prayer being vomited up by the fish. Now Jonah is being introduced 'a fresh' to the God of second chances, the God of mercy, the God of grace, and Jonah is again asked to prophecy.

Let's look at **Jonah 3:1-4**, where we're introduced to the God of second chances and new beginnings:

*Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the LORD... Jonah began to go into the city, **going a day's journey**. And he cried, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown [or destroyed]!"*

What does Nineveh do when they hear Jonah's preaching?

### **Jonah 3:5-9**

The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."

Nineveh has learnt a lesson – has Jonah? Does Jonah finally comprehend that "Salvation comes from the Lord" – Remember his prayer, he ends it with the words – quote "I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord'.

I don't think he is quite there yet.

Let's look at chapter 4.

He's done what God asked him to do, he's preached destruction to the Ninevites, but he's still not happy about it. What does he do?

### **Jonah 4:5-8**

*Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. **6** Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. **7** But at dawn*

*the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."*

So, Jonah made himself a shelter – it had no roof, God provided a very leafy plant, Jonah has shelter, God provides a worm which eats the plant and Jonah is again very dissatisfied – so much so that he says it would be better for him if he were to die. HE IS A LITTLE SLOW IN GETTING THE MESSAGE?

God gives him one final message –

**4:10-11**

*But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"*

God shows His Sovereignty through a very good lesson. Jonah had no right to be angry – for anything. God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and God shows to Jonah, as He does to Job in the book of Job, that He is creator of all, He is also the Life Giver to all and no-one usurps God's Sovereignty.

**Romans 9:14-16**

*What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION." So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.*

Our ministry today is a ministry of reconciliation:

**2 Cor 5:18-19**

*Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ **reconciling the world** to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has **committed to us** the word of reconciliation.*

This is our commission – we are to bring this reconciliation to the world – His Son already died for the world, the penalty has been paid, now it's up to

us to go full steam ahead with the Ministry of Reconciliation – whether we like it or not. This is the lesson of Jonah – God is SOVEREIGN and He alone will choose. We just have to do the job He asks us to do.

**Matt 28:18-20**

*"And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

Are we running from the Ministry of Reconciliation? A ministry of telling this wicked and Godless world that God is not happy with them.

Now – **how** we do it, will make a big difference as to how the world will respond. Remember – God is love, He is mercy, He is kindness, He is forgiveness – He wants every single person on this planet, past, present and future to be in His Kingdom, to accept His sacrifice, his forgiveness and then to show that same love He showed, to the rest of humanity.

The job lies with us, we have the words to speak, just as Jonah had. He had to go tell the City of Nineveh, we have to go tell anyone God happens to put in our path – gently, lovingly, but with conviction.