

# Lessons from Jonah

*“Now these things happened unto them by way of example; and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come.”*

*—I Corinthians 10:11, Revised Version*

## **SOMETIMES CHRISTIANS**

do not pay much attention to the Old Testament, possibly because a large portion of it relates to Israel, and because there are lots of names, places and events that that occurred long before Jesus came at his First Advent. Perhaps these do not seem as relevant to

one's faith as the admonitions found in the Gospel accounts and the New Testament epistles. Prophecy oriented students of the Bible may see in the various Old Testament narratives possible fulfillments in New Testament events, but even if such is not the case, valuable lessons still may be gained from studying God's dealings with characters of ancient times and making profitable applications for the Christian's walk in the "narrow" way. (Matt. 7:14) Such are the lessons from the Book of Jonah.

Jonah is identified in II Kings 14:25 as a servant of God and a prophet. Thus, it would be expected that such a chosen one would do the Lord's bidding as required. Unlike other prophets, he was not sent to Israel but to the heathen people of Nineveh, a city in the kingdom of Assyria. The Prophet Nahum describes Nineveh as a "bloody city ... full of lies and robbery." (Nah. 3:1,7) After God directed Jonah to preach to the Ninevites, what was his reaction? He did not say anything, but simply fled and took a ship out of Joppa that was going to Tarshish. (Jon. 1:1-3) Jonah ignored God and was clearly disobedient. Bible characters often made serious mistakes. In looking at their deficiencies, we might even feel a little superior to them, thinking to ourselves that we would never have done what Jonah did.

## **FULFILLING RESPONSIBILITY**

Do we ever ignore, or disobey, the will and Word of God? Do we utilize all the opportunities for telling others the good news of the Gospel as we should? (Matt. 28:19,20) As the Lord's people, we should not flee from our commission, as did Jonah, but understand that we are to fulfill our responsibilities. When Isaiah queried as to how long he should proclaim God's word, we read, "Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate."—Isa. 6:11

Concerning obedience to God, we are reminded of the following admonition. "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above,

where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection [Greek: exercise the mind] on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” (Col. 3:1-3) While not condoning Jonah’s failure to hearken to God’s instructions in preaching to Nineveh, as followers of Jesus we might properly engage in self-examination. Is it true of us that our minds are exercised as fully as possible toward things that are above? If not, then to the degree that such is not the case, we are not fully hearkening to the Word of God.

Jonah was asleep in the ship when it was struck by a terrible storm. As it raged, the heathen sailors prayed to their gods for deliverance. They were aware something unusual was happening and cast lots to determine who it was that had caused their calamity. The lot fell upon Jonah. The shipmaster was rather astonished that he would be sleeping instead of calling upon his god, and inquired who he was. Jonah stated he was a Hebrew and feared the Lord of heaven. (Jon. 1:4-10) A consideration for Christians, in contrast to Jonah, is suggested by the following text, “Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.”—I Tim. 4:12

As children of God, do our actions and dealings with others in the world always reflect that something is different about us—that we have higher aspirations and standards of conduct? Could it be said of us, as it was of Daniel, that no fault could be found in us except it be concerning the law of our God? (Dan. 6:4,5) Although Jonah stated he feared the Lord, the God of heaven, if he had shown the

proper reverence for the Creator, would he have fled from his assigned task of preaching to the Ninevites? Would he not at the very least have been concerned about the men in the ship and have prayed to the Father on their behalf?

Those in the ship were amazed that Jonah, though stating that he was a Hebrew, would run away from his God, especially since they spent their lives trying to appease and pacify their own gods. The earlier question, as to why he was asleep and not praying, was indeed a reproof to one who was a messenger of the true God.

### **SELF-EXAMINATION**

Do we ever fail to live up to our professions of Christian living? Have we ever had unguarded moments when we said or did something that does not represent the highest standards of devotion to the Master? Has the Lord ever permitted someone who was not a believer to reprove us for our conduct, thus making us feel ashamed? This is all part of self-examination.

The closer we are to the Lord the more we will be cognizant of the Apostle Paul's words and realize our need for cleansing and forgiveness through Christ's mercy. "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. ... O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin."—Rom. 7:18,19,24,25

Jonah 1:11-17 contains lessons both with respect to God's mighty power as well as those of a prophetic nature. In these verses, Jonah urges the sailors to cast him into the sea because his presence was the cause of their distress. They showed nobility of character by rowing harder in order to avoid taking that step, but it was to no avail. Ultimately, they sought pardon from Jonah's God for throwing him overboard, after which the sea immediately became calm. The sailors recognized that the God of the Hebrews was true, and they prayed to him, offered sacrifices, and made vows. Concerning Jonah, he was swallowed and in the fish's belly for three days and nights.

Though not according to his character deficiencies, but in a prophetic sense, Jonah seems to represent Christ and also his body, members of his church. Jesus said, "As Jonas 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." (Matt. 12:40) Christ rose on the third day, receiving his spiritual resurrection. Thus, as Jonah willingly let himself be put symbolically to death by being cast into the sea, Christ willingly yielded his life in actuality as a sacrifice for father Adam and the whole race of humanity. (I Tim. 2:5,6) During the present Christian age, followers of Jesus also willingly give their lives in sacrifice and service, following in Jesus' footsteps.—Rom. 12:1; I Pet. 2:5

Jonah, chapter 2, depicts the prophet's experience while in the belly of the fish when he committed himself to prayer. He was in very difficult straits because of his disobedience in fleeing from God's

command. There is an element of hope when acknowledging that even though he was apart from God, he spoke of looking toward his holy temple again. Jonah perhaps recognized that God makes provision to grant forgiveness when one goes astray and then returns to him.

One obvious lesson for us is that even when we have done poorly, we should never neglect the opportunity for prayer. Not all prayers may be answered immediately or in the manner desired, but those who have been chosen by the Father may rest assured that as long as they have the desire to commune with the Lord, he will in his own time and manner, answer in accordance with his perfect will.—I Thess. 5:17; James 5:16

### **DISCIPLINE NECESSARY**

Jonah's situation finds certain parallels in his experience with that of the nation of Israel. Like Jonah, Israel was especially chosen by God. They were to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, and a peculiar treasure unto the Lord. (Exod. 19:3-6) However, they, as Jonah did, rebelled against God, neglected to obey him and thereby failed to fulfill their mission. Thus, they received disciplines from God in the form of abuse by other nations for many centuries.

The Master's words were very pointed as he wept over the nation of Israel. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you

desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.”—Matt. 23:37-39

Presently, Israel is still looking to military alliances and national defense as a solution to her problems. However, just as Jonah, from the depths of despair, acknowledged that “Salvation is of the LORD,” so too will Israel have to make the same acknowledgment when the work of restoration commences.—Jon. 2:9; Isa. 1:24-26; Zech. 12:10; Acts 3:20,21

When Jonah finally went to Nineveh and did as God commanded, the people repented. “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. So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding 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.”—Jon. 3:1-4

The account continues, “So 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 him 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 any thing: 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.”—vss. 5-10

As we look at all the wickedness in today’s world, if we are living righteously, it must distress us as believers. The story of Nineveh’s conversion is an important one concerning the scope of the effectiveness of Christ’s coming kingdom. While the Bible indicates that some will have to be forever destroyed in the “second death,” that will probably include a very small minority of individuals. (Rev. 20:12-15) If it were not so, God’s permission of evil, so that mankind learns through his own experience the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and then makes the appropriate contrast during the kingdom when Satan is bound, would not really be effective.—Rom. 7:14; Rev. 20:1-3

Sodom was destroyed because ten righteous individuals could not be found dwelling there. “Thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee.” (Matt. 11:23,24) If the people of Sodom are recoverable, we can be assured the same will be true for the overwhelming majority of mankind.

## TRUSTING IN GOD

Jonah prayed, and said, "O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore 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." (Jon. 4:2) Perhaps Jonah was thinking these heathen deserved to be destroyed, especially since they were a threat to Israel. How could God allow such people to live? Were not the Israelites his chosen people and, therefore, better than others?

God is an all-wise and merciful Father. He is ready to forgive when sincere repentance is made, regardless of one's previous circumstances. It is true that we are to love righteousness and hate iniquity, but it is also true that we cannot hate sinners and be pleasing to God. "As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways."—Ezek. 33:11

Another reason Jonah may have been displeased was that he felt that he was made out to be a false prophet, since he preached that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days and that it did not happen. He knew also that the people of Nineveh would be forgiven if they repented, but apparently he hated the Assyrians so much he did not want them to have a chance to repent. It seems unusual that Jonah, a chosen servant, should be angry with God. In recalling his experiences in the depths of the ocean in the belly of the fish, and the fact that in the Lord's providence he was saved and given a second chance to do what he was directed to do in

the first place, how is it possible that he could dare to be displeased with God? We should perhaps pose the same question.

Are we ever angry because we are going through difficult experiences? Do we ever wonder why we must go through them, or do we complain about them? Do we believe that as children of God, with guardian angels, sometimes things happen to us that are not permitted for a good purpose? The Apostle Paul answers, “No trial has overtaken you that is not faced by others. And God is faithful: He will not let you be tried beyond what you are able to bear, but with the trial will also provide a way out so that you may be able to endure it.” —I Cor. 10:13, *New English Translation*

In another place, the apostle adds, “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” (Heb. 12:11, *English Standard Version*) Every true child of God can attest to experiences of discipline and training. We should always appreciate these as evidences of our sonship as opposed to resenting them, and, even if not expressed openly, be angry that God did not see fit to prevent them.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Subsequently, Jonah went outside the city, and he saw a plant prepared to provide him shade as an evidence of God’s graciousness towards him, but after that, a worm was appointed to attack the plant and it withered. “God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.” (Jon. 4:1-9) Jonah’s

anger upon the gourd that perished was more important to him than the fact the people of Nineveh repented.

Although Jesus died for all mankind, the offer of salvation now is only to his footstep followers during this present Gospel Age, and to the world at large, “the residue of men,” in the future. (Acts 15:14-17) At present, Satan, “the god of this world,” has blinded the minds of those who believe not, and it will take the work of Christ’s kingdom to set right the minds and hearts of mankind, when the “inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness.”—II Cor. 4:4; Isa. 26:9

Like the citizens of all nations past and present, the people of Nineveh also must come back from the tomb and be given an opportunity for life and to learn righteousness. “For the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth.” “There shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust.” (John 5:28,29; Acts 24:15) The mission of faithful Christians now is to proclaim the soon to be established kingdom of Christ as the good news that will eradicate all the evils of this present order. ■

