

The Tragedy of an Unwilling Missionary

Scripture: Jonah

Code: 80-10

INTRODUCTION

In great contrast to Jesus, the seeking Savior, Jonah illustrates what a missionary should not be. He was prejudiced, selfish, and disobedient. Yet the book named after him is instructive: it contrasts what Jonah was with what a missionary should be, representing God's concern for the lost versus Israel's indifference. It also shows that God's people can be reluctant or unconcerned about obeying God's call to make disciples.

LESSON

I. JONAH'S FIRST CALL (1:1; 2:10)

A. His Commission (1:1-2)

Jeroboam II (c. 794-753 B.C.) was king of Israel. The nation was prospering, its ancient boundaries restored as far northeast as Damascus. Since the days of King Omri (c. 885-874 B.C.) the northern kingdom had been attacked by Syria and Assyria. The Israelites particularly hated and feared Assyria because its growth as an empire threatened their national security. In the midst of that tension, God called Jonah to go to the capital of Assyria: "The word of the Lord came unto Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me" (Jonah 1:1-2). We know little about Jonah, but his name means "dove," symbolic of a messenger of peace.

Nineveh was a large city: It required three days to travel from one side to the other (3:3; cf. 4:11). Originally built by Nimrod (Gen. 10:8-11), it was on the east bank of the Tigris River. The city was advanced culturally but its people were arrogant and corrupt. Nahum the prophet spoke against Nineveh as a bloody city full of lies, violence, sensuousness, and idolatry. Their soldiers were infamous for their cruelty. Although God knew of their wickedness, He nevertheless commissioned Jonah to go and preach to them. God sent him there not only for Nineveh's spiritual welfare, but also to shame Israel in a dramatic way. Israel was religiously self-indulgent and did not bother to evangelize the surrounding nations. So when Jonah went alone to preach to Nineveh and the entire city repented, it was a sharp rebuke to Israel's attitude. It seems God often sends individuals to accomplish His work when a larger group does not obey.

B. His Disobedience (1:3)

However, Jonah did not at first obey his divine commission. Rather, he "rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa, and he found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (v. 3). He left from Joppa (modern Jaffa, located about thirty miles northwest of Jerusalem) for Tarshish (probably in the western Mediterranean; some suggest Spain). He planned to go as far as he could in the opposite direction of Nineveh.

Why did Jonah flee? One probable reason was fear. The commission required Jonah, in time of war, to enter the enemy's capital city and preach to them. As frightening as that would be, Jonah himself gave another reason: "I fled before unto Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil" (4:2). If Nineveh repented, God would graciously forgive her. And Jonah abhorred the thought of God's doing that for

a Gentile enemy.

Like some of God's people today, Jonah came to the point of hating the lost, not loving them. In his thinking, Nineveh deserved condemnation, not salvation. Perhaps he envisioned this: If Nineveh repented, God would bless her. Since Israel was living in sin, God was not blessing her. Therefore God might turn to the Gentiles, ending Israel's special election. Fearing Nineveh would receive God's mercy and grace was a wrong attitude for Jonah to have. He had substituted his will for God's. To flee "from the Lord's presence" does not mean Jonah tried to escape from God's sight--an impossible thing to do (Jer. 23:24)--but to be far away from Nineveh so God would have to find someone else. He would be physically unavailable.

C. The Consequences (1:4-16)

1. A storm at sea (vv. 4-7)

As Jonah was on the ship going to Tarshish, "the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was in danger of being broken. Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep. So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not" (vv. 4-6). God pursued Jonah by having a lost person call him to prayer. But Jonah didn't want to talk to God. Then "said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah" (v. 7). The mariners discovered Jonah was the reason for their problem.

2. Jonah's being cast into the sea (vv. 8-16)

They then said to Jonah, "Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us. What is thine occupation? And from where comest thou? What is thy country? And of what people art thou?" (v. 8). It was a series of questions asked in a state of panic. Their life was in danger, and they found the one responsible. Jonah replied, "I am an Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who hath made the sea and the dry land" (v. 9). He identified himself as a worshiper of the true God, who is the Creator. He also told them of his disobedience because the next verse says, "Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them" (v. 10).

The sailors responded, "What shall we do for thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? For the sea raged, and was tempestuous" (v. 11). Jonah could have repented, but instead he replied, "Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm for you; for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you" (v. 12). He was so belligerent, prejudiced, and self-willed that he wanted to die rather than preach. His heart was cold toward God's passion for making disciples. Negative situations can soften the heart, but it didn't happen here.

Rather than immediately follow up on Jonah's recommendation, the mariners were merciful, for they "rowed hard to bring [the ship] to the land, but they could not; for the sea raged, and was tempestuous against them" (v. 13). The Hebrew term translated "rowed" refers to breaking through an enclosure--a wall of water in this case. Although they could not bring the ship to land, they knew Jonah's God sent the storm. Therefore, "they cried unto the Lord, and said, We beseech thee, O Lord ... let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood; for thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased thee" (v. 14). They had two requests: Don't let us die, and don't punish us for his death. "So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging" (v. 15). The calming of the sea confirmed that Jonah had sinned against God. Nevertheless, God used Jonah because "the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the Lord, and made vows" (v. 16). God will always accomplish His work.

3. Jonah's being swallowed by a fish (1:17; 2:10)

His being cast into the sea was according to the divine plan, for "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" (v. 17). That God prepared the fish shows He still intended to use Jonah.

While in the fish's belly, "Jonah prayed unto the Lord, his God" (2:1). His prayer of repentance contained several elements. First, Jonah recognized God's authority. He submitted himself to his Father in prayer, no longer fleeing Him. Second, he recognized his predicament: "I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of sheol cried I, and thou heardest my voice" (v. 2). Jonah was not happy in his hopeless condition and was near death. Third, he recognized God's presence: "Thou hadst cast me into the deep.... All thy billows and thy waves passed over me. Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thine holy temple. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul; the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth, with its bars, was about me forever; yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord, my God" (vv. 3-6). Jonah was aware of God's control over his circumstances. Being in the fish's belly was not accidental.

Jonah also recognized God's forgiveness: "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple. They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy" (vv. 7-8). His focus transferred from his problems to God's goodness. Thinking his disobedience would bring happiness and fulfillment, it brought emptiness and loss of mercy instead. Now realizing the blessings of obedience, Jonah said, "I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the Lord (v. 9). He offered praise to God and promised to keep his vows. "Salvation is of the Lord" was his plea for deliverance. He knew that only the Lord could deliver him. Thus he also recognized God's power. The Lord heard his prayer and "spoke unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land" (v. 10).

II. JONAH'S SECOND CALL (3:1; 4:11)

A. His Commission (3:1-2)

We don't know how much time passed before chapter 3 begins, but the Lord called Jonah again: "The word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee" (vv. 1-2). He gave him the same command, which shows God is gracious and merciful. He still wanted to use Jonah.

B. His Obedience (3:3-4)

"So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city of three days' journey. And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (vv. 3-4). He preached a simple message of judgment.

C. The Results (3:5-10)

As he preached "the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; let them not feed, nor drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God; yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them, and he did it not" (vv. 5-10).

The big miracle was not that a fish swallowed Jonah, but that an entire city repented of their sins! Fasting and putting on sackcloth were symbolic of repentance. Because Nineveh turned from its evil ways, God did not judge her. The people's repentance allowed our righteous God to extend His

mercy to them. Repentance brings mercy, but wickedness brings judgment.

D. His Reaction (4:1-11)

Because the Lord had mercy on Nineveh, "it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry" (v. 1). As we noted before, Jonah was afraid God's merciful nature might lead to that (v. 2). His attitude was so bad he actually prayed, "O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live" (v. 3). But God was gracious in his reply: "Doest thou well to be angry?" (v. 4). It was a gentle rebuke. Deep in Jonah's heart was a zeal for Israel. For an enemy to receive God's favor was more than Jonah could bear.

"So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made a booth for himself, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city" (v. 5). He wanted to know if Nineveh's repentance was real. If it wasn't, he wanted to be the first to see God judge the city. Then "the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceedingly glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd, that it withered. And it came to pass, when the sun did rise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live" (vv. 6-8).

The gourd probably had large, broad leaves. Instantly it grew and shaded him. When God took away his shade, Jonah became angry. God then said, "Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And [Jonah] said, I do well to be angry, even unto death. Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for which thou hast not labored, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?" (vv. 9-11). The Lord was saying, "Don't you have the wrong perspective? You're more concerned about a plant than a city! I created those people in My image and caused them to grow, and you don't even care that they perish." So Jonah had the wrong priorities. He had concern for himself but none for making disciples.

CONCLUSION

What about you? What are your priorities? Are they the same as God's, or are you allowing self-interests to interfere with reaching the lost?

Focusing on the Facts

1. What was Jonah's commission (1:1-2)?
2. Describe the city of Nineveh.
3. Why did Jonah flee the Lord's call (1:3; 4:2)?
4. What does fleeing "from the presence of the Lord" mean (1:3)?
5. What was the mariners' initial reaction to the storm at sea (1:4-7)?
6. How did the mariners respond when they discovered the reason for the storm (1:8-16)?
7. What spiritual benefit did the mariners receive through Jonah (1:16)?
8. Describe the elements of repentance in Jonah's prayer (1:17-2:10).
9. What does Jonah's second call indicate about God (3:1-2)?
10. Summarize the results of Jonah's preaching in Nineveh (3:5-10).
11. Why didn't God judge Nineveh (3:5-10; 4:2)?
12. How did the Lord teach Jonah a lesson (4:6-8)? What was that lesson (4:9-11)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Jonah ran from the Lord, but the Lord constantly pursued him in mercy and love. Therefore Jonah

could pray, "I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving" (2:9). Jeremiah had that same awareness of God's love and mercy: "It is because of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22-23). And the psalmist said, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy" (Ps. 103:8; cf. Jonah 4:2). Have a daily awareness of God's mercies to you, and express your thankfulness to Him.

2. Jonah learned that disobedience results in emptiness, but obedience brings happiness and blessing (2:7-8). Thomas Watson wrote, "God commands nothing but what is beneficial. 'O Israel, what doth the Lord require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, and to keep His statutes, which I command thee this day, for thy good?' To obey God, is not so much our duty as our privilege" (The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations, I.D.E. Thomas, ed. [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977], p. 199). Have you received the blessings that come from obeying God? Do you delight in obeying Him (Ps. 37:4; 40:8)?

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