

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from the life of Jonah: Running away from God – Jonah 1

The Book of Jonah is a favourite part of the Bible with many of us. The story it contains is short; there are no wasted words, which is true of the rest of the Bible; it is easy to understand; and it is quite gripping, even if we know it nearly off by heart. It is popular with children (and Sunday School teachers!) because of the story, with older people because of its lessons, and even with serious theologians, who write remarkably long books on it, considering it is so short. How well do you know the Book of Jonah? There's always something extra to learn, but then, that's true of the rest of the Bible too.

It's a temptation to speak on the whole book but we must concentrate on chapter 1. However, just a few general points before we begin. We learn from 2 Kings 14:25 that Jonah came from Gath Hopher in the north of Israel and that he prophesied in the days of Jeroboam II that that king would take back much of the territory which Israel had lost to its enemies. That was about the 8th century BC.

Unlike the other prophetic books in the Old Testament, the whole of the book of Jonah is narrative and there is none of the kind of prophecy we generally find in these other books. It consists of four chapters.

- Chapter 1 deals with Jonah's attempt to avoid obeying God's word to preach to Nineveh, and his being swallowed by the great fish.
- Chapter 2 deals with his prayer to God from the fish's belly,
- Chapter 3 with his preaching to Nineveh and how its inhabitants repented, and
- Chapter 4 with Jonah's sour reaction to God's mercy when God did not destroy the city.

Another feature of the book of Jonah is that several significant words are repeated.

For example, goes down.

- Jonah goes down to Joppa,
- He goes down into the ship's hold, and
- He goes down into the depths of the sea.

Then there is the word hurl (or cast).

- God hurls a great wind on the sea,
- The crew hurl the cargo overboard, and
- Jonah is hurled into the sea.

Lastly, appoints

- God appoints a great fish,
- He appoints a plant to shelter Jonah,
- He appoints a worm to eat the plant, and
- He appoints a scorching east wind.

These, and the way the book is structured show that it is a literary work of merit. The unknown writer is an example to us of doing one's best in God's service. We, too, should seek to ensure that what we do for God is of the best but not, of course, in the energy of human flesh. Plenty of unsaved people work very conscientiously but we need more than that; we need to have God's Spirit guiding and empowering us so that what we produce in whatever form of service we are engaged is not only useful to others but pleasing to God and showing something of His character. The writer of Jonah did that. He used his literary skill to present a true story in a way that appeals to us, gives us obvious and powerful examples to avoid or to follow, and shows us something of the character of God in a way that we do not get in quite the same way in other parts of the Bible. Whether he knew that he was writing God's inspired Word, we do not know. And he could not have imagined that more than 2,500 years later people would still be reading his book in parts

of the world and in languages that he had never heard of or even imagined would exist. So we do not know how far our work will go or what effect it may have.

The book begins with a remarkable expression, though similar expressions are common enough in the Old Testament: “Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it: for their wickedness has come up before me.’” Jonah was no ordinary man; he was a man to whom God spoke directly. He had prophesied accurately before about what Jeroboam II would do and perhaps he had made other prophecies which the Bible does not mention. He knew the voice of the LORD when he heard it and he reacted immediately – in disobedience. He arose to flee from the presence of the LORD.

Before we get too critical of Jonah, let’s ask ourselves how well we obey the voice of God. “But,” you say, “I’m not a prophet. God doesn’t speak to me like that.” Maybe God doesn’t speak to you as He did to Old Testament prophets but He most certainly does speak to us from His Word, the Bible. Sometimes it is a word which we feel is personal to us; more often it is a word which applies to all believers. How obedient are we to what God so plainly tells us there about the need to repent of our sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, about living a life pleasing to Him, about what God thinks of a sinful way of life, about what will happen to this world when He judges it, about His blessings for His people and the eternal glory of heaven? What effect does God’s Word have on us? We do not need to run away to avoid God’s presence; we can just ignore it and carry on as before. Nothing seems to happen; there’s no thunderbolt from the sky to destroy us and so we seem to get away with our disobedience. But, of course, we don’t. We read in Galatians 6:7: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” Whether we are Christians or unbelievers, there will be a reckoning. We cannot play fast and loose with God and get away with it. The way we live affects our spiritual lives and, even more importantly, our eternity.

Why did Jonah do completely the opposite of what God told him? Nineveh is north-east of Gath Hopher and he went south to Joppa in order to go in a westerly direction as far away as possible. He must have been pretty desperate because he surely knew that God was not a local or national god, as so many of the pagan ones were, but the Maker of the sea and dry land, of universal power and significance.

But why did he disobey God in such a way? Why didn’t he just ignore God’s word and stay put? Isn’t this the usual way people disobey God – just pretend He isn’t there or that He didn’t really point out something from the Bible or whatever other way He chooses to communicate with us? There was something more.

Jonah was a successful prophet of some experience. What he had predicted had come true, so it could not have been reluctance to speak in public or lack of experience. No, it must have been the Assyrians, the inhabitants of Nineveh. They were a thoroughly bad lot. Armies are not noted for being kind and considerate to their enemies but the Assyrians had added an unusual degree of cruelty to their practices, including skinning alive the defenders of cities the Assyrians had besieged and putting them out in the sun, and putting hooks in the noses of their captives to drag them along with. Do you remember how in Isaiah 37:29, God says to Sennacherib, the Assyrian emperor besieging Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah, “Therefore I will put My hook in your nose and My bridle in your lips, and I will turn you back by the way which you came.” It was an appropriate way of describing the judgment which was coming on this brutal despot. At the end of the chapter, we read that the angel of the LORD killed 185,000 of the Assyrians in one night. Sennacherib then returned to Nineveh and was murdered by his sons.

So we can understand why Jonah would not be well-disposed towards the Assyrians and would want God to destroy them. If he didn’t go to Nineveh and warn people of their impending doom, they would not have the opportunity to repent, and disaster would overtake them. And that would be only right if you were in Jonah’s position. But we can see another reason later on in the book – Jonah knew that God was gracious and merciful and that He would relent of doing harm to the people of Nineveh. Not only would God forgive Israel’s enemy, but Jonah would become a failed prophet. He would prophesy an event and then it wouldn’t happen – complete failure for a prophet. You’re no prophet if your prophecies don’t come true.

So Jonah fled. And how did he flee? Down. Down to Joppa, down into the ship, then down into the ship’s hold and, eventually, down into the belly of the great fish. If we try and avoid God and His word to us, there’s only one way we go, and that’s down.

Well, Jonah went **down** to Joppa and **down** to the quayside and there was a ship ready to go to Tarshish. How convenient! And he had the fare – how convenient again! At least he didn’t attribute these convenient and happy coincidences to God’s intervention on his behalf as we might be tempted to do. But, then, if we’re going away from God, Satan can always make sure that there is someone or something to help us on our way. We’re not told whether the fare was cut-price, rather like an Old Testament version of today’s cut-price airlines, but, for ourselves, Satan’s trips may seem a bargain at the time but we’ll pay the full whack for our folly by the end of the journey.

And where was Tarshish? Well, the scholars aren't too sure but it was probably a place in Spain called Tartessus, which mined and exported metals. If so, it was the furthest from Israel anyone in Jonah's position could get to. But, of course, we can never get completely away from God, as we read in Psalm 139 and as Jonah soon found out.

Anyway, they set sail but then we read that God hurled a great wind on the sea. The force of the storm was such that the ship threatened to break up so the crew cried out to their various gods and, more practically, hurled the cargo overboard. The cargo was the whole point of the ship and its voyage, and the means of the crew's livelihood, but their lives were more important than the cargo and the money which shipping it earned, so it had to be jettisoned. In this, they are a good example to us; is there anything in your life which is preventing your being saved, or hindering further spiritual growth, or crippling your service for the Lord, or spoiling your witness, but which you won't let go of? Be like the mariners – get rid of it. Your eternal salvation and your relationship with God are more important than anything else.

And where was Jonah during all this? Fast asleep in the lowest part of the ship! The ship must have been pitching and tossing, there was the noise of the wind in the rigging, the shouting of the crew as they prayed to their gods and attempted to make themselves heard to each other over the noise of the storm, and they had been down in the hold getting out the cargo. And Jonah slept through the lot! This was not "the peace of God which passes understanding." This was complete irresponsibility. The only man on the ship who believed in the one true God and he was behaving worse than the pagan crew. They prayed to gods which didn't exist; Jonah didn't pray to the God Who did. But we can't criticise. How often, in certain circumstances, do unbelievers behave with more responsibility than God's people. It can be quite shameful. Let it not happen to us.

Once the captain had got Jonah awake and had told him to pray to his God, they then cast lots to see whose fault the storm was. Like us whenever anything goes wrong, they wanted to know who to blame. Their pagan religions included myths about the gods punishing people who had committed particularly evil crimes and they thought that this was one of those occasions when the gods were taking vengeance on someone who had particularly irritated them.

They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. Normally, using something like a short straw to find out who the culprit was would be pretty inaccurate, almost guaranteed to come up with the wrong answer. But God was in this and so He guaranteed the right answer. It was all Jonah's fault. At least he didn't try to wriggle out of it. Then he told them who he was and that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD. At last, he was being true to what he really was and what he truly believed but it was tragic that the truth had to be forced out of him. When it must have been obvious to him that the disaster was all his fault, he still kept quiet about his role in it until the casting of the lots found him out. If it hadn't been for the storm, Jonah would have happily sailed all the way to Tarshish and never said a word about his God. May we never fall into that kind of error. We don't want others to have to say to us, "We never knew you were a Christian."

The crew were greatly alarmed at what Jonah said. They didn't say, "Who is your God? How can He be greater than our gods?" Partly this was because the storm itself was sufficient evidence of the existence and power of Jonah's God. But it was probably also because, despite the plethora of gods and goddesses they had in their religions, there was still the idea of one supreme creator god above all the others. It is true that this belief gradually disappeared but those who have studied ancient religions say that the belief was originally there. Whatever the mariners' reasons, they wanted to know how to stop the storm and Jonah told them, "Hurl me into the sea." But the crew were very decent men and, rather than hurl Jonah overboard, they tried to row to the land. Again, the unbelievers shamed the believer by their sense of responsibility and their kindness towards a man who had come on board for very bad and selfish reasons and under false pretences, who had completely destroyed their enterprise and reasonable hope of gain, and who had done nothing to help when the storm arose. You would have expected them to think that they would be well rid of Jonah. Just a nod from the captain to the lads, a quick grab and a quick heave would have been all that it took to have got shot of the cause of their troubles and for the storm to end. They would not have had a bad conscience about it for, after all, Jonah himself had suggested that they should throw him overboard.

But no, they dug their oars into the water all the harder. It was to no avail. It was useless. The storm only grew worse. And why? Because God had His purposes not only for Jonah, but also for Nineveh, "that great city," and all its inhabitants. He was not going to let Jonah's likes and dislikes alter His purposes. God wanted the people of Nineveh preached to so that they could have the opportunity to repent of their sins in order that God might save them from His judgment, which would otherwise have overtaken them. Jonah was the man God had chosen for the task and Jonah it would be, regardless of any objection Jonah might have or any action Jonah might take to avoid a task he plainly regarded as completely unacceptable.

The failure of the well-meaning crew's good intentions, despite their strenuous efforts, has lessons for us. We cannot achieve our salvation, and certainly not anyone else's, by trying harder. We cannot earn our salvation. We cannot row our way through the storms of life or through the mess created by our own moral failures, to what we hope will be a safe haven. God has ordained that there is only way to be saved, there is only one way to heaven, and that is by

repentance towards God and faith in His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing else will cleanse us from our sins, nothing else will get us to heaven, nothing else will fit us for God's presence, no matter how hard we may try. Even very decent and nice, responsible men like the crew of the boat Jonah was on can get it completely wrong.

Another lesson for us to learn from this is that there are occasions when something has to be given up because it is not according to God's mind and will. It may be something we are doing and that He has blessed in the past but the time has come to change and move on to what is according to His will. An example of this in the Bible is when God told Elijah to go to the Brook Cherith, and then told him to go to Zarephath when the brook dried up. Or perhaps we may have in mind what seems to be a good idea but it just isn't what God wants us to do at that particular time. Others may be doing it with God's blessing but God has something else for us to do. Obviously, it needs spiritual wisdom and discernment to know what God's will is for us. It will probably be harder for us to know what it is than it was for Jonah because God told him quite unmistakably. Jonah was correct in thinking he knew what God wanted him to do, and completely wrong in the way he responded to that command.

Jonah went overboard and the storm stopped. The mariners were suitably impressed by the obvious and close connection between obeying Jonah's God and the way the wind and the waves immediately calmed. Indeed, they feared exceedingly and sacrificed an animal to the LORD, and made promises to Him, presumably about what they would do when they got back to dry land.

And Jonah? What happened to him as the waters closed over his head? His prayer in the next chapter makes it sound as though he went a long way down, and some people think that he actually drowned. But God had prepared, or appointed, a great fish. The thought of being swallowed by a great fish does not appeal to me at all but it was the salvation of Jonah. God was not going to let His servant just disappear; He still had a great work for him to do. This can be an encouragement for us. We may go the wrong way, we may make serious mistakes and even directly disobey God but, if we are truly God's, He will not let us go. This should not encourage us to be careless; far from it, but we can take encouragement from this story and remember that believers in the Lord Jesus are eternally God's.

Now some people will tell us that this story is just a myth, or a legend to make a point or even entertain. God doesn't speak to people, except in their imagination, they say. No whale (but the Bible says a great fish) – no whale could swallow a man whole because their throats are too small (but that depends on the particular species of whale) and you couldn't survive inside a whale or a fish. But the Bible says that **God** prepared the great fish. It was not any ordinary fish but one in which Jonah could survive for three days and three nights without being digested and without suffocating for lack of air. As with the other miracles in the Bible, we should believe that they happened because God says so, not because someone has found an explanation for any particular one. The Bible doesn't need human support to make it believable.

So let's remember again the well-known and well-loved story of Jonah and learn and apply to ourselves the lessons we have seen in this wonderful book of the Bible.

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