

**Living Messages
of the
Books of The Bible**

GENESIS TO MALACHI

BY

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE MESSAGE OF JONAH

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Revelation of the Lord

- i. The Lord and Nineveh.
 - a. His Attitude. Pity. 4:11.
 - b. His Activity.
 - 1. The Message sent.
Against its Wickedness.
 - 2. The Repentance of GOD.
Produced by Nineveh's
Repentance.
- ii. the Lord and Jonah.
 - a. His Need of a Messenger.
 - b. His Persistence and Patience.
 - 1. For Delivery of His Message.
 - 2. For Fellowship of His Messenger.

**II. The Revelation of the Responsibility
of Representation**

- i. The positive Statement.
 - a. To Represent. He only sends those to

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

Everything of value in this Book is embodied and emphasized in JESUS, and to us.

I. The Lord and the Cities

JESUS and Jerusalem.

II. The Lord and His People

JESUS sends us.

JESUS needs us.

III. Our Failure

- i. Not Ignorance of GOD.
- ii. Hatred of our Brother.
 - a. The Foreigner.
 - b. The Pariah.

IV. How shall we overcome?

- i. Not by forcing Love to them.
- ii. But by Obedience to GOD, which issues

- represent Him who know Him. 4:2. in Love to Man.
- b. Therefore to Obey.
 1. His Purpose rather than their Desire.
 2. Satisfaction in that Purpose.
- ii. The negative Revelation.
 - a. The underlying Reason of Failure.
 - Hatred of Nineveh.
 - b. The resultant Manifestation.
 - Estrangement from GOD.

THE book of Jonah is peculiar among the prophetic writings in that it contains no message delivered to the people of GOD by the prophet whose name it bears. The book is a story, and the story is the message. It was not written for Nineveh. It was written for Israel, using that word in its narrower application to the Northern kingdom, yet recognizing that the moral values of the book have their application to the whole nation.

In order, then, to discover the message of the book, we must seek for the outstanding facts in the story. In doing this it is of the utmost importance that we distinguish between the incidental and the essential. The incidental things are the ship, the storm, the whale, the gourd, the wind, and Nineveh. I need only pause here long enough to say that the incidental things are not necessarily things existing only in the imagination. These things are incidental because they were the instruments in the hand of the master Workman. The essential matters of the book are the transactions between the Lord and Jonah.

It is when the attention is fixed upon these, and all the other things are seen as incidental, that we begin to find the permanent value of the book, and to discover its living message.

Thus to concentrate the attention upon the essential persons is to find that the book is supremely the one of missionary teaching in the Old Testament.

Whereas a missionary purpose is to be found in the whole history of the Hebrew people, this one brief book in the prophetic section does more clearly set forth that missionary purpose, both as to its source and its method, than any other book in the whole of the Old Testament library. It reveals the attitudes and activities of GOD towards the nations, and towards His own for the sake of the nations.

It rebukes the failure of those who should represent Him.

It recalls to worship those who have neglected that responsibility of representation.

We may hold different opinions as to when and by whom the book was written, but we cannot read it in the way indicated without seeing that its first intention was that of rebuking the exclusiveness of the chosen people of GOD. Whether Jonah wrote it himself or not, it purports to be the story of events in his life, and there can be no reasonable doubt that the Jonah referred to is the one named in the book of Kings as exercising his ministry in the reign of Jeroboam II.

If we recall the prevailing conditions during that period we find two things of the most strangely contradictory character.

- Israel was attempting to form alliances with the nations around her, and
- at the same time was more exclusive religiously than she had ever been.

She had come to hold the idea that the religion of the Lord was hers only, that GOD had made her His peculiar people and cared nothing for others, and that the only attitude of GOD towards the people outside the covenant was that of hostility.

The whole of the Hebrew contempt for, and antagonism to, surrounding nations is focused in the picture of Jonah. The whole of the Divine attitude towards the surrounding nations, the Divine pity, the Divine patience, the Divine power, is revealed as we see the Lord dealing with Jonah.

Thus there are two permanent values.

- first, the revelation of the attitude of The Lord; and
- secondly, the revelation of the responsibilities of such as represent Him.

We do not find the deepest note concerning the Lord until we arrive at the end of the book. The story begins with a command to Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh, and cry against it.

When we follow the story through, and come to the last words, we touch the deepest note:

"Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: 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?"

"Should not I spare Nineveh?" Here we touch the fundamental truth of the whole book. Everything else is the outcome of it. The command to Jonah to go to Nineveh, the patient persistence with which GOD compelled him to obedience, are alike the outcome of what is declared in that brief sentence.

The relation of this book of Jonah to the books we have already considered is full of interest.

It completes a remarkable triptych presenting three pictures of the Lord.

- in Amos His sovereignty over the nations is revealed.
- in Obadiah He is revealed as the GOD of judgment.
- in Jonah the supreme revelation is that He is a GOD of mercy, a GOD of pity.

The word **spare** is significant.

The Hebrew word literally means *cover*. Should not I cover Nineveh? The thought perfectly harmonizes with the revelation of GOD suggested in the words which JESUS uttered over Jerusalem: **"How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!."**

The idea is that of covering them, and so shielding them from danger. Should not I cover Nineveh, brood over it, protect it, feel its sorrows in My own heart, shield it from destroying forces? In that word we have His attitude towards sinning cities. That is the source of missionary endeavor in all the centuries, "**Should not I spare Nineveh?**"

Out of that attitude all the activities of the Lord proceed.

I think if I took up this book of Jonah, and read it for the first time, I should inevitably misread it, because I should put into the first command to Jonah an emphasis wholly of anger in the presence of the wickedness and abounding iniquity of Nineveh; but I cannot so read it after I have read, "**Should not I spare Nineveh?**" Not that the standard of holiness is lowered, not that Jonah was sent to it with any other message than that of judgment against its sin; but that I have now discovered that GOD's anger with sin is born of His pity for the sinner.

When Nineveh repented, GOD repented, and repented because He cannot change.

The Hebrew word here has more in it than the suggestion of *change of mind*. It suggests *a sob, a sigh, a breathing of agony*. Yet it does also suggest change, and therefore what He said He would do, He did it not.

In the moment when Nineveh turned from its evil to Him, He straightway changed His purpose of judgment. Nineveh fulfilled its responsibility by obedience to Him; and His attitude was changed because He cannot deny Himself, He cannot be untrue to the central fact of His nature. Whenever we read that GOD repented, and we study the context, we shall find such statement either followed or preceded by a declaration of the cause, and the cause is always man's repentance. So that when a man turns from or repents of his wickedness, GOD turns from His purpose of judgment which in itself was love-inspired.

In further examination of the essential things, we notice GOD's need of a messenger.

"**How shall they hear without a preacher?**" is the enquiry of the New Testament, and in that enquiry, as in this story, there is manifest a great principle of supreme importance. Out of that grows the explanation of His persistent patience to secure the fellowship of His messenger, "**The word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time.**"

The man who had failed at first had a second opportunity of fulfilling the purpose of GOD in Nineveh; and beyond that, there is a third time, a third time of attempt to bring this man into sympathy with the purpose of GOD in mercy. The methods were of the gourd provided and withered, and the conversation between the Lord and His messenger.

There was tender satire in the question of GOD as the margin renders it, Art thou greatly angry?" Jonah replied "**I do well to be angry, even unto death.**"

Again GOD asked the same question, and continued:

"**Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it**

grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh?"

Thus GOD appealed to Jonah, persuading him to fellowship in love.

The story ends with the picture of this man still in rebellion, still angry.

If he wrote the book, then I claim GOD won his victory and brought him into sympathy with Himself, for the story told reveals his folly and his failure.

What, then, is the revelation of this book as to the responsibility of those who represent GOD? Forgive me if I first state it in the most obvious and apparently unnecessary way. The responsibility of those who represent the Lord is that they represent Him. Now what was the trouble with Jonah?

- why, when sent to Nineveh, did he find a ship and attempt to reach Tarshish?
- why, when commanded by the Lord to deliver a message, did he attempt to escape by resigning his position as a prophet?
- why, after the remarkable interposition and deliverance which came to him, and after he had delivered his message, did he sit in hot anger and rebellion against GOD?

I think the answer we should be inclined to give at first is that he did not know GOD. That, however, is not true, for it is written that when Nineveh was spared, **"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.."**

Therein is revealed the tragedy of this book.

The flight to Tarshish and the hot rebellion were expressions of something much more serious. The things Jonah knew of the Lord are the great truths contained in the most wonderful words in the Old Testament, words in which GOD had unveiled Himself to His servant long before, **"a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering, and plenteous in mercy and truth."**

Jonah knew all this, and that is why he did not go. Now we are finding the reason of his anger. It was not caused by ignorance of GOD, but by hatred of Nineveh. He did not want Nineveh to be spared. On the human plane I understand him perfectly. Nineveh was guilty of cruelty and abominations for which one hundred years later another prophet uttered her doom. She was merciless and cruel, and Jonah was in rebellion against her being spared.

GOD only sends those to represent Him who know Him. The responsibility, therefore, of those who are called to represent GOD, is that of obedience.

His purpose, rather than their desire, must be, the master passion of their heart. Their obedience must be overruled by the purposes of GOD, governed by them, and submitted to them. The result of failure in this is estrangement between the messenger and GOD.

What, then, is the living message of this book?

We have had this word of prophecy made more sure in that all its suggestiveness has been embodied for us in the Person and the mission of One Whom we call Lord and Master. Everything of value in this book is embodied and emphasized in the Lord JESUS CHRIST.

Therefore its teaching comes to us with even greater force, because with greater light than that with which it came to ancient Israel.

That final word, which reveals the fount out of which all this story springs, the word which announces the pity of the Divine heart, flames for us in new light in the picture of JESUS CHRIST in His attitude towards Jerusalem.

Do not let us, however, make that picture of CHRIST weeping over Jerusalem the picture of something in the past; it is the picture of His attitude at this moment towards this city, and towards all the cities of the earth. Think of all the cities, the habitations of cruelty, places where humanity is manifesting its most awful corruption, and then remember that GOD pities them all.

However we may fail towards our own or other cities or lands, GOD has pity on them.

Do we care for the plant that comes up and perishes? Then GOD says, "**Should not I spare Nineveh?**" We shall never be missionary enthusiasts until we come into fellowship with that pity. Once we do so, we shall find the corrective to all our halting. When He beheld the city He wept over it. That is a revelation of the eternal fact in the nature of GOD.

All the picture of the Lord in His dealing with Jonah is fulfilled for us also in the New Testament revelation.

If the Lord CHRIST pities men, in order to send His messages to them, He needs us. GOD always needs a man to stand in the gap. The Word must be incarnate before it becomes powerful. We scatter our Bibles far over the world, and thank GOD that we do so, but the ordained method of reaching men is to send the Bible, with a man. It is by the human voice, the actual living messenger, that the Word of GOD is made powerful. CHRIST still needs messengers to the cities, and He still sends us. There is no man, woman, or little child who really belongs to CHRIST, who does not share the responsibility:

"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me."

That command comes out of infinite pity and infinite love.

Why cry against Nineveh's wickedness?

- because it is damning Nineveh;
- because GOD would save Nineveh;
- because GOD's act of destruction is forever a strange act.

The act that comes out of His heart is the act of construction, salvation, and love. Therefore cry against the wickedness that blights and spoils.

Before we criticize Jonah let us turn the light on ourselves. How far have we obeyed? There are facts in the story of Jonah which show that there was much of nobility about him, even in the moment of disobedience. When he went out from the presence of the Lord, he went down to Joppa and found a ship waiting (it is remarkable how accommodating circumstances seem to be sometimes when we are trying to escape responsibility), then he paid his own fare. There is a fine touch of honesty about that. We have not always been so honest. Do not forget, however, that if we are really commanded by GOD, the fortuitous concurrence of circumstances, Joppa, the ship, and the fine independence of paying our own fare, will not ensure our reaching Tarshish. The hand of GOD is still upon us, and we thank Him that it is so.

The secret of the Church's comparative failure in missionary enterprise is not that we do not know GOD and His compassion. We do know Him. His love has been commended to us. We have felt its warmth, its fire. We know its victories in our own lives. Why, then, do we halt? For exactly the same reason which halted Jonah. Because we hate Nineveh.

The Church does not want to see the world saved, does not want to see the heathen nations brought to CHRIST. She still speaks of her work as foreign missionary work; still describes men of other nationalities and other climates and other colours as *natives*, as *foreigners*; still adopts the attitude of supercilious indifference to them.

If that statement seems too severe, come nearer home.

Why does not the Church reach the outcast people in London and save them? Because the Church does not like the outcast people, does not want them saved. We write of the pariahs of India in pity, but the submerged outside our own doors we prefer to keep outside. In how many pews in the average church would the outcast be welcome if he or she appeared on Sunday next? Do we really want them? Are we ready to cooperate with GOD?

How shall we overcome this difficulty? Not by trying to love them. Never was a more absurd thing said by any man than that he would try to love some one. It is impossible. We cannot try to love these people. What, then, shall we do? Fall in line with the command of our Lord and what we know of Him, and do what He bids. Such obedience will create love even for those whom we cannot compel ourselves to love.

There are a great many people in this city of whom we think with revulsion. We do not want to get near them. We are not really anxious they should be saved. We have never stretched out a hand to help them. Let us begin to do it, not out of love for them, but out of love for the Lord.

As surely as we do, we shall find beneath the rough surface gems with luster as wonderful as any we have discovered in any walk of life. We shall find that they also are lovable.

The whole lesson of the book of Jonah is that of the sins of exclusivism, the sin of imagining that if we have received light, it is for ourselves alone.

Let us away to Nineveh because GOD commands it, whether the going falls in with our

prejudices or not; and as we go we shall come into new fellowship with Him, and find a new comradeship with humanity, and withal hasten the coming of the day of His perfect victory.

~ end of chapter 31 ~
