

Truth for Today

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Speaker: Mr. David Pulman

Messages from some Old Testament Prophets: Jonah

Jonah is one of those people whose name is remembered for the wrong reason. He is associated with disaster in any circumstance but especially at sea. His name has become part of the English language, and can be found in any comprehensive English dictionary. To call someone a "Jonah" is to imply that they are likely to cause a problem. Yet this is far from what is really true as the events recorded in the book of Jonah demonstrate.

The book of Jonah teaches us about the futility of disobeying God, about the necessity of the work of repentance, and about the blessing of obedience. It provides us with a true understanding of God - that He is both a God of justice and a God of love.

Jonah was a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II, a king of Israel. In the 2 Kings 14:25, Jeroboam gains a victory and is able to recover territory previously lost. Verse 25 states that it was "according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah". It is important to understand that the prophetic word is God's word and that the prophet must speak God's word accurately and faithfully. Jonah was a reliable prophet who was used by God to make His word known. God expected obedience to the message from those who heard it.

The victory of Jeroboam the second took place about the year 786 BC. The events in the book of Jonah dealing with Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, are considered to be in the same year. Assyria was one of many enemy nations surrounding Israel. In little more than 60 years, Assyria would be the nation that God used to bring a final judgement upon Israel. All the nation of Israel would be carried away into captivity, never to return. Since then Israel has been lost among the nations until some future time when God will call them back to Himself.

Jeremiah 3:18 looks forward to this time: "In those days the house of Judah shall walk with the house of Israel, and they shall come together out of the land of the north to the land that I have given as an inheritance to your fathers." The captivity of Israel is different from that of Judah. When Judah was carried into captivity, they returned out of Babylon 70 years later. The details of Israel's captivity can be read in 2 Kings 17.

Background to the book of Jonah

There are three main points to keep in mind when considering the book of Jonah.

1. Although the nation of Israel was part of God's chosen people, they had departed from God and were worshipping all kinds of idols. God's prophets were sent on a dangerous work to speak God's word to the people, including the king. The prophets were extremely loyal to the service God had given them. God was loving and very patient towards His people. God is, and always has been, a God of love.
2. Jonah was sent, not to Israel, but to Israel's greatest enemy at that time. Just because Jonah was a prophet, it did not prevent him from being a person who was patriotic to his country and had the same national dislike of all other nations, especially those considered Israel's enemies.
3. Jonah also knew his God. The key to Jonah's initial reaction is found in 4:2, "For I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm." This knowledge of his God was fine for Israel but Jonah found it abhorrent when God sought to bless other people.

Jonah's disobedience.

In 1:1-3 we have the LORD God giving Jonah a message to preach to the people of the great city Nineveh. Jonah runs away in the opposite direction. Did Jonah think that he could prevent God from seeking to save people who are lost? God desires that everyone should come to repentance.

This reaction from Jonah is very predictable considering his natural hatred for other nations. Jonah appears to think that he can indeed run away from God. There is no place in the world that anyone can run to and escape from God. David in Psalm 139:7-12, said to the Lord,

“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me. If I say, “Surely the darkness shall fall on me,” Even the night shall be light about me; indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; The darkness and the light are both alike to You.”

The remainder of chapter 1 concerns the storm God sends while Jonah is asleep on the ship. This is a most remarkable event and there is no other true story of such amazing proportions. Jonah is unconcerned as he travels away from where God wants him to be. The storm is of such severity that the captain and mariners are worried. Goods are thrown out of the ship but all appears to be lost in this tremendous storm. All the mariners are praying to their gods but they realise that Jonah is missing. He is found and told to pray. However, Jonah knows why there is such a storm. Jonah explains who he is and why he is on board the ship. In 1:9-10, Jonah speaks of the God of heaven. The reputation of the true God was known by these seafaring people. Everyone on board ship becomes more afraid. How different today when many people are not aware of the existence of God, and some even deny His existence.

Jonah has a solution to the problem. Verse 12, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me.” If Jonah cannot run away from God, at least by ending his life he cannot be used to bring God’s message of repentance to the people of Nineveh. Jonah is still trying to be disobedient to God. At first the mariners are reluctant to throw Jonah into the sea. However, they are unable to prevail against the storm by rowing and there is no other alternative. Once Jonah is cast into the sea the tempest ceases.

Jonah’s first lesson.

If Jonah thinks he can escape God by being thrown overboard, he is mistaken! 1:17, tells us “Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.” For many years, even amongst Jewish scholars, the book of Jonah was considered a fanciful tale, rather than being a true event. However, the Lord Jesus used this story in a remarkable way. He spoke about the period of His death; when His body would be in the grave as being the same period of time that Jonah was in the belly of the great fish, see Matthew 12:40. The Lord would not use something that was untrue! So the amazing event caused by Jonah disobeying God is taken up in a remarkable way. Who else but God could take the failure of Jonah and turn such an event into an illustration of something far greater - the death and resurrection of Jesus?

Jonah’s prayer of repentance and God’s answer.

Jonah has three days and nights inside this great fish. At the end of it he is still alive by the mercy of God. It is at this point that chapter 2 commences with Jonah praying. In his prayer, he rehearses what has taken place and the effect that this experience has had upon him. After the three full days inside the fish, Jonah is brought to repentance and he is still thankful to his God. Chapter 2 is all about Jonah’s recovery.

Jonah begins to liken his experience as being in Sheol, or Hades, the place where the spirit goes after death claims the body. As Jonah prays, he knows that God will hear him. God is dealing very severely with Jonah when he is cast into the sea and swallowed by the fish. But God’s purpose in dealing severely with Jonah has Jonah’s recovery in view. God still wants Jonah to go to Nineveh. If I stray away from God and do not follow His word, I am not abandoned by God. God will work through the circumstances of my life to bring me back to Himself. God has work for you and me to do. It reminds me of the children’s chorus which captures this thought so simply and clearly.

*“Jesus bids us shine with a clear pure light,
Like a little candle burning in the night.
In this world of darkness so we must shine,
You in your small corner and I in mine.”*

It was Solomon in his great prayer during the temple dedication, who desired that God would listen to His people when they prayed, especially when in great difficulties and in foreign lands. Jonah in thought looks towards God’s temple. He knows that help will come to those who truly repent. Jonah had thought that his life was at an end but he now realises that he is being preserved. He is still alive; he remembers God. Now with confidence he prays looking forward to the time when he will again sacrifice and give praise to God. Jonah’s confidence in the God of salvation is revived.

After Jonah has finished his prayer, God who is in control of all situations causes the fish to vomit Jonah out onto dry land. Jonah's prayer included his repentance. Jonah finds himself back on land ready to start again. This time there is no thought of disobeying God!

Jonah now obeys and goes to Nineveh

Chapter 3 begins with the same words as chapter 1: "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.'" Jonah has probably about 500 miles to walk in order to bring God's message to Nineveh.

There is an interesting lesson for everyone in these first two verses. If, as a Christian, I decide to go my own way and not to follow the Lord's directions for my life, I will not progress spiritually until I return in repentance to the point of my departure. Repentance in the scriptures has two aspects,

1. The initial repentance of a sinner when the conclusion is reached that I am wrong and God is right. This is when the Gospel message of salvation is accepted through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His accomplished work of redemption on the cross.
2. Repentance is also required when a Christian fails the Lord in some way. This principle is found in both 2 Corinthians 7, regarding the Christians at Corinth, and Revelation chapters 2 and 3, in the addresses to the seven churches.

The same commission is given again to Jonah, but now it is accepted with a different attitude. Jonah goes according to God's word. The message Jonah preaches concerns the destruction of the city in forty days time. It is God's judgement upon the people of Nineveh for their great wickedness. When the Gospel message of salvation is preached today, is the coming day of judgement also mentioned? There is no time scale today as with Jonah. Then it was only 40 days away. The Gospel today has been proclaimed for approximately 2,000 years. Would there be a change in the hearts of the people of this world if we could say that the Gospel of free salvation ends in forty days time? Or forty hours? Or forty minutes? The Bible does say that Jesus is coming but not when. In John 14:3, He simply says, "I will come again". It could be at any moment when the Lord comes personally for every Christian. 1 Thessalonians 4:16 tells us, "The Lord Himself will descend from heaven". The speed and power of the event is recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:52, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye ... we shall be changed".

Nineveh was a great city which took three days to walk through. Jonah enters the city and commences to preach. Here is a man who has been in a fish's belly for 3 full days. We might conclude that he would not be very attractive! Jonah brings a message of coming judgement, this man who has himself been through God's judgement for disobedience. What is the effect on the people of this great city? They believed God because of the message of coming judgement proclaimed by Jonah. They recognised that the message demanded a change of heart and the people of Nineveh showed their true repentance of heart by fasting and dressing in sackcloth. Then all the people, including the king, waited to see what God would do. When I speak to others of salvation, judgement and the coming kingdom of the world to come, do they hear God speaking?

All the people including the king repented. They sat in ashes, an outward sign, asking God for forgiveness. What would God do?

At the end of chapter 3 we are told that God saw what they did, the sackcloth and ashes, but He also looked into their hearts and saw that they had truly repented. The people had turned from their evil ways. Only God can look into our hearts and minds to see motives and what is real. Because the people of Nineveh truly repented, God turned away His intended judgement from them and spared the inhabitants of that great city. The message of salvation today is so similar. Repent and the judgement of God will be turned away from you. This is why Jesus died upon the cross. All who believe see that Jesus took their punishment at the hand of God. What is left for those who believe? Nothing less than blessing and eternal life.

God is a God of love

In 2 Kings 14, Jonah was not angry when his prophetic words came true. Yet at the beginning of chapter 4 we have a very angry prophet.

Jonah had still to learn the true heart and nature of God, that regardless of nationality or any thing else, God desires all people to be saved. In the last chapter of this book, God has to teach Jonah a lesson. While Jonah waits to see what would happen to the city and the people, God provides him with shade from the sun. A plant grows quickly and shelters Jonah, but just as quickly God causes the plant to wither. Jonah, not realising this suffers from sun stroke. He moans and complains about the death of the plant. Then God said to Jonah, "You have had pity on the plant for which

you have not laboured, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than 120,000 persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left?"

Jonah worried about a plant. God was concerned about 120,000 people who might have perished for their wickedness. The people were saved because God persevered with His servant in order that a message of warning might be preached to them.

Conclusion

Jonah had to learn that his God is gracious and merciful to all mankind, not just to a select few. Have I the same interest in bringing the lost to God so that they might be saved? In this most remarkable book we learn that it is better to obey God than to disobey. We learn also that God loves and desires nothing less than the richest of blessing for the people of this world.

The relevance of this true story for today can be summarised in CH Gabriel's lovely hymn:

*"In lovingkindness Jesus came,
My soul in mercy to reclaim,
And from the depths of sin and shame,
Through grace He lifted me.
From sinking sand He lifted me;
With tender hand He lifted me;
From shades of night to plains of light,
Oh, praise His name, He lifted me."*

Let us pray. Lord, give me a desire to serve You, in bringing the message of salvation to the lost. Let me not hold back, if those to whom I am sent are different in some way. Let me but see the value of such a one, that as You died for me, You died for them also. Amen.

Let us finish with a verse from LA Bennett's hymn:

*"Oh, teach me what it meaneth;
That cross uplifted high,
With One, the Man of Sorrows,
Condemned to bleed and die.
O teach me what it cost Thee,
To make a sinner whole;
And teach me, Saviour, teach me,
The value of a soul."*

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