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JONAH

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it....But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (Jonah 1:1-3 NKJV).

The story of Jonah is the story of a man who tried to flee from God. It is the story of a man whose disobedience led him down, down, down. He went down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the sea, down into the whale, and then further down—“down to the bottoms of the mountains” (Jonah 2:6). He was really *down!*

But the story of Jonah is also the story of a man that repented and changed direction. *God does allow U-turns!* Ultimately, his ministry caused a whole city to turn to God!

In preparing this message for a recent sermon at our church, I wanted to see how long it would take to read the book of Jonah. It took about six minutes. Seems today everyone claims to be so *busy!* Do people not even have six minutes for Bible reading?

The book of Jonah says Jonah was swallowed by “a great fish.” In the New Testament, translators have used the word “whale” (Matt. 12:40). Some question whether the opening of a whale’s throat is large enough to swallow a man. But here is the key to the whole thing: the LORD prepared *this* fish (Jonah 1:17).

One preacher said he believed the LORD could make a fish big enough to swallow the Empire State Building if he chose to! Furthermore, he not only believed the whale swallowed Jonah; he would believe the Bible if it said *Jonah swallowed the whale!*

The name Jonah means “DOVE.” *Etymology* is a fancy term for word origins. The etymology of “dove” appears to stem from “dive,” referring to the diving motion of the dove. It is pointed out that the past tense of “dive” is “dove,” spelled the same as “dove,” but pronounced differently.

When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a DOVE (Matt.3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21; John 1:32). The question has been asked: Did the Spirit *look* like a dove or *descend* like a dove? Some believe “descended like a dove” speaks of a dove’s diving, hovering motion—not that the Holy Spirit *looked* like a dove. It is pointed out that Jesus “beheld Satan *as lightning* fall from heaven” (Luke 10:18), not that Satan

looked like lightning, but *fell* like lightning—his power being quickly broken through the ministry of Jesus. But, either way, that is not our subject here.

After the Flood, a dove returned to Noah with an olive leaf in her mouth (Gen. 8:11). The dove is commonly regarded as a symbol of peace and love. But there is something else about a dove that is not as well-known. The prophet Hosea said the tribe of Ephraim was like “a silly dove, without sense” (Hosea 7:11).

According to *Clarke’s Commentary*, the dove is “a bird that has little understanding; that is easily snared and taken; that is careless about its own young, and seems to live without any kind of thought. It has been made...the symbol of conjugal affection. Nothing worse could have been chosen, for the dove and its mate are continually quarreling”!

That a word like “dove” can be used two different ways is not uncommon. The word “lion” can refer to Jesus or the devil, depending on how it is used (Rev. 5:5; 1 Peter 5:8). Jonah was like a “*silly dove*” when he tried to flee from God’s presence.

Contrary to what some claim, Jonah was a real person, one who actually lived. We know from the text his father’s name. Jonah was the son of Amittai. We also know when he lived, and *where*: Gath Hopher.

For that information, we turn clear back to 2 Kings 14:25. (In the Bible I am using, this is 857 pages *before* the book of Jonah.) King Jeroboam “restored the territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the Sea of Arabah, according to the word of the LORD...which he had spoken through His servant *Jonah the son of Amittai*, the prophet who was from *Gath Hopher*.”

Then turning still further back, to the book of Joshua, we can determine where “Gath Hopher” was located. This was an area in northern Israel that had been apportioned to the tribe of Zebulun (Joshua 19:13). More specifically, Bible dictionaries tell us Gath Hopher was only about three or four miles from Nazareth where Jesus grew up! Though it was centuries later, no doubt Jesus would have heard a lot about Jonah, especially because of this close proximity to his hometown.

Understandably, Jonah was a folk hero among the Jews. It was a popular name handed down. Peter’s father was named Jonah. We recall the words of Jesus to Simon Peter: “Simon, *son of Jonah*, do you love me more than these?” (John 21:15).

In earlier times, primitive people believed in many gods. One might be the god of a certain area, some other god of another. The Bible records a statement made by the Syrians: “The LORD

[Jehovah/Yahweh] is God of the hills, *but he is not God of the valleys,*” and they planned their military strategy accordingly (1 Kings 20:28). The fact is, the God of Israel is God, not only of Israel, but *everywhere!* (Deut. 10:14).

David expressed it this way: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there...[even] in the uttermost parts of the sea“ (Psa. 139:7-9).

Jonah should have known this. How foolish it was to think he could flee from God's presence by going to a far away country.

In our text, the Lord's message was: “*Arise, go to Nineveh.*” But, instead, “Jonah *arose* to flee to Tarshish.” He did arise. He did go—but he did not go where *God* told him to go!

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrians, Israel's enemies (2 Kings 15). Jonah's people felt they, exclusively, were God's chosen people and that God, therefore, was unconcerned about others! In that setting, Jonah's relatives would think he had gone “overboard on religion“ should he say God called him to Nineveh! Besides, it was a hard place, so wicked God was going to overthrow it. So, instead, Jonah went a different direction. But why *Tarshish?*

One day, years ago now, I recall reading a verse that described items imported from Tarshish. “The king's ships went to Tarshish...every three years came the ships of Tarshish bringing GOLD, and SILVER, IVORY, APES, and PEACOCKS” (2 Chron. 9:21). Might this be a picture of why Jonah wanted to go there? Allow me to “sermonize” a little bit.

Tarshish was a land of GOLD and SILVER. Jonah would receive bigger offerings there. He could build a more luxurious church there. He might become wealthy! How many people today, like the ancient Israelites, dance around a golden calf, worshipping *gold* more than *God!* Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. How different was Peter who said: “Silver and gold have I none,” but he had power to heal the crippled beggar in the name of Jesus!

Tarshish was a land of IVORY. Ivory might speak of luxury, which can be a blessing; but not at the expense of God's call!

Jonah wanted to go to Tarshish—a land of APES, possibly a type of that which is unclean, counterfeit, and vulgar.

And, Tarshish was a land of PEACOCKS, a bird commonly recognized as a symbol of pride. For years a television network has used the peacock with its colorful tail feathers as a logo. We have heard the saying, “Proud as a peacock.” The middle letter in “pride” is “I.” “Pride goes before destruction” (Prov. 16:18).

Many today reject God's will for their lives and flee, as it were, to a land of silver, gold, ivory, apes, and peacocks! They want Christianity without Christ; a crown without the cross; promises without commandments—having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof.

One day years ago I was reading about Jonah going to *Joppa*. Then I began to think about another man who also went to Joppa: Peter. When Peter was there, he stayed with “Simon a tanner, whose house was by the sea” (Acts 10:6). At Joppa, Jonah was also by the sea, for he boarded a ship. In location, then, they may have been very close—though their time of being there is separated by centuries. Everything else is *contrast*:

Jonah went to Joppa to take a ship to FLEE from God; Peter was at Joppa SEEKING God.

Jonah went DOWN into a ship; Peter went UP to the housetop.

Jonah FELL ASLEEP; Peter FELL INTO A TRANCE.

Jonah REBELLED at a missionary call to Gentiles; Peter RECEIVED a missionary call to Gentiles that changed the course of this world!

After Jonah left Joppa, a terrific storm came up at sea. The sailors began to pray to their gods, but to no avail. They were convinced a storm of this magnitude was a sign of divine wrath. They cast lots (cf. “lottery”) and the lot fell on Jonah. They began to quiz him. “What is your occupation?” they asked. It is interesting to note he had not told them he was a preacher!

Despite his faults, Jonah was willing to give his life to save others. He admitted he was wrong. If they would throw him overboard, the sea would become calm. Reluctantly the ship's crew did so and the storm ceased. At this point they offered a sacrifice, the only time the Bible mentions a sacrifice offered on a ship.

It would appear that Jonah was doomed. But underneath *are* the everlasting arms! There in the belly of the great fish, Jonah prayed and then began to praise the Lord “with the voice of thanksgiving.” Then “the LORD spoke unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah on dry ground.”

This had been quite an experience for Jonah—and also for the whale. Imagine that whale heading back for deeper sea, shooting some water in the air, and saying: “*Wheeeee!* If there's anything that makes me sick to my stomach, it's a backslidden preacher! I wonder what denomination he's with?”

Given a second opportunity, Jonah now went where God told him to go. His message was right to the point: “Forty days,” he cried, “and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” What happened must have surprised Jonah. “The people of Nineveh believed God.” As a sign of repentance they put on sackcloth—on themselves *and their animals* (Jonah 3:8). Imagine a dog chasing a cat down the streets of Nineveh, both wearing sackcloth!

“Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it” (Jonah 3:10).

Finally, what can *we* learn from the story of Jonah today? Is the path we are on leading down, down, down? Are we, like Jonah, fleeing to a land of silver, gold, ivory, apes, and peacocks? Have we headed for “Tarshish” when God has called us to “Nineveh”? Are we concerned about God's will for our lives, or are we trying to flee from his will? —RW

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