

## See Jonah Run

The Prodigal Prophet – Part II

Jonah 1:2-3

### Introduction

What is the world's dirtiest job? What do you think is the crummiest job on the planet?

Maybe you think you have it – and you are dreading Monday morning.

I wondered what kind of information was available on this question, so I googled, “world’s dirtiest jobs”. I discovered jobs too gross to even imagine. Some people really do have tough jobs.

I will mention one job title – how does this grab you – Sewage Inspector. It happened to be pretty high on the list of the world’s dirtiest jobs. The article even provided a picture of a man doing this job in a full body suit with oxygen tanks strapped on his back and a diver’s hood strapped down and taped tight, as well as a mask and thick gloves. The picture showed him waist deep, descending a ladder from which he would disappear into raw sewage.

What kind of classes are needed in college to land a job like this? Some of you are thinking, “None – you just have to live with my roommate and you are ready.”

While I was at it, I researched the world’s most dangerous jobs.

Number eight on the list was forestry – lumber jacks. Because of hidden roots, high winds, working with chain saws a hundred feet in the air, and falling branches, this was one of the most dangerous jobs.

High on this list as well, were police and fire personnel. Every day on the job is a risk in which they put their lives on the line. You may have seen the recent news reports of the funeral held at our

church for a state highway patrolman who died after his car collided with a truck. People from all over came to pay homage to their fallen comrade.

Steel workers, roofers, and crane operators were other categories high on this list, as many die each year while operating heavy machinery or working high above ground.

Number one on the list was fishermen, along with pilots, bus and truck drivers – literally hundreds of people who work in the field of transportation die each year.

If we rolled the clock back to the Old Testament, there was a time when the most dangerous job on the planet was the office of prophet.

- Elijah had a contract out on his head.
- Jeremiah was beaten, imprisoned several times, and thrown into a well in which he sank to his waist in the mud and was left to die.
- Daniel was thrown to lions.
- Nehemiah was even threatened with his life after moving to Jerusalem; in fact, at one point he and his men worked at the wall restoration with one hand, while using the other hand to hold spears or swords.

There really was nothing more difficult or dangerous than obeying the will of God.

One particular prophet, whose story line usually focuses on a big fish, is rarely appreciated for his faith. Jonah has served faithfully for the past few decades. Some Bible scholars believe Jonah is an older man when the call comes to go to Nineveh.

He is seasoned, experienced, and dedicated to King Jeroboam and the nation Israel. His prophecy to Jeroboam and the nation has come true, adding to his credibility and fame. Jonah is definitely of the tribe of his mentor, Elisha.

However, God then calls him into the next chapter in his life – the most difficult one yet – and Jonah will run away.

## Jonah's Call from God

Let us listen in as Jonah gets the call from God. Look at Jonah 1:1-2.

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying,*

*“Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.”*

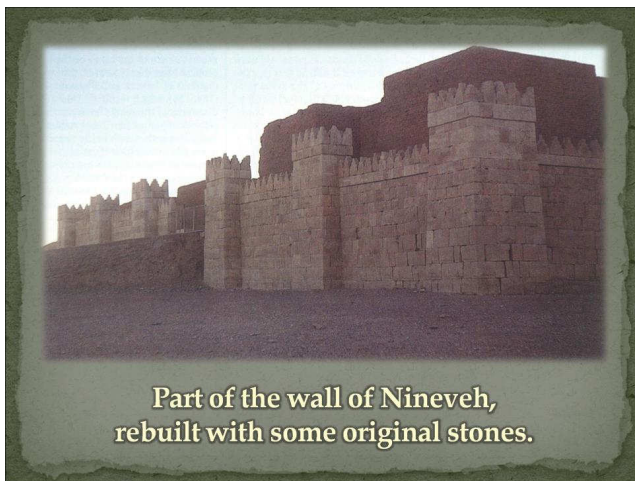
Note the last phrase again, “. . . for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

One paraphrase words this phrase, “They smell to the highest heavens”.<sup>i</sup>

In other words, God says, “Jonah, Nineveh has become a city of sinful sewage. The stench has reached heaven. Get on your prophet’s gear and deliver a message to them, ‘Clean it up.’”

The command of God’s word got Jonah’s attention. But the destination of his assignment immediately gripped him with a host of emotions – emotions that eventually led him to resign as a prophet of God.

Let us climb back into Jonah’s generation and try to understand the reason why.

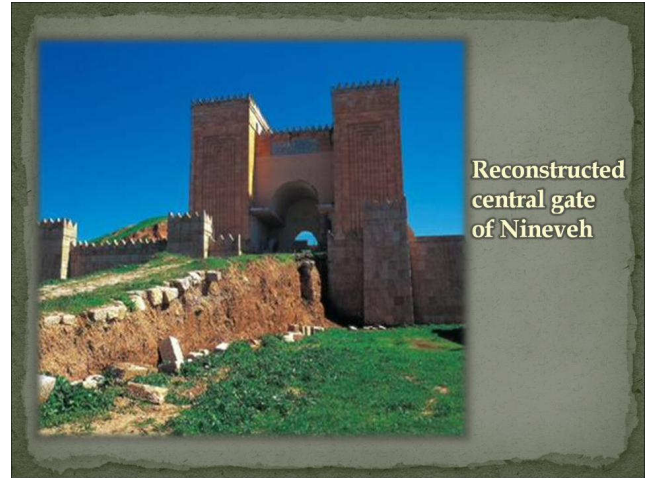


Part of the wall of Nineveh, rebuilt with some original stones.

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. This was the dominant kingdom that would eventually take Israel into captivity. The city of Nineveh was located in modern Iraq, near the northern city of Mosul.<sup>ii</sup>

It would rule this part of the world until it was conquered by the Babylonians about one hundred fifty years after Jonah’s death.

Much of Nineveh has been excavated and part of the city’s wall has been reconstructed using original stones. This capital city was an impressive fortress – built for war and a warlike people. They were Israel’s most feared enemies.



Reconstructed central gate of Nineveh

Jonah eventually walked through the central gate of Nineveh, which has also been reconstructed on its original site in Iraq using much of the original stone. The towers of the gate are nearly three hundred feet in the air. It was a breathtaking exposure to the grandeur of Nineveh – and the power of the Assyrian Kingdom. God even refers to Nineveh in verse 2 as “the great city”.

Thanks to archaeologists, we now know much about the palace and the king himself.



Austin Layard's drawing of the Royal Palace

The palace was beautifully and colorfully painted with battle scenes and warrior gods. When the King of Assyria assumed the throne, he supposedly took the hand of god whereby he was invested with the power of their national god, Marduk.

The empire this king would rule would stretch from the Persian Gulf to the borders of Egypt.<sup>iii</sup>

However, above all, the Ninevites were known by the Jews for their cruelty.

The prophet Nahum would also prophecy against Nineveh with this description,

*Woe to the bloody city, completely full of lies and pillage; her prey never departs, the noise of the whip, the noise of the rattling of the wheel, galloping horses and bounding chariots!*

*Horsemen charging, swords flashing, spears gleaming, many slain, a mass of corpses, and countless dead bodies . .*

*. . . because of the lust of the harlot, the charming one, the mistress of witchcraft, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and people by her witchcraft.*

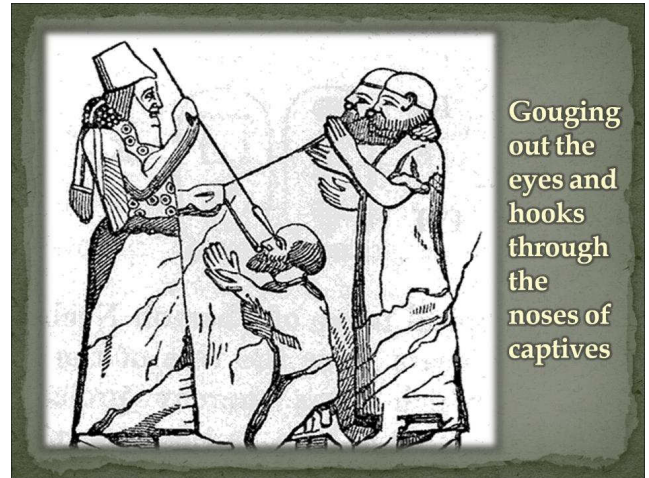
*“Behold, I am against you,” declares the Lord of hosts;”*

*Nahum 3:1-5a*

The Ninevites were demon-worshipping, immoral, brutal, unmerciful, perverted people. They boasted of their cruelty. Excavated records brag of live dismemberment, often with one hand left attached so they could shake it before the person died.

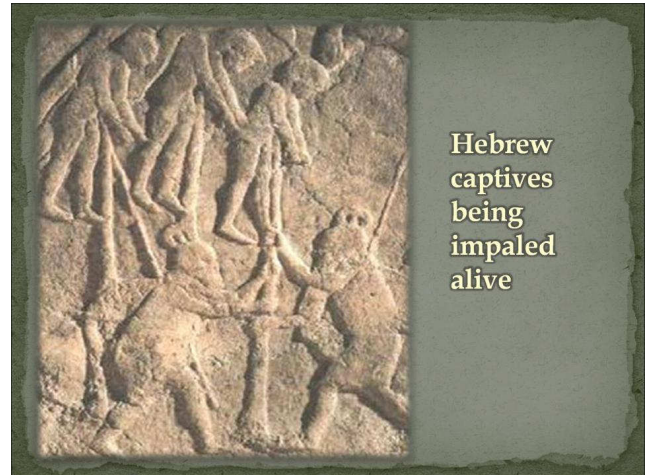
They made parades of heads, requiring a friend of the deceased to carry the head elevated on a pole. Ninevites boasted of their practice of stretching live prisoners with ropes so they could easily be skinned alive.

One Assyrian king boasted of his cruelty when he recorded these excavated words, “I flayed the skin from as many nobles as had rebelled against me and draped their sin over the pile of corpses. I burned their children. I captured many troops alive and cut off their arms and hands, noses, ears and extremities.<sup>iv</sup>



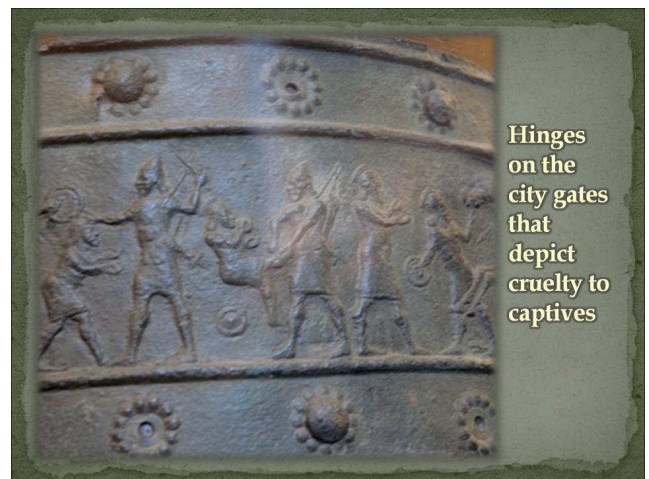
Gouging out the eyes and hooks through the noses of captives

It was the custom of the Ninevites to gouge out the eyes of their prisoners or to put hooks in their noses to humiliate them by leading them around like cattle before killing them.



Hebrew captives being impaled alive

The Ninevites would also impale their captives alive and then set them on fire – a practice that Nero would adopt centuries later for Christians, covering them with tar and making them living torches to light his garden parties.



Hinges on the city gates that depict cruelty to captives

Even the hinges on the city gates of Nineveh, which have been discovered, depict the cruelty of these people to captives.

Ninevites were proud of the terror they struck in the hearts of their enemies; they were proud of their reputation for being unmerciful.

It is no wonder that Jonah will later say to God, “I did not want You to show them mercy!”

However, this was the call of God.

Let me give several observations about this call from God.

**1. First, this call from God did not allow for any confusion.**

Jonah could not miss this call.

Circle in your text or note in your mind the three verbs in this calling, “Arise . . . go . . . cry (or speak out) . . .”

These are not suggestions. In the Hebrew language, these are imperatives; commands that can have exclamation points after them.<sup>v</sup>

Part of our problem in obeying God is not that we do not understand Him – it is that we do understand Him.

We really do not like it when God uses imperatives. We prefer suggestions. We are Americans – we believe in voting. God has one vote and we do too.

However, God is not in the practice of handing out ballots.

*Arise . . . go . . . [speak] . . .*

Jonah did not need to go into his study, pull out his Hebrew lexicon and parse these imperatives to make sure he understood.<sup>vi</sup>

This call was unmistakable, undeniable, and entirely upsetting. The will of God for Jonah did not allow for any confusion.

**2. Secondly, this call from God did not attempt to hide reality.**

There was no sales pitch in this call.

*[Jonah] . . . their wickedness has come up before Me.*

“Their sin stinks to the high heavens. They’re perverted and wicked and cruel. I know what I’m asking you to do. I realize how difficult it will be for you.”

We think God really must not have wanted us to do whatever it was we thought He wanted us to do because had He known what it would involve and the

difficulty it would create in our minds and hearts and bodies, He certainly would never have called us to do it.

No, this was the will of God for Jonah:

- whether he felt good about it or not;
- whether he wanted to do it or not;
- whether he agreed with God or not;
- whether he thought the Ninevites worthy or not;
- whether he was uncomfortable or not;
- whether he was fearful or not;
- whether he was happy where he was or not.

“Jonah, you’ve walked with Me and you’ve spoken for Me in pleasant places and to receptive audiences. Now arise, go and call out to the Ninevites.”

The will of God did not allow for any confusion.

The will of God did not attempt to cover up reality.

Let me give one more observation about this call.

**3. Thirdly, the will of God for Jonah did not announce a return to safety.**

There were no guarantees in this call to the ministry. It was not laced with promises of future rest, comfort, and ease.

Jonah was never offered the benefit package every prophet would have appreciated. There were no benefits like: the assurance of a listening audience, a welcome by the Ninevites, hospitality offered by this cruel kingdom – to which he will go, by the way, and announce that the people are all going to die in forty days unless they repent and follow his God.

You might say, “You have got to be kidding! Jonah has every reason to believe his head is going to be on some pole in Nineveh in a matter of days. No way!”

However, there are no loopholes in this call – no way to misunderstand it; no guarantees of safe conduct and safe return. It was simply the call to do something humanly, emotionally impossible.

What has God asked you to do for Him that you are resisting; what is His impossible task assigned to you?

You have your list of fears, excuses, and good reasons that God’s task for you will not work. Perhaps it is disappointments, lack of assurances, or

maybe the task is just not what you expected, or wanted.

Surely God's will is never upsetting or uncomfortable or unhealthy or undesirable.

However, Jonah knew; he understood. And there was only one thing in his mind he would do – run!

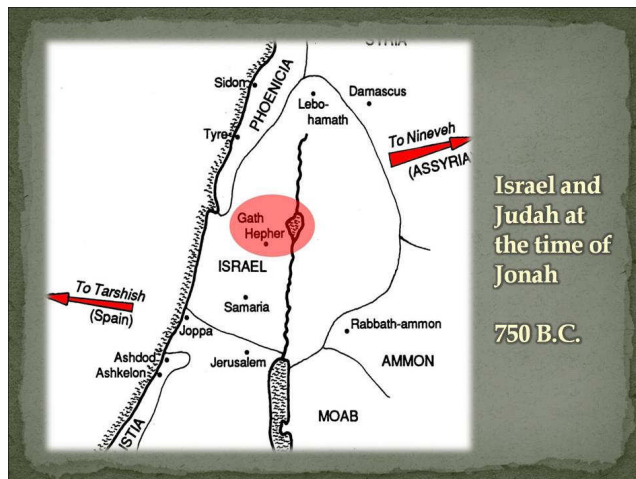
Look at Jonah 1:3.

*But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.*

Run, Jonah, run!

See Jonah run!

Now do not be too quick to judge – Elijah ran for his life from Queen Jezebel – just one woman sent a prophet of God into hiding (I Kings 19:3). At least Jonah is running from an entire kingdom.



Now, let me help you get your bearings on Jonah's flight. Jonah was from Gath Hopher and was perhaps living at this time in Samaria, the capital city of Israel. Twenty miles southwest was the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and Israel's main port city of Joppa.

But wait, Jonah knows he cannot run from the presence of the Lord – God is omnipresent. Jonah knows David's words,

*Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? (Psalm 139:7)*

Jonah knows he cannot outrun God.

The New Jewish Translation translates this to underscore that Jonah is actually running from the Lord's service.<sup>vii</sup>

Jonah has effectively turned in his resignation. He has quit. He has said, "I've had it! I will no longer be the prophet of the Lord."

To prove it, Jonah leaves Israel for good and sets sail for Tarshish.

Tarshish was located on the coast of Spain and is in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh. In fact, Tarshish was considered the most western spot of the known world.

Jonah is going as far away from the service of God as he possibly can!

One author put this into geographical perspective when he put it this way: this is like the word of the Lord coming to a Jewish man who lived in New York during World War II, telling him to go to Berlin to preach to Nazi Germany, and instead of this, he goes to San Francisco and boards a ship bound for Hong Kong.<sup>viii</sup>

So Jonah has cashed in his prophet's pension to come up with the rather large amount needed to sail to a place where he would quietly live out the rest of his days.

See Jonah run!

## Lessons from Seeing Jonah Run

Three lessons strike me as I observe this prophet running from this difficult assignment from God.

### 1. Whenever we run in disobedience to God, we are running in the wrong direction.

Imagine Jonah down at the docks looking for a ship headed anywhere west. He is running down the boardwalk, asking captains and crewmembers alike, "Where are you heading? Egypt – no, that's too close to home. Antioch – no, no. Carthage – not there either. . . . Sir, to where do you set sail? Tarshish. Tarshish – as far west as you can safely go – that's perfect. How much?"

Can you imagine Jonah making his way to the shipping office to book passage and then paying the fare with coins stamped with the image of Jeroboam II? Was Jonah smitten with guilt?

Had he even explained to the king that he was leaving – and why? What about Jonah's friends; people who were counting on him; young prophets who looked up to him; a nation that heard God speak through him? Did he even leave a note?

There is so much wrong in not doing right. There are so many people affected; so much is lost.

This leads to a second observation.

**2. Secondly, whenever we run in disobedience to God, we pay a higher price than we planned.**

The truth is that when we run away from God, we never really find a place where we can enjoy being.

“Okay, I’m here – now what?!”

The disobedient Christian is the most miserable person on the planet.

Alexander Whyte noted a generation ago in his commentary, “No booking clerk [in Joppa] could have told Jonah what it was actually going to cost him to get on board that ship. Running from God is always a costly affair.”<sup>ix</sup>

Remember the old saying,

- Sin will take you further than you ever wanted to go;
- Sin will keep you longer than you ever wanted to stay;
- Sin will cost you more than you ever wanted to pay.

Did you ever think about the fact that Jonah will never get a refund for his ticket?

However, to Jonah, this does not matter. He is probably thinking how well everything is working out –

- there just happens to be a ship
- that just happens to be about to weigh anchor
- and just happens to be going a long way away from Nineveh.

“This is easier than I thought!”

This leads to one more lesson to learn.

**3. Thirdly, whenever we run in disobedience to God, Satan will be happy to arrange the transportation.**

We will also discover that whenever we repent, God will provide the transportation back.

Jonah disobeyed the imperatives – “Arise . . . go . . . speak.”

What about us?

Have you ever thought about the fact that the Christian life is filled with imperatives; commands?

They are clear, challenging, unmistakable, and unavoidable.

Let us look at a list of some of the imperatives that are, by the way, the word of the Lord to you and me who are living in New Testament times.

- Hold fast – I Thessalonians 5:21;
- Follow Christ – John 12:26;
- Speak the truth – Ephesians 4:25;
- Put on – Ephesians 4:24;
- Be alert – Revelation 3:2;
- Give to God – II Corinthians 9:7;
- Sing praise – Colossians 3:16;
- Study the word – II Timothy 2:15.

This is just the beginning.

Jonah disobeyed three imperatives and ran the other way.

What are we doing with a dozen imperatives? Are we running in the opposite direction too?

At this moment Jonah thinks he has gotten away – disobedient, yes, but free from this awful calling. And now, exhausted from the hurried packing, the frenzied decisions, and his race to the coast of some twenty miles on foot, he boards the boat and falls asleep below deck believing he has successfully run away from the Lord.

The words of one author summarized the issue in this text of Jonah 1:1-3, when he wrote,

*I am not the master of my destiny . . . not even my daily life; God is. To obey means to yield my will for His will; my desire for His desire; to engage in activity that is different, or unpleasant, or strange, or dangerous, or difficult, or simply a drudge. I relinquish control and another’s words call the shots. I am no longer my own master.<sup>x</sup>*

Jonah will learn this soon enough.

In fact, he might not have slept so soundly had he been able to see through the flooring of his cabin – down in the deep waters of the Mediterranean Sea, swimming quietly, keeping pace, under orders to just tag along.<sup>xi</sup>

And this fish will obey.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/14/2008 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2008 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> David J. Clark and Eugene A. Nida, A Handbook on the Books of Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah (United Handbook Series, United Bible Society, 1978), p. 51i.
- <sup>ii</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Jonah (Intervarsity Press, 1988), p. 98.
- <sup>iii</sup> H. W. F. Saggs, The Babylonians (London, 1962), p. 94.
- <sup>iv</sup> James Bruckner, NIV Application Bible: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah (Zondervan, 2004), p. 28.
- <sup>v</sup> William L. Banks, Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet (Moody Press, 1966), p. 14.
- <sup>vi</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson, Man Overboard (Banner of Truth, 1981), p. 12.
- <sup>vii</sup> UBS, p. 53.
- <sup>viii</sup> James Montgomery Boice, The Minor Prophets (Baker Books, 1983), p. 266.
- <sup>ix</sup> John Phillips, Exploring the Minor Prophets (Kregel, 1998), p. 141.
- <sup>x</sup> Dan Schmidt, Unexpected Wisdom (Baker, 2002), p. 1.
- <sup>xi</sup> Phillips, p. 142.