

## **Lessons from Jonah**

The Jonah saga is the account of a Hebrew prophet working well beyond his comfort zone. Alive during the reign of Jeroboam II, about 750 B.C. (2 Kings 14:25), Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet whom we know of who was directly called to be a missionary in another country. The truth that the Creator of all races did not intend to limit salvation only to His chosen people is stated repeatedly in the Old Testament, especially in Isaiah and the Psalms, even though popular Israelite theology at the time of Jonah did not accept that the Gentiles were also in God's plan to partake in salvation. Even in New Testament times it was a hard lesson for the Jewish believers to learn.

In the four chapters of Jonah, we read an honest record of Jonah's reluctant pioneering experience as a foreign missionary, both the positive and the negative. Here a person's inner, and very human reaction to the call of God is preserved, along with a powerful appeal for the need of foreign missions. A few guidelines for foreign missionaries and cross-cultural witnesses emerge from the book, which also points to solutions for some of the issues and problems modern missionaries face.

Outside the book of Jonah, the prophet is mentioned in one other Old Testament passage, 2 Kings 14:25. Here he is honored as a prophet that predicted Israel's recapture of territory taken by Syria.

Jonah was born in Gath Hopher (Hebrew for winepress at the water hole), a town in Zebulun in northern Israel, only a few miles from Nazareth. This means that both Jesus and Jonah were Galilean prophets, separated by about 750 years.

Read Jonah 1:1-3,9,12; 2:1-9; 3:3-10. What kind of picture do these verses present about him, both the good and the bad?

Jonah emerges from his book a strange mixture of strength and weakness: self-willed and rebellious but also teachable and obedient. He was loyal to God, courageous, and a believer in prayer, but he was also narrow-minded, selfish, and vindictive. While Jonah was described as a servant of the Lord in 2 Kings 14:25, he cut a somewhat sad and tragic figure in the book bearing his name. It is a mark of the integrity and reliability of the Bible that he was described in such a candid manner. The natural, human tendency of a writer would be to obscure and hide less-acceptable aspects of biblical heroes. But under the Spirit's inspiration, the Bible's authors present the valiant along with the petty in the lives of people to illustrate the truth that, no matter how weak and unpleasant these characters may be, God is able to work through them if they are willing.

What other Bible characters did God use despite their personality flaws? What hope can we draw for ourselves from the fact that God uses flawed and damaged people to work for Him in reaching out to others?

### **An Early Missionary**

Go to Nineveh! was God's command to Jonah. In the Old Testament the usual appeal to the nations was come to Zion. God's original plan was for Israel to live their religion, making the nation so attractive that other nations would come to them for guidance (Isa. 56:7).

Jonah, as a forerunner of the disciples in the New Testament (Matt. 28:18-20), is told to go to Nineveh, which to him seemed an unclean center of idolatry, brutality, and

totalitarianism. Jonah made detailed preparations to go west by sea even though God had directed him to go east by land. Jonah, the unwilling prophet, fled in the opposite direction.

Read Jonah 1:3-17. What lessons can we gain from this amazing narrative?

God's response to Jonah's flight came in the form of a mighty storm. The winds obey their Creator, even though His prophet does not (Mark 4:41). Jonah slept during the storm while the Gentile crew prayed (Jon. 1:5). In honesty Jonah confessed that he caused the calamity, and he testified to the true God and Creator. Notice that his reply, I am Hebrew, referred both to his religion and his nationality. In their alarm at the ferocity of the storm, the Gentile sailors tried to save themselves and the passengers, and they showed compassion to Jonah in their reluctance to comply with his instructions to throw him overboard. (The reluctant prophet was willing to sacrifice himself to save others.) When they finally complied, the storm ceased and the sea calmed (Jon. 1:15). The amazed sailors became Jonah's first converts to his God, who could work through Jonah even while he fled from his call.

The salvation of Jonah was just as miraculous as was the salvation of the ship. God prepared a great fish. The original Hebrew doesn't specify what sort of fish saved Jonah by swallowing him. Jonah in the belly of the fish is certainly the best-known episode of the story; however, it should not overshadow the book's deeper message that God loves, cares for, and wills the salvation of all people.

In the end, there is only one God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth (see Isa. 44:8; 45:5-6). Anything else anyone worships is idolatry and error. Any other god they pray to is imaginary, a lie.

Why is this truth so important for us to realize and internalize for ourselves, especially in the context of mission?

### **In the Belly of the Big Fish**

The three-day experience in the belly of the big fish became a type of the death and resurrection of Christ (Jon. 1:17-2:10; Matt. 12:40). God provided and directed the great fish. Although there are accounts of people who survived at sea after having been swallowed by a whale, we must remember that God provided this particular great fish, as well as the miraculous power that sustained His servant while inside. That is, in the end, this was a miraculous event that could have occurred only through the supernatural intervention of the Lord, who is revealed all through the Bible as a personal God who does indeed intervene miraculously in people's lives.

There is evidence that the phrase three days and three nights was an ancient figure of speech expressing the time needed for the imaginary journey to Sheol, the Hebrew name for the realm of the dead. Considering what happened to him, Jonah indeed should have been as good as dead.

In the belly of the fish, Jonah began to pray. The captain had directed Jonah in vain to call on your God (Jon. 1:6, NKJV). Now in a hopeless situation, Jonah starts to pray, and seriously, too. It took something this desperate to get him finally to do what he should have been doing all along. A summary of Jonah's prayer has been preserved in the form of a psalm of thanksgiving. Such psalms typically include five parts:

introduction;

description of the distress;

cry to God for help;

report of God's action; and

promise to keep any vow made and to testify to God's saving action.

That is, Lord, if You get me out of this, I promise to do such and such. Who hasn't prayed like that before? The question is, Did you do what you covenanted to do?

Read Matthew 12:40. How does Jesus take the story of Jonah and apply it to Himself? See also John 2:19-22.

The chapter ends with the words: And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land (Jon. 2:10 NIV). God's command to the great fish brought about what well-meaning sailors failed to do for Jonah. In the same way, Christ commanded the disciples after His resurrection to go into all the world, so Jonah after his underwater adventure went to the Gentiles and became the most successful missionary in the Old Testament. Jonah's rescue witnessed to God's saving mercy. His seaweed-draped arrival on the beach testified to God's determination to save even sinful Assyrians from death.

### **The Nineveh Generation**

Read Jonah 3. What great message is found here in the context of outreach and evangelism?

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you (Jon. 3:1-2 NIV). Two verbs are important in the text. First, this is the second time God says Go! God does not give up. He grants failing humans a second chance. Here again we have the New Testament mission concept, which is the idea of going to the nations, as opposed to expecting the nations to come to you.

The other important verb is proclaim. Proclamation has always been important in the Bible. It is still the most effective way of spreading the gospel message. God emphasized to Jonah that it should be the message I give you. That is, the message we proclaim must be God's, not our own, or even a tweaked, modified, or bowdlerized version of it.

God's message is generally threat and promise, judgment and gospel. His stark proclamation was Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown (Jon. 3:4 NIV). That was the judgment. Yet, there was also the promise of hope, of deliverance, of salvation (there must have been because the people heeded the message and were saved).

Even with the everlasting gospel at the heart of it, Revelation 14:6-12 also warns about judgment. Gospel and judgment go hand-in-hand: the gospel offers us God's way to avoid the condemnation that judgment would justly bring upon us all.

No preaching of the gospel is fully effective unless judgment is taught. Political correctness, which leads to a watering down of these stark elements and downplaying differences between religions or even between different Christian traditions, is risky. Though in mission we need to adapt our presentation for the people we are trying to reach (contextualization), we must never do so at the expense of the message God has given us to proclaim.

In Jonah 3:5-10, what happens? The Ninevites believed, acted on their beliefs, exercised their faith, and were saved.

God has given us some wonderful promises, and stern warnings, too. What should this story teach us about the conditionality of these promises and warnings?

### **Jonah's Lament**

Jonah 4:1-11 confirms that the greatest obstacle for God to get His prophet involved in world mission was not distance, wind, sailors, fish, or Ninevites. It was the prophet himself. Ninevite faith contrasted with Jonah's unbelief and vindictive spirit. Jonah is the only person in the Scriptures who accuses God of being gracious, compassionate, and slow to anger, abounding in love and who relents from sending calamity. One would think most people would view these aspects of God with thankfulness.

When Jonah learned of God's purpose to spare the city that, notwithstanding its wickedness, had been led to repent in sackcloth and ashes, he should have been the first to rejoice because of God's amazing grace; but instead he allowed his mind to dwell upon the possibility of his being regarded as a false prophet. Jealous of his reputation, he lost sight of the infinitely greater value of the souls in that wretched city. The compassion shown by God toward the repentant Ninevites displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 271.

Read Jonah 4:10-11. What do these texts teach us about the character of God in contrast to sinful human nature? Why should we be glad God, not fellow human beings, is our ultimate judge?

Jonah showed his anger twice in Jonah 4. He was angry because God changed His mind and saved Nineveh's more than one hundred twenty thousand inhabitants. He was also angry because the vine withered. In his selfishness, the prophet needed to get his priorities right.

God instructed Jonah to recognize human brotherhood based on the fatherhood of God. The prophet should accept his common humanity with these foreigners, although they were wayward. Were not 120,000 people more important than a vine?

Read again the Lord's rebuke to Jonah. In what ways might the Lord be able to say something similar to us? That is, how often do we find ourselves more concerned over our own personal issues, many of which at times can really be trivial, than over the lost souls whom Christ shed His blood to save?

### **Further Study:**

The book of Jonah is so significant for understanding the biblical basis of mission, because it treats God's mandate to His people regarding the Gentile peoples and thus serves as the preparatory step to the missionary mandate of the New Testament. But it is also important for catching a glimpse of the deep resistance this mandate encounters from the very servant Yahweh has chosen to discharge His worldwide work.—Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1978), p. 96.