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Where are you going?

Preached at Higher Praise Christian Fellowship
Sunday, May 16, 2010

Foreword

I preached this message at Higher Praise Christian Fellowship on Sunday, May 16, 2010. What you see here is more the Bible study version of it.

The Call

Jonah 1:1-3

Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.

But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah is the most unusual prophet of the Old Testament. Unusual as the call he received from God.

He was born in the northern kingdom of Israel, at Gat-Hepher¹, a town located not far north of Nazareth. He lived during the days of Jeroboam II, who ruled the kingdom of Israel from 786 to 746 BC.

¹ Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, that speaks of Jeroboam II, “He restored the border of Israel from the entering of Hamath to the sea of the plain, according to the Word of Jehovah, the God of Israel which He spoke by the hand of his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, who *was* from Gath-hepher.”

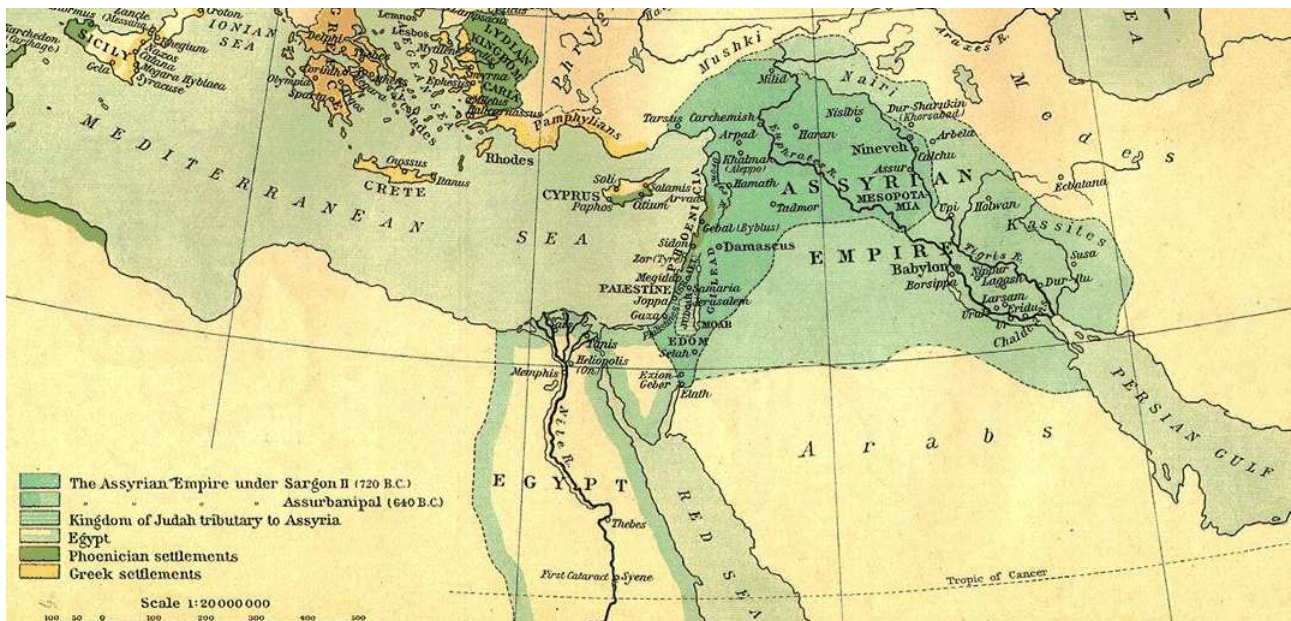
Jesus mentions Jonah many times, thus sanctioning both his existence and the authenticity his book.

At that time Nineveh was the magnificent capital city of the Assyrian empire. It was there, in the core of the most powerful and dreadful empire, that God sent him.

As you can see in the map that follows, Nineveh was north east of Israel. It was close to the city of Assur, the very town from which Assyria derived its name. It's particular position made the Assyrians a people devoted to war.

Some years later after the story of Jonah, in 722 BC, the Assyrians invaded the Kingdom of Israel, took captive its people, carrying them away as slaves and make a literal colony of the kingdom, ending its history for ever. The Kingdom of Judah, to the South endured for some time more, till it was destroyed by the Babylonian king Nebucadnesar in 586 BC.

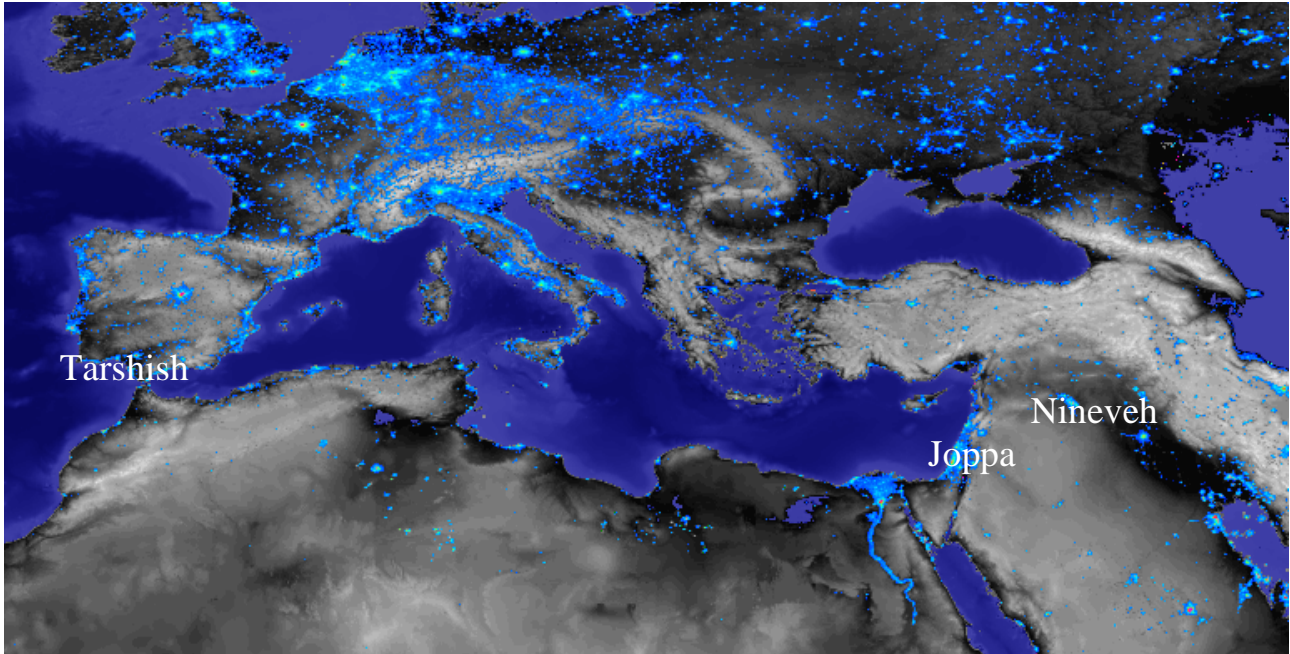
The picture found at www.genealognation.com perfectly illustrates the extent of the Assyrian power.



Nineveh was a very busy, commercial town. It must have been very rich at the time. We could compare it to New York of today: a pride for its people. Still, it was evident and understandable the feeling of uneasiness of Jonah, confronted with a culture that challenged all that he held dear.

It is so easy to judge him, reading our Bibles, comfortably sitting on a couch. But, how would you feel if God told you to go preach the Gospel in China, or Pakistan, or Afghanistan, or Turkey, or Iraq, in a hostile land?

Jonah had all the good, possible, reasonable, rational, plausible reasons not to go.



Jonah went down to the town of Joppa², where he found a ship and sailed to Tarshish. As you can see in the map, Tarshish was on the opposite side of the world of his days. God told him to go East. He went West, as far as he could.

Let's be honest with ourselves: there's nobody else in the room - but God. I believe most of us can recall times when doing God's will, meant being removed from our comfort zone. So, we simply ignored God's voice.

Let's ask ourselves this question: **Are we really going somewhere if we are not going where God tells us to go?**

Jonah soon found out for himself that the answer was: no!

² Joppa is a very important sea town in the Bible. It was situated not far north-west from Jerusalem. In fact it was used to import wood for the building of the temple at Jerusalem. **2Chronicles 2:16**, *“And we will cut wood out of Lebanon, as much as you shall need. And we will bring it to you in floats by sea to Joppa. And you shall carry it up to Jerusalem.”*

This port was also important for the building of the second temple. **Ezra 3:7**, *“They gave silver also to the masons and to the carpenters. And they gave meat and drink and oil to the people of Sidon and to the people of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant which they had from Cyrus king of Persia.”*

It is also mentioned many times in the books of Acts. Worth mention is that Peter had his vision about the Gentiles in Joppa. See Acts 11.

Jonah 1:4-9

“But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken. Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep. So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not. And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou? And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land.”

Jonah was a prophet of the Most High. There was no place where he could hide himself from God. In the end, he knew he was not doing the right thing. And, even in the most unexpected situation, when all he wanted was to be an anonymous passenger aboard a ship, he ends up giving a testimony about his God.

Some Christians want to be anonymous, just living their lives without being bothered by their moral obligations to obey God’s Word and be a witness to this world. But what is the sense in that? Christians are not secret agents.

Jesus said: *“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket³, but on a lampstand...”* Matthew 5.14-15.

Jonah did not want to go where God sent him. But the Lord showed him, giving us an example, that if you are not going where God wants you to go, you are not going anywhere at all.

One more thought.

We must realize that the way we react to God’s calling, will have an impact on the people around us. Our relatives, our friends, mother, father, spouse, children. Any serious relationship in our lives will be effected by our being or not being obedient to God’s call. It is inevitable. Like we say in Italian – and it matches perfectly with our narrative: “we are all aboard the same ship.”

There is a general silent agreement in today’s society that everything happens by chance.

The less educated respond to this embracing a more or less conscious dependence on superstition. The more educated show a 360 degrees sceptic attitude. The sober Christian must depend upon the Word. To put it like a very good friend of mine preached it one time, “It’s design and not coincidence.”

³ The construction of the phrase is typically Hebrew. If we want to bypass the Greek and try to translate the Semitic thought behind it, we could say: *“Nor do they light a lamp to put it under a basket”*

A Christian knows nothing happens by chance. God has a plan.

The Bible says: *“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”* Romans 8:28.

It is a lot better to follow God’s directions and rest on His judgment, instead of doing whatever we think is best or more comfortable and end in a situation where the only thing we can do is cry out to God.

This is what happened to our “hero” here, Jonah.

Jonah 1:10-16

“Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous. And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you. Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them. Wherefore they cried unto the LORD, and said, We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee. So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows.”

This is as far as Jonah’s stubbornness brought him. And, in the end, willing or not, he had to witness of his God to strangers, who even believed his testimony in the end! And the only one in danger now, was him and him alone.

Jonah 1:17

Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

The Bible does not speak of a whale here and I don’t know where this mistaken belief originated. But I believe it’s very common. Since in Italy I heard the same thing being said by the uninformed.

It was a fish. A whale is not even a fish, though the Hebrew broad definition – as we usually do in our languages - may include a whale among the fishes. It has been said that the Bible is mistaken here, since a whale cannot swallow a man up whole. But the true mistake is the false belief that the Bible speaks of a whale, since it simply doesn’t.

We can’t lose focus on what really matters here. In fact, unwillingly Jonah became a *type* of our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Jesus said: *“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the huge fish, so the Son of Man shall be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”* Matthew 12:40.

It was worth getting off the subject to remember this wonderful detail of the unique harmony of the Bible.

Now, in the dark belly of a fish. Alone in the middle of the sea. Scared. Discouraged. With no rational way of escape. In despair, Jonah realized what he had done and that now, the only thing he could do was seek His face for forgiveness and help.

The end of this meditation will be Jonah's prayer. I hope it may inspire us to meditate about our lives right now - before we find ourselves into the fish's belly - and seek seriously for God's face.

All we need to do is try to be more like Jesus and less like Jonah.

Jonah chapter 2

“Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice. For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me. Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.

I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God.

When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.

They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.

But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD.

And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.”