

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Lessons from the Lives of Old Testament Characters: The prophet Jonah

Jonah stands out as being quite different to the other Minor Prophets. There are twelve Minor Prophets, nearly all of whom are concerned with Israel in one way or another. Jonah is the exception on one occasion in that he was sent to a Gentile nation. This comes as a surprise. Earlier in the Bible, reference is made to Jonah in 2 Kings in which he is involved in his normal service as a prophet to Israel. We are reminded of the Lord's words to Paul in Acts 22, "Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles." As we read the Old Testament, Israel is seen to be the centre of God's national dealings although His heart of love was never far removed from the Gentiles. There were many Gentiles who became the recipients of His compassion. Just remember Naaman the Syrian, the leper who was cleansed. That incident is recorded in 2 Kings 5. There was also the widow woman of Zarephath to whom Elijah was sent. We read about this in 1 Kings 17. There were many others of whom we read in the Old Testament. How thankful we should be, living in New Testament times, having learnt of the love of God to all, whether Jew or Gentile.

### Jonah's commission.

Jonah was a servant of Jehovah and he was given work to do. Let's read this commission, "*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before Me*" (Jonah 1:2). Nineveh was the chief city of the Assyrian Empire. It was known for its sinful and evil ways. As a nation, it was arrogant, self-seeking and full of pride. We read often about it in the Old Testament. There were occasions when God used this nation to chastise His own people. "*O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation*" (Isaiah 10:5). God does as He will among the nations. In the later prophet, Nahum, we learn much more of the wickedness of the Assyrian. The preaching of Jonah was a message of judgement. However, Jonah does not excel in obedience; he does the very opposite. Let's read what he does, "*But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish*" (Jonah 1:3). A map shows us how contrary his actions were. Later on in the book, it will become evident why he took this course. Let's leave Jonah for a while to consider our responsibility as servants and the matter of obedience.

It does not become us as Christians to criticise any other servant; we are so prone to failure ourselves. Even in natural things, working under an earthly employer, it is expected of us to do what we are told; how much more if we are engaged in the Lord's service! The Christian has the supreme example in our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ and is called to follow His steps. Let's recall the well known words of the Apostle Paul in that memorable letter to the Philippians, chapter 2. We will break in at verse 7, "*But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of servant, and was made in the likeness of men*". The expression 'form' indicates that He wasn't only like a servant, He really **was** a servant. As believers we are to follow His example.

Let's return to Jonah and his strange journey again. Everything seemed to go very well when he arrived at Joppa. There was a ship going to the very place he had determined to be. This just suited him fine; so he paid his fare and boarded the ship and settled himself down for the voyage. This puts a tarnish on the project. Jonah was a prophet and there is no doubt about it. We have the words of Jesus, the Son of God for it, "*the prophet Jonas*" (Matthew 12:39). Whatever was he doing acting like this? Maybe it was because he was a true Jew, very much a patriot for his own nation. He found it difficult to make contact with Gentiles. After all, God had called out the Jew to be His own peculiar people. This may be part of the reason for his reluctance to go to Nineveh, but it wasn't the only reason. As the story unfolds, this will appear. The wheels of God's government turn swiftly and surely. Let's follow the narrative.

There is now a spectacular change in the story. The LORD comes into the picture! It is well worth considering this. If we have become servants of the Lord Jesus this is a great privilege, but there are also responsibilities; we cannot do what we like. Just listen to the way chapter 1 continues, "*But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken*" (Jonah 1:4). God acts swiftly. So far Jonah's plans seemed to have gone his way. We are told that the sailors were afraid. These were men who were probably hardened to life at sea. The sea was so rough that they set about lightening the ship. It seemed to be panic stations! Where was Jonah? The word 'but' occurs again, "*But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep*" (Jonah 1:5). No doubt, by now his conscience was at work. So to try and stifle his conscience he went to sleep.

But Jonah was rudely awakened by the shipmaster, surprised by his apparent disregard in the midst of such a violent storm. He said to Jonah, *“What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not”* (Jonah 1:6). They evidently recognized that Jonah had a resource they did not possess; they were heathen and had no knowledge of Jonah’s God. They fell back on casting lots to determine who was the cause of the trouble and the lot fell upon Jonah. He then came under some rough questioning and he gives a good confession. Let’s listen to it: *“...I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land”* (Jonah 1:9). The name ‘LORD’ is ‘Jehovah’, that particular name known by a God-fearing Jew as the God who is unchanging in His faithfulness to His promises to their nation. This must have been very confusing to these seamen; they all knew that he had fled from the presence of the LORD.

The seamen again question Jonah, *“What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous”* (verse 11). His answer was very strange. He said to them, *“Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto thee: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you”* (verse 12). We must remark on the consideration of the seamen for Jonah. Heathen though they were, they did all that they could to avoid casting him into the sea. They tried to get to land, but this was impossible because of the violence of the storm. So there was no other way except to do as Jonah said. The moment they cast him into the sea the storm ceased its raging. This had a very striking effect on the seamen. Listen, *“Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD and made vows”* (verse 16). What a change! It almost sounds like conversion.

This brings us to the closing verse of chapter 1, a very important one indeed. We must quote this in full, *“Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights”* (verse 17). Today, sceptics deride this story of Jonah “It is just an allegory, a myth with some useful lesson for us to learn,” they say. “Such a thing could never happen.” What must the response from the Christian be? We must not allow the word of God to be derided in this fashion. I trust that we who are listening to this talk today believe the Bible to be what it claims to be; inspired by God. However, the final judgement in this story must rest with the words of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, *“For even as Jonas was in the belly of the great fish three days and three nights, thus shall the Son of man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights”* (Matthew 12:40).

### **Jonah as a type of the Lord Jesus Christ.**

Much has been written as to the true meaning of the verse just quoted from Matthew’s Gospel. Tradition has its voice; famous names have added their contribution. However, in our talk today we enter into no controversy, but accept the words at their face value. Also the testimony of the Apostle Paul must be quoted, *“For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the scriptures”* (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

### **Jonah’s prayer in the belly of the fish.**

By now, Jonah must have felt very humbled; God’s ways are past finding out. Jonah’s disobedience was going to cost him a good deal more than the fare he had paid to the shipping company. In the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12, we read of chastisement. This is a very interesting word; we are inclined to think of it as meaning a punishment of some kind. This is a mistaken impression; the word means ‘child training’ so while we are having to suffer for taking a wrong course we are also being trained according to the Lord’s mind. Our profit is the end in view! Just listen to a verse from Hebrews 12:11, *“Now no chastisement for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them who are exercised thereby”*. This led to the remarkable prayer of Jonah in chapter 2. Another point worth noting is that even if we feel that something has come in to cause distress, we must be sure to keep the lines of communication open and pray. Jonah did! The knowledge Jonah had of the Bible is astounding; he was certainly an avid reader! Also he was able to remember many of the Psalms. It is a very good practice for Christians also to memorize the scriptures.

Coming back again to think of Jonah as a type of the Lord Jesus in His death and resurrection, let’s look a little closer at some of the Psalms Jonah quotes. Two outstanding psalms noted in his prayer are Psalms 42 and 69. In both of these psalms, there are passages which refer distinctly to the Lord Jesus; in fact the whole of Psalm 69 is considered to be a Messianic psalm. Listen to Jonah 2:3, *“...The floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me”*. Compare these verses with Psalm 42:7, *“Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me”*. These words from Psalm 42 are prophetic, pointing to the sufferings of the Lord Jesus when on the cross He bore the judgement of God which we deserved. Psalm 69 tells the same message, *“I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me”* (verse 2). When Jonah prayed, he was surrounded by water as well as being inside the fish. He was in these circumstances on account of his disobedience. Jesus suffered the waters of judgement because He was obedient to God’s will and because of His great love to us. We haven’t the time to go into all of Jonah’s prayer, but it comes to a close suddenly! Let’s listen to it, *“But I will sacrifice unto Thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD. And the*

*LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited Jonah upon the dry land*" (Jonah 2:9-10). This is resurrection; Jonah's ordeal was at an end! Jonah had passed through death and resurrection in a figure, thus pointing to the *greater than Jonah*, the Lord Jesus Christ. There is something very special about 'dry land', it means a firm footing! Christian friend, never forget that we belong to a risen Christ.

### **Jonah's mission to Nineveh**

We should not be surprised that the Lord Jesus said that Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites. As we have just said, Jonah had passed through an amazing experience. He now obeys the call to go to Nineveh; this was no mean task! *"So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three day's journey. And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown"*. It was a message of judgement, because the sin of the city was great. The results were great also, *"So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them even to the least of them"*. Even the king repented and covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. If such a thing as this had happened in our day, wouldn't we have rejoiced? But Jonah wasn't pleased at all; in fact, he was angry. He was a true Jew; he was unhappy about the goodness of God going out to the Gentiles.

### **The references made to Jonah by the Lord Jesus in the New Testament**

It is perhaps time to look at the scriptures in the New Testament which refer to Jonah. They are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. It is a good thing that the Son of God Himself puts the stamp of divine inspiration upon the prophecy of Jonah. The remarks made by Jesus were not complimentary to the nation of Israel. The Jews were always asking for signs; they did this by trying to catch Jesus out in His words. They refused His teaching and sought for His life. Eventually He was crucified by the Gentiles. Let's listen to the passage in Luke 11, *"...This is an evil generation: they seek a sign; and there shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet. For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation"* (verses 29-30). Jesus was warning the Jewish leaders that as Jonas was sent to the Gentiles, so if they persisted in their rejection of Him God would turn to the Gentiles with the Gospel. This in fact did happen; in Luke 24:47 after His resurrection, Jesus commissioned his disciples, *"that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem"*. How thankful we who are Gentiles should be that the Gospel has reached us. It is the same God who spared the Ninevite sinners who offers us the remission of sins.

In Luke 11:32 Jesus continued His appeal to the Jews, *"The men of Nineveh shall rise up in judgement with this generation, and shall condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here"*.

In the last chapter Jonah was angry. We now learn why he was so reluctant to go to Nineveh in the first place. The message he was given was one of judgement. But Jonah knew that God was gracious and merciful, but this didn't seem to affect him. He was more concerned about his reputation. If he were to preach judgement and then a merciful God forgave them, Jonah would lose face. He had some lessons to learn! So Jonah sat outside the city. God prepared a gourd to protect His servant from the heat. The next morning, God prepared a worm that smote the gourd so that it withered and he had no protection. God prepared an east wind and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah so that he fainted. He became even more angry, complaining that God had taken away the gourd. The LORD has the last word, *"Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest to grow...And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?"* Jonah had a lot to learn! Let's close with a verse from the Apostle Paul. *"Is he the God of the Jews only? Is He not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also."* (Romans 3:29)

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