

Message #2**Jonah 1:1-2**

In these first two verses, Jonah gets a direct order from God, a specific assignment. At times, our problem is in knowing just precisely what to do and when to do it. That was not a problem for the Jewish prophet Jonah. God gave him a direct order and frankly, Jonah didn't like it and wasn't about to do it.

If you were a Jewish prophet, assignments from God were not optional. When God gave a prophet a specific message and ministry, there was to be no debate, no discussion and no delay. It was the responsibility of the prophet to accomplish the assigned task. God would go with the prophet, but the prophet was to do his part in proclaiming His Word to whomever God directed.

As the book of Jonah opens, we learn a very important lesson:

GOD'S ASSIGNMENT TO JONAH WAS TO WARN A SPECIFIC PEOPLE OF THEIR WICKEDNESS AND OF GOD'S FUTURE JUDGMENT.

Let me be so bold as to suggest that part of our responsibility to the specific people with whom we work, live, study and play is to warn them concerning their sin and concerning God's future judgment.

When I read the opening two verses of Jonah, I am reminded of something Jesus Christ said when He was here on earth concerning the Holy Spirit—"And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8).

How does the Holy Spirit convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment? By the witness and testimony of His people. In other words, it is our job to warn the lost concerning their sin, concerning God's righteousness and concerning God's future judgment. Like it or not, the same assignment given to Jonah is the very same kind of assignment given to us.

Jonah's assignment was not to make people feel good about themselves. His assignment was to warn the wicked of God's judgment (warn the lost and carnal). Now to understand this, there are three key elements we want to see here:

ELEMENT #1 – The word to the prophet. 1:1a

Jonah is a narrative, a story which begins without any conjunction or connective. In many O.T. books, the narrative begins with some type of connective that plugs us into some previous narrative account.

For example, Exodus begins with the connective "now" (Ex. 1:1). Leviticus begins with the connective "then" (Lev. 1:1). I Samuel begins with the connective "now" (I Sam. 1:1).

There are many other illustrations of this as well, but it is not true with Jonah.

The first thing God wants us to think about when we turn to Jonah is that Jonah received the Word of the LORD, the Word of Jehovah—the self-existing God of the universe who can do whatever He wants to do.

We do not know how Jonah received the Word of God; the Hebrew text simply says the Word of the Lord was or became or came to Jonah.

In Hebrews 1:1 we read these words—“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways....” This tells us that God apparently spoke to these prophets in a variety of ways. We know in the case of Moses, God spoke to him audibly (Ex. 3:4ff). We also know that God communicated to Moses through writing (Ex. 32:15-16). At times, God would also speak to prophets through visions and dreams (Num. 12:6). Apparently when God would do this, He would give the prophet some very unusual analogy or riddle that, on his own, the prophet could not figure out (Amos 7:1-9; 8:1-2). Before God put all of His Word in writing, He spoke to these prophets “in many ways.”

We do know that near the end of the book, Jonah was actually having verbal conversations with God (Jonah 4:2-4, 9, 10-11). God did actually speak to Jonah in the course of the story, but we are uncertain as to how Jonah got his original message.

The thing that is stressed in the opening of this book is the fact that God did give His Word to Jonah, not how He gave His Word to him. It will become very evident from Jonah’s reaction (we will see next time) that Jonah knew for certain that he had received the Word of the Lord. There was no doubt in Jonah’s mind that God’s Word had been delivered to him.

Now God’s Word is very sacred. When God gave His Word to a prophet, it was not to be taken lightly by the prophet or the people. God demanded exact communication of His message. For a prophet to refuse to transmit God’s message perfectly was a very serious matter that would lead to some very serious consequences. For example, when Moses disregarded the Word of the LORD at Meribah and struck the rock rather than speaking to the rock, God prevented Moses from entering the Promised Land (Num. 20:7-8, 11; Deut. 32:48-52). God warned Ezekiel the prophet that if He gave His Word to the prophet, that prophet had the responsibility to accurately communicate it or God would require blood from the prophet’s hand (Ezek. 33:8-9). It was a very serious crime for a prophet to receive God’s Word and then not give it.

When we search the New Testament, we discover God’s Word is still sacred. In fact, in the last chapter of the Bible, God warns people not to add or subtract anything from His Word (Rev. 22:18-19). God’s Word is to be communicated precisely and accurately and serious judgment will come to one who refuses.

ELEMENT #2 – The identity of the prophet. **1:1b**

We have already covered most of this in our introductory study, but it is important to observe that Jonah was the son of Amittai. Amittai was of the tribe of Zebulun, because Gath-hepher was a city given to this tribe in the distribution of the land under Joshua (Josh. 19:10, 13; II Kings 14:25).

These words “son of Amittai” tell us Jonah is a Jewish prophet of the tribe of Zebulun. He was one of the chosen people. He was one of the prophets. He was one of the northern prophets of Israel. He had Jewish parents, he had a Jewish home in the Promised Land and he had an important job—he was a prophet. He was pure Jewish. Life for Jonah, the son of Amittai, was good.

We must never use our elective heritage or our past ministry successes as an excuse for not accomplishing what God wants us to accomplish here and now. Jonah loved his Jewish heritage, but he hated the Gentiles of Assyria.

It is so easy to surround ourselves with our church family and with the things of God and forget about our responsibility to reach the lost, to be witnesses for Christ. That is exactly the rut of Jonah.

ELEMENT #3 – The assignment for the prophet. **1:2**

God had a specific assignment for Jonah—go to Nineveh and communicate His message. Now to understand this assignment and to set the stage for Jonah’s negative response—I would like to point out three critical facts:

Fact #1 – Jonah was commanded to arise. **1:2a**

The verb “arise” is a command in Hebrew. The particular word used here would imply that Jonah was not going forward. He had apparently somewhat lost his impulse for moving forward (Gesenius, *Hebrew Lexicon*, p. 727).

Probably ever since making his famous prediction in II Kings 14:25, life had been good for Jonah. He was enjoying his success but perhaps had become somewhat good for Jonah. He was enjoying his success, but perhaps had become somewhat complacent. It was time for him to get moving forward again, to get up and get going. This was not an option for Jonah; this was a command of God to Jonah.

It is so easy to become complacent when things are going well. It is so easy to sit back and enjoy the ride. However, we must always be moving forward for God.

There are always new things to accomplish and new people to reach. We need to have the philosophy of Paul, forgetting things past, pressing on.

Fact #2 – Jonah was commanded to go to Nineveh. **1:2b**

Of all the cities in the world and of all the people in the world, the last place on earth Jonah would want to go would be Nineveh.

There are at least three reasons why Nineveh would not have been Jonah's choice of cities to visit:

(Reason #1) - Nineveh was Israel's enemy.

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and even though Assyria was in somewhat of a lull, Assyria controlled the Promised Land and most of the world.

(Reason #2) - Nineveh was a “great city.” **1:2; 3:2, 3; 4:11**

There is no question that God wants us to realize that when He ordered Jonah to go to Nineveh, it was a “great” city. It was majestic, magnificent, strong and powerful. It was a city of grandeur and glory. It was a great city of the world.

The city of Nineveh was first build by Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-11). Although it was not in its full glory until the Assyrians took it and rebuilt it, it was always impressive and evil. Nineveh was so large that it took three days just to walk through it (3:3). Based upon the fact that there were 120,000 children who did not even know their right hand from their left (4:11), many estimate the population was anywhere from 600,000 to 1 million.

When the city of Nineveh stood in all of its glory, Jerusalem, the city of God, was certainly not in the same impressive condition. It was war-torn and anything but impressive. Jonah certainly could not see going to a godless city he absolutely hated that seemed to have everything in the world. As far as he was concerned, God ought to wipe this city right off the world.

(Reason #3) - Nineveh was a wicked city. **1:2**

We have many immoral cities in the United States—New Orleans, Las Vegas, Reno, San Francisco and New York; but as bad as these are, they aren't as bad as Nineveh was, yet.

When we read Nahum 3, we discover that Nineveh was a bloody city (3:1), a city of deception and stealing (3:1), and idolatry and murder (3:3). It was a city known for its immorality (3:4) and it's Satanism (3:4). Nineveh had plenty of bars, as J. Vernon McGee said—Nineveh was given over to cruelty and brutality, wine and women, the bottle and the brothel, the sauce and sex (Vol. 3, p. 759).

Jonah was a righteous servant of God and he did not want to even go to the city of Nineveh (i.e. my perspective of Las Vegas). But that is exactly where God wanted him to go.

Fact #3 – Jonah was commanded to preach against Nineveh. **1:2c**

Jonah was not given a positive message to preach. He was to preach against Nineveh. He was specifically to preach that Nineveh was so wicked that God was going to destroy it in 40 days (3:4).

Now most of the Assyrian leaders lived in Nineveh. They would not take kindly to a lowly Israeli who marched into their powerful city and started proclaiming such a message. Since the Assyrians were known to mutilate people, Jonah was probably afraid of two things: 1) That he could be killed for this message and 2) That God would be gracious and might not destroy the city (4:2). We specifically know the last reason was one, but we may assume so was the first.

There are many things we learn from these two opening verses:

- 1) Our job is to set forth clearly and accurately the Word of God.
- 2) God may grant us opportunities to set forth His Word to our worst enemies.
- 3) When God gives us opportunities to set forth His Word, no excuse will ever be good enough for not doing it.
- 4) There are times when our instruction ought to be aimed at people and aimed against them.
- 5) When wickedness reaches a certain level, God's judgment will always come.