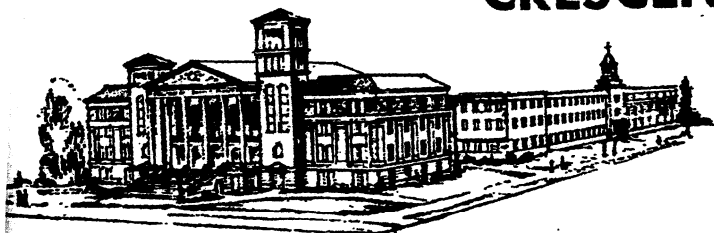


# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH



## SERMONS

"JONAH: THE RUNNING PROPHET"

Sunday Evening, November 5, 1961  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: The Book of Jonah

For sheer preaching possibilities, there is no passage in the Bible that surpasses the little book of Jonah. It has rightly been regarded as one of the noble classics of the Old Testament. Dr. T. H. Robinson regarded it as "the forerunner of Christianity in Judaism." All this makes doubly tragic the way it has been usually regarded. For instead of concentrating on the major themes, the discussion has usually bogged down to a whale and whether or not a man could be swallowed and survive. Ask the average man about Jonah, and the association with the fish is probably all he will know. Tonight I want us to push aside the incidentals and deal with the great message of this book. I think it is one of the finest missionary tracts in all the Scriptures, and I want us so to approach it in our thinking.

We must first of all determine the exact nature of this book. Is it historic or parabolic truth? Now a massive debate has been waged on this issue, but notice carefully how I phrased the question. We are not asking: is it true or false? Rather we are seeking the form that this truth has assumed. I am not concerned about the questions of natural possibility; that is, could a whale swallow a man? This was a burning question twenty-five years ago, but today we are more humble in our assertions. God has such power and our knowledge is so limited that we do well not to pontificate about what is "possible." The liberals of past generations held to a natural law that ruled out the miraculous. Today we are much more cautious. Therefore, I want to emphasize that all of the elements in the story could have happened; the storm and the lots and the fish could all have coincided by the power of God. The truth of the book is not the issue at all. Rather, it is the difference in narrative and parable, the difference between the account of the Lord's Supper and the story of the prodigal son. Both are true; it is only a question of form.

We do know that a prophet named Jonah is mentioned in II Kings 14:25; he lived in the eighth century B.C. and was a rabid Jewish nationalist. Of course, Nineveh was a city and many of the details are factual. But if this is simply a historical account of Jonah's activities, the end result is rather negative. We have no oracle of his teaching, but only the embarrassing account of his intractable refusal to fulfill his calling. From a purely historical standpoint, Jonah is a reflection on the office of prophet and his story ends on a discordant note.

However, if this is looked on as a kind of historical parable that is aimed at arousing Israel to her missionary calling, it assumes a positive significance. It speaks to a problem that was very real in Israel after the Exile, namely, the exclusive attitude of the Jews. It could be the work of one who was inspired by the universalism of Deutero-Isaiah and anxious to stem the tide of Ezra's influence. If so regarded, it becomes a classic like unto "the elder brother portion" of the story of the prodigal son. It is an effort to arouse Israel by drawing a portrait

right before her eyes. Now I am not the least dogmatic at this point, and would not argue with one who approaches it as historical. It is true in either case. But let us look at it as an attempt to awaken in Israel her missionary calling.

The work begins with a command of the Lord to Jonah to go to Nineveh and pronounce judgment on her wickedness (1:2). This was the great capitol of Assyria, located northeast of Jerusalem. But Jonah goes down to Joppa and buys a ticket to Tarshish, a Spanish town that is due west. Here we have the unusual spectacle of God pointing in one direction and a prophet going in the other. Why did he refuse to obey? Was it because he was afraid of failure or fearful of the Assyrians? No, the answer is: he was afraid he would succeed. You see, the Israelites hated all their enemies, especially the Assyrians. These people had been a constant irritant, and Jonah was not about to be the instrument of their salvation. He wanted them to be destroyed and had no intention of sharing the mercy of his God with them. Jonah was a man of limited love, and the universal demand of God was more than he could accept. So he "turned on his heels" and fled in the other direction.

Now this is the main thesis of the book: that Israel was unwilling to be an instrument of God's inclusive purpose. The universalism of God was there from the very beginning. When He called Abraham, it was that he might be a blessing to all people (Genesis 12:3). And the whole story of the Bible is a struggle at this point - the clash of God's wideness with man's narrowness. The Israelite who read this little book would condemn Jonah for being disobedient, but he was actually condemning himself. For this was the downfall of Israel. And it is well that we take note of this fact. The mantle of God's purpose has fallen on the Church, yet we are still plagued with limited love. Some want the Church to be only one race or only one class or only one type, but this is to violate our calling. God's love is all-inclusive, and he who reacts against this repudiates God's purpose. Jonah is Israel, the victim of limited, exclusive love. In his running he was diametrically opposed to God's command.

So Jonah boards this west-bound ship and goes to sleep. But a storm arises. The author reflects the faith that all nature is controlled by God, and rises up to thwart anyone who violates His will. Francis Thompson wrote in The Hound of Heaven: "All things betray thee, who betrayest Me." And so nature reacts against Jonah. The sailors are typically heathen. They believed in many gods, and were trying to find out which one was displeased. They awakened Jonah and urged him to pray - imagine a prophet having to be so prompted by a heathen! Then they cast lots to find out who was the cause. It fell on Jonah, and he confessed his plight. He suggested they throw him overboard, but they were quite reluctant. They tried everything else first - throwing over the cargo, rowing for shore - but at last they had to do so. Then the fish came, the sea quietened, and the sailors paid a vow to Jonah's God.

What is the writer trying to say here? First, there is the irony of Jonah's action. He was willing to sacrifice himself for some few heathen individuals, yet he would not give himself to save a whole city. When he thought in the abstract, he reacted one way; when he thought of concrete individuals, it was quite different. This is a baffling inconsistency, to be sure, but is it not present right today? I know people who love certain Negro individuals as devotedly as they do their own family. Yet when you speak of Negroes as a group, they have inflamed prejudices. Jonah hated Assyrians in a mass; he was willing to die for a few sailors. The other point the writer is making is about the nature of the non-Jews. The sailors were

more humane to Jonah than he was to Nineveh. It is tragic that sometimes "the non-Christian is more Christian than a Christian himself." And the sailors were capable of receiving the religious message. When the seas quieted, they responded. The author was saying that the Jews had no monopoly on religious capacity. Others were redeemable if given a chance.

The next chapter (2) pictures Jonah in the great fish reciting a Psalm of deliverance. He comes to himself, and when he is coughed up and recommissioned, this time he follows instructions. He goes to Nineveh with a terse message of judgment: "Forty days, and Nineveh will be destroyed" (3:4). At this simple message, great things begin to happen. The whole city is touched, and from the king to the lowest peasant a state of repentance is declared. Again the author is saying that the non-Jew can respond. And he also says that God had mercy upon them. The English version says: "God repented." This does not mean God changed His mind; it means rather that the people had changed. God's attitude is constant. He does not vacillate; but we can move from wrath to mercy if we are willing to repent. So God acted through Jonah's preaching.

Up to this point all seemed well. Jonah had been obedient, and great results had come forth. But the fourth chapter depicts the same old spirit in Jonah. One would think the prophet would be rejoicing at his great success; but no, where is he? Up on the hillside waiting for the destruction. When he realizes that God has had mercy, he is so angry he wants to die (4:3). Jonah is still the victim of his exclusivism. He still does not want Nineveh to be saved. The last scene is quite significant. God makes a gourd grow up and then it is destroyed. When Jonah laments this tragedy, the irony is absolute. Here Jonah is more concerned for a plant than a people. He did not even create it, yet he felt the bitterness of its destruction. But he is willing for God to destroy a whole city of people who are His very handiwork. With this the story closes, but not without revealing to Israel the absurdity of her position. The returning Jews were trying to rebuild a city, and were more interested in stones than in souls. Just as the incident of the Elder Brother ended by contrasting the Pharisees to God, so Jonah ends with the same contrast - over here is God, over there is Israel.

Yes, it is a great little book, and its message of universalism and rebuke echo down to us today. We are His messengers; missions is our mission. We are to include all men in the scope of our concern, or fail as did Jonah.

Someone has said that the greatest miracle of the book is not the storm or the fish or the revival; it is the fact that God could use a man like Jonah. But you know, there is a greater miracle than that - He can use folk like you and me. Think of what He could have done if Jonah had been willing!