

Biblical Missionaries: Lesson 4

The Jonah Saga

Memory Text: “Then Peter opened his mouth and said: “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him.” (Acts 10:34, 35)

Setting The Stage: The story of Jonah occurs around the late 8th C, during a very difficult period of Israelite history. The kings that sat on Israel’s throne all did evil in the sight of the Lord, and national judgment was fast approaching. Although God brought blessings to Israel in the hopes of inducing His people to turn to Him, then king Jeroboam II did evil in the sight of the Lord, as did his successors.

Assyria was the dominant nation of the time, bringing the surrounding nations under her rule. The capital of Assyria was Nineveh. It was founded by Nimrod (Gen. 10:11) on the fertile bank of the Tigris River soon after the dispersion from the tower of Babel. Over the centuries it flourished until it became “an exceeding great city of three days journey.” (Jonah 3:3) We are told that the total length of the ancient walls is about 7 ½ miles. The area of the walled city, which is roughly triangular in shape, is 1,640 acres. By allowing about 50 sq. yards per person, the ancient population inside the walls may be estimated at 160,000, with more living outside the city walls.

It was to this city that Jonah, the only prophet called to go to another country to share the message of God, was called to go to. Does God desire all people to have a knowledge of Himself? Was the gospel just for Israel or was it for all people? The story of Jonah highlights the need for missionaries, and outlines one man’s response to the call of God to go on a mission for Him.

Sunday – The Flawed Prophet

2 Kings 14:25; Jonah 1:1-3, 9, 12; 2:1-9; 3:3-10

2 Kings 14:25. What impression do you have of Jonah after reading this verse? First, we see that Jonah had a wider mission than the book of Jonah records. He was from a place in the borders of Zebulun 2 ¾ mi north by east of Nazareth (an alleged tomb of Jonah is still exhibited there). This makes both Jesus and Jonah Galilean prophets separated by 750 some years. Jonah is honored as a prophet who predicted Israel’s recapture of territory taken by Syria. Jonah faithfully discharged his duty.

Jonah means “dove” and his father’s name, Ammittai, means “faithfulness. Jonah was a prophet of God. One could expect that a faithful dove would be obedient to the call of God, but instead we see Jonah “flying” in the opposite direction.

Jonah 1:1-3; 2:7; 3:1-5, 10; 4:1. What do these verses tell us about Jonah in relation to his call to go to Nineveh? “Jonah emerges from his book a strange mixture of strength and weakness; self-willed and rebellious, but teachable and obedient. He was loyal to God, courageous, a believer in prayer, and yet he was narrow-minded, selfish, and vindictive.” Jonah’s (and others) initial run from responsibility and God’s grace toward him provides encouragement to all of us who not only sense our insecurities but who have also acted upon them. God is patient, but will sometimes use extreme measures to bring us back to faithfulness.

What makes any of us crumble when we’re faced with pressure or what appears to be an overwhelming task?

1. Failure to pray (Mark 14:38). When we fail to pray, it’s easier to quit.
2. Failure to prepare (Dan. 1:8). When we fail to prepare, it’s easier to acquiesce.
3. Failure to persevere (Eph. 6:10, 11). When we fail to persevere, it’s easier to relinquish.

What is God calling you to do? Don’t shirk your responsibility or run from your calling. Take a stand. Dig in your spiritual heels. And press on toward the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Monday – An Early Missionary

Jonah 1:3-17; Isaiah 56:7; Matthew 28:18-20

Jonah 1:2, 3. “Go to Nineveh.” Would you have gone? A few years before Jonah’s call, Assyria had brutally attacked and conquered Israel – an event that was very still alive in the memory of the Israelites. According to Nahum, Nineveh was “the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims.” (Nahum 3:1) He asks, “Who has not felt your endless cruelty?” (v. 19)

It is likely Assyria had perfected the art of genocide and torture. Perhaps it wasn’t the ideal place for an evangelist to hold meetings. How well do we do with Jesus command found in Matthew 20:18-20 commanding us to go into all the world? Do we find ourselves making excuses like Jonah?

What caused Jonah to run from God’s call? Fear, discouragement, and cultural superiority and religious prejudice. Someone once quipped, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” Yet inherent within the command to “go” we see a God who loves people and is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9).

Psalms 33:13: “The Lord looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men.”

2 Chronicles 16:9: “For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him.”

Job 28:10: “He cuts out channels in the rocks, and his eye sees every precious thing.”

Jonah 1:4-17. Jonah runs from God’s call and yet God sends a storm to wake the sleeping prophet up. The crew prays for deliverance, Jonah eventually confesses that he caused the calamity, and he witnesses about the Creator God, to the extent that the crew turn to Him. Reluctantly they throw Jonah overboard at his request and not only does God preserve the ship, but also the prophet by a large fish. God saves Jonah because He intends to save Nineveh. Your life is preserved for a greater purpose – to point men and women to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord!

Tuesday – In The Belly Of The Big Fish

Jonah 1:17-2:10; Matthew 12:40

Jonah 1:17. It must have seemed like forever (see Jonah 2:6) being in the belly of this great fish the Lord prepared for Jonah. As unbelievable as it seems, the story is a true account of the facts. After all there are stories of individuals who have survived out at sea having been swallowed by a whale. Also, the Bible says god prepared the fish for Jonah. The story reveals the lengths God will go to intervene in a person’s life to save them.

Jonah 2:2-9. Distress and trouble are always calls to prayer. Jonah’s prayer follows a similar pattern to psalms of thanksgiving – 1. Introduction; 2. Description of the distress; 3. Cry to God for help; 4. Statement of God’s action; 5. Promise to keep any vows made. “If you get me out of this, I promise to do...”

Matthew 12:40. How does Jesus take the story of Jonah and apply it to himself? The scribes asked Jesus for a sign to prove His Messiahship and Jesus tells them that the only sign He will give them is the sign of Jonah. Two aspects of Jonah’s ministry parallel that of Christ: 1. Jonah’s encounter with the fish (v. 40); and 2. Jonah’s successful preaching to the people of Nineveh (v. 41).

“Three days & three nights”. Not a few have had trouble understanding this phrase that has led them to believe that if Jesus was in the tomb for a full 72 hour period then He must have died, not on Friday, but on a Wednesday or Thursday. This can’t be the case for a couple of reasons:

1. Inclusive reckoning which was the ancient method for counting. It included the day on which any period of time began and also that on which ended, no matter how small the fraction of the beginning or end of the day was involved. For example; we say that a child is not one year old until after he/she has lived 12 full months from the date of birth. The child becomes one year old when it enters its second year of life, and becomes 2 years old after he has completed his second year. Therefore a child is called “10 years old” all through his 11th year, and only becomes 11 after he has reached the end of

- the 11 full years. Not so in the Bible. Noah was 600 years in the six hundredth year of his life (Gen. 7:6, 11); although his 600 years were not reckoned inclusively. In his 600th year he was considered 600, not 599.
2. With this in mind it becomes easier to understand why the Bible writers referred to the same period as follows: "In three days" (Matt. 26:61; 27:40; Mark 14:58; John 2:19-21); "After three days" (Matt. 27:63; Mark 8:31); "The third day" (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 27:64; Mark 9:31; 10:34; Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 21, 46)

"Heart of the earth." The supreme evidence that Jesus was the Messiah was His resurrection from the dead. Paul, writing about experience of conversion a person must undergo in order to receive eternal life shows how Jesus death, burial, and resurrection is the way to a changed life – death to self, burial of the old life of sin, and renewal of life through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 6:11). And what effects this change? The preaching of the word accompanied by the Holy Spirit (v. 41)

"The change in human hearts, the transformation of human characters, is a miracle that reveals an ever-living Saviour, working to rescue souls. A consistent life in Christ is a great miracle. In the preaching of the word of God, the sign that should be manifest now and always is the presence of the Holy Spirit, to make the word a regenerating power to those that hear. This is God's witness before the world to the divine mission of His Son." (Desire of Ages, p. 407)

Wednesday – The Nineveh Generation

Jonah 3; Revelation 14:6-12

Jonah 3:1-4. God persisted in sending Jonah for two reasons: 1. To save Jonah. 2. To save the people of Nineveh. What is God's method in bringing salvation? 1. Sending (versus waiting for them to come to us). 2. Proclamation of the word of God (versus theory or a modified version of the word). What is the message God usually sends? It's a message of warning (versus scratching itchy ears) and promise (hope). Today, like in the time of Jonah, God desires all men (irrespective of religion, race, social status, gender, or age) to be saved.

Titus 2:11: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men."

Acts 11:18: "When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.'"

Revelation 14:6, 7: "Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth - to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people - saying with a loud voice, 'Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.'"

“The time is at hand when there will be sorrow in the world that no human balm can heal. The Spirit of God is being withdrawn. Disasters by sea and by land follow one another in quick succession. How frequently we hear of earthquakes and tornadoes, of destruction by fire and flood, with great loss of life and property! Apparently these calamities are capricious outbreaks of disorganized, unregulated forces of nature, wholly beyond the control of man; but in them all, God’s purpose may be read. They are among the agencies by which He seeks to arouse men and women to a sense of their danger.

“God’s messengers in the great cities are not to become discouraged over the wickedness, the injustice, the depravity, which they are called upon to face while endeavoring to proclaim the glad tidings of salvation. The Lord would cheer every such worker with the same message that He gave to the apostle Paul in wicked Corinth: “Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city.” Acts 18:9, 10.

“Let those engaged in soul-saving ministry remember that while there are many who will not heed the counsel of God in His word, the whole world will not turn from light and truth, from the invitations of a patient, forbearing Saviour. In every city, filled though it may be with violence and crime, there are many who with proper teaching may learn to become followers of Jesus. Thousands may thus be reached with saving truth and be led to receive Christ as a personal Saviour.” (Prophets & Kings, p. 277)

Thursday – Jonah’s Lament

Jonah 4:1-11; 2 Peter 3:9

Jonah 4:1-11. Often the greatest hindrance to mission is not circumstances but the missionary. Jonah is the only person in the Bible who accuses God of being merciful and gracious, something most people should be/are grateful for.

“When Jonah learned of God’s purpose to spare the city that, notwithstanding its wickedness, had been led to repent in sackcloth and ashes, he should have been the first to rejoice because of God’s amazing grace; but instead he allowed his mind to dwell upon the possibility of his being regarded as a false prophet. Jealous of his reputation, he lost sight of the infinitely greater value of the souls in that wretched city.” (Ibid., 271)

The discomfort Jonah experienced was not so much physical as it was mental and spiritual. He felt vexed, humiliated, and disappointed, all for the wrong reasons. Jonah was angry that God didn’t destroy the Ninevites, and angry when God permitted the gourd to wither. He loved his air-conditioner more than the Ninevites. Talk about a distorted sense of values! How are your priorities? Are they in line with God’s who has no pleasure in the death of the wicked?

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 For God did

not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

Ezekiel 33:11: “Say to them: ‘As I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?’”

2 Peter 3:9: “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

Appeal: The book of Jonah shines the spotlight on God’s incredible mercy and love for humanity – each and everyone of us. We realize that in order to fulfill God’s mission for the last days we cannot rely on feeling and inclination, but instead have faith in God’s word. As we submit to God’s leading it is only then that we can better determine the scope of God’s work and our role within it. Isn’t it time we intentionally reach others for Jesus?