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Day 167 - June 16

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## **The Divided Kingdom (930-725 BCE)**

### ***The Preaching of Jonah against Nineveh***

**Readings: *Jonah 1:1-4:11; 2 Kings 13:5-6; 14:25-27***

#### ***Reflections:***

- The story of Jonah is held by most Christians as a literal piece of history although the form of the story is actually more closely aligned with a parable, similar to ones that Jesus taught. The fact that the story identifies a historical figure, Jonah, does not in fact mean that it is a historical account. See Luke 16:19-31 where Jesus tells a story involving Abraham. This does not diminish the truth of the story but it does help us focus on the right issues. The dialogue should not be around “can a man be swallowed by a whale for three days?” or “can a plant grow over night?” but “why don’t religious people get God’s compassion for lost people and so quickly stand in judgment?”
- The story opens with God’s call on Jonah to preach judgment against Nineveh, a known enemy of Israel and one with a history of incredible violence and ruthlessness. Now Jonah runs in the exact opposite direction, heading west across the Mediterranean Sea rather than east across land to Nineveh. A terrible storm comes up and a group of Gentile sailors actually show more compassion and mercy for Jonah with their lives at risk than Jonah is showing towards the people of Nineveh under God’s direct command.
- The sailors show true fear of God before they reluctantly throw Jonah into the sea at Jonah’s command. Jonah does not drown but is swallowed by a great fish. For Jonah this would have been his greatest fear. Israelites of that time were terrified of water and the mythical monsters of the deep seas. This was the worst possible fear he could have encountered. Yet there in the place of ultimate anguish, fear and death, God protects him and saves him. The song Jonah sings inside the great fish parallels many of the psalms and captures the revelation he has discovered. In the future days of Israel, they as a nation will go into captivity as Babylon conquers them and takes them as slaves within their nation. Like Jonah, they will be trapped within a great beast. Yet, as slaves within Babylon, as they would reflect on this story of Jonah, they could be encouraged that even in Babylon, far from the Promised Land, living as slaves and not free people, God could take care of them.

- When Jonah is spewed back out on land in miraculous fashion, Jonah is now ready to be obedient to God. Jonah now heads to Nineveh to complete his calling.
- Jonah preaching judgment to Nineveh although at first glance does not seem like the kindest thing to do, in fact, it is a form of enemy love. It is the “tough love” side of enemy love where someone has the courage to challenge a person who is way out of line. This is one of the rare and powerful stories of enemy love in the Old Testament prior to the coming of Jesus. Nineveh does repent in the story and Jonah’s mission is a wild success.
- The story is far from over as Jonah now goes into a pity party. Jonah is depressed and angry because God was merciful to his enemies and didn’t destroy them. As Jonah is sulking, a plant grows up over him to shade him from the hot sun. A worm then comes along and kills the plant. In his anger and depression, Jonah wishes he was dead. God finally confronts him about his priorities, “You have been concerned about this vine (symbol of the Promised Land), though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh (the Gentile enemies of Israel) has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left (no discernment of right and wrong) and many cattle as well (concern for all creation). Should I not be concerned about this great city?” This final question is the clincher.
- Jonah like Israel is only interested in his comfort. The vine, like the Promised Land, was meant to be a place of comfort but in reality its security and comfort came and left. Yet, all around Israel was the opportunity to share the light of the God’s truth to the enemy nations that encircled them. Israel though completely missed God’s heart for these nations. They had their hearts locked on judgment and could never look at their enemies with compassion. The story ends with God challenging a well-known religious leader, “Don’t you care about anyone but yourself?”
- This story is timeless. How easy is it to run away from God when you must face your fears and overcome your preconceived judgments of others? How consistently does God want us to confront our greatest fears and discover that He will take care of us and we can trust Him in all things? How amazing is the grace of God that goes way beyond anything we could have ever dreamed? How easy it is to be religiously proud and judge when God is pouring out his mercy on those we don’t like rather than to celebrate that God’s love is so big? How easy is it to be religious and subtly concerned only for our own comforts and convictions rather than to be truly relational, loving and other-centered?
- Jonah is a key parable that helps us understand the “irreligious message” of the Old Testament just as the “parable of the two sons” told by Jesus is a key parable that helps us understand the “irreligious message” of the New Testament.