

Jonah

The Church at Gun Hill

Introduction

Jonah, the son of Amittai, was a prophet from Gath-Hepher in northern Israel. This was about 3 miles north-east of Nazareth in Galilee. When God saw the affliction of Israel, that it was very bitter, He sent a promise of restoration through the Jonah which was fulfilled by Jeroboam II. (II Kings 14 v 25). It is interesting, for it reveals either the ignorance or the lies of the Pharisees when they challenged Nicodemus and said to him, “**Are you also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee arises no prophet.**” (John 7 v 52)

If you mention Jonah, people usually remember the story of the big fish. Some with a bit of modern knowledge might challenge the idea of a whale, pointing out that a whale is not a fish, but people in Biblical times did not classify creatures as we do now. The AV translation, in Matthew 12 v 40, records the words of Jesus as “For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly ...” And one has to say that a whale, as an air breathing mammal, would be more likely to swallow a man in such a way that he could breathe and survive and then vomit him up again on dry land rather than in the depth of the sea. In the end, it does not matter and whether it were a fish, a whale or a big sea creature, it makes no difference to the purpose of the story. But how many people can tell you about the gourd or the worm or the vehement east wind? All three, together with the big fish, were prepared by God as tools for dealing with Jonah.

The book is not a prophecy as such, but it is about the life of a prophet. There is no explicit prophetic message given to the reader, but what God has to say to each one of us is implicit in the story. The book brings out the pity which God feels towards sinners, a pity which is at the root of His tender mercy and His marvellous grace. We cannot do what God wants us to do unless we share His attitude towards the lost.

God’s Commission and Jonah’s Response

Jonah was told by God to go to Nineveh, a vast, ungodly and idolatrous city to cry against it because of its wickedness. Ancient earthly cities seemed to arise out of an earthly need for self-protection, especially when men had gone astray and forsaken God. Thus they were frequently steeped in wickedness and gripped by a manifest defiance towards God. The first city in the Bible was built by Cain, the world’s first murderer. He called it Enoch after his son, whose descendants developed and learned skills to make themselves independent of God – organised farming, music for entertainment and manufacturing skills. (Genesis 4 vv 16-22). Later, when Eve bore Adam a third son – through whom the Messiah would eventually come – then men began (again) to call upon the name of the Lord. (Genesis 4 vv 25-26).

After the flood, Nimrod, the mighty hunter against the Lord built the city of Babel and others in the land of Shinar. The project brought about the building of the tower of Babel also, an act of defiance and self-elevation against God. The tower was never finished for God scattered the people and confused their languages. However, Nimrod built other cities for we find, in the correct rendering of the text, that, “**Out of that land he went forth into Assyria, and built Nineveh ...**” (Genesis 10 vv 8-11).

God's people, Israel, hated the likes of the Ninevites who were their enemies. They were sinners, violent, ungodly, vile and idolaters. Jonah hated the Ninevites too and seems to have been of the opinion that they should all be destroyed. Instead of obeying God, Jonah ran away. He boarded a ship, paid the fare and set off for Tarshish – in the opposite direction. Jonah just wanted to get away from the presence of God. Now, from Sunday School days and onwards, I had always got the idea that Jonah ran away because he was scared of going to this vast enemy city. If you read all four chapters, you will discover that this was not the case. Jonah would not go, because he did not agree with God. He saw no point in proclaiming a message of certain judgment because he knew that God would have pity and spare the people if they repented. This indeed was the attitude which was revealed in Jonah when the people did repent and God withdrew the judgment. The key is in chapter 4 vv 1 & 2: ***“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry. And he prayed unto the Lord, and said, I pray you, O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore, I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that you are a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repent of the evil.”***

The sad thing is that when Jonah ran away for the Lord, he paid the fare. There is always a price to pay for disobeying the Lord. Many observe that Jonah's pathway of disobedience was a downward one: he went down to Joppa and finding a ship there, went down into it. (1 v 3) He was cast overboard and went down into the deep, down to the bottoms of the mountains (2 v 6). The route that leads away from God is always down. The terrible events that followed were from the Lord. A great wind sent by God threatened the ship and all aboard. The mariners cried out to their gods but all to no avail. Eventually, they discovered that Jonah was the cause of the problems. He confessed to them what he had done and gave them the solution: they were to throw him overboard. After initial reluctance, they did so. ***“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.”*** (Jonah 1 v 17).

Out of the Depths

Jonah was brought under the judgment of God. His personal faith was not in question but his attitude to the sinful nations outside of Israel was. His attitude was not God's attitude. Out of the belly of Sheol (the place of the dead = NT Hades) he cries out in faith to the Lord with the assurance that God had heard him and knew all about his situation. God had cast him out of His sight into the deep, under the billows and waves of His judgment. Yet, in faith, Jonah could declare that he would yet look forward to His holy temple. Eternal destruction threatened, but God would bring up his life from the pit (destruction). The old life should then have been dealt with as his life would be brought up from corruption. There are echoes of this in one of the “Songs of Degrees” – Psalm 130: ***“Out of the depths have I cried unto you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice: let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications... Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption.”*** Jonah would avail himself of the mercy of God and yet would still not extend that blessing to the other nations around him nor see that God, whose heart of pity was gracious and merciful to Israel, also desired to be gracious and merciful to all who would turn to Him in true repentance and faith. His view about God's judgment being poured out upon the likes of the Ninevites was: ***“They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.”*** (2 v 8) In other words, those who worship idols put themselves outside of God's mercy. Jonah assures the Lord that he, however, will sacrifice to Him with thanksgiving. Nevertheless, there is a change of intention here, for Jonah also assures that he will pay what he has vowed; he will do his duty. He at least acknowledges that salvation is of the Lord yet he does not seem to appreciate that the pity which he would deny to the Ninevites, is the same pity which moves God's heart to save Israel. The problem is that Israel in general and Jonah in particular seem to see their relationship with God as one

merited rather than granted in grace and mercy. In the New Testament we find the phrase “sinners of the Gentiles”. Salvation is, however, God’s work of mercy and grace to all and upon all who repent and believe. Nevertheless, at this final confession, the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land. (Jonah 2 v 10) He received a second chance to do God’s bidding. It is so good to know that the Lord does not write us off when we fail.

Just Doing His Duty

Although Jonah went and preached God’s message, that within forty days He would destroy Nineveh, his attitude remained just as it had been before. Nineveh was a vast city of three days journey across. From that we may infer that it would be greater than the area encompassed by the M25 motorway. By the time he was a third of the way through the city, the people from the king down began to repent of their wickedness in earnest, fasting, putting on sackcloth and sitting in ashes. Everyone turned in repentance from their evil and violent ways. When God saw their response, His mercy and grace just flooded in. They were spared.

Jonah was displeased exceedingly and was very angry. He had rather see this vast city of more than 120,000 people, who were in such darkness they could not discern between right and wrong, wiped out than think badly of him for delivering a prophecy which was not fulfilled. Jonah seemed to resent the fact that God, as he had already pointed out, was **“a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.”** (4 v 2) As he longed for Nineveh to be destroyed, no doubt with fire from heaven just as Sodom and Gomorrah had been destroyed, did he not remember how persistently Abraham had interceded before God that the city should be spared? As he kept coming back to the Lord, he finally got agreement that if there were just ten righteous people in Sodom, God would spare it. Abraham was a man after God’s own heart. In the end, God did what was right. The only righteous people in the city, Lot, his wife and two unmarried daughters were brought out before the fire fell. Even his wife perished as she turned to look back at the place where her heart was.

God challenged Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry?” There was no reply from Jonah. In spite of everything that had happened, he still expected God to see it his way and, having crossed the city, he emerged on the east side and there camped out to see what would happen. He still held on to the idea that it must surely be destroyed. God prepared three more things: a gourd which grew rapidly to provide shade from the merciless sunshine; a worm, which, on the following morning, destroyed the gourd; then a vehement east wind, which blew everything away allowing the sun to beat down on Jonah’s head.

God again challenged Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the gourd?” Jonah’s reply was immediate and indignant. “Yes, I do well to be angry, even unto death.” What a remarkable display of self-indulgent petulance! Jonah may have obeyed the commission to cry against the Ninevites, but his heart was as far away from the heart of God as it was when he was on the ship bound for Tarshish. How could a prophet of the Lord be grief-stricken to the point of death over a flimsy plant of a mere day and yet have no pity at all for over 120,000 people who were the desperate victims of their own ignorance of God? The contrast between Jonah’s pity for the gourd and God’s pity for the entire population of Nineveh justifies God’s position absolutely. God showed how selfish, aloof and ridiculous Jonah’s attitude was and rests His case with the question, **“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?”** Readers of the book, aware of their own shortcomings and failures, are unanimous in their reply, “Of course.”

The Lessons for Us

This story is in the Bible, not just because it was a historical event involving one of the prophets of Israel. It is part of the Scriptures of Truth, the Word of God, because there are lessons for us. This is a great truth that God cares for every human being on the planet. ***“The Lord ...is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”*** (II Peter 3 v 9) God cares about all people. He is not the unfeeling character sometimes discussed by philosophers of religion. God cares. God is love. Concerning His disobedient people of old God reveals through the prophet Isaiah that ***“In all their affliction, He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them: in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bare them, and carried them all the days of old.”*** (Isaiah 63 v 9) Should He not have pity on these who, unlike Israel, had no law to guide them?

The Jewish nation was supposed to show to the nations, through their experience and testimony, the goodness and mercy of God. In process of time, they saw God as their exclusive possession, despising and cutting themselves off from the Gentile nations. Therefore, just as Jonah was, they were cast out. Jonah should have been a warning to the Ninevites but in the end, became an example of the judgment of God. Jesus took up the story and explained that what had happened to Jonah was a sign to the evil and adulterous generation that the religious leaders of His day had become: ***“For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation and shall condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonas, and behold, a greater than Jonas is here.”*** (Matthew 12 vv 39-41)

Jesus experienced what Jonah experienced, that the Jews experienced by taking their place. He was cast out. He was brought down to Sheol. The words of Jonah described the experience of Jesus too. ***“Out of the belly of Sheol cried I, and You heard my voice ...all Your billows and Your waves passed over me. Then I said I am cast out of Your sight; yet I will look again to Your holy temple. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depths closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet have You brought up my life from corruption...”*** (Jonah 2 vv 2-6) To be sure, David prophesied of the Messiah, ***“For you will not leave My soul in Sheol; neither will You suffer Your holy one to see corruption.”*** (Psalms 16 v 10) Peter, in Acts 2 v 31 correctly applied this to the death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus’ death and burial in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights, followed by His resurrection would be the sign to the Jews, a nation cast out, that the Messiah has come and taken their place. He has borne the judgment on sin upon Himself and made a full and complete atonement for His people. Then, they themselves, who thought that every other heathen nation deserved to be punished by God, will turn in repentance to the Lord and be saved. ***“And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon Me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son ...In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness.”*** (Zechariah 12 v 10 and 13 v 1)

God’s attitude today, the church’s attitude to sinful men and women and our attitude to the people of where we live and work, is not one of judgment but of pity. We can reach out in the same way that Jesus did, full of grace and truth. Let us, in compassion, feel the great need around us. Jesus said, ***“For God***

sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” (John 3 v 17) God has indeed called us to separation from the world and all its corruptive influence; He had called us out of evil systems which are contaminated by the world. Many Christians err here and think that the sinfulness of others necessitates a disdainful separation from them. If that were so, how could we go on living in this present evil world? Paul, by the Spirit, grasped the situation, for we are here, in Christ’s stead, seeking the lost that they might be saved. **“I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators; yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters, for then must you needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner, with such an one no not to eat.”** (I Corinthians 5 v 10 & 11)

Separation is to do with relationship between the believer and the evil world system. It does not mean that we have to ostracise everyone that is not a believer, having nothing to do with them. Those that take such an attitude often have an aloof feeling of security in their own salvation and may well demonstrate, like Jonah, a pitiless attitude that one day those wicked sinners will find out in hell that we were right and they were wrong. Have we forgotten that Jesus moved and ministered among sinners, unscrupulous tax-collectors, thieves, and harlots? Why? It was because He had not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Those that are whole do not need a doctor, but those that are sick do. I have heard Christians say in response to some appalling crime or some vile blasphemy and with a certain degree of self-righteous indignation, “It’s a wonder that God doesn’t strike them down dead.” It is the Jonah attitude. The disciples of Jesus exhibited it too. When certain Samaritans would not receive Jesus because He was heading to Jerusalem, James and John said, **“Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elijah did? But He turned and rebuked them and said, ‘You know not what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.’”** (Luke 9 vv 54-56)

Have You a Heart of Compassion for the Lost?

We need to get in line with God’s attitude of pity, mercy and grace. **“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, and has committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be reconciled to God.”** (II Corinthians 5 vv 19 & 20)

The world of the ‘evolved’ believes in survival of the fittest. The Bible message, on the contrary, is that it is **“not by might (our might), it is not by power (our power), but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.”** (Zechariah 4 v 6) The Lord’s work is the salvation of those who are lost, life to the dead and dying, and bringing men and women out of shameful failure and loss into the glorious gain of His cross. When Jesus came to the wayward, rebellious city of Jerusalem, He did not say, as Jonah seemed to desire, ‘Let it burn!’ He wept over it. He was full of pity and compassion. **“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kills the prophets, and stones them which are sent unto you, how often would I have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you would not!”** (Matthew 23 v 37)

Jesus drew attention to the fact that the men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah and that in Jesus, a greater than Jonah is here. And that is still true as we go out in His name, with His authority and in His power. Are you with the Lord? Do you have such a passion for lost souls? Would you weep and pray over this area where the Lord has placed us? If Jonah, with such an unfeeling heart, could preach

the message of God and bring about such a turning to God beyond anything we could ask or think, what can happen when we obey God and proclaim the Gospel, sharing the pity and love that He has for those who are lost in sin? How great is His love? ***“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”***

(John 3 v 16) The trouble today is that so many Christians have neither the desire for the lost to be saved nor the willingness to go and tell them the Good News. If Jonah could bring about a city wide ‘revival’ when that was not the result he wanted, what can we accomplish if we share the Lord’s compassion for the unsaved and obey His commission to go into all the world, warning of the judgment which sin will bring but preaching the Gospel of salvation by God’s grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? What a revival is just waiting to happen! Love the lost! Pray without ceasing! Seek the lost!

The story leaves Jonah in his self-centred, uncaring, angry but miserable state. Did he ever change? The story is left like that because it was, and still is, the story of the attitude of God’s people Israel. It will change when they see how greatly God has loved them and how they have responded to God’s mercy and grace. They will look upon Him whom they have pierced. Then they will know how great God’s love is for lost and rebellious sinners. How can we not want to share the good news of that salvation which has brought us forgiveness, delivered us from the wrath to come and bestowed on us God’s gift of eternal life?

“And we have known and believed the love that God has to us. God is love; and he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him. ...as He is, so are we in this world.” (1 John 4 vv 16 & 17)

Amen.