

“JONAH: THE RELUCTANT PROPHET”

“Man Overboard!”

Scripture Reading – Jonah, 1:11-17

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So the sailors asked Jonah, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”. “Pick me up and throw me into the sea”, he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you”.

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then they cried to the LORD, “O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased”.

Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him. But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights. From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.

‘And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son”.’

Hebrews, 12:5-6, NIV

This series, ‘JONAH: THE RELUCTANT PROPHET’ is based on THE BOOK OF JONAH.

Daily newspaper headlines and overflowing prisons bear dramatic witness that sin runs rampant in society today. With child abuse, pornography, serial killings, terrorism, anarchy, and ruthless dictatorships, the world seems to be filled to overflowing with violence, hatred, and corruption. In the light of these tragedies, we begin to understand the necessity of God’s judgment. We may even find ourselves wishing for vengeance by any means upon the violent perpetrators. Surely they are beyond redemption.

How would you respond if God told you to take the Gospel to the worst offenders?

Jonah was given such a task. Assyria, a great but evil empire, was Israel’s most dreaded enemy. The Assyrians flaunted their power before God and the world through numerous acts of heartless cruelty. So when Jonah heard God tell him to go to Assyria and call the people to repentance, he ran in the opposite direction. Jonah hated the Assyrians, and he wanted vengeance, not mercy; so he ran. Eventually, Jonah obeyed and preached in the streets of Nineveh, and the people repented and were delivered.

As you read Jonah, see God’s love and compassion and realise that no one is beyond redemption. The Gospel is for all who repent and believe. Learn from the story of this reluctant prophet and determine to obey God, doing whatever he asks and going wherever he leads...

“MAN OVERBOARD!”

The records of the British Admiralty testify that James Bartley, an apprentice seaman on board the whaling ship STAR OF THE EAST, was swallowed whole by a whale, two hundred miles east of the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic, during February 1891, and he lived to tell the tale.

Bartley, on his first whaling voyage, fell overboard from a small boat as a large whale was harpooned. Upon being hit, the whale went to a depth of 800 feet, before it ended its dive. Eventually, the line slackened as the huge fish surfaced in the twilight. The hot climate made it imperative that the catch be cut up quickly. Having no means to raise the huge animal on deck, the men peeled off the blubber of the whale as they slipped and slid along the immense back of the giant mammal.

Working by lantern light, the tired crewmen removed the whale’s stomach and winched it on deck. The sailors were startled to notice something moving inside, so the ship’s surgeon was called to make a careful incision in the tough flesh. Out slid the doubled up sailor, James Bartley. He was alive, but unconscious. The doctor ordered he be drenched with seawater, a treatment that restored his consciousness, but not his reason, for he babbled incoherently. Confined to a cabin for several weeks, and bound tightly so he could not injure himself, Bartley eventually regained his senses. Within a few weeks he was able to relate the tale of what happened to him during his terrifying ordeal.

Bartley said that when he saw a large mouth open over him, he let out a scream as he was engulfed by it. He then felt sharp stabbing pains as he was swept across the whale’s teeth and then slid feet first down a slimy tube into the whale’s stomach. He said he could breathe, but the odour soon rendered him unconscious. The last thing he could remember was kicking as hard as he could against the soft yielding flesh.

As a result of his fifteen hours inside the belly of a huge whale, James Bartley lost all the hair on his body and was blinded for the rest of his life. His skin was bleached to an unnatural whiteness that gave the appearance of him being anaemic, despite the contrary. Bartley never made another trip to the sea and settled down to shore life as a cobbler in his native city of Gloucester. He died eighteen years after his terrifying adventure and remarkable survival. On his tombstone there is a brief account of his seafaring experience and a footnote that reads: ‘JAMES BARTLEY, A MODERN JONAH, 1870-1909’.

We look at the story of the real Jonah and see what lessons we can learn from him...

THE SEA WAS GETTING ROUGHER AND ROUGHER

Francis Thompson wrote an epic poem entitled ‘THE HOUND OF HEAVEN’.

In it, he pictures someone fleeing God (like Jonah) only to find the Lord patiently and triumphantly pursuing him until the wayward one finally learns to rest in the Lord. The central point of the poem is its astonishing assertion that sometimes human beings flee from God and that God actually pursues and follows them.

'I fled from God, down the nights and down the days. I fled from God, down the arches of the years. I fled from God, down the labyrinth of my own mind. In the midst of tears, I hid. Under running laughter, I hid from God. Up steep slopes I sped, shot precipitated over chasmed fears. But those strong feet of God came after me, with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, with constant speed and divine instantcy. And a voice, more persistent than the feet, spoke and said: "You are my precious one. I will not let you go". Yes, that is the way God is. So persistent, so diligent, so untiring in his pursuit of us when we are lost.'

"THE HOUND OF HEAVEN", Francis Thompson

Charles H Spurgeon said that God never allows his children to sin successfully, and Jonah is proof of the truth of the merciful chastening of God. The word 'CHASTENING' or 'DISCIPLINE' literally means 'ENFORCED LEARNING'. It is best described as simultaneous wrath and mercy.

If you are a Christian, chastening is inevitable; it is painful, it is preparation.

'And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son".'

Hebrews, 12:5-6, NIV

God seems to employ three levels of chastening, with three different levels of intensity...

INTERNAL CHASTENING – When God speaks to us through his word.

'When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?".'

Acts, 2:37, NIV

EXTERNAL CHASTENING – When God sends someone to speak to us.

'The captain went to Jonah and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish".'

Jonah, 1:6, NIV

TERMINAL CHASTENING – When God simply takes you home.

A good example of this is the fate of Ananias and Sapphira in **Acts, 5:1-11**, or those who Paul referred to in his letters who had 'FALLEN ASLEEP' (see **I Corinthians, 11:30**).

God went to great pains to not only show great love to Jonah, but also to show him the importance of his mission to preach the Word of God in the great city of Nineveh. Because Jonah was no longer listening or obeying the Word of God, the Almighty sent a wind that

caused a great storm to get his disobedient prophet's attention. He sent a whale, a great fish, or a sea monster, in order to prepare Jonah for the important task that still lay ahead of him.

SO THEY ASKED HIM, "WHAT SHOULD WE DO TO YOU TO MAKE THE SEA CALM DOWN FOR US?"

WHAT SHOULD WE DO? is a very good question to ask...

On the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples with great power and purpose, and Peter, filled with the Spirit, preached to the crowd in Jerusalem, the coalescing of the acts of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God caused the residents of the city to ask, **"BROTHERS WHAT SHOULD WE DO?"** (see **Acts, 2:37**).

After Paul and Silas were thrown into prison for preaching the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they were praying and singing hymns at midnight when an act of the Holy Spirit caused the prison walls to shake, the doors to fling open, and the chains of the prisoners to fall off. The jailor asked, **"WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED ?"** (see **Acts, 16:30**).

When the Word of God is backed up with the Holy Spirit, it is a tremendous occasion.

Jonathan Edwards once preached a remarkable sermon entitled 'SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD'. As he read, in a monotone voice, by candlelight from his pulpit, grown men in the congregation literally hung on to their pews lest they felt they were sliding into hell. Outside the church, passers by hung on to tree trunks as they felt a powerful force of nature.

Edwards took his text from Deuteronomy, 32:35: 'IN DUE TIME THEIR FOOT WILL SLIP'.

It had a tremendous impact. But when he preached the same sermon again, in another place, nothing supernatural happened. Others have preached the same sermon and no irregular event has been reported. But when the Word of God and the Work of God coalesced together, there was a great effect.

"PICK ME UP AND THROW ME INTO THE SEA", JONAH REPLIED, "AND IT WILL BECOME CALM"

It would be a mistake to suggest Jonah was a martyr – a title he did not deserve.

Martyrs die for the glory of God, but Jonah offered to die because he would rather have died than obey the will of God. He should not be classified with people like Moses (see **Exodus, 32:30-35**), Esther (see **Esther, 4:13-17**), and Paul (see **Romans, 9:1-3**), who were willing to give their lives to God in order to rescue others.

Nonetheless, Jonah did rediscover an important principal.

Someone has rightly said that 'YOU ARE NOT READY TO LIVE UNTIL YOU ARE READY TO DIE'. You cannot save your life if you have one eye on the outcome: There is a line in a song which says, 'LOVING LIFE TOO MUCH WE LOSE IT, DEAD TO SELF, WE TRULY LIVE'.

'Jesus called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and

for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?’

Mark, 8:34-37, NIV

Jonah is, however, to be commended for telling the truth.

But we do not commend him for taking his life into his own hands. He should have surrendered his life to the Lord right then on board ship, and let God give the orders. Had he fallen to his knees and confessed his sins to God, Jonah might have seen the storm cease immediately and the door open to a great opportunity for witness onboard the ship.

“I KNOW THAT IT IS MY FAULT THAT THIS GREAT STORM HAS COME UPON YOU”

It is said that the hardest six words to say are: ‘I AM SORRY, I WAS WRONG’.

Jonah knew that he had disobeyed and that the storm was his fault, but he did not say anything until the crew cast lots and he lost the toss. Then Jonah was willing to give his life to save the sailors, although he had refused to do the same for the people of Nineveh. Jonah's hatred for the Assyrians had completely affected his perspective. He would rather die if it meant the sailors could be saved, but he did not want to live in order that the Ninevites might be saved.

We must always be on our guard against hubris, ‘spiritual pride’.

*What is it keeps me out of all the love and faith and fire I need?
O drive the foes from out my soul, whate’er it cost, howe’er I bleed!
No sin cursed thing shall I allow, if thou wilt come and sanctify me now.*

William Booth, SASB 440:2

*From thee I would not hide my sin, because of fear
What men may think; I hate my pride, and as I am appear,
Just as I am, O Lord, not what I’m thought to be,
Just as I am a struggling soul for life and liberty.*

Herbert Howard Booth, SASB 415:2

INSTEAD, THE MEN DID THEIR BEST TO ROW BACK TO LAND, BUT THEY COULD NOT

Jonah told the sailors the startling truth, but they had compassion for him.

It is significant that the heathen sailors at first rejected Jonah's offer and began to work harder to save the ship. They did more for Jonah than Jonah had been willing to do for them. By trying to save Jonah's life, the pagan sailors showed more compassion than Jonah, because Jonah did not want to warn the Ninevites of the impending judgment of God. Believers should be ashamed when unbelievers show more concern and compassion than they do. God wants us to be concerned for all of his people, lost and saved.

The Bible tells us that they did their best; they literally ‘DUG WITH OARS’.

This shows the utter futility of disobeying God's Word and attempting to save yourself. The sailors engaged strenuous effort in a forlorn effort to secure their own salvation.

‘There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.’

Proverbs, 14:12, NIV

Of course, people today still believe that they know better than God.

They point to education and say that if we work hard at educating everyone, it will bring about our salvation. They point to science and say that if we work hard and search for new and better ways, it will bring about our salvation. Some even cling to money believing that it will secure their salvation because everything has a price and anyone can be bought. The truth is, however, the price has already been paid, and it is the only price acceptable to God.

‘For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.’

1 Peter, 1:18-21, NIV

THEN THEY CRIED TO THE LORD, “O LORD...”

The sailors knew something of the God of Jonah and the Hebrews.

These pagan sailors knew some basic theology: the existence of Jonah's God, his judgment of sin, their own guilt before him, and his sovereignty over creation. They confessed, **“FOR YOU, O LORD, HAVE DONE AS YOU PLEASED”**. They called God by his personal name – YHWH! Nonetheless, there is no evidence that they abandoned their old gods. Perhaps they merely added Jehovah to their ‘god shelf’. They threw themselves on God's mercy and then threw Jonah into the raging sea, and God stopped the storm.

In all fairness to the sailors, their actions show three positive steps to salvation...

THEY CALLED ON THE NAME OF THE LORD

The Bible clearly states, **‘EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED’** (see **Romans, 10:9**).

THEY ASKED GOD TO SHOW THEM MERCY

The tax collector did such in his simple but profound prayer: **‘LORD, HAVE MERCY ON ME A SINNER’** (see **Luke, 18:13**). Jesus stated that this prayer was answered by God, and the tax collector, rather than the ‘righteous man’, went home justified.

THEY DIGNIFIED GOD’S ACTIONS

One of the things that separate the Christian believer from the unbeliever is that the Christian declares God right and just now. One day, all mankind will bow down before Christ. Some will do so out of fear, but those who do so in love have the better

experience. It is important that we acknowledge that God has been faithful to us – and all his actions have been right and just.

THEY GREATLY FEARED THE LORD, THEY OFFERED A SACRIFICE, AND MADE VOWS TO HIM

THEY FEARED THE LORD

‘God uses sex to drive a man to marriage, ambition to drive a man to service, fear to drive a man to faith.’

Martin Luther

‘The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death.’

Proverbs, 14:27, NIV

THEY OFFERED A SACRIFICE TO THE LORD

When the storm ceased, the men feared God even more and made vows to him. How they could offer an animal sacrifice to God on board ship is a puzzle to us, especially since the cargo had been jettisoned; but then we don't know what the sacrifice was, or how it was offered. Perhaps the sense is that they offered the animal to Jehovah and vowed to sacrifice it to him once they were safe on shore.

‘God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!’

Romans, 5:8-9, NIV

THEY MADE VOWS TO THE LORD

Many a person in the midst of great trial and tribulation has declared they will serve God if he gets them out of their current predicament. How often people make such vows, but what happens when they are delivered? Do they always fulfil the vow they have made?

God always takes all our vows very seriously.

‘Jesus said, ‘Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’, and your ‘No’, ‘No’.’

Matthew, 5:37a, NIV

*O Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end,
Be thou for ever near me, my Master and my friend.
I shall not fear the battle if thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway, if thou wilt be my guide.*
John Ernest Bode, SASB 862:1

BUT THE LORD PROVIDED A GREAT FISH TO SWALLOW JONAH

The real question is not, ‘ARE MIRACLES POSSIBLE?’ but rather, ‘DOES GOD EXIST?’

A man visited a psychiatrist to share a problem which greatly concerned him, “Doctor, I have a terrible problem”. “Please tell me about it”, said the doctor. “Well, I believe that I am dead.” “Hmm, that is a heavy concern. May I ask you a question?” “Of course”, replied the man. “Do you believe that dead men bleed?” “Of course not. That’s preposterous”, said the patient. The psychiatrist reached over and picked up a long hat pin, took the man’s hand, and pricked his finger with it. As the blood began to flow, the man stared at his finger and exclaimed, “Well, what do you know! Dead men do bleed after all!”

The Bible declares that ‘WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE’ (see Matthew, 19:26).

Remember the little girl whose teacher laughed when she spoke about Jonah being swallowed by a great fish? The teacher laughed and scoffed and said, “That is impossible. It could never happen”. The little girl said, “When I get to heaven I’ll ask Jonah myself and find out if it was true”. To which the teacher replied, “What if Jonah did not go to heaven?”. The little girl replied, “Then you can ask him”.

The whole point of this miracle is that God does not need a precedent.

Just because mankind today doubts the possibility of the existence of such a creature, and questions if a man could survive three days and three nights in the belly of such a great fish, does not invalidate the literal account of Jonah’s experience. The point is that Jonah found himself drowning in the Mediterranean Sea because of his disobedience, but God still wanted his prophet to preach in Nineveh. Therefore, God divinely appointed such a creature, at such a time, for such a purpose as this.

It is enough for me because the Bible tells me it is true.

Regardless of what kind of ‘GREAT FISH’ or ‘SEA MONSTER’ God appointed to rescue Jonah, it was a miracle. If you cannot accept the miracle of Jonah and the great fish, then there are a lot of other miracles in the Bible that are going to give you trouble. If you have trouble with Jonah, then you will probably have trouble accepting the fact that the Red Sea was opened for Moses and the Israelites. If you have trouble with Jonah, then you will probably have trouble accepting the bodily resurrection of Christ, because Jesus himself used the example of Jonah as a pointer to his miraculous resurrection.

Wanting science to prove every aspect your faith means that you are living on very thin ice. Science can neither prove nor disprove that Jonah survived being in the belly of a great fish for three days and three nights. Science can neither prove nor disprove that God exists – and that he desires an intimate relationship with you. Whilst it is always good to doubt your doubts, there is a great danger in doubting your beliefs – it can leave you open to throwing out your beliefs. The Christian knows that he accepts God by faith, and by faith, we are commended.

‘And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.’

Hebrews, 11:6, NIV

JONAH WAS INSIDE THE FISH THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS, THEN JONAH PRAYED