

Introduction

There is a two pronged sin common among humanity. It is the judging of a matter without knowing all the relevant data, or not being interested to hear both sides of a situation. Due to this natural tendency, when the story of Jonah is presented he is normally viewed in a bad light. In my 60 plus years of listening to the story of Jonah or hearing ministry on the kings of Judah and Israel, I cannot think of a single time when there was any ministry on Jonah and his prophecy (2 Kgs. 14:25). He is normally presented as a disobedient servant who ran away from the work God called him to do. There is no doubt that he did so, but I want to think of Jonah and possibly why he ran away, observing that the Lord never criticised him, some of the lessons we can learn from him, and the Lord's use of him in the New Testament.

Why did He run away?

There were two reasons for his rejection of God's command, one which he gives himself (ch. 4:2). He knew the great heart of love God had. Second, he would have known the vicious character of the people of Assyria and that they would seek to destroy Israel (Isa. 7:17-25; Zeph. 2:13-15).

Some practical lessons to be learned from Jonah

God at times will ask us to do things which are against our grain.

- 1) The people God commanded Jonah to go to:
 - a) Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire and they were a cruel people in warfare. By the pictures and inscriptions we learn the following:
 - i) In the official royal inscriptions, Ashurnasirpal II calls himself the "trampler of all enemies ... who defeated all his enemies [and] hung the corpses of his enemies on posts." † The treatment of captured enemies often depended on their readiness to submit themselves to the will of the Assyrian king:
 - (a) "The nobles [and] elders of the city came out to me to save their lives. They seized my feet and said: 'If it pleases you, kill! If it pleases you, spare! If it pleases you, do what you will!'" † His response was to slaughter as many as possible by the most cruel means. He wrote, "I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me [and] draped their skins over the pile [of corpses]; some I spread out within the pile, some I erected on stakes upon the pile ... I flayed many right through my land [and] draped their skins over the walls." † "I felled 50 of their fighting men with the sword, burnt 200 captives from them, [and] defeated in a battle on the plain 332 troops. ... With their blood I dyed the mountain red like red wool, [and] the rest of them the ravines [and] torrents of the mountain swallowed. I carried off captives [and] possessions from them. I cut off the heads of their fighters [and] built [therewith] a tower before their city. I burnt their adolescent boys [and] girls." † "In strife and conflict I besieged [and] conquered the city. I felled 3,000 of their fighting men with the sword ... I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city." † Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, Part 2: From Tiglath-pileser I to Ashur-nasir-apli II* (Wiesbaden, Germ.: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), p. 165. Grayson, p. 120, 124.
- 2) Jonah valued the transient things more than the souls of people.
 - a) There is a lot of talk about the need for revival, but by and large little done to provide the platform for such a blessing. When discussing with some well taught men about this, it was suggested that the fundamental reason is that we do not believe what we preach nor practise what we preach. This was followed by a resounding, "No, we do believe what we preach". Then the speaker asked, "If we

really believed in a heaven of eternal bliss or a hell of living unending in the eternal fire of divine judgment, would we be more concerned about those dying in their sins? If we were really in the work of evangelism and ministry to the saints for the glory of God, would we be more zealous? Is it possible that, unlike Jonah who did in his heart believe the message of the judgment of God, we don't? Is it possible that by conformity to the world and its interests Heaven and Hell is simply an intellectual piece of data? The reality is, every individual is going to be in either Heaven or Hell.

- 3) Jonah had no concern for the people who were living under the judgment of God.
 - a) Jonah was living with the understanding that Nineveh was a city of an estimated half a million people who lived unaware of the judgment of God that was about to fall on them. Despite being a prophet of God, he refused to go to warn the inhabitants of the city of impending judgment. Stopping, and in astonishment, we ask, "What sort of 'christian' man was he?, How callous and cold was his heart?, how unlike the God he professed to serve?" I must not point the finger at him with a holier than thou attitude for I also live in a world of 7.530 billion people, that is 7,530,000,000,000 individuals, the vast majority of them practising some religious rituals, but unless redeemed by the sacrificial substitutionary sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, they are going to eternal damnation. The question is, "Am I moved to tell them the gospel or for others to do so, or am I like Jonah, having little heart for the unsaved?"
- 4) Jonah intellectually believed in the omnipresence of God but not in its reality.
 - a) I have no doubt that every believer believes in the omnipresence of God and the truth, "Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me" (Heb. 13:5, 6). Surely Jonah also believed this truth and so his running away from the presence of the Lord seems to be a contradiction, for such a thing is impossible.
 - i) What does it mean?
 1. It is my understanding that it does not mean a loss of the consciousness of God for those who are banished to hell are separated from the presence of the Lord but not from the awareness of Him (2 Thess. 1:9). Adam and Eve sought to hide themselves from the immediate coming face to face with God (Gen. 3:8). Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, that is, he went out from the sphere in which God made His way and His will known to him, for never again do we read of God speaking to him (Gen. 4:16; 1 Jn. 3:12; Jude 11). The Psalmist well knew the truth, "Whither shall I flee from thy presence?" (Psa. 139:7).
 2. This has a very practical lesson. We can take ourselves out of the sphere where God's will is known, but graciously God speaks to us again. Quickly some might say when one leaves our church or denomination then they are taking themselves out of the sphere where God's will is known and obeyed. The problem is, we can be in that place externally or intellectually but not in spirit. The Corinthians were in such a state. They were saved and in church fellowship yet Paul admonished them, "Be ye reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). This was not written to unbelievers but believers. When the disciples would have driven away the women who brought the children, they were out of the sphere and spirit of God's will being obeyed.
 3. Speaking for myself, I find a "Jonah" like spirit in me. I'm sure there have been times when the Lord has prompted many of us to witness to an individual, and like Jonah, we found something else more convenient to do and failed to obey.
- 5) Jonah learnt God's constraining resources.
 - a) If God wants us to do something which we are reluctant to do, He will create the circumstances in which will do it, just like Jonah. God will strive to bring the most disobedient, unwilling individual back to the place of glad obedience.

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Lessons From Jonah

1. When we are away from God, try to see calamities for what they are, God speaking to us, they are not just random acts of, "that's the way things happen." Sudden deaths, illnesses, financial disasters, etc.
2. Moses was exceedingly reluctant to obey God and go to Egypt, but God, in gentle grace, removed every obstacle and encouraged him so that eventually he went. (Ex. 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10).
3. There are times when we are very reluctant to take on a work God has purposed to give to us, go to a place He has bidden us to go, or speak to an individual and we didn't. Despite what has been taught publicly that, "God is the biggest loser of all time", God is not a loser and never will be. If one person utterly refuses to do His bidding for the glory of Christ, then He will use another individual.
4. Possibly the hardest lesson in the christian life is to not just say the words of the Lord, "Not my will, but Thine, be done" (Lk. 22:42), but to live them.

. . . Rowan Jennings