

Jonah: Missionary God

Jonah Chapter 2

It was 1967 and a team of four of us left Bandar Abbas, the main southern sea port of Iran. We were going to Zahedán, the last city before you cross the border into Pakistan. To reach Zahedán you had to go due north on the main road, then east on the main trunk road from Tehran to Zahedán.

Our team leader thought we could cut off a hundred miles by heading across country. It was mainly desert. We headed out northeast towards Kerman across the desert. As we traveled the villages became fewer and farther apart. The road finally gave out and disappeared.

It was late afternoon and we were low on diesel fuel. We couldn't go forward. The heat was oppressive. We were out of water. There remained just one can of peas. We opened the can of peas. We ate the peas and divided the juice left in the can among the four of us. I went to bed with a swollen tongue.

We were all praying and I began to wonder if this was to be the end. The next morning the heat of the sun forced us out of our sleeping bags. There was nothing for breakfast. We gathered for prayer wondering what was to become of us.

Two hills rose either side of us. Before us was a great valley with mountains opposite. As we prayed we heard a tinkle of bells in the distance. Then we saw a man mounted on a camel travelling up the valley. We began to wave our arms and yell with out croaking voices. Somehow we got his attention. He took us to a small oasis down the valley. Fresh water trickled out from under several palm trees. We drank and filled our water bottles. From there he led us to an outpost of the Gendarmerie, where we were able to fill out diesel tank and make it back to the main highway.

This is a story of being lost, then saved.

Jonah had a lost and saved experience.

Jonah did not have a heart for the job God had given him of warning Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria, about its wickedness and impending doom.

How did God remind Jonah of what it was like to be lost, and what it was like to be saved? He put Jonah in the belly of a great fish.

We have read of how the sailors threw Jonah into the sea. As he fell into the sea God provided a fish to swallow Jonah.

Can we take this event seriously? Jesus did. In Matthew 12:38 to 40 we find the Pharisees demanding a miraculous sign from Jesus. He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be 3 days and 3 nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here!"

Jonah chapter 2 is Jonah's cry to the Lord from the belly of that fish. It was a cry of personal salvation! Over 20 times Jonah makes use of the personal pronouns "I", "my" and "me". He was in desperation. We hear him cry, in verse 2 "In my distress I called ..." "... from the depths of the grave I called for help..." "... you listened to my cry ..." In verse 3 "you hurled me into the deep ..." "... all our waves and breakers swept over me..." and so forth. Jonah expressed his lostness.

But God saved him. He said in verse 6 "... but you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God."

In the last line of verse 9 Jonah said, "Salvation comes from the Lord!"

Through this horrific experience Jonah remembered the terrible significance of personal salvation.

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Why have American churches sent and continue to send missionaries out to the ends of the earth? They remember what it's like to be lost and then saved. Knowing how important salvation is to themselves they don't give up on world evangelization. They know God is the God of the nations, not just the God of America. Secondly they remember personal salvation.

Many come to know and follow the Lord in their youth. If they haven't lived a life of crime or vice it might be easy to forget or even not fully realize how important salvation from moral and spiritual slavery really is.

But God allows us to go through very painful experiences in life, times when we feel lost, times when we cry out to the Lord in desperation, and times when we realize once more that only the Lord can rescue us from ourselves and our circumstances.

God allows us Christians to remember what non-Christians suffer in their lostness so we might have a heart for the task of world evangelization.

But what is lesson number 3? If chapter 1 reminds us that God is the God of the nations and chapter 2 reminds us of the importance of personal salvation, then chapter 3 reminds us of the importance of the evangelization of groups of people.

When Jonah preached in Nineveh the response was overwhelming. The king repented in sackcloth and ashes, and sat down in the dust. He called on Nineveh to fast, repent and turn from their wicked ways. God relented, seeing their humble response.

This was not the profession of faith of a single person. What we have in Nineveh is what we call a "people movement".

Years ago missionaries preached the gospel in one the largest islands in Asia. After a time some village heads came to the missionaries to say they wanted to follow the Lord as a whole village. The missionaries found this a tough one to handle. They were used to individuals making professions of faith. What was all this about a whole village being saved? So they sent the chiefs away saying people had to come one by one to make a decision to follow Christ. The village heads went away shaking their heads? They couldn't understand these foreigners.

Twenty years later it began to dawn on the missionaries that they should receive these groups of people who were responding to the gospel. It was the beginning of a great breakthrough and people movements began among the tribes of the island.

In America we are used to individual decisions. Most societies make decisions as a group.

Thirty miles from a very large city in Asia there was a village of middle caste people. One man purchased a Bible and he began to tell others about it. They began to meet at the village center passing the Bible from person to person around the circle. Each person who could read would read a portion and make a comment if they liked. They soon covered great sections of the Bible. They decided they wanted to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. They had learned of his death and resurrection. They understood he had created them. He was their creator. They had broken his laws. His wrath; his anger was on them. They needed the Lord's forgiveness. In Christ God would forgive.

One of the young men found a leaflet that explained how teams of single men evangelized from town to town. He signed up. Three weeks into his time on the team he gave his testimony. As he began to explain what had happened in his town the guys on the team began to realize this man's village was unusual. The teams have since sent more experienced people to that town to disciple them.

Something similar has happened in another town in another place. People are still coming to the Lord. Some of their young people have helped on the teams.

In northwestern part of a country in Africa there is a people movement going on right not amongst a very large tribe. Some say up to 9000 have turned to Christ. Whole villages of people of the state religion have turned to the Lord.

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What is lesson number 4 in chapter 4?

Jonah continued in relative unconcern for the Ninivites. God provided a vine to grow up and give Jonah some shade from the sun. He enjoyed the comfort. He took it on board, as though it were his. He became very possessive of that vine. Then God took the vine away. The wind and sun beat down on Jonah and he felt faint, so faint he wished to die.

This was the second time Jonah said he wanted to die. He didn't like God's game plan, his mercy on Nineveh when they repented. If Nineveh is not punished for their sins then all I want to do is die! That's how Jonah felt.

If Jonah was repelled by Nineveh's wickedness then he was put off even more by the idea that God in his graciousness and compassion would show that city His mercy. This is what chapter 4 verses 1 to 4 is all about.

As we continue reading chapter 4 we find Jonah enjoying the shade of a vine as he watched the city of Nineveh. It's very clear from the text that God does not condemn Jonah for enjoying the shade of the vine. But God does question Jonah when he shows more concern for the loss of his shade than for the salvation of Nineveh.

There are many things God gives us to enjoy, physical, material and emotional things! I used to be so much more uptight about these things. It was so easy to judge others who seemed to have so much materially. I'm a slow learner but I'm learning. Last weekend I was in a missions conference at another church. One of the highlights of that weekend was meeting some of the guys who fly radio-controlled model airplanes. I started getting excited when I heard someone tell us about his model airplane hobby. My brothers and I still build them. Anyway last Saturday morning we went flying those RC planes. Let me tell you, actually flying those things is 1000 times more fun than just watching.

What the Lord is concerned about is when our hearts are thrown into turmoil at the loss of one of our comforts or enjoyments, and when people are lost, our hearts remain cold or even respond in anger.

I enjoyed so much the testimony of a man by the name of McClellan, the president of Sun-Life Insurance in Memphis, and director of McClellan Foundation. Here is a man who is making a lot of money and who is interested in the Lord's work and world missions. The Lord laid on his heart and that of his wife the importance of giving according to how the Lord has prospered him. They decided they could give 70% of their income to the Lord's work. They still had plenty left over. They encourage everyone to give but also realize that someone under much financial pressure might only be able to give 5% of their income. Let's go for it with a positive attitude. Let's get rid of the Jonah complex and give our lives, our time and our money cheerfully!