

# Jonah An absent prophet

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[0:00] To this passage of scripture, let's just pray once briefly that the Lord will open our eyes.! Heavenly Father, open our eyes to behold wondrous things in your law. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The glorious generation asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.

Well, I've given away the end of the story now. We haven't got to the bit about the Ninevins repenting, but actually that's not the end of the story. But Jesus obviously saw Jonah as pointing forward to himself.

But who is this fishy character, Jonah? In fact, as I already mentioned, Jonah and Nahum are often studied together, because between them they describe God's delayed but ultimately final judgment on the Assyrian city of Nineveh.

[1:35] And it's quite important to understand them in the context of the political history of the ancient Near East at the time. We're talking around the 6th century BC.

Yeah, 6th century BC. 7th century BC. Yeah, right. Around that time. Which was immensely complicated.

If you read the book of Isaiah, you get a hint of this. But the situation, the politics of that time were very complicated with shifting alliances and complicated empires, one which would rise to some power and then decline again.

So let's see if we can set Jonah and Nahum into... What I put up there on the slide is a very simplified, a really oversimplified version of this timeline, but it does have the main points on. There had been settlement at Nineveh on the Tigris, probably as far back as the 3rd millennium, really from the beginning of recorded history.

[2:49] But... And there had been a first Assyrian empire in the 2nd century BC, but it had gone into decline. But then towards the end of the 2nd century BC, well, the city of Nineveh had begun to grow with a temple to the goddess Ishtar, built near the Tigris River.

And we'll learn more about Ishtar when we go on to study Nahum. But it was a center of worship of the goddess Ishtar. And then in the 9th century, the Assyrian empire revived, and the great city, Nineveh, grew up around the temple of Ishtar.

Historians called it the Neo-Assyrian empire because it was, in a sense, the 2nd Assyrian empire. It was probably the largest city in the world at the time, Nitniva.

Although it's thought it didn't actually become the imperial capital until about 700 BC in the reign of Sennacherib, which was after the time of Jonah, actually, which does raise one or two minor questions of why the king was in the city at the time, among other things.

But we'll come to that when we come to that chapter. And so the Neo-Assyrian empire rose around the 9th century BC.

[4:17] It was growing all during the time of between 800 and 700 BC. It really reached the height of its power around 700 BC.

But by that time, it had made a lot of enemies including, in the end, Egypt, when Thebes was destroyed, 686 BC.

And so, in fact, in 612 BC, the city of Nineveh was destroyed by the Babylonians, in fact. It was the Babylonians, in the end, who conquered the city.

In fact, they destroyed it so thoroughly that for 2,000 years, nobody knew where it had been.

Greek and Roman historians obviously had records of it, but they said nobody knew where it was and some even doubted that it actually existed.

[5:25] And neither did the Islamic scholars, historians of around the 9th and 10th century AD. They didn't know where it was either. In fact, it wasn't until the late 18th century and the 19th century that the position of Nineveh on the Tigris was finally identified by archaeologists.

And now much of it has been excavated, including, interestingly, a mound where legend has it that Jonah is buried. I don't know how much credence one can give to that legend, but there is a legend that Jonah is actually buried in Nineveh.

Nahum, as we will see when we get there, cursed the city. And it seems that the curse of Nahum continues to have its effect right through into the 21st century because now the ISIL are busy destroying the ancient ruins of Nineveh as being un-Islamic.

Anyway, that's a brief history of the city itself. How do these prophets fit into it? Well, first of all, we need to mention that after the time of Solomon that we were hearing about this morning, after the reign of Solomon, the nation of Israel split into two parts.

The southern kingdom, which became known as Judah, was the tribe of Judah, the tribe of Benjamin, and most of the Levites, who, of course, were centered around the temple in Jerusalem.

[7:01] The other tribes formed what became known as the northern kingdom of Israel. Jonah himself was a citizen of the northern kingdom.

In fact, right up to the north part of the northern kingdom in Galilee. He was the only Galilean prophet, which again is one of the many parallels between the life of Jonah and Jesus.

In 2 Kings 14.25, there was a reference to the prophet Jonah, referring to the reign of Jeroboam II. I don't think you really need to look it up, but it's just useful for dating purposes. Because it means that Jonah must have been around around 780 to 755 BC.

So the prophecy of Jonah is normally dated to around 780 and 755 BC. How do we know when Nahum was around?

[8:04] And I'll mention the whole timeline while we're looking at it. We know when Nahum was around because Nahum mentions the destruction of Thebes in Egypt as a past event.

And the Assyrians had indeed destroyed the city of Thebes in 663 BC. So Nahum must have been writing after that and probably when it was still a fairly recent memory, it was still up in people's minds.

And so the prophecy of Nahum is usually dated to around 660 to 630 BC. Clearly he must have been around before the time of the actual destruction of the city in 612.

So now, how did the Assyrian Empire relate to the two kingdoms, the northern and southern kingdoms? The northern kingdom of Israel made an alliance actually with various other kingdoms against the Assyrians.

And in fact, the southern kingdom of Judah tried, well to some extent, did make an alliance with Assyria and it all got very, very complicated.

[9:18] So the politics of that age were incredibly complicated. But just to cut it short as it were, in 722 BC, the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel.

And that's pretty much all you hear of it really. It more or less disappeared from history. And at the time, as I say, the southern kingdom had actually made an alliance with Assyria and more or less became a vassal kingdom.

And Hezekiah, King Hezekiah, the king of Judah, had originally been a vassal king of Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, the emperor of Assyria.

But he, probably at the instigation of the Babylonians or the Egyptians or possibly both, he actually rebelled against Assyria, leading to an Assyrian invasion but the, the whole of Judah was ravaged and the second city, Judah, second city of Lachish was indeed destroyed, taken and destroyed by the Assyrians.

As you can see on the frieze at the British Museum, if you go and go to the British Museum. But famously, Sennacherib failed to take Jerusalem itself.

[10:52] The country was ravaged but Jerusalem and Hezekiah survived and Isaiah records the destruction of the Assyrian army outside the city overnight and without a battle. And whether this was what destroyed, actually destroyed the army, we don't know whether it was disease or infighting or some other cause is not recorded but Isaiah was quite clear that in attributing this to God's intervention, he said simply that God destroyed the army of the Assyrians outside Jerusalem.

And this occurred in 701 BC and in fact Judah survived the fall of the Assyrian Empire and of course was not destroyed until a century, over a century later by the Babylonians.

So that gives you a bit of the history. Now of course there is quite a historical irony with the story of the prophet Jonah because in saving Nineveh Jonah actually led indirectly to the destruction in 722 BC of his own kingdom of Israel.

Israel. And in fact some people have suggested because of this that perhaps actually this is not literal history but it's intended as a parable possibly written by Jonah himself or perhaps by somebody writing after the fall of Israel.

And indeed I'm not sure one should totally reject this theory out of hand because the nature of the text is quite strange. The way it's written it's quite sort of mythic in the way it's written.

[12:37] But there are also strong arguments against the view that it was written as a parable. It certainly was regarded as historical by the ancient Jewish scholars and perhaps most importantly of all those words of Jesus that the men of Nineveh will stand up in judgment with this generation and condemn it.

So if this wasn't literal history it's rather difficult to make sense of that statement. So it has been said that no one's going to go to the stake defending the historicity of Jonah but I would recommend to you that you do regard it as historical truth.

I think it probably is meant to be historical truth. So we might put it it's not myth presented as history but rather it's history presented as myth. The history is presented to us not because of its particular historical importance but because of what it tells us about the Lord and what it tells us about Jonah the prophet and what it tells us about God's concern for all the people of this world.

So ultimately the message of Jonah is the message of grace but we find that balanced when we come to Nahum of the message of judgment. So before we look at particular at this first chapter let's just point out some of the parallels between Jonah and Jesus.

Remember that Jesus was also sent with a message to those who didn't really want to hear it. Jesus again slept in a boat through a storm the sailors of Jonah's boat were probably Phoenicians and they would benefit indirectly from Jonah's rejection of initial rejection of the word of God and we remember that for Jesus a Phoenician woman would benefit indirectly from the Israelite rejection of the word of God and it was a Phoenician woman who's daughter Jesus healed and Jesus said it's not right to take the bread that should go to the Israelites and throw it to the dogs but the woman said even the dogs get the crumbs that fall off the table and indeed these Phoenician sailors in Jonah's time were also to find grace because of the rejection in this case of the prophet initially of rejecting the word of God ultimately of course

[15:26] Jonah was prepared to give up his life for others as we saw in verse 12 and he was figuratively at least resurrected after three days and Jesus himself called this the sign of Jonah this is mentioned actually three times in the gospel in Luke 11 and actually twice in Matthew in chapter 12 and again in chapter 16 and later in that chapter when Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah Peter is described there and I think only there as Peter son of Jonah presumably his father really was called Jonah but at that particular point with already referred to the prophet Jonah Matthew obviously thought it was meant or Jesus perhaps in his own words thought it was worth pointing out that Peter was the son of Jonah and indeed the sign of Jonah perhaps applied in a sense to Peter as well he was also going to be a prophet who was going to have his struggles but if

Jonah is a picture of Jesus then equally Jonah is also a picture of rebellious Israel because Jonah's problem was not that he was scared to go to Nineveh those of us who might be old enough to remember the old Sunday school lessons or perhaps were taught the story of Jonah at school may remember actually being told that Jonah didn't go to Nineveh because he was frightened but it's simply wrong I mean it's clear from verse 12 that Jonah was a man of considerable personal courage he wasn't a coward by any means he wasn't frightened of death why was Jonah so keen not to go to Nineveh well actually he tells us in chapter 4 verses 1 and 2 he says I was greatly displeased and became angry Jonah prayed to the Lord oh Lord is this not what I said when I was still at home this is why I was so quick to flee 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 Jonah's problem unlike most of us who preach the word of God one way or another Jonah's problem was not that he thought he would not be listened to but he was afraid he would be listened to Jonah didn't want the Ninevites to find grace didn't want to escape he didn't want them to escape the destruction Jonah thought that God should only be interested in Israel and that if he had any message to the Gentiles it should be just a message of wrath and judgment and that was in spite of God's promise to Abraham that all nations will be blessed see Jonah had a sneaking suspicion that God was into compassion and he didn't really like that and even that is a warning to us is it do we think that way about those outside the church of God do we hope that they will get what they deserve or do we agree with the words of Peter the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise as some understand slowness he's patient with you not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance the Lord was going to give

Nineveh a warning give them a chance to repent but Jonah was going to find this a very hard lesson to learn as we'll see as we lead on in the story but God starts the lesson here with these superstitious sailors so let's now just get a few lessons out of the first chapter itself and in fact there's just six lessons what I'd like us to see from this chapter first of all the Lord was not only in Israel secondly that disobedience has consequences thirdly that God's plan to save cannot be overturned fourthly that a cry for mercy is actually the only viable plan fifthly that a sacrifice is necessary and sixthly that God answers a plea for mercy so first of all let's remind ourselves the Lord was not only in Israel where was it that

Jonah was going to well he tells us he brought a ticket for Tarshish actually nobody to this day knows where Tarshish was it's generally assumed to have been somewhere in the western Mediterranean possibly in Spain as it suggested on this map here could have been on the northern coast of Africa nobody knows where it was basically it had two things in its favour as far as Jonah was concerned it was in diametrically opposite direction to Nineveh Nineveh lay to the east of the kingdom of Israel and Tarshish lay far to the west and it was as far as you could get and basically still be in the realm of civilization it was almost semi mythical you might perhaps think of people's attitude to China a westerners attitude to

[21:01] China 500 years or so ago people did know that China and Japan were real places after all the explorers had been there and come back but for most people they were just hopelessly far away and almost places of myth and legend and to the inhabitants of Israel and that area I think Tarshish must have been very much like that there was a place there somewhere way way over to the west but basically if you went past Tarshish you might as well have fallen off the edge of the world that was absolutely the edge of human civilization and in fact the term a ship of Tarshish became a sort of technical term for a long range trading vessel we've come across that in Isaiah and other other prophets talks about ships of Tarshish they were the sort of super tankers and container freighters of their day because

Tarshish was as far as you could get and still be in the realm of civilization and of course Jonah didn't really want to go to Tarshish the point was that it was the far displaced west he could book a ticket for and he told us what his aim was in verse 3 his aim was to flee from the presence of the Lord but he'd forgotten the words of David which we read in Psalm 139 Jonah would remember those words perhaps he wouldn't have done what he did but he didn't and so he headed for Tarshish but even if Jonah had made it to

Tarshish he still wasn't going to escape the presence of the Lord because the Lord was indeed present in the Mediterranean and on that ship and the second lesson is that disobedience has consequences and sin has consequences not only for Jonah but for those around him as well and when the people of God and particularly those whose job it is to declare the word of God act in a disobedience or unwise manner we must expect a bad result sin causes trouble and not just for the sinner in this case Jonah's sin was going to embroil the ship's crew in a storm and put them in peril of their lives so Jonah had to learn that just as he could not flee from the Lord so he couldn't disobey the Lord with impunity either he was going to suffer himself and so were those around him disobedience has consequences and thirdly

Jonah had to learn that God's plan to save cannot be overturned not even by Jonah's disobedience in spite of all Jonah's efforts God was actually going to bring good out of this situation now you and I know that storms are caused by things like the jet stream and the gulf stream and so on aren't they but these sailors were superstitious lot and so when the storm came up they decided that some God must have been offended and of course in this particular case they were quite right and when they discovered that the God in question was Yahweh the God of the Hebrews they must have been particularly worried they must have heard stories of the way Yahweh had dealt with his enemies in time past and they were very worried indeed they'd heard of the destruction that he'd wreaked perhaps on the

Egyptians when the Egyptian cavalry had been drowned perhaps they'd even heard of the fall of the city of Jericho they knew the power of this particular God but what they didn't know and they didn't know because Jonah had failed to tell them that the Lord was God not only of anger but also of compassion so these poor sailors were caught in a situation not of their own making what were they to do if they keep Jonah on board everyone was going to drown anyway if they threw a prophet of the Lord overboard who knows what worse disaster might befall but God wasn't going to be stymied by Jonah's failure he forced Jonah however reluctantly to bring the word of God onto that ship and ultimately that word was not a word of judgment but a word of salvation

[26:17] God was going to save those sailors not just from shipwreck but also from their own idolatry and superstition but what should they do well there was only one viable plan there was only one thing that was going to save the lives of those sailors and you notice that commendably I suppose actually the sailors tried to save themselves and Jonah they tried to run ashore to row ashore I suppose if you're in the shipping business then throwing your passengers overboard is not particularly good for trade but it was never going to work in fact their only hope really was to resign themselves to the will of God and to appeal for him for mercy in verse 14 they were caught either way they couldn't appeal to the Lord's covenant because they were idolaters and had sacrificed to other gods they couldn't even like

Rahab claim that they'd suckered God's people in fact they were just about to do exactly the opposite throw one of them overboard all they could do was acknowledge that the Lord was sovereign and ask for forgiveness and pray that they wouldn't be made guilty of the blood of Jonah and did you notice that their prayer was answered they didn't incur guilt they didn't incur guilt for killing Jonah because Jonah survived and so they avoided the blood guilt of killing Jonah lesson five is that a sacrifice is necessary whatever can be said against Jonah I have to say at least he was prepared to accept the blame for his own disobedience and flight he said I know it was because of me that this storm has come upon you he admitted his failings to the sailors and thus effectively to God also and in a sense his sin was being imputed to these sailors they were suffering for his sin they'd become involved in his sin in taking him away from the presence of the Lord and Jonah was able to see the injustice of that and so Jonah was prepared to give up his own life to save theirs but the law of Moses of course actually forbade human sacrifice but this was different because this was a voluntary sacrifice by Jonah himself but actually of course it wasn't really the sacrifice of Jonah that was going to do any good for these sailors this death of Jonah wasn't even enough to pay for his own sins let alone the sins of the sailors so as we said like the sacrifice of Abraham's son Isaac the Lord in the end didn't accept Jonah's offer of his own life for the lives of the sailors because Jonah received his life back from the grave just as Isaac had but although neither he nor the sailors could have known it in offering himself voluntarily he was

pointing towards that true and effective sacrifice of the true saviour

Jesus Jesus also gave up his life voluntarily but his life was of sufficient value to cover the sin of Jonah and to cover the sin of those Phoenician sailors and to cover all those Old Testament believers and to cover those people in Nineveh who repented and indeed all of those we read of in Revelation where it says after this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation tribe people and language standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb they were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands and they cried out in a loud voice salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb and it would appear that part of that great crowd are those Phoenician sailors because it says at the end of the chapter that they made vows to the Lord so presumably they repented of their idolatry and made vows to the

Lord instead so somewhere among that great crowd perhaps are those Phoenician sailors and they are indeed able to say from their personal experience that salvation belongs to our God and that's the sixth lesson that God answers a plea for mercy those sailors are part of that great multitude and God heard their prayer and taught them the fear of the Lord and they abandoned those powerless gods who weren't able to save them and turned instead to the living God and it might be less obvious or dramatic for us but unless we have called on the name of the Lord we're just in the same precarious position as they were and as the people of Nineveh were like them like those sailors like as we'll see later the people of Nineveh a cry for mercy is the only plan to adopt and we learn that through the death of

[32:06] Christ not through the death of Jonah really but through the death of Christ God will answer such a prayer and we will remember also if like Jonah we're already numbered among the people of God and yet we do sin and yet God will answer a prayer of repentance and call us back and it's that prayer of repentance of Jonah that we're going to look at next week because God was not yet done with Jonah but let us just remind ourselves that if we haven't done so already we are like those sailors in grave danger and we need to call not on any other God because it just doesn't work but to call on the name of the Lord and we can do that through the name of Jesus so let's sing another hymn of God