Lessons from Jonah

"Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."
—I Corinthians 10:11

SOMETIMES BELIEVERS don't pay much attention to the Old Testament, possibly because a large portion of it relates to Israel, and also because there are lots of names, places and battles that took place long before Jesus came at his First Advent. Perhaps these may not seem as relevant to the Christian's faith as do the admonitions found in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. There are many students of the Bible who are interested in prophecy and may suggest various possible fulfillments regarding Old Testament events, but even if such is not the case, valuable lessons still may be gained from studying Old Testament narratives and making profitable application for the Christian's walk in newness of life. Such are the lessons from the Book of Jonah.

II Kings 14:25 specifically identifies Jonah as a servant of God and a prophet. As such, 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 residing in Nineveh, which is described 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 didn't say anything, but simply left Nineveh and took a ship out of Joppa that was going to Tarshish. He ignored God! He was disobedient. Biblical characters often did many things wrong. 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 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 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 engage in a

bit of self-introspection. Is it true of us that our affections are always set upon 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 1:4-10 indicates Jonah was asleep in the ship, in the midst of a storm, as the heathen sailors were praying to their gods for deliverance. They were aware something unusual was happening and cast lots to determine who was the cause of their calamity, and it 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 told them he was a Hebrew and feared the LORD of heaven. A consideration for believers 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 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? In Jonah 1:10, the men were amazed that he would be running away from his God, especially since they spent their lives trying to appease, or 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.—vs. 8

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 in the way of self-examination, but the closer we are to the Lord the more we are 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 considerations both with respect to God's awesome power as well as lessons of a prophetic nature. In this portion, Jonah urges the sailors to cast him into the sea because his presence was the cause of their distress, but they really showed nobility of character by rowing harder in order to avoid taking that step. Ultimately, they sought pardon from Jonah's God for throwing him overboard and immediately the sea became calm. They recognized that God 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.

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. During this present Gospel Age, followers of Jesus willingly give their lives in sacrifice. This process has been going on during parts of three great one-thousand-year day periods. (II Pet. 3:8) Other prophecies, and deteriorating conditions on earth, suggest it will be very soon when the human family will return from the grave, and receive blessings during Christ's kingdom of righteousness.—John 5:28,29, *Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott*

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. Possibly this may be a reference to the sacrifices in connection with the Day of Atonement and a recognition that God has made provision to grant forgiveness when one goes astray and then returns to him. One obvious lesson is that even when we have done poorly we

should never neglect the opportunity for prayer. Not all prayers may be answered 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 manner, answer in accordance with his perfect will.

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, and through them all the nations of the earth were to be blessed. (Exod. 19:3-6) They, like Jonah, rebelled against God, failed to obey him, and thereby fulfill their mission. Thus, they received discipline and abuse by other nations even to the present time. 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; but, just as Jonah, from the depths of despair, acknowledged that "Salvation is of the LORD" (Jon. 2:9), so too will Israel have to make the same acknowledgment when the work of restoration commences. (Acts 3:19-21) 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. 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."—Jon. 3:1-10

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 kingdom. While the Bible indicates that some will have to be forever destroyed (Rev. 20:12,15), that would probably include a minority of

individuals. If it were not so, God's permission of evil, so that mankind would learn the exceeding sinfulness of sin and then make the appropriate contrast during the kingdom when Satan is bound, would not really be effective. 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

"He prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, 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; and how could God allow such people to live. Weren't the Israelites his chosen people? Were they not 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. "Say unto them, 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; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?"—Ezek. 33:11

Perhaps one of the reasons Jonah was 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 didn't happen. Also, in Jonah 4:2, the reason Jonah fled from God is given. He knew the people of Nineveh would be forgiven if they repented, but apparently he hated the Assyrians so much he didn't 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 angry with God? Are we ever angry with God?

Are we ever angry because we are having difficult experiences? Do we ever wonder why we must go through them? Do we ever complain about anything? Do we believe that as children of God, with guardian angels, sometimes things happen to us that he does not permit for a good purpose? "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."—I Cor. 10:13

"No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them

which are exercised thereby." (Heb. 12:11) Every true child of God can attest to experiences of chastening. Would that we would always appreciate these as evidences of our sonship as opposed to resenting them, and, even if not so expressed openly, be angry that God did not see fit to prevent them.

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. 4:9

FULFILLING A MISSION

Jonah's pity 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 Christian believers during this present Gospel Age, and to the world at large in the future. Satan, as "the god of this world," has blinded the minds of those who believe not (II Cor. 4:4), and it will take the work of Christ's kingdom to straighten them out. (Isa. 26:9) Like Sodom, the people of Nineveh also must come back from the tomb and be given an opportunity for life and to learn righteousness. "The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here." (Matt. 12:41) 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. ■