

Jonah in Prophecy

Commentary for May 1, 2013 — “Our Salvation [Is] Nearer than When We Believed”

The quote above is from Romans 13:11. I became interested in the teachings of one denomination for selfish reasons in the 1970s. I thought that the organization’s knowledge of prophecy could help save me and my family from the tribulations to come. While it is true such knowledge may be helpful, the denomination had very little understanding of prophecy, certainly much less than they promoted and advertised.

I suppose many of you joined religious groups in the past for similar reasons — to save yourselves. This is not a bad thing. In fact, the apostle Paul encourages such a thing when he wrote, **“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”** (Philippians 2:12). This quote comes from Psalm 2:11: **“Serve YHWH with fear, and rejoice with trembling.”** Paul also tells us not to neglect our **“great salvation”** (Hebrews 2:3).

Repentance and salvation from God’s wrath is one theme of the Book of Jonah. It is also the subject of Dr. Martin’s article, “The Book of Jonah.” The [“May 2013 Newsletter”](#) introduces the article; read that first. The Scriptures contained in the Bible are the means to learn about the wisdom of God’s salvation for all mankind. Addressing his colleague Timothy, Paul wrote:

“And that from a child you have known the holy scriptures [for Timothy it was what we now call the Old Testament], which are able to make you wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

• **2 Timothy 3:15**

Learn the wisdom given in the Book of Jonah and from Dr. Martin’s teaching.

Jonah’s Prophecy

Part of the wisdom about salvation comes from the Book of Jonah, which contains only the briefest of prophecies (**“And Jonah ... cried, and said, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown,’”** Jonah 3:4). This is the extent of the prophecy we are told that Jonah preached to the Ninevites. Doubtless he said more, but this is all we are told in the text. Yet we know Jonah was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel during the time of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25). Most scholars think he prophesied there for a long time.

Almost the entire Book of Jonah is a narrative about the experience of the man Jonah as he is manipulated by YHWH. Jonah rejected God’s desire that he go preach, prophesy, and offer repentance and grace to an evil Gentile city (Jonah 1:2). He eventually did so and the Ninevites did repent (Jonah 3:6–10; Matthew 12:41).

Foolishly thinking he could thwart God’s will, Jonah sought to save his own people Israel by having God’s judgment come upon the Ninevites before YHWH used Assyria to punish Israel for its sins and evils they and their kings committed (2 Kings 14:24). Isaiah 10:5–19 notes

that Assyria was assigned to be the instrument of God's wrath against Samaria (Israel). Nineveh was the leading city of Assyria.¹

"The native name appears as Ninua or Nina (Ninaa), written with the character for 'water enclosure' with that for 'fish' inside, implying a connection between Nina and the Semitic nun, 'fish.'

• **"Nineveh" in ISBE Bible Dictionary**

Nineveh began on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, but later it was constructed on both sides of the river. Therefore it was a very long city, unwallled for much of its existence. Like most ancient cities, the extent of the urban area extended far beyond its walls, as implied by Jonah 3:3.

"This 'exceeding great city' lay on the eastern or left bank of the river Tigris, along which it stretched for some 30 miles, having an average breadth of 10 miles or more from the river back toward the eastern hills. This whole extensive space is now one immense area of ruins."

• **"Nineveh" in Eastons Bible Dictionary**

The Assyrian people were great traders (Ezekiel 27:24; Nahum 3:16) and their warriors were fierce and committed horrible atrocities upon their opponents and victims. Its people were known for their violence, even the unnamed king of Assyria admitted this to be so²:

"But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.

• **Jonah 3:8**

What Jonah hoped for, the destruction of Nineveh and Assyria, did happen, but it occurred after God punished Israel. YHWH eventually used Assyria to punish Israel. Speaking through the prophet Nahum about Nineveh, YHWH expresses His feelings about His judgments:

"God is jealous, and YHWH revenges; YHWH revenges, and is furious; YHWH will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserves wrath for his enemies. YHWH is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked."

• **Nahum 1:2-3**

God is patient yet He remembers (Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30-31) and will pay those who disobey Him. The Assyrians forgot their repentance (as David forgot God for a time):

"Now consider this, you that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver."

• **Psalm 50:22**

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¹ The text of Jonah nowhere says it was the capital of Assyria, although many scholars have said this. Jonah just states that it was a great city. Nineveh was built by Nimrod after the flood. (See modern translations of Genesis 10:8-12. Older translations say Asshur built Nineveh. See also Micah 5:6.)

² Remember, violence toward people was the cause of God's judgment of the flood (Genesis 6:11, 13). Other judgments come, even judgments against spiritual beings (see Psalm 82) because those in power do not protect the innocent from wickedness.