

JONAH

As we read the Book of Jonah, we are all very familiar with the story of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish. He then repents while in this great fish and is promptly then spewed out of the fish. We read that he then goes to Nineveh and many people repent after hearing his message. But... is that really the whole story of the Book of Jonah. Let's see...

The first time we read of Jonah, himself, is found in 2Kings 14:25 - "*He (Jeroboam II, the son of Nebat, the king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel) restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of his servant **Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet, which was of Gathhepher.***" Jonah's "adventure," that we read of in the Book of Jonah, took place before the Assyrians defeated the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Actually, in the Book of Jonah, we see that God had given Assyria a chance to repent of their actions against God's "disobedient" people of the Northern Kingdom. If we look closely at this time frame within the Bible, we will see that God gave both Assyria and the Northern Kingdom a chance to repent from their wicked ways. Unfortunately, they both ended up yielding to their own wickedness and both ended up being defeated.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel was defeated first, ultimately by the Assyrians and they became assimilated into the Assyrian culture. They never really recovered from this defeat. This is actually where the Samaritans originated from. They were people from the Northern Kingdom (Israelis) who became assimilated into the Assyrian culture by marrying the Assyrians. Unfortunately, we then see that Assyria was defeated and ultimately absorbed into the Babylonian Kingdom under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar. A few years later, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was also ultimately defeated by Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar, as well.

Jonah is the son of Amittai who came from Gath-hepher in Zebulun. He was a "prophet" of the Northern Kingdom of Israel after the Kingdom split at the conclusion of Solomon's reign. Jonah, whose name means "dove," was a proud, stubborn, disobedient, unfaithful, grumbler, and altogether a bad-tempered, cantankerous old grouch. Yet, the scriptures tell us that he was used by God as a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel and we ultimately have the Book of Jonah for us to read and glean from. God can and will use anybody for His purposes.

In the Book of Jonah we see that God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria at the time. At that time, the Assyrians were attacking the Northern Kingdom – they were at war with each other. God called Jonah to go and warn the violent and godless Assyrians of their impending doom if they would defeat the Israelis, the Northern Kingdom.

As we have seen (2Kings 14:25), Jonah was used by God as His prophet to the Northern Kingdom. Here, God wanted to use him again but in a different way. Jonah was to be sent by God to go to whom Jonah considered as the enemy and tell them to repent or be destroyed. As a “patriot” of the Northern Kingdom, this seemed totally preposterous to him. The thing we must realize, however, is that Jonah knew it was God who was speaking to him.

Unfortunately, instead of listening and obeying God and His command, Jonah took off and ran in totally the opposite direction – to Tarshish. Jonah first fled to Joppa, a seaport in the Northern Kingdom, and then got himself a passage on a ship bound for Tarshish which was in the opposite direction from Nineveh. In other words, Jonah was running away from God and God’s call on his life.

Tarshish is actually modern day Spain. If you know anything about geography, you know that Spain is totally in the opposite direction of where Assyria was. To make it clear – Assyria was due north of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It is where Syria borders Israel, today. Tarshish, on the other hand, where modern day Spain is, is approximately 1938 nautical miles **due west** of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Wow!!! That is a far distance away and in the opposite direction from where God wanted Jonah to go. Hmmm....

Jonah, as we have seen, was used by God to speak to his own people, the people of the Northern Kingdom. That was not an issue for Jonah. He gladly spoke on the behalf of God to His people. However, now God wanted Jonah to go beyond what Jonah thought was how he was to be used by God.

God wanted him to now go and speak to those who were not of “God’s people” – the Assyrians. God wanted Jonah to go and speak to, who Jonah thought, were the enemies of God and His people. Jonah was to be sent to people who he did not like or possibly even hated. God had other plans. Hmmm....

This is vital for us to realize. God is love!!! As far as God is concerned, **everyone** should have the opportunity to hear from God and have the opportunity to repent from their evil ways and turn towards Him. Even if they are looked upon as God's enemy and therefore enemies of God's people. We must truly grasp the fact that God desires for everyone to be saved. He desires for every person to repent and to turn towards Him. The Assyrians were enemies of God and His people. However, God still loved them and desired for them to be saved – if they truly would repent and truly turn towards Him.

As we mentioned, Jonah did not agree with God's heart. He took off and went in the opposite direction from where God wanted him to go. We know the story. A great storm came upon the ship and it was going to sink. The men on the boat realized that it was because of Jonah and his disobedience to God. However, they did not immediately throw him overboard. They tried to go on but it was a losing battle.

Finally, Jonah knew it was his fault. We can say that he did the noble thing and had them throw him off the boat. However, I am not sure of that. I personally, think, although I am not sure, that he simply knew of his disobedience towards God and that he knew this was truly all his fault. I think he just wanted to end it all.

But... God had other plans. We know the story of the great fish. Jonah cries out while in the belly of the fish, *"I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heard my voice."* (Jonah 2:2) Yes, we read that Jonah repented and chose to do what God told him to do. The fish then "regurgitated" Jonah and Jonah was saved. He then, reluctantly, went to Nineveh. We read that he went throughout the streets telling them to repent from their wicked ways.

Jonah, who although he may be complying on the outside, is still stubbornly disobeying on the inside. He did not really want to do this. The reason being was that he did not particularly like the Assyrians. They were, after all, the enemy of His people. To his utter dismay, he finds that all the people, their king and even their animals put on and were all clothed in sackcloth sprinkled with ashes.

This was a symbol of their desire to repent as well as an indication of their absolute acceptance of the prophetic word sent to them by Yahweh through Jonah. They expressed a deep repentance and what seemed their desire to get right with the God of the Israelis (Jonah 3:5-10). This was exceptional simply because Yahweh was not really an Assyrian god. They worshiped other gods. Yet they heard the message, given by the messenger of Yahweh God and they heeded that message.

We see that this does not suit Jonah at all and he goes into a fury of rage towards God and he tells God just that. (Jonah 4:1-3) Yes, Jonah was not a happy camper. The people did, at least for the moment, as they were told – they repented of their ways. Jonah should have been happy at that. However, Jonah was upset that they repented and were turning towards God. What!!! He was upset that they were turning towards God??!!! What does this say about this “man of God?” Hmmm....

God’s answer to Jonah was to cause a leafy gourd to grow up to help protect Jonah from the blazing sun, for which Jonah is somewhat sullenly grateful. Then God removes it the next day. Jonah again gets very upset. Notice what God asks Jonah in Jonah 4:9, “... *Do you do well to be angry for the gourd?*” In other words, is it truly right of you to be angry with this gourd that has withered away? Notice Jonah’s reply. He states, “... *I do well to be angry, even unto death.*” Jonah is a bitter man!!!

We are left with God’s reply to Jonah’s bitterness. The Book of Jonah ends as God states, “... *Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not labored, neither made it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And **should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?***” (Jonah 4:9-11)

What God is telling Jonah, as well as us today, is that how much more compassion will Almighty God have on a people who are utterly ignorant of God and who also do not know the true difference between what God tells them is right from wrong. God will give everyone an opportunity to truly accept Him as their God. God is so loving of all His creation.

Unfortunately, the people of Nineveh did not keep their ways of repenting towards God. They had a “flash pan” experience with God. It was not a lifelong, life changing experience. We see this with many people. We see people totally reject Jesus. Sometimes they accept Jesus and then they stay with Him for a season and then they turn back to their old ways. Some may say they accept Jesus just to appease the person bringing them the Good News but ultimately, they really don’t want Jesus in their life nor to be the absolute Lord in their life.

We see this expressed by Jesus in His parable of the sower who sows the “seeds” of the Good News of salvation as found in Matthew 13:3-9; 18-23. The Good News (the seed) is given to everyone to have the opportunity to hear and receive. We know the parable: Some fall on the wayside and the birds come to eat it and take it away; some fall on stony ground and start to grow but the cares and concerns of this world begin to overtake the seed and it withers away; some fall among the thorns and they begin to grow but the deceitfulness of riches comes and chokes the seed and it also withers away; but some fall on good ground and grows and brings forth good fruit which is their own salvation and the salvation of others.

Jesus actually identified Himself with Jonah’s three-day sojourn in the belly of the great fish, noting it as a foreshadowing of His own death, when Jesus would spend three days “in the heart of the earth,” before His resurrection (Matthew 12:39–41). *“...An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonah: For as Jonah 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 Jonah; and, behold, a greater than Jonah is here.”*

While Jesus uses this analogy from the Book of Jonah, He does not compare Himself to Jonah nor Jonah’s inner most being. We can see that Jonah was totally the opposite from Jesus. Jesus was willing and He did give of His life for everyone, whether they would accept Him or not. They all had and still have a chance to believe in Him. Jonah, was a man who just cared about himself. He may have been used by God but it was not because of his heart nor of himself. It was all God.

We see that Jonah prophesied to Nineveh but he wasn't happy about it (Jonah 4:1). Herein we find another touchstone for our lives: aligning our desires with God's is always a process. Just because we go through the motions of following God's will does not mean our hearts are aligned with His will. God wanted Jonah's actions **and** his heart. Hmmm....

Do we sometimes do the things that God wants because we just know that we should? Or are we doing them because we believe and we are in total agreement with whatever God wants to do? This is sometimes difficult for us. Put yourself in Jonah's place. You are a child of God and you want to be used by God. God tells you to go to a person or people that you know are totally opposite of your beliefs. But, God wants you to go and speak with them. Do you disagree with God and try to run away from what God is calling you to do? You can try, but God will be following you. God will continue to give you the opportunity to do His will.

You can try to run to another part of the world but God will find you. You can be "swallowed by a fish" but God will find you. You can be like Jonah and "outwardly" repent from your foolish ways. But you must be sure, unlike Jonah, that your **heart** is truly ready to do whatever God desires for you to do. Are you ready for the fact that it may turn out the way God wants and not what you may want? Or... will you go away sulking like Jonah did? Hmmm.....

This is important. As a child of God we should desire for all to be saved; not just those who we think should be saved. We must be willing to go places that may be out of our "comfort zones." We must be willing, not just in words, but with our actions to back up who we are and what we say we believe. The fact of the matter is that we, as joint heirs with Jesus, should desire that none would perish but that **all** would come to the saving knowledge of Jesus.