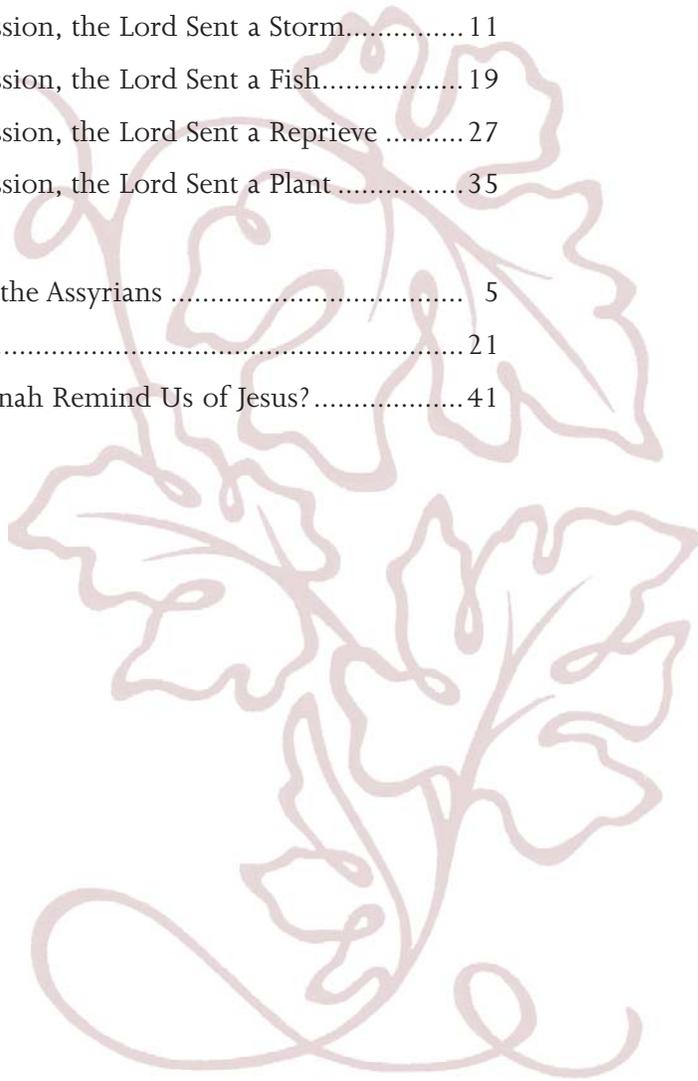


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THE RELUCTANT PREACHER

With good reason, many people are afraid of fire. It spreads. It kills. It destroys. We respect those who fight fires and rescue people entrapped by them. They risk their own lives to save others. Many firefighters have gone into burning buildings to rescue someone trapped and perishing in the flames. What a relief for a person gasping and choking to see the silhouette of someone who can help! Unfortunately, at times even firefighters themselves become victims in need of rescue.

So it was with God's prophet Jonah. God had sent him to Israel to rescue people from the sin that leads to the fires of hell. The lifeline Jonah extended to them was the Word of God. But Jonah was an extraordinary person with extraordinary talents. God gave to Jonah the rare mission of extending the lifeline of his enduring promises to the gentile people of Nineveh. They too were to be included in God's plan of salvation. Only God could rescue Nineveh. Only God could rescue Israel. And only God could rescue Jonah, the rescuer in need of rescuing.

Jonah's is more than a timeless and fanciful tale. It is reliable truth about God's compassionate and saving heart. It was as true then as it is now: "Salvation comes from the LORD" (Jonah 2:9).



Jonah carefully placed on his bed what he thought he'd need for the journey: a tunic, a cloak to fight off the cold nights, a staff that had stood in the corner for the rough roads, some extra food, and, yes, a new pair of sandals. He'd better not forget his money pouch because there would be a one-way ticket to buy. How far would Jonah actually have to go to get away? He'd also miss the bare confines of his tiny room. The little window framed the olive trees outside as if it were a work of art hanging on the cool stone wall. He'd also miss his small Galilean village. Even though nothing exciting ever happened in Gath Hepher and no one famous ever came from Galilee, he would still miss this place. Jonah had no idea where he was going—except away. Far, far away. He just couldn't do what his Lord was asking him to do. Was it really the Lord who was asking? Was he mistaken? The Lord had always made his message clear before. Why should Jonah doubt it this time? The message didn't seem to make sense.

It wasn't that Jonah was afraid of hard work, rejection, or being a spokesperson for the one true God. He'd done it before. He had the privilege of going to Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, where he had an audience with the King of Israel himself, Jeroboam II. The Lord had good news for Jonah: there was going to be a renaissance of sorts in Israel, and King Jeroboam was going to oversee it. What a change that would be from the past! The Israelites had lost territory after territory. They were the laughingstock of neighboring lands. All the nation's wealth went down the drain in tribute to other

THE LORD SENT A PROPHET

peoples more powerful than they. These misfortunes were soon going to change. The Lord had revealed it.

Things did get better! Jonah had been privileged to see it. Through conquest and acquisition, Jeroboam had expanded the eastern boundaries of Israel. It now reached limits they hadn't seen since the reigns of Kings David and Solomon during the golden age of the monarchy. Soon tributes from these conquered lands began to flow into Israel's coffers. This cash flow triggered unprecedented wealth and opulence—for those on top at least. What a privilege it was to convey good news for a change! What a joy to see that things turned out exactly as the Lord had said they would!

For once others were treating the Israelites as the people of promise the Lord had said they were. Didn't everyone know that salvation was from the Jews? The Prophet—the promised Messiah-King—was to come from this nation and do his work within it. Wasn't this what the good Lord intended when he approached Abram on that starry night, promising to make him into a great nation and to give him a great land? Through Abram and the nation descended from him, the Lord would bless everyone on earth. The Lord had long ago created this nation from the offspring of an aged and infertile couple. The Lord had nurtured this nation from a clannish group of captive slaves in Egypt. He had led them to the very land he had promised, on oath, to Abraham—a land he had said he would give to the patriarch's descendants.

Before entering the Promised Land under Moses' leadership, the Lord gave these special people his Law at Mount

Sinai. This Law was his pledge to be their God. His people's response was their pledge to be his people. They would show they were his people by living lives of obedience to his commands. God's commands would serve as a protective hedge around his chosen people. In keeping them, they would look and act differently from the other nations that surrounded them. As the Lord's chosen people, they would be different from other nations. They would be his cradle of salvation for the world. Jonah was proud of his heritage as a Hebrew. It was about time they experienced a little prosperity.

Not that the Israelites deserved it. They hadn't always looked and acted so much differently than the infidel nations around them. Jonah had to admit to himself that even in Israel's present outward prosperity, there was much spiritual poverty. The rich cared little for the poor and downtrodden. Why should they care? They had what they needed to fill their homes and their bellies. It seemed the more God blessed them outwardly, the more spiritually famished they became. Their religion had become a sham; they had let it degenerate into a mere shell; they had cut the heart out of it. They had no heart for the Lord and no heart for one another. No longer were they living in repentance. No longer did they walk in faith with the Lord who would bring Christ into the world through them. Jonah had to admit that what seemed to be a new high point in Israel's history was, in reality, a low point. The Israelites were ripe for God's judgment.

Jonah, however, didn't want to be a channel for God's judgment. After all, Jonah's name meant "dove," a messenger