

See Jonah Preach

The Prodigal Prophet – Part V

Jonah 3:1-4

Introduction

In a couple of weeks, I will be heading back to the State Fair again this year – for one reason that can be stated in two words: deep fried. Have you ever had a deep fried Snickers candy bar? They are sold at the fair. After I eat corn on the cob and get my vegetables out of the way, I go to the Snickers counter and stand in line for an hour.

At this counter, they take a Snickers bar and poke through it with a stick – sort of like a corndog. They then dip it into what looks like pancake batter and transfer it over to a vat where it is deep fried. It comes out fluffy and crispy. Then they roll it in powdered sugar – and you are willing to buy it for forty-seven dollars. You can almost hear your left aorta slamming shut, but it is worth risking your life.

I tried the deep fried Twinkie a few years ago, but it was really too sweet. Hey, I have my standards! I tried deep fried Oreos one year as well, but they were not nearly as good. At this year's State Fair, it is back to the gold standard for me – the tried and true deep fried Snickers bar.

It is hard to believe we are selling stuff like this – and eating it – at the very time when our culture has become more and more aware of fat grams and bad cholesterol. This is a time when restaurants are being held liable for serving up food products cooked with trans fat, whatever that is.

Actually, I looked this up. A *New York Times* article explained that trans fat is created by pumping hydrogen into oil at high temperatures. It creates not only an inexpensive fat product for cooking, but prolongs shelf life in products and creates (and I

quote), “food that is flavorful and crisp” – which is why we want to eat it.

Just a few months ago, this *New York Times* article went on to say, the state of California enacted a ban on all trans fats – California, of course. And listen to this – restaurants must comply by the year 2010 or be closed.ⁱ

One can only wonder how long it will take before this conspiracy affects the North Carolina State Fair. This may be my last chance to have a crisp, flavorful, deep fried Snickers bar. I cannot wait!

Now I happen to admire people who do not cave in, even when they go to the fair. They walk right by the deep fried booth – and wave to me as they walk by. My hat is off to you. I am proud of you. I feel sorry for you, but I am proud of you.

If junk food stayed at the State Fair, we would all be better off. In fact, I am glad I do not have the option of eating that stuff but once a year.

The trouble is, junk food is not just a physical temptation – it is a spiritual problem too.

Walter Kaiser pointed out the anemic state of affairs in the American church today and placed the responsibility squarely upon the shoulders of pastors and teachers who are preaching and teaching everything but the word of God. He writes,

It is no secret that Christ's church is not at all in good health . . . She has been languishing because she has been fed, as the current line has it, “junk food”; all kinds of artificial preservatives and all sorts of unnatural substitutes have been served up to her. As a result, theological and biblical malnutrition

*has afflicted the very generation that has taken such giant steps to make sure its physical health is not damaged by using foods or products that are . . . harmful to their physical bodies. Simultaneously, a . . . spiritual famine [has] resulted from the absence of any genuine publication of the Word of God . . .*ⁱⁱ

How true this is. We are serving up deep fried Snickers in the form of sermons, Sunday school lessons, and Bible study materials. There is little nutrition, if any; it is artificially sweet and without textual substance or theological fiber. There is certainly no meat in sight. Creative topics and superficial study, skipping here and there for quick answers and clever fixes have left the church in poor health.

Much of the solution is not a ban on unhealthy things. The solution is a change of diet; it is a return to teaching not just the word of God, but the words of God.

While the average pastor, Sunday school teacher, or Bible study leader is tempted to simply teach on the latest interest about life in general, they must resist for the sake of the health of the church. It bears repeating that the average ministry is expounding on life and illustrating with scripture, but we must return to expounding the scripture and illustrating with life.

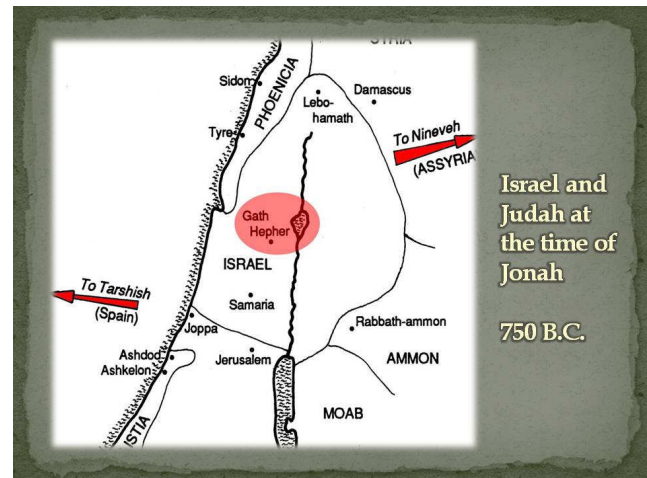
By the time the average Christian reaches Jonah chapter 3, they are under the impression that all the good stuff is over. They might have some faint awareness that Nineveh repented and that Jonah was not too happy about it, but once they get past the great fish throwing Jonah up onto dry land, that about wraps up the series for them and it is time to move on to another Bible story.

However, I have discovered that Jonah chapter 3 is deeply convicting to me as a pastor, and to everyone who teaches a class or Bible study of any age or size.

Jonah chapter 3 could, in fact, very well hold the key to a spiritual awakening – a return to spiritual health and vitality, beginning in the pulpit or the lectern and then, spreading throughout the average church in America.

Frankly, we are in desperate need today for preachers and teachers to follow the example of Jonah, as well as for people to respond like the Ninevites.

Jonah's First Chance



You may remember that Jonah had been told to go to the Ninevites. And he responded by going to Joppa, on the coast of the Mediterranean, and booking passage on a boat heading for Tarshish, which is on the coast of Spain. Tarshish was in the opposite direction and as far away from Nineveh as he could go.

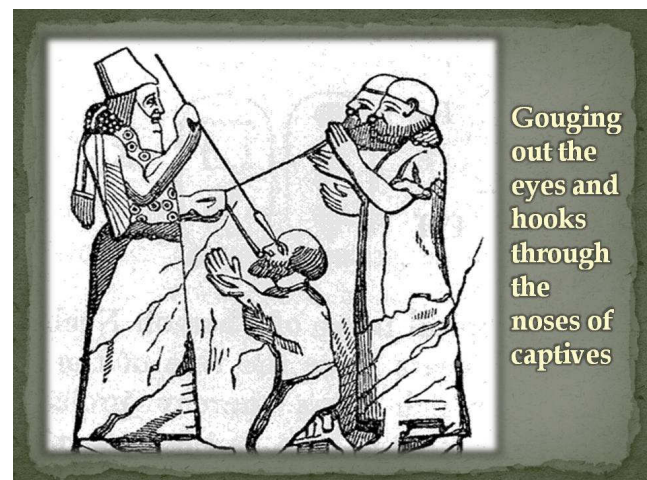
Why did Jonah do this?

One reason is that he was a patriotic Jew. Jonah had come to believe, along with most of his countrymen, that God belonged to them; that salvation belonged to the Jewish people.

Only when Jonah was inside the fish did he rediscover,

...Salvation belongs to the Lord! (Jonah 2:9b)

Salvation is the Lord's to give – to whomever He will.



Gouging out the eyes and hooks through the noses of captives

Furthermore Jonah was bitterly resentful, if not afraid, of the notorious Ninevite cruelty to their captives. The Ninevites were known for skinning their captives alive, gouging out the eyes of their prisoners, or humiliating them by leading them

around with hooks in their noses like cattle before having them killed.

I was recently at the British Museum in London and saw firsthand the clay designs that once plastered the king's palace walls in Nineveh. There were drawings of prisoners being dismembered and piles of skulls left by castle walls.

Frankly, Jonah did not want God to show mercy to these unmerciful people. He did not want them to receive anything from God but punishment and death. We will actually hear him admit to this later.

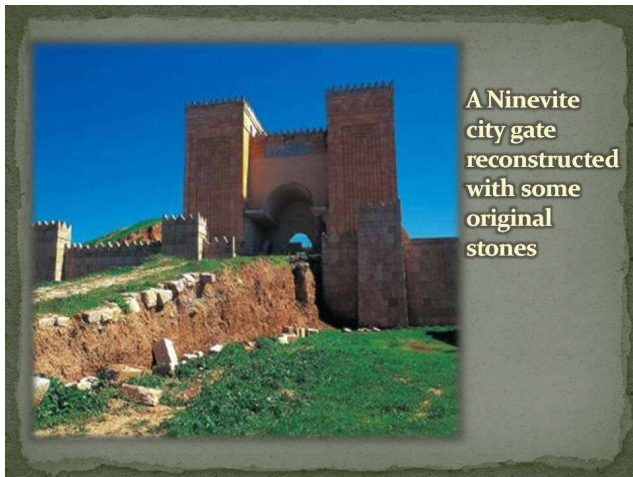
So, Jonah runs.

However, God sent a great fish after him to bring him back. Chapter 2, verse 10 tell us that Jonah was, . . . vomited . . . onto dry land.

If I were Jonah, I would have expected to retire somewhere back in Samaria, or maybe in my hometown of Gath Hepher.

If I were God, I would have been looking for another prophet.

And I would have been wrong on both counts.



Jonah is prepared to accept this mission to the capital city of the Assyrian Kingdom – the impressive city of Nineveh.

And God is prepared to reenlist him.

Jonah's Second Chance

The next words, in fact, are most moving to me. Notice Jonah chapter 3, verse 1.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time . . .

Pause for a moment and let these words sink in.

. . . the second time . . .

Wow, what a phrase! What grace and forgiveness are bound up in these three words – the second time.

We do not reenlist someone like Jonah. We go back to the drawing board. We send out for résumés. We start over.

Peter had his chance in the courtyard. John Mark had his shot at standing firm in the garden. Thomas missed his chance by skipping the upper room. They all had second chances!

James Montgomery Boice wrote in his commentary on Jonah at this point,

If we were to say, "Go home now, Jonah. I'm glad you repented of your disobedience, but you are no longer useful to me," we would be just and reasonable in doing so. Does God always do that? Does God stoop to use those who have rejected His commission; turned a deaf ear to His word; pursued a course of determined disobedience? Yes, He does. If He did not, none of us could serve Him.ⁱⁱⁱ

None of us!

This is not defending disobedience. This is defending the grace of God – not just in Jonah's life, but in your life and mine. He is the God of second chances and beyond.

Another author gave me a reminder when he wrote, "Honest reflection compels the believer to speak of Him as the God of the 999th chance; how many times have we been forgiven and had yet another opportunity given to us to do something for Christ?"^{iv}

Imagine the thrill of Jonah the prophet as he heard the word of the Lord coming to him again – the second time.

George Morrison, the well known Scottish pastor and writer from several generations ago, once wrote, "The victorious Christian life is really nothing more than a series of new beginnings."^v

Jonah's Sacred Charge

Now look at Jonah 3:2.

Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and proclaim to it the proclamation which I am going to tell you.

It is interesting to me that this is the same commission Jonah first received in chapter 1. However, the first time, Jonah is told of the wickedness of the people of Nineveh, but in this second commission, Jonah is not reminded of their

wickedness. Instead, he is challenged by God with the sacred task to, “deliver to them My word”.

Jonah is given a second chance and now, he is given a sacred charge.

This charge is nothing less than to preach the word. It is the same charge given by Paul to Timothy, and to every pastor since,

*[Timothy], preach the word...
(II Timothy 4:2a)*

There will always be the pull to preach something else – something more appealing; something more titillating; something more positive or promising at times. Nonetheless, the reformation of souls and the awakening of hearts come by means of the power of the gospel (Romans 1:16), which comes through,

*. . . the word of God [which] is living and powerful, and sharper than [their most effective weapon] any two-edged sword . . .
(Hebrews 4:12)*

I think there is something else in this that God is warning Jonah not to do.

Jonah has just survived three days in the belly of a great fish. He has just ridden all the way back, by God’s command, in the belly of this fish to where the fish spit him safely out onto dry land.

Think about this. Who has this kind of testimony?

Have you ever been to a testimony meeting where everyone tried to top everyone else? No one can top this one. Jonah will dominate any testimony meeting. What a testimony!

“I grew up in a Christian home and got saved in college after some challenging times,” just does not hold a candle to:

- “My Miracle Ride in the Belly of a Fish”
- “How I Survived Three Days Under Water”
- “Life Inside a Whale and Why I’ll Never Eat Fish Again.”

Who can top this?!

Talk about a testimony! Jonah will have a best seller. No one else has ever experienced what he experienced.

“Uh uh, Jonah, none of that. You deliver to them My message; My proclamation; My word. Don’t tell your fish story; don’t dramatize your call back into ministry; don’t focus anyone’s attention on you. Jonah, go to that great city and deliver My warning to them.”

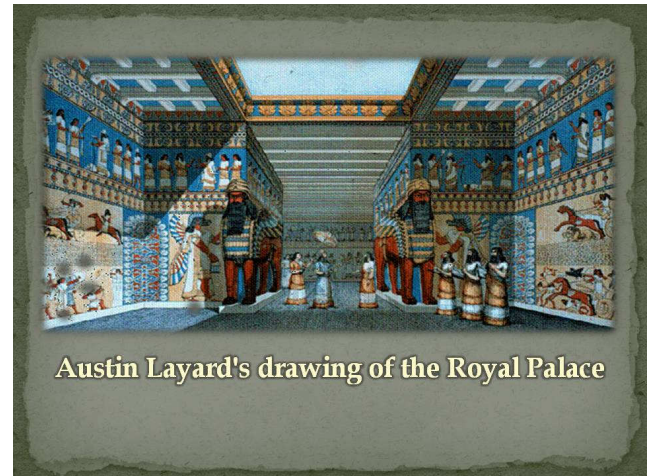
Four times, by the way, God refers to Nineveh as He does in verse 2 – the great city of Nineveh.

- It was great in history, having been founded by Nimrod, the great-grandson of Noah.
- It was great in size with the circumference of the city and its suburbs being sixty miles and having 600,000 people living there. One wall of the city had a circumference of eight miles and boasted 1,500 towers.
- It was great in sin being idolatrous, immoral, and brutal.^{vi}

Nineveh was located on the eastern banks of the Tigris River, near the modern city of Mosul in northern Iraq.^{vii}

Some of Nineveh’s walls have been reconstructed on their original site. Some of the gates have been reconstructed as well, using original stones.

Jonah would have entered the city through a massive gate, with towers stretching into the sky. Assyrian soldiers would have been looking down at this foreigner who dared to enter.



Austin Layard's drawing of the Royal Palace

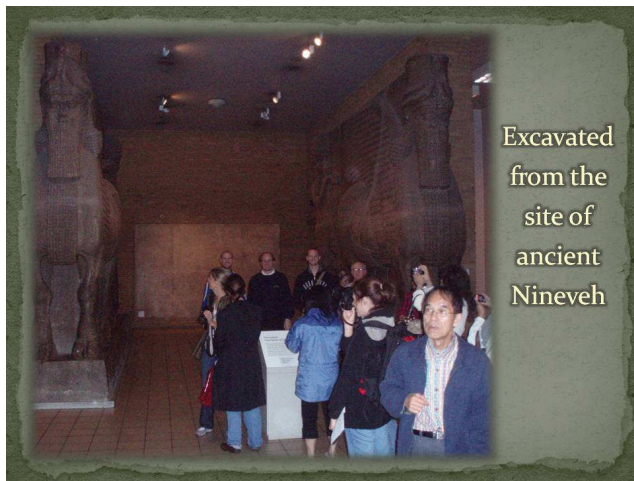
Jonah would no doubt have visited with the king himself. The text implies that the king repented upon hearing the message. More than likely he was given a personal audience with the prophet.

Jonah would have seen the palace as it was excavated centuries later – brilliantly colored with battle scenes.

It is interesting that for years, skeptics said that one of the reasons the Bible was unreliable was that it spoke of the great city called Nineveh and there was no evidence that it even existed. Then, in the mid-1800s, an archeologist by the name of Austin Layard discovered the hill under which the buried ruins of Nineveh lay. In fact, in the dry sand that had covered the city, it was incredibly preserved.

Jonah would have entered the palace and stood near two huge oxen with the faces of bearded men. They were placed in palaces and at the entrances of temples for protection from evil spirits.

A pair of these winged gods was excavated by Layard and now stands in the British Museum.



I had the opportunity to stand between two of these in the British Museum just a few days ago. They are massive creatures carved out of stone.

In this picture, you are looking at something nearly 3,000 years old – not the guy in the blue jacket! You can just make out the oxen with their bearded heads. I am standing in the middle with my sons, Benjamin and Seth, and my father – you can just make out his head, and yes, he is standing up.



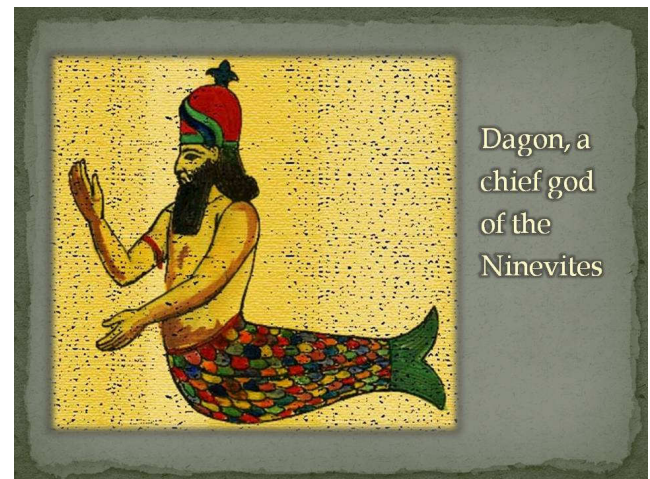
The official museum picture of these winged guardians is more impressive. These winged bulls with human heads and faces served the king of Nineveh as a guardian to protect him from spiritual danger. He had two of them in his palace.

I can imagine that Jonah had the opportunity, while standing in the palace, to perhaps point at these massive idols and say, “O King, they will not guard you from the judgment of my true and living God.

You have forty days until He judges you and your city and your people.”

Did the king listen at this point? Frankly, I believe that the king was already prepared to listen. In fact, Jonah might have been given nothing less than a royal reception. The events in this book imply, in fact, that he was given assistance in order to travel from place to place, covering the key places in capital city of Nineveh.

I have little doubt that the story of a man riding in the belly of a fish and being delivered to dry ground by the great fish had already reached the ears of the king. And I believe this with good reason. One of the chief gods of the Ninevites happened to be a fish god. His name was Dagon. Dag is the word for fish.



The Ninevites worshiped Dagon, the fish god, and believed he ruled the Mediterranean and beyond. Actually he was half man from the waist up and half fish from the waist down. Carvings and paintings of Dagon have been discovered by archeologists in and around the city of Nineveh like the one in this picture.

Add to this the fact that a Phoenician inscription, two hundred years after Jonah lived, informs us that one of the chief cities of Dagon happened to be Joppa – the very city where Jonah fled and more than likely the very place he was returned by the great fish.

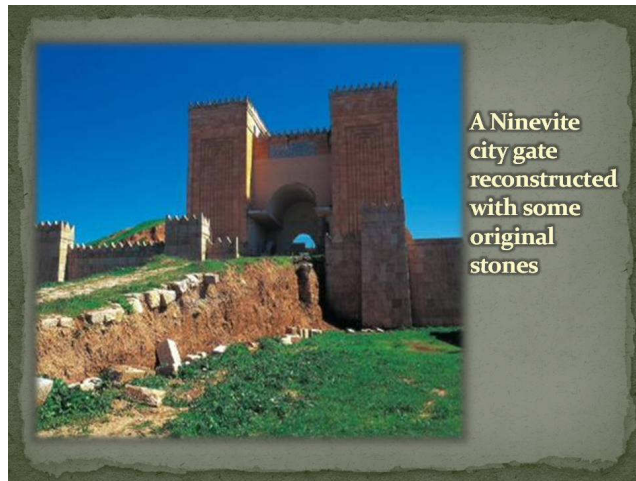
When we put all the pieces together, we discover that the Ninevites were prepared to listen!

I believe God used Jonah’s disobedience and intentionally chose his transportation back to Joppa with exactly the Ninevites’ superstition and idolatry in mind.

The Ninevites are prepared to listen to a prophet who rode inside a great fish commanded by his God – a God who evidently can command the great

fish of the sea; a God who is evidently more powerful than Dagon, their fish god.

The stage is uniquely set for the greatest national conversion in the history of the planet.



Notice Jonah 3:4.

Then Jonah began to go through the city one day's walk; and he cried out and said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown."

The word "overthrow" means literally, "turn upside down". The tense of the verb indicates thoroughness, so this would be a complete destruction or overturning of the city's foundations, walls and gates.

This is the same verb that is used to describe the total destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.^{viii}

From a human perspective and rationale, this enterprise appears ridiculous. How can one man, claiming to be God's prophet, confront thousands of people with his offensive message that his God was going to turn Nineveh upside down or else?^{ix}

Can you imagine what Jonah was thinking as he walked up the hill toward the city gates of this massive city?

Jonah was one man, but a man sent from God, with a message from God he was prepared to deliver.

Ladies and gentlemen, to this day, centuries later, this is still God's method of bringing about reformation, revival, and an awakening in any land. He works through a teacher, a Bible study leader, a disciple, a mentor, a pastor who delivers the words of God.

Reformation comes when a people of God submit to the will of God and communicate to their world the word of God – then God will do what only God can do.

Is it really surprising then, to read in the very next phrase in verse 5,

Then the people of Nineveh believed in God...

Imagine this – they believed in God. By the way, it does not say they believed in Jonah.

The people of Nineveh may not have been all that swept away by Jonah. However, they were swept away by the warning of this Sovereign; they were swept into the mercy of Jonah's God.

Martin Luther, the reformer, was once asked about his incredible contribution to the Reformation when the church itself and many millions of lives were changed. He responded, "I simply taught the word of God, and the word of God did everything else."

The beginning of this great awakening is now underway. A man who was given a second chance is fulfilling his sacred charge. And the word of God will do everything else,

. . . for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes . . . (Romans 1:16)

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/12/2008 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Jennifer Steinhauer, "California Bars Restaurant Use of Trans Fats," New York Times (July 26, 2008).

ⁱⁱ Walter C. Kaiser, Toward an Exegetical Theology (Baker, 1981).

ⁱⁱⁱ James Montgomery Boice, The Minor Prophets (Baker Books, 1983), p. 292.

^{iv} William L. Banks, Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet (Moody Press, 1966), p. 72.

^v George Morrison, quoted by Warren W. Wiersbe in Be Amazed (Victor Books, 1996), p. 83.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 84.

^{vii} Henry M. Morris, The Remarkable Journey of Jonah (Master Books, 2003), p. 95.

^{viii} Banks, p. 80.

^{ix} Wiersbe, p. 85.