

Reflections from Jonah – A Prophet Just Like Us

A casual reader could easily mistake the Book of Jonah for a legend¹ or a fiction novel with a strong moral message. Instead, it's genre is a biological narrative known as an extended episode². The short book "is filled with suspense, drama, lessons for life - and it really happened"³. It is a historical⁴ account concerning the call of God upon a regular guy named Jonah. Although Jonah was a believer much like you and I, he was also a man set apart to fulfill a particular calling. God did not call him in the general sense as He calls all people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, Jonah was a Hebrew prophet called specifically by name. He was chosen to carry out an unambiguous task at a precise time in history.

An overview of this tremendous book includes God's call upon Jonah. His task was to go to the Assyrian capital⁵, Nineveh and preach against it, for its sin was great in the eyes of the Lord. This task eventually distinguished him as the first known foreign missionary. Jonah, however, did not like the prospect of preaching to the Ninevites, a dreaded gentile people who were at enmity with the Jews. Jonah foolishly attempted to run from God and His call by purchasing a boat ticket to Tarshish, a far away city in the opposite direction. God responded by sending a thunderous storm while the ship was out to sea. Jonah was reluctantly tossed overboard by his shipmates who drew lots to determine who

¹ Salters, R., (1994) Jonah & Lamentations; JSOT Press, Sheffield, UK; p. 45

² Nkhoma, C.; (2004) Dallas Baptist University, Old Testament Survey Notes

³ Hawkins, O.; (1990) Meeting the God of the Second Chance – Jonah; Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, New Jersey p. 13

⁴ Salters, R., (1994) Jonah & Lamentations; JSOT Press, Sheffield, UK; p. 41

⁵ Dake, F. (1963, 1991) Dake's Annotated Reference Bible; Dake Publishing, Inc., Lawrenceville, Georgia p. 1521

was responsible for the storm, since they all feared for their own lives. Desirous of Jonah's attention, God sent a large fish⁶ to swallow up Jonah thereby giving him an opportunity to reconsider his willingness to serve. After Jonah offered a prayer of praise and repentance, God instructed the fish to spew him up onto dry ground. God again called Jonah into service. This time he obeyed, albeit unenthusiastically. Much to Jonah's dismay, the Ninevites repented. Because of his own personal and national pride, and his deep seeded prejudices against the Assyrians, Jonah was angered by God's mercy toward them. The book ended with a heart-to-heart discussion between God and Jonah concerning Jonah's ungodly and unwarranted response.

The study of this book invites numerous questions that should be answered. For example, why did God call *Jonah* to Nineveh? Why not somebody else? Why did he run from God? What caused Jonah to flee at the thought of preaching to the Ninevites? What was so fearsome about their city? And how do we know that this book isn't fiction after all? What did Jesus see in Jonah? How are we like Jonah? How does Jonah remind each one of us of ourselves? Let's take a closer look at this amazing book to find some answers.

Some say the story of Jonah is nothing but a fable, legend, parable, or a myth; some suggest it's a "fantastic tale about a man being swallowed by a whale and surviving the ordeal"⁷. Some say the story is an allegory with a hidden meaning⁸. Such is not the case. Jesus Christ himself vouched for the historical

⁶ Salters, R., (1994) *Jonah & Lamentations*; JSOT Press, Sheffield, UK; p. 42

⁷ Kennedy, J.; (1956) *Studies in the Book of Jonah*; Broadman Press, Nashville, Tennessee. p. xi

⁸ Hawkins, O.; (1990) *Meeting the God of the Second Chance – Jonah*; Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, New Jersey p. 14

accuracy in the New Testament (Matt 12.39-41 and Luke 11.29). Both accounts verify that the Ninevites repented of their sin. Jesus indicated the story was a historical fact and not the result of someone's imagination. He referred to the whole situation as a miraculous sign. Jonah was in fact, in certain ways, a forerunner of Himself.

God sent Jonah to preach to the people of Nineveh. His purpose was to forewarn them of their impending judgment (destruction) caused by their immense, never-ending wickedness. God chose Jonah for the job for several reasons. First, there was no one in the city who knew God and was able to speak in His behalf. So, God selected an Israelite, Jonah, a Hebrew prophet with considerable experience in preaching to his own people. Secondly, he was a recognized and successful statesman, a diplomat, used by God to influence his own people⁹ (2 Kings 14.23-25)¹⁰. Over the years, God blessed him with certain skills and experiences which He wanted him to use to carry the message to Nineveh. But Jonah was not enthusiastic. In fact, he was fearful. He had never preached to outsiders before, only to his own people group. To avoid the discomfort of uncertainty, he ran away from the Lord and the task given to him.

Herein lies our first reflection. God will not ask us to do anything without first preparing us in some way, ie, life experience, training, education, etc. If it is God's will that we step out of our comfort zone, then we must do so in faith. We know that God will provide our every need, no matter how small or large that need is. How often do we run away from a challenge God gives to us because of

⁹ Salters, R., (1994) *Jonah & Lamentations*; JSOT Press, Sheffield, UK; p. 23

¹⁰ Dake, F. (1963, 1991) *Dake's Annotated Reference Bible*; Dake Publishing, Inc., Lawrenceville, Georgia

our fear of failure, rejection, or ridicule? A man once said that the letters f-e-a-r stood for **F**alse **E**vidence **A**ppearing **R**eal. Fear is Satan's number one tool. Granted, without the saving grace of God, and the shed blood of Jesus Christ, we all would be nothing more than useless sinners headed for judgment. Praise God that *is not* the case! The blood of Christ covers the sin of a believer; we are saved by the grace of God. That grace enables us to live In His will, to do His will without fear. Our creation by God, our relationship with God, and our position in Christ makes us worthy if His calling and the task at hand. The Holy Spirit makes us able. But we alone chose to be – or not to be willing and available. Jonah was well equipped for the task, but he wasn't willing or available. How often do we miss the blessings of God because we are not willing or available?

Jonah fled. He ran. But let's not be too hard on him. Why would a man of God be afraid? Jonah, like the apostle Peter, you, and I, tend to focus on the task instead of the taskmaster. Peter looked at the wind and waves and considered the situation insurmountable. Jonah looked at Nineveh and considered it hopeless. From a human standpoint, his viewpoint was understandable.

The city was home to nearly one million people. It was the capital of the Assyrian Empire who conquered and controlled the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Simply put, the Assyrians were Israel's enemy. They were Jonah's enemy too. The people were considered godless heathens. The city was founded by Nimrod¹¹ whose claim to fame was the introduction of child sacrifice to satanic gods. It totaled 300 square miles and was protected by five - 100-foot-thick

¹¹ Dake, F. (1963, 1991) Dake's Annotated Reference Bible; Dake Publishing, Inc., Lawrenceville, Georgia p. 1521

walls, which were wide enough for four chariots. Moats were built between the walls. It was, by all accounts a formidable city – the fortress of the enemy. And God had the audacity to command Jonah to preach against it! The message was simple: 40 more days and the great city of Nineveh will be destroyed.

Like some of us occasionally, Jonah took what he thought was the easy way out of a tough situation. Instead of facing the challenge, he gave up. He went to Joppa, an Israeli port city, to find a ship. He was actively fleeing the Lord. We normally do not actively *flee* from the Lord; we just sort of ignore His presents.

Jonah found the ship, paid the fare, and set sail and got more than he bargained for. He found himself in the midst of a great wind. The ship was rocked by the massive waves and its professional sailors were afraid; so much so that they unloaded their cargo into the sea to lighten their load. They drew lots to discover who was responsible for their predicament. When the lot fell to Jonah the sailors threw him overboard. Despite Jonah's disobedience, God sent a large fish to swallow Jonah, saving him from certain death. He was safe inside the fish, but it was dark, pitch black. It was probably quiet. The smell must have been nauseating. Most importantly, he was completely alone. He was in total isolation. Isolation is another of Satan's negative devices. During this isolation, Jonah prayed and praised God like he's never done before! The second reflection is this: we, like Jonah, pray most earnestly when we have nowhere else to turn. We like Jonah, need to be disciplined and corrected by God and

persuaded to do what's right. God has a way of getting our attention, of convincing us of our need to confess, to repent and to seek out the Lord.

The third reflection deals with our ability to call out to God when we are in the depth of a situation just as Jonah was in the depths (of the grave) when he called for help. When Jonah disobeyed God's call on his life, Jonah fell into despair, hence the proverbial 'storm' in his life. The storms in our lives are often caused by our own rebellion also, yet God awaits our return. God, as He did with Jonah, can and will lift us up out of our depths and calm the storm we're in.

The Assyrians repented at the preaching of Jonah. God chose to show Himself to the Gentiles. He lifted these people from their sin to salvation. Jonah disagreed with God's decision to be compassionate and merciful to the enemies of Judah. But their past didn't matter to God.

There are two additional lessons here. First, God isn't concerned with our past either. He's concerned about our present and future. We can call upon Him at any time, no matter who we are, where we are, what we've done; repentance and revival is always available to us. Secondly, believers occasionally take on the attitude of Jonah in regard to nonbelievers. Jonah was abounding in self-righteous pride and prejudice. He was Hebrew; those he preached to were non-deserving Ninevites. In his anger and pride Jonah told God "I told you so! I knew you would have mercy! And in the process, you made me look like a fool by preaching destruction, but your word didn't come true. See, see... that's why I ran in the first place!" (Slight paraphrase). Jonah had the same problem we have. God brought revival to his heart *and* to his enemies. God's love and

mercy is universal. So, what's the problem? Jonah did not really want his enemies to be saved. He wanted them punished for all they did to him and his fellow Hebrews. It would be similar to God having mercy on Adolf Hitler or Hamas. How would American and Israeli Christians react if the former Nazi or Hamas terrorist repented and publicly professed Christ as Lord and Savior? It's an interesting question for which I have no answer. But God is God and not answerable to us any more than He was accountable to Jonah.

Lastly, God miraculously provided shade for Jonah in the desert. Then God took it away. Jonah again became angry with God and wanted God to justify His actions. Jonah failed to realize that God is God – holy and omniscient. He alone is sovereign. He alone is in control of the universe. We are His finite creations. He owes us nothing, including an explanation. Our responsibility is to obey God, not question him.

In many ways, Jonah blew it! He just did not measure up! On the other hand, he pleased God in several ways. On the surface Jonah seemed confused, torn between wanting his own way while simultaneously wanting to please and serve God as he had so many times before. Doesn't this sound just like us? We, as ordinary people can relate to Jonah on so many levels. There is a multitude of similarities between him and us – too many to cover in this short paper. Suffice to say that God's intention was to teach us various things through the life and times of Jonah. And at that, God succeeded.

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