

Jonah 1

Written by K B Napier
Wednesday, 17 June 2009 13:43

Many Christians receive a call from God to take up a particular ministry, but refuse to enact it. Or, by looking only at their own lives, they misinterpret such a call and 'miss' it. Either way, God may not repeat the call for some time, if at all, for his own purposes, and so that person will not know the blessings associated with his or her ministry.

Every one of us has a ministry of some kind or other, some more vocal or physically active than others, ranging from private prayer for the saints and various ministries to preaching, witnessing, or supporting others financially or otherwise. There are no back-seat drivers or silent partners!

In Colossians chapter four Paul sends a rebuke to Archippus: "Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfill it." Whatever the ministry given to us by God we must obey and fulfill it.

In the Book of Jonah (written between the 6th and 4th centuries BC) we come across an ancient version of Archippus: Jonah. His was a reluctant minister, too. Yet, when he complied with his calling, many thousands entered the Kingdom of God. None of us knows the extent of our ministry in terms of saved souls or the spread of God's word.

Some years ago I was surprised and humbled to learn that those who received or read my teaching notes passed them on to many others, who also did the same thing. Then I started receiving confirmation that people had been saved, or repented of quite nasty sins. This came at a time when I wondered why I bothered at all – God kindly and graciously showed me that though I might not know the direct results of taking up this ministry given to me by God, it was used to good effect by the Holy Spirit. So, I carried on, tightening my grip on the plough. It is far from easy, but it must be done.

Remember that every Christian, whether with a 'big' or a 'small' ministry, or one that is unknown, is watched by the unsaved. They watch to see if they will falter and tarnish their witness. Fulfill your ministry! It is a privilege and an honour to serve the living God, and the results of what you do and say may have far-reaching effects.

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Interestingly, the account of Jonah is found in both the Old Testament and the Muslim Qur'an (as Yunus or Yunaan, or 'the One with the whale'). His name in Latin is Ionas ('dove'). For reasons of unbelief the straightforward report of Jonah – that he was swallowed by a fish – is usually called a myth or symbol, though the wording is obviously that of an actual event. In this study we will firmly adhere to the swallowing by a fish as an actual event. Jonah was commanded to preach to the people of Nineveh but tried to escape the command by taking a ship to Tarshish and the ship suffers a great storm brought about by God. Instead of going north-east, he ran north-west!

Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25 as well as in the New Testament (Matthew and Luke), when Jesus said the miracle of Jonah and the fish represented His own death and resurrection, as a divine sign. The message by Jonah is said to have been delivered in a "quite miserly" fashion, yet it is *God* Whose word saves, not man's! Perhaps Jonah was afraid of the city, given its size and wicked status. The prophet Nahum also wrote scathing rebukes against Nineveh and its evils.

Jonah was a prophet who lived in the era of king Jeroboam II, and lived in the region of Galilee, the village of Gath-hepher close to Nazareth. Sura 10 of the Qur'an is named after him, 'Sura Yunus', though he is only mentioned in verse 98. However, a summary of the account is given in Sura 37, verses 139-149. Even today a monument to Jonah can be found in the Arab town of Masshad. A main street in Jaffa is named after Jonah. Suffice to say Jonah is treated with great respect in the Middle East.

In the Old Testament he is listed as one of the twelve Minor Prophets. They are called 'minor' not because they are less important, but simply because their books are of shorter length. In the Hebrew bible, all twelve are included as one book. Jewish tradition says Jonah was a small boy brought back to life by Elijah.

The Book of Jonah is read annually at the time of Yom Kippur during the 'mincha' prayer. This is because the Jonah account describes 'Teshuva' – the ability to repent and receive forgiveness from God. The source of this vital fact is said by Jews to originate with the Book of Jonah, which is not correct; the source is found much earlier in scripture. Besides being reluctant to obey God's command, Jonah also appears to be less than compassionate towards those he preached to. How easily we can identify ourselves with such a poor spirit!

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The 'fish' in the account is usually translated as 'great fish', but not necessarily a whale. It may even have been a 'sea serpent'. Some even think it was a specially-created fish just for the purpose. Whatever the fish was, it swallowed Jonah whole and he remained alive and unharmed. To me, this suggests one of the larger whales. However, it is also possible that a fish/mammal that is now extinct was responsible, something many would now refer to as 'prehistoric'. Whilst inside the fish, Jonah's head may have been protected by seaweed (2:5, this is one theory).

The writer of Moby Dick, Herman Melville, was a professional whaler who records a sperm whale swallowing a sailor, who was later rescued alive, with his skin bleached by stomach acids. But, even without such evidence, we can be assured that the Bible means what it says – Jonah was actually swallowed by a large sea creature.

Nineveh

At the time, Ninevah was a huge and important city, on the eastern bank of the river Tigris, Assyria. Today, it would be on the opposite bank of the river running past Mosul, Iraq. The city was so large that it took about three days to walk around or through, according to the Bible and measurements of the excavated brick walls, though some of the ruins are now built-over by the suburbs of Mosul.

The city was on the main route between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, so became very rich and powerful. Like so many similar cities, it was given over to all kinds of immorality and wickedness. It is recorded in about 1800 BC that it was a centre for the worship of Ishtar. In the 14th century BC, after some centuries of subjection to other kings, the kings of Assyria overtook the city. However, it was not until about 883-859 BC that the city was greatly expanded. The city contained numerous architectural and engineering wonders. Sadly, many great places have fallen because they disregarded God. Though a large number repented to God because of Jonah's message, the city slowly returned to its godless status as the original repenting citizens died.

This is a reminder of the fact I have given many times, that a local church is only as Christian as its living saved members. We cannot ascribe salvation or godliness to any local church or to any gathered congregation on the strength of the original saved founders, no matter how pious or godly they may have been. Each successive generation must itself be saved and obedient.

Tarshish

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According to Josephus, Tarshish is the city of Tarsus in southern Asia Minor (modern Turkey). But, the name was not always used of an actual place. For example, when the Bible refers to the “ships of Tarshish” it does not mean a place, but the fact that the ships were very large and used for long journeys. Thus, when we are told Jonah tried to escape to Tarshish, it may indeed have meant Tarsus, but it could also have meant any place far away, or as some authors believe, anywhere along the coast of Phoenicia.

Overall, there are many interpretations of ‘Tarshish’! I suppose that as the Book of Jonah is an actual historical account, we may assume Tarshish to mean Tarsus, which seems a reasonable assumption. But, even if it really meant some place far away, it does not change the account at all. It is my personal opinion that as this is an historical account, we should read ‘Tarshish’ to mean ‘Tarsus’, an actual place. I also think the wording of the text suggests this.

Verses 1 & 2

1.

Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,

2.

Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.

Jonah was a prophet, so God spoke to him personally. The first part, “word of the Lord” may be translated ‘the utterance of Jehovah’. The word ‘saying’ can mean actual speech or a command in the mind. Either way, Jonah was ‘called’ by God to do a particular thing. As I have said elsewhere, this kind of ‘call’ from God is actual and cannot be misinterpreted, and has the effect of a ‘burden’ on the soul.

Jonah was the “son of Amittai” (‘my truth’). Because of this some Hebrew writers refer to Jonah as the ‘Son of Truth’. He was not known for his patience or for his compassion! Even so, as I have noted before, the manner of a man of God may not always be to the liking of listeners or readers, but this cannot negate the message itself. If it is from God, the manner of the speaker is not relevant, and listeners should not allow their dislike of his manner to cast a shadow over what God says. Rather, they must obey.

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God commanded Jonah to go to “Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it”. Notes on Nineveh have already been given. Jonah was to take a message of warning from God. What is interesting about this, is that the city was in Assyria, not Israel. On the other hand, Abraham was called from Babylon. We cannot question why God chose Nineveh for a warning; we may only accept that it occurred. It does tell us, however, that God will speak to whomever He wishes, and call those He has elected, even those we would never think of as candidates for salvation.

God said that Nineveh was to be warned because of the wickedness of its people. That is, they were acting in a way that was malignant, bad, evil, hurtful, in every known way. God can change such a people in an instant – as happened here. This is why I am convinced that the modern world has now passed the moment of opposition to homosexuals, who presently gain in strength and power. It is now a time for a Jonah to demand their repentance. It is time for us all to call on God’s might and power to overcome and to displace their evil with good, by prayer, and strong faith and witness.

Verse 3

1.

But Jonah 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 thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

We are not told why he did it, but when Jonah received the command, he tried to run away – a very odd thing for a prophet to do! Yet, we can all do very odd things in our Christian lives. It is possible, as has already been said, that he was afraid of Nineveh. It is also possible that, as a Jew, he did not wish to take God’s word of repentance to a non-Jewish people. Whatever the reason, Jonah tried to escape God’s command, though such an escape is impossible.

He travelled from Galilee to Joppa (‘beautiful’) on the west coast, which, during the reign of Solomon, was Jerusalem’s main port. There he obtained passage on a ship going to Tarshish. The words “going to Tarshish” implies Tarshish was a place rather than a term for a long distance.

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No man can run away from God's presence, for He is everywhere. He knows our hearts and our actions, even before we think, speak or act. On many occasions we may not like what God has asked us to do, but we must do it or suffer the consequences. The man who runs from God is merely making himself miserable and setting a precedent for future failures in his life.

Verses 4 - 6

1.

But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.

2.

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.

3.

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.

Of course, God knew where Jonah was at all times. He created a terrible storm at sea which was so fierce it threatened to break up the ship. The sailors were petrified and began to call out in anguish to their various gods. Then, they began to empty the ship of everything, to improve ballast.

Meanwhile Jonah was deep in the ship, sleeping. This came to the notice of the captain, who awakened him roughly. 'What do you think you are doing, sleeping at such a time? Call upon your god, as we have, to see if he will help us!' Of course, he did not know Jonah's God was the God of the Hebrews – but any old god would do in a crisis!

And this is how most people think, is it not? They never bother with God (or a god) until they are in a severe crisis. Then they cry out in anxiety and hope for God to help them. Many even promise all kinds of things if God does so! But, their prayers and cries are in vain, for God will

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not listen to them. They do not belong to Him and they are counted as dead already. When Christians do similar things, God will not listen. This is because the only true prayers are those that come from an obedient and holy heart, with words already given by God. God is not our personal firefighter!

Verses 7 - 10

1.

And they 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.

2.

Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou?

3.

And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land.

4.

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.

Being religious and believing in myths, the sailors cast lots to find out who had brought this calamity upon them. They cast the lot – small pebbles that were interpreted according to the pattern in which they fell. By this method they discovered that Jonah had something to do with it. We are not told how this happened, but God used it to bring His anger upon Jonah.

The sailors converged on Jonah, demanding to know who he was. 'What do you do? Where do you come from? Who are your kinsmen?' He told them the truth – he was an Hebrew who feared the Creator Jehovah of heaven and earth. At hearing this, the sailors were even more afraid and wanted to know why Jonah had done this. They were referring to the fact that Jonah had previously confessed to them that he was trying to escape God's will. Men who are called

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to a task by God, and try to run away from it, can affect many others, putting their lives in danger, as happened to the sailors.

Verses 11 & 12

1.

Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous.

2.

And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.

Of course, the sailors were not concerned about Jonah's private motives; they just wanted to be safe. Immediately, they thought they had to *do* something to Jonah, to stop the tempest, and asked what this should be. It was their idea of appeasing a mighty 'god'. This time Jonah did not shirk his responsibility and ordered them to throw him over the side. He realized that the storm was caused by his passage on the ship.

Verses 13 - 16

1.

Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them.

2.

Wherefore they cried unto the LORD, and said, We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, 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.

3.

So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging.

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4.

Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows.

To their credit the sailors did not wish to end Jonah's life so easily, and tried their best to row to a shoreline. But, the storm was too great. They called out to Jonah's God for help and mercy, and asked that they should not be held liable for his death. In their plea they recognized that everything was in this God's hands, Whoever He was.

Then, they picked up Jonah and threw him overboard into the swelling waves. Immediately, the sea stopped raging and the storm ceased. The men on board recognized this to be a divine, miraculous event and were very afraid, offering a sacrifice to God and making many vows for their safety.

Have you made a vow to God when faced with danger or some crisis? If you have, make very sure you do what you vowed, or your fate will be sealed. No man should make a vow to God unless he means it and will carry it out, for it is a promise to the Lord of all.

Verse 17

1.

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.

Whether it was immediately or soon afterwards, Jonah was swallowed by a "great fish". It does not matter if it was a whale, a fish, or some other large creature, for in those days people did not know the difference between mammals and fish. It was a sea creature! As I suggested earlier, it could be a now-extinct 'prehistoric' creature. It might even have been created just for this moment, for "the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah". Whatever the creature was, it was big enough not just to swallow a man, but able to keep it in its belly for three days.

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Of course, this is why Christ said Jonah was a type of Himself, buried and rising again on the third day. Was his skin bleached by stomach acids? We just do not know. The main fact is that a big creature *actually* swallowed Jonah, who *actually* stayed inside the stomach for three days and nights. It does not matter if some say it is impossible. We already know from a whaler that it is possible. Even if no-one gave evidence in support of such an event, it is Christian duty to believe it. It was not a vision of Jonah's; it was not a myth; it was not symbolic. It actually happened. And, also, it is a warning to all reluctant Christians.

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