

Jonah

Background -

Jeroboam II was King of Israel, 8th century BC. Jonah is mentioned as a prophet in 2 Kings 14:25.

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, now called Mosul, the largest city in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. It is 800 miles from Israel by land, as the crow flies. It is surrounded by inhospitable desert with very cold winters and baking hot 40c + temperatures in the summer.

Assyria was an aggressive rising power and within 20 - 30 years would invade Israel (the 9 northern tribes) and begin a process we'd call ethnic cleansing 2 Kings 18:9-11. During Jonah's period Assyria would be viewed as an enemy state. Judah too would have problems with Assyria's hero king, Sennacherib Isaiah 36:1-22 and Isaiah 37:36-38.

Can we rightly describe Jonah as racist? He had no regard for the people of Nineveh, his only regard was Israel. God loved Israel but he loved Gentiles as well. Examples, Luke 4:25-27, also Rahab the prostitute, Ruth the Moabitess, Uzaiah the Hittite. God encountered a similar attitude from Peter in Acts 10:9-15.

So for God to ask an Israeli prophet to warn Nineveh of its imminent destruction if they didn't repent would be akin to asking a Ukrainian prophet to go to Moscow to preach repent or get wiped out. An attitude of, 'yeah God, bring it on,' would be a predictable response.

Jonah was looking at the geopolitics and the immediate future situation, we can look back in hindsight whereas God could see the future in much greater detail than we can. Look back through our Bible and history books. Peter sums this up in 2 Peter 3:9.

We read in Jonah chapter 1 God's instruction to Jonah, Jonah's response and God's intervention.

Have you ever deliberately disobeyed the voice of God, or more likely a Bible teaching, and found yourself in deep do-do and turned to God with a grovelling apology and a plea for help? Maybe we can relate to Jonah's stupidity a bit more closely than we realise. Well, this is Jonah's response in his prayer in chapter 2; pity he didn't mean it. A beautiful prayer but as later we find out, it's not from the heart, just lip service.

In Jonah chapter 3, he wanders around the city for a day giving his sermon. Maybe it was just 8 words, maybe that's a precis, but you don't get the impression that Jonah put his heart and soul into the job. Nevertheless, he gets his message across with great effect. The repentance was immediate and absolute and it had a ripple effect that reaches the king who immediately issues a statute obliging everyone to repent by special decree. God immediately forgives and withdraws His death sentence on the city.

In chapter 4 we read that Jonah didn't stick around, he didn't want to get caught up in Nineveh's punishment so he makes a quick beeline for the hills surrounding the city. When he's a safe distance, he sits down on top of a hill and waits for the show to begin. God 'plays' with His petulant prophet. If this was during summertime it's likely that the temperature would have been in the 40s so Jonah built a shelter and was very grateful

when God provided a tree that grew up in couple of hours and provided more shade. But at dawn the following day God sent a worm that killed the plant off and the leaves quickly withered, much to Jonah's annoyance. To add to Jonah's woes God sends a scorching hot wind from the Indian subcontinent that gives Jonah a bit of heatstroke that, with him being a bit of a drama queen, makes Jonah wish he could die!

Eventually Jonah realises that the show's been cancelled and gives God a good dressing down and whilst he's at it, a justification for his disobedience.

God tries to reason with Jonah, reminding him that he'd done nothing to plant the tree and yet he was more cross about the death of the tree and he didn't care two hoots about the 120k people and the city of Nineveh, who God describes as being a wee bit docile (don't know their left hand from their right). Jonah doesn't seem quick to take this on board.

Lessons we can learn from Jonah.

In the end, obedience is so much easier than rebellion.

Lessons on God's forgiveness and restoration such as the prodigal son.

Lessons on racism. The Jews thought they had a monopoly on God, see Luke 4:24-28.

God's message to Nineveh via Jonah had eternity lasting effects Matt 12:14. Even until recently there was a strong Christian community in Mosul but that was pretty decimated recently by Isis.

God doesn't always send in His best man for the job.

Big decisions involve God.

Our lives effect others, especially rebellion.

Love your enemies Matthew 5:43-49.

Love nature but love people more.

God is desperate to save anyone that's saveable.

Jonah's prayer compared to His attitude. Also don't leave it so long.

God protects us, even when He's disciplining us.