

## **“JONAH: THE RELUCTANT PROPHET”**

### ***“The Deliverance of the Ninevites”***

#### **Scripture Reading – Jonah, 3:1-10**

*Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you”.*

*Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city – a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned”. The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.*

*When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish”.*

*When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.*

***‘For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.’***

***Ephesians, 2:8-10, 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...*


#### **“THE DELIVERANCE OF THE NINEVITES”**

*According to a BBC website, some of the world’s most difficult questions for men to answer include the following:*

- ‘WHAT ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT?’ Because no matter how you reply, no one believes you!*
- ‘DO YOU LOVE ME?’ Because disaster strikes if your positive reply is not very enthusiastic.*
- ‘DOES MY BUM LOOK BIG IN THIS?’ Because... well, you know why ladies!*
- ‘DO YOU LIKE THIS?’ Because she obviously likes it, and you probably hate it.*
- ‘WHICH ONE OF THESE TWO DO YOU LIKE THE BEST?’ Because she doesn’t really like either.*
- ‘ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?’ Because she knows you are really watching the football!*

Of course, when men ask, WHAT’S WRONG? we always take women at their word when they answer ‘NOTHING’. We know something is wrong, but we just won’t worry about it any more!


*Today, we come to two back-to-back verses in the Bible which require us to ask two of the most difficult of all theological questions...*

 **In Jonah, chapter one, we saw God’s patience with Jonah.**

Jonah received the call of God to go to Nineveh, but he disobeyed and headed instead for Tarshish, in the complete opposite direction! He conveniently found a boat ready to take him away from the presence of the Lord, but God sent a terrible storm that threatened the lives of the mariners. Jonah was forced in to revealing his true identity and the extent of his sin before he was thrown overboard and became a submariner when the great fish swallowed him.

 **In Jonah, chapter two, we saw God’s mercy toward Jonah.**

After spending three days inside the great fish, Jonah eventually prayed. God heard his prayer, honoured his faith, accepted his confession, and restored his ministry. Despite undergoing God’s discipline, the chapter ends with God speaking to the whale, the whale vomiting Jonah on to dry land, and the reluctant prophet stinking of fish innards.

 **In Jonah, chapter three, we see God’s power through Jonah.**

The Lord graciously calls his prophet a second time, and this time Jonah obeyed. He preaches a short message in a great city, and everyone, from the king to the lowest subject, responds positively to his words. God looks down upon a repenting people and relents from the threat of immediate destruction – although he does not suspend imminent judgement.

***We look at Jonah and see what lessons we can learn from his amazing experience...***

**"WHO KNOWS? GOD MAY YET RELENT AND WITH COMPASSION TURN FROM HIS FIERCE ANGER  
SO THAT WE WILL NOT PERISH"**

Back-to-back in *THE BOOK OF JONAH*, we have verses that prompt us to consider two questions:

'DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?'      This first question is complex and full of difficulty.  
'DOES GOD REWARD WORKS?'      This second question is a little more easily answered.

### **Does God change his mind?**

*There are some important truths that must be borne in mind before we attempt an answer...*

#### **GOD'S CHARACTER HAS NOT CHANGED**

*"I the LORD do not change."*

**Malachi, 3:6a, NIV**

*'Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father  
of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.'*

**James, 1:17, NIV**

*In a world of shifting values, there are standards that remain,  
I believe that holy living by God's grace we may attain...*

*All the promises of Jesus are unchanged in every way,  
In my yesterdays I proved them, I believe them for today...*

**John Gowans, SASB 324:3a, 4a**

#### **GOD'S COMMANDS HAVE NOT CHANGED**

*'God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.'*

**Romans, 11:29, NIV**

In the belly of the great fish, Jonah made vows to the Lord, but he was not sure if God still wanted him to go and preach in Nineveh. The marvel is that God came to Jonah a second time and revealed that his will for Jonah had not changed. Nineveh was still very much on God's agenda. This time, Jonah obeyed the Lord and travelled to the great city.

The modern Church seems to be preoccupied with earthly concerns – food, shelter and clothing, dealing with the hungry, the poor, politics. These are the things the Church should be involved in, but we must never forget that THE GREAT COMMISSION of Jesus is still in effect:

*'Jesus came to his disciples and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age".'*

**Matthew, 28:18-20, NIV**

#### **SCRIPTURE CLAIMS THAT GOD CANNOT LIE**

*'God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible  
for God to lie.'*

**Hebrews, 6:18, NIV**

If this is true, how do we reconcile the words...?

'FORTY MORE DAYS AND NINEVEH WILL BE OVERTURNED' and God 'DID NOT BRING UPON THEM THE DESTRUCTION HE HAD THREATENED'.

We could shelve the question by claiming Jonah had not preached God's message. However, there is absolutely nothing in the text to give us this option. When Jonah entered the city and preached there was no way he was not preaching God's Word. Notice again how it is written, God 'DID NOT BRING UPON THEM THE DESTRUCTION HE HAD THREATENED'.

#### **SCRIPTURE CLAIMS THAT GOD KNOWS EVERYTHING**

*'James said to the men and brethren in Jerusalem, "Known unto God are  
all his works from the beginning of the world".'*

**Acts, 15:18, KJV**

*'Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is  
uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.'*

**Hebrews, 4:13, NIV**

If this is true, how do we reconcile the words...?

'FORTY MORE DAYS AND NINEVEH WILL BE OVERTURNED' and God 'DID NOT BRING UPON THEM THE DESTRUCTION HE HAD THREATENED'.

**The problem is we now face more questions than we started with:**

'DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?'	I don't know!	Yes... No... Maybe!
'DOES GOD LIE?'	I don't know!	Yes... No... Maybe!
'DOES GOD KNOW EVERYTHING?'	I don't know!	Yes... No... Maybe!
'DOES GOD BLUFF?'	I don't know!	Yes... No... Maybe!

#### **DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND? NO!**

*'God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should  
change his mind.'*

**Numbers, 23:19a, NIV**

*'He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is  
not a man, that he should change his mind.'*

**I Samuel, 15:29, NIV**

#### **DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND? YES!**

*'The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart  
was filled with pain. So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have*

*created, from the face of the earth – men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air – for I am grieved that I have made them”. But Noah found favour in the eyes of the LORD.’*

**Genesis, 6:6-8, NIV**

**In the life of King Hezekiah, we see how tears move the heart of God.**

The King of Israel became gravely ill and God despatched the prophet Isaiah to the royal palace to tell the monarch that his life was at an end and it would be right for him to settle his affairs before he died. The King turned to the wall, wept bitterly and prayed earnestly to God. Isaiah was on his way home when the Lord spoke to him and sent him back to the King with another message: **“GO AND TELL HEZEKIAH, ‘THIS IS WHAT THE LORD, THE GOD OF YOUR FATHER DAVID, SAYS: I HAVE HEARD YOUR PRAYER AND SEEN YOUR TEARS; I WILL ADD FIFTEEN YEARS TO YOUR LIFE’”** (see Isaiah, 38:5).

#### **DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND? WHO KNOWS?**

**Often we come to a question like this with our minds already made up.**

We have already decided, from the evidence we have personally discovered, what God is like. It is almost like the foolish man that said, ‘MY MIND IS MADE UP, DO NOT CONFUSE ME WITH THE FACTS’. However, the only way to know for certain is to become completely empty before God.

The King of Nineveh saw through Jonah’s Message and hoped that God would not give a warning like this if there was no hope. The King of Nineveh asked, **“WHO KNOWS?”**. He emptied himself like a little child because he did not know the answer to his own question.

*A man was walking north towards Scotland, but he was on a train travelling south, so which direction was he heading? But while he was walking north, travelling south, the earth was rotating in an easterly direction, so which direction was he heading? But whilst the earth is rotating, it is also orbiting around the sun and tilting a little on its axis in order to create the seasons of the year, so which direction was he heading? But there is more, the sun is rotating in a spiral arm around our galaxy called the milky way which is but one galaxy that is moving in the vast regions of the universe, so which direction was he really heading?*

**Does God change his mind? Who knows? Do you know? Can you know? I do not know!**

***‘Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out!’***

**Romans 11:33, NIV**

*God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform,  
He plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.  
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.*

**William Cowper, SASB 29:1, 4**

**God is not meant to be fully understood, he is meant to be fully worshipped.**

**When we cease to wonder, we cease to worship.**

**WHEN GOD SAW WHAT THEY DID AND HOW THEY TURNED FROM THEIR EVIL WAYS,  
HE HAD COMPASSION AND DID NOT BRING UPON THEM THE DESTRUCTION HE HAD THREATENED**

**We have noted previously that God saw the wickedness of the Ninevites.**

The wickedness of Nineveh was such that it **‘SMELLS TO HIGHEST HEAVEN** (see 1:2, TLB). Now, God saw not the wickedness, but the works of the Ninevites as **‘THEY TURNED FROM THEIR EVIL WAYS’**. Their actions moved the very heart of God and he relented from destroying the city with its 120,000 inhabitants.

*Whilst it was difficult, if not impossible, to answer the question: ‘DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?’, it is relatively easier to answer the question: ‘DOES GOD REWARD WORKS?’, a question which this verse requires us to ask...*

**Before we answer this question we must settle one theological point immediately.**

Namely, that we are not saved because of our works. The Bible is quite clear that our salvation comes to us only through God’s grace, and it is that grace that produces good works – repentance, regeneration, faith – within the heart of the converted sinner.

**We must understand the relationship between God, preaching, faith and works.**

***“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.’***

**Romans, 10:13-17, NIV**

**The story of ‘THE DELIVERANCE OF THE NINEVITES’ follows this pattern.**

**Jonah, 1:1-2** ***‘The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me”.’***

**Jonah, 3:4** ***‘On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned”.’***

**Jonah, 3:5** ***‘The Ninevites believed God’.***

**Jonah, 3:10** ***‘When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.’***

**The Salvation Army teaches:**

*‘We believe that repentance towards God, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit are necessary for salvation. We believe that we are justified by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and that he that believeth hath the witness in himself.’*

**“ARTICLES OF FAITH”, SA Doctrines 7-8**

**The reality is, of course, that we are saved because of God's grace.**

That grace produces within us repentance, faith, and regeneration. When God sees such works within us, we receive his salvation. In a very real sense, the Lord is simply responding to the produce of his works within us.

*'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.'*

**Ephesians, 2:8-10, NIV**

*'We become Christians through God's unmerited favour, not as the result of any effort, ability, intelligent choice, or act of service on our part. However, out of gratitude for this free gift, we will seek to help and serve others with kindness, love, and gentleness, and not merely to please ourselves. While no action or work we do can help us obtain salvation, God's intention is that our salvation will result in acts of service. We are not saved merely for our own benefit but to serve Christ and build up the church. We are God's workmanship (masterpiece, work of art). Our salvation is something only God can do. It is his powerful, creative work in us.'*

**"LIFE APPLICATION BIBLE", Study Notes**

**God looked with compassion upon the grace induced works of the Ninevites...**

*'When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence".'*

**Jonah, 3:6-8, NIV**

#### **THE NINEVITES ENGAGED IN FASTING**

**'THE NINEVITES BELIEVED GOD AND THEY DECLARED A FAST'**

**'THE KING PROCLAIMED: "DO NOT LET ANY MAN OR BEAST, HERD OR FLOCK, TASTE ANYTHING; DO NOT LET THEM EAT OR DRINK"'**

**Scripture notes how the people of God have been blessed by fasting.**

There is, of course, no virtue in fasting for its own sake – unless you are overweight! And some of us might do that! But fasting is a biblical teaching. The Bible tells us that, fasting was not only the practice of the Ninevites, because King David also fasted. It tells us the fasting was the practice of Jesus; it was the practice of Paul and the other apostles.

**Therefore, we should fast ourselves, but when?**

Three suggestions: (1) When the burden you carry is so great that you do not want to eat. (2) When there is a great decision to be made and you want to be certain of God's divine guidance. (3) When it seems that God is hiding his face, and he is far away from you.

#### **THE NINEVITES WORE SACKCLOTH AND ASHES**

**'ALL OF THEM, FROM THE GREATEST TO THE LEAST, PUT ON SACKCLOTH'**

**'THE KING OF NINEVEH ROSE FROM HIS THRONE, TOOK OFF HIS ROYAL ROBES, COVERED HIMSELF WITH SACKCLOTH AND SAT DOWN IN THE DUST, AND SAID "LET MAN AND BEAST BE COVERED WITH SACKCLOTH"'**

Sackcloth was made from camels' hair or goats' hair, and ashes are absolutely worthless. John the Baptist would later 'mourn his message' as he continually wore sackcloth made from camels hair for clothing. The people of Nineveh thought that there was nothing left to live for. The king issued the proclamation that even the beasts should be covered with sackcloth.

**The Ninevites were completely humiliated.**

Before they could have written the apocryphal book 'HUMILITY – AND HOW I OBTAINED IT', but now they were completely humiliated. Humiliation is the recognition that our ways have offended God. Humiliation is the recognition that we have absolutely no bargaining power with God. Humiliation is the recognition that there is nothing we can do in ourselves. They sat down in the dirt and dust and wondered if in forty days they would be destroyed.

#### **THE NINEVITES ENGAGED IN PRAYER**

**'LET EVERYONE CALL URGENTLY ON GOD'**

The King of Nineveh commanded his people to 'CRY MIGHTILY TO GOD', to pray with tears. The sailors cried out to the Lord during the storm and Jonah 'CRIED BY REASON OF MINE AFFLICTION' in the belly of the great fish, and during his dramatic entrance into 'the great city'. Israel's King Hezekiah's tears moved the very heart of God. Would the same be true of the pagan people of Nineveh?

**Generally speaking, there are three types of prayer.**

COMMUNION is that daily fellowship with God when we seek his presence.

PETITION is that bringing to God our needs and the needs of family.

INTERCESSION is standing in the gap between God and the desperation of mankind that only the Lord can take away. It is when we plead earnestly, often with tears, that the Lord will step into the situation with his almighty, supernatural power.

#### **THE NINEVITES CHANGED THEIR WAYS**

**"LET THEM GIVE UP THEIR EVIL WAYS AND THEIR VIOLENCE"**

**When Jonah preached destruction, the Ninevites knew why.**

They were acutely aware of their own faults and failings. They were aware of their iniquity, wickedness and sin. They were not surprised that destruction was coming. They knew they had to change their way of life in order to survive. But would they actually do it?

**DEPTH OF MERCY! CAN THERE BE MERCY STILL RESERVED FOR ME?**