

(841-814/813), the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom had been subjected to tribute as a vassal of Assyria, and nationalistic-minded Hebrews were no doubt chafing under the yoke of this foreign domination. Perhaps there was also some subtle element of national prejudice which rendered Jonah undisposed to deliver such a warning to Israel's Gentile overlords. And then, there was that undeniable apprehension that God in His great compassion, might just spare the metropolis the suffering it so richly deserved, thereby discrediting Jonah, and permitting Israel's national enemy an opportunity to continue to dominate the homeland. For whatever reason, Jonah's carnal mind (Rom. 8:5-7) balked at the commission to sound the trumpet of doom in the capital city of the world's super-power. He decided instead to run to Tarshish, and the book that bears his name is the autobiography of a renegade prophet who is later reclaimed, rescued, and recommissioned to proclaim a timely message to a city slated for judgment. Our study of Jonah will seek to highlight salient points from his personal experience that will hopefully assist us in walking with Jonah's God.

## *The Prophet's Predicament*

When Jonah heard the Word of the Lord enjoining him to journey

to Nineveh, his carnal inclination strengthened into a settled resolve to flee from the presence of the Lord unto Tarshish, a Phoenician colony in far-away Spain. We read, *"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 1:3). Certain points stand out as beacons in this passage. First of all, notice that Jonah, under the influence of carnal thinking, scurried away in a direction diametrically opposite to the location of Nineveh. He was called to embark on a trip approximately 500 miles due east. He fled due west. This waywardness describes for us the inevitable deviation from the Divine course that takes place when men, even prophets, yield to the dictates of unruly self-will. We find that the sinful contrariness outlined in Rom. 8:5-8 was just as much in action in BC 782 as it was later in AD 57 when Paul wrote these words: *"For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please*

*God."* (Rom. 8:5-8). When the Word of the Lord comes to us, calling us in a direction that exposes self-centered instinct, pride, carnality and prejudicial thinking, we must seek deeply to sort out these erring impulses in order to find and follow the Spirit's inclination rather than the dictates of a fleshly frame of mind. Thus shall we avoid the ruin of running from God's localized presence where He speaks and deals with us.

Secondly, we find that Jonah's immediate response to God's directive Word is to run as far as he can from God's presence. This is the beginning of all backsliding. Seeking to evade, avoid, and escape God's presence is a dangerous proposition and yet it is practiced by the least and the greatest. Ignoring convicting thoughts, disregarding the voice of conscience, tuning out a timely message, overlooking warning signs along the way, neglecting church attendance—all are the backslider's attempt to sink into a world of deep spiritual slumber.

DOWN, DOWN, DOWN, DOWN, went Jonah in his attempt to outrun the inescapable call of God. First, he went down to Joppa (1:3a- יָרַד - "to go down, to descend"), then into the hold of the ship (1:3b), later into the inner recesses of the ship (1:5), and finally down to the bottoms of the mountains (2:6). This course of

descent describes the inevitable result of seeking to evade the presence of God. The first step of the backslider sets him on a slippery slope that leads to a downward slide.

## *The Prophet's Prayer*

*"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" (Jonah 2:1,2).*

After the frightened sailors, faced with certain shipwreck, had discovered that Jonah had fled the presence of the Lord, they cast him overboard into the raging sea, at his own bidding. Immediately, a great calm settled on the sea, as Jonah descended to the bottom of the sea in a death-by-drowning ordeal. This close brush with death and burial in a watery grave called forth his soul in desperate prayer. It was then that he "cried by reason of affliction," "look[ed] again toward [His] holy temple" and with his life ebbing away, his prayer came in unto God, into God's holy temple (Jonah 2:2,4,7). Jonah saw himself as descending into the underworld (vs. 2—"the belly of שָׁאֵל"; vs. 6—"brought up my life from corruption [שְׁחָתָה]"). God had delivered him from so great a death, and may we not, in the words of the apostle, believe that Jonah's God "doth deliver" today, and "will yet deliver us" from every death-like form of trouble? (II Cor. 1:8-11; Ps. 30:2,3; 71:20).

Jonah's split-second prayer, breathed in the very article of death, brought a swift answer, for the Lord had prepared a large fish (לִי־גָדִי: 1:17) to rescue His renegade prophet by scooping him off the sea bottom and swallowing him intact. There in the submarine cavern of the sea creature's stomach, Jonah celebrated his signal deliverance and renewed his consecration: *"I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD"* (2:9). This fresh submission to God's will (James 4:7) and willingness to heed his prophetic call, moved God to speak to the fish, which promptly regurgitated the praising prophet (2:10).

### *The Prophet's Preaching*

*"And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee" (Jonah 3:1,2).*

Now that Jonah has had personal experience of God's mercy, and a veritable "baptism unto death" (Rom. 6:3-6), he is ready to do God's bidding and deliver a doomsday message to a pagan city. His life's story, one of signal redemption from deserved death, if at all known to the Ninevites, became as it were a sign to these unbelievers (Luke 11:29,30; Matt. 12:38-40). As he ventured through suburban Nineveh to the heart of the inner city, Jonah shouted out the five-worded theme of his proclamation: עֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְיִנְיָוָה נִהְפָּכֶת: *"Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown."* The solemn impact of this lone foreigner shouting a short sermon shook the evil city to

its foundation. The city responded en masse by believing the God of Jonah, proclaiming a fast, putting on sackcloth (a coarse material generally made of goat's hair), crying mightily to God, and turning everyone from his evil way. Even the king divested himself of his royal robe, donned sackcloth, and sat in mourning upon the ground. Such a response to God's warning of dire judgment to come (Jn. 16:11; Acts 24:25) moved the Lord to relent from the intended calamity, for we read: *"And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not"* (3:10).

The conversion of this city, which antiquity suggests was home to 600,000-1,000,000 inhabitants, is one of the most remarkable revivals in all of redemptive history. The repentance of Nineveh, with its genuine faith, deep contrition, mighty prayer, and perceptible change, stands out as a pattern for all others who would flee from the wrath to come, by laying hold of the hope set before them through Jesus Christ our Lord (Heb. 6:18,19).

### *The Prophet's Perplexity*

*"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry. And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil" (Jonah 4:1,2).*

God's sparing of penitent Nineveh greatly grieved God's servant. In fact,

he was grieved to the point of anger over the apparent injustice of a ruthless, immoral, and violent nation's escape from a well-deserved punishment. Jonah's eye was evil because God was so good and ready to forgive (Matt. 20:15). It seems that Jonah had forgotten that he himself was a brand plucked from the burning, mercifully spared a richly deserved death. This elder-brother syndrome (Luke 15:11-32) affects many of God's servants today. How many cannot rejoice in what God is doing, as He works salvation in the midst of the earth, because He chooses to save those who seem less desirable in the eyes of God's people. Gentiles, members of another race, a different denomination, the social outcast... all have been included in the gospel net, and sometimes to the great chagrin of God's very own messengers. Even Peter wrestled with the propriety of ministry to the "unclean" Gentiles (Acts 10:14,15), but God showed him that he should call no man common or unclean (Acts 10:28). In a similar vein, God rebuked the self-righteous hypocrisy of Jonah through the gourd and worm incident. Jonah was glad of the gourd grown supernaturally to relieve the grief caused by the sun's scorching heat, but strangely sad of the grace shown to the city of Nineveh! Herein lies a great irony—that God's messengers of mercy may at times be astonished (Acts 10:45) at the generosity of God's grace and the depth of His readiness to forgive even the vilest of sinners. Let us not be so-minded. We serve a God Who can look upon the likes of a Nineveh, and yet pardon upon men's repentance with words that reflect His nature as Love: *"And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?"*

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# RENEGADE PROPHET

*The True Life-Story  
Of Jonah's Journey  
With God*

**W**hen Jonah of Gath-hepher (II Kings 14:25) heard the Word of the Lord compelling him to *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me"* (Jonah 1:2), he, like many servants of the Lord since, was confronted with a dilemma. First of all, the city of Nineveh was the capital of the notorious Assyrians, whose bloodthirsty and barbaric brutality was known the world over. Prisoners of war dreaded falling into their hands since they often skinned their unhappy victims alive, impaled them on sharp stakes, or piled their decapitated heads in pyramids outside the city gates. Furthermore, for several decades now, beginning with the reign of Jehu