

July 5, 2009

Jonah: Running From God

Purpose: To show the futility of rejecting God's call and attempting to flee from God's presence

Key Bible reference: Jonah 1-2

Key Verse: Jonah 1.3

Biblical Interpretation

When God calls a prophet, he or she usually obeys God's directives. In the Bible, when God says, "Get up and go," the next line of the story usually reads, "and they went." This was not the case for Jonah, however.

Jonah 1:1-3. Like many other prophets, Jonah was called and sent on a mission. Instead of doing what God commanded, as Amos and Isaiah did, Jonah tried to get out of the task God assigned him. The Book of Jonah is the story of his futile effort to disobey God's call and to escape his responsibility.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which dominated Israel and Judah from 745 B.C.-609 B.C. The Assyrians were cruel and heartless. They moved whole populations to distant places in their empire in order to break up any signs of nationalism or revolt. They were responsible for "losing" large numbers of the ten tribes of Israel, who were moved elsewhere and not heard from again. Like most Israelites, Jonah hated the Assyrians and the people of Nineveh. He did not want to go to Nineveh, even to proclaim its doom!

We get an idea of how deeply the people of Israel hated the Ninevites in the Book of Nahum, written when Nineveh was finally destroyed in 612 B.C. Here the city is compared to a brazen harlot: (Nahum 3:4-5)

Jonah went to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. The location of Tarshish is not known, but it may have been in what is now Spain. In any case, Jonah sought to flee as far as he could. He mistakenly believed that the Lord lived only in Israel.

Naaman the Syrian thought the same thing. That is why he requested two mule loads of Israelite earth so he could worship the God of Israel (2 Kings 5:15-17). But Jonah and Naaman were both wrong. The God of the Bible is everywhere.

Verse 4. The Lord was not through with this prophet. Jonah was in a ship at sea, but he could not escape God. A mighty wind arose and threatened to destroy the vessel.

Verses 5-6. The sailors and their captain were alarmed, and each one called upon his god for help. Only Jonah, the prophet of the Lord, lay asleep in unconcern. These pagan sailors were more aware of what was happening and were more religious than Jonah. The captain awakened Jonah and demanded that he pray to his god to save the ship and its people. The text gives no indication that Jonah complied with the captain's command.

Verses 7-9. The sailors cast lots and discovered that Jonah was the one responsible for the terrible storm. It was he who was being punished and thus bringing all the others into danger. Instead of throwing Jonah overboard immediately, the sailors asked questions to determine what they should do. When asked who he was, Jonah replied, "I am a Hebrew....I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

Verses 10-11. It now became clear that the storm took place on account of Jonah. Nevertheless, the sailors still did not throw the offender overboard.

Verse 12. Jonah urged the sailors to cast him into the sea in order to save the ship and their own lives. He acted with courage, willing to die rather than have others perish; but he still was not willing to carry out the Lord's directive.

Verse 13. The sailors vainly tried to ride out the storm. They did not wish to sacrifice Jonah's life to save their own. While Jonah, the Hebrew prophet, was filled with hatred toward foreigners like the Ninevites, these pagan sailors showed a decent respect and concern for Jonah's life. The story is filled with such irony.

Verses 14-15. At last the sailors prayed to the Lord, the God of the Hebrews. If Jonah would not acknowledge the Lord, these pagan sailors would. They begged God not to punish and destroy them for what Jonah had done. Then they reluctantly threw Jonah into the sea. The waters immediately became calm, and the ship went on its way.

Verse 16. These sailors became worshipers of the Lord when they saw the sea subside. Jonah, the reluctant prophet, made believers out of them!

Verse 17. God provided a great fish to save Jonah. God commanded the forces of nature, the wind, the sea, and a great creature of the sea, to thwart the intentions of the rebellious prophet. This is not punishment but grace. God cared about Jonah just as God cared about the sailors and the wicked Ninevites. God wanted them all to do what is right, wanted them all to be saved. So God gave Jonah a second chance.

Jonah 2:2-9. This interesting prayer of Jonah should not be skipped over. Some scholars believe the prayer does not belong here. They claim it is so general, it could have been written by anyone in distress. And it depicts a penitent prophet, yet later chapters show that Jonah still did not understand what God was doing at this point.

Recent commentators have said that the prayer does belong with the rest of the Book of Jonah. Jonah did experience distress, did call out to God from the depths of the sea, and did thank God that his life was saved. He made a promise that he would worship in God's holy Temple and sacrifice to God. Nevertheless, Jonah did not understand or approve of what God was doing; and he did not share God's concern for the wicked Ninevites.

Verse 10. God spoke to Jonah earlier, and Jonah ran away. God spoke to the great fish, and it immediately did what God asked it to do. Who is really God's obedient servant?

An advertisement appeared in a local newspaper: "For sale: hunting dog that listens to commands."
That's fine, but I want to know more. My dog listens to commands and then does nothing. I want one that does what he or she is told to do!