

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 8 March 2009

No. T0563

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Lessons from the life of Jonah: The Power of God's Word – Jonah 3

Today we continue in our study of the life of Jonah, the Old Testament prophet. Our study of Jonah 1 was under the heading "Running away from God" and we looked at chapter 2 using the heading "Can there be forgiveness?"

Before turning to chapter 3, it may be useful briefly to summarise the part of the life of Jonah which we have considered so far. Jonah is first mentioned in the Bible in 2 Kings 14:25 from where we learn that Jonah's father was Amittai and that he was born in Gathhepher, which I understand is in Galilee, not far from Nazareth. It is not clear exactly when Jonah lived but it is likely to have been about 800 or 900 years BC. Jonah was instructed by God to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh and to warn of God's judgement against the people of that city because of their wickedness. Instead of obeying God, he went by ship in the opposite direction, trying to flee from God's presence. God prepared a great storm and the sailors were much afraid, knowing that Jonah was disobeying God. Jonah told the sailors to throw him overboard and then the seas were calm. The sailors turned to God.

God had not forgotten Jonah despite his disobedience. In His grace, God prepared a great fish which swallowed Jonah. He was there for three days and three nights. Jonah's earnest prayer is recorded, from the belly of the great fish, in chapter 2. Nowhere in the Bible can a prayer have been made from a more unusual place! Jonah repented, the Lord heard his prayer and Jonah is recorded in verse 9 as saying "Salvation is of the LORD." Jonah's change had begun and God, who always hears a genuine prayer of repentance, caused the great fish to vomit out Jonah on dry land. An almost unbelievable story but one which is authenticated by the Lord Jesus Himself in Matthew 12 and Luke 11.

This brings us to our chapter for today, Jonah 3, and our heading for today is "The power of God's word."

During the course of this talk, I would like to read the whole of Jonah 3 and I will start now by reading from the beginning of verse 1 to the middle of verse 3, using the Authorised Version of the Bible. "And 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."

What a change has now taken place in God's servant, Jonah! God's instruction to His servant hadn't changed and His message hadn't changed. However, Jonah certainly had changed because of God's dealings with him. In chapter 1, Jonah's response to God's instruction was complete disobedience combined with the folly of thinking that he could run away from the presence of God, the One who is omnipresent. Here, in contrast, in chapter 3 Jonah's obedience to God's repeated instruction is immediate.

From these first few verses of chapter 3, I would like to take three lessons for all of us who, like Jonah, would be servants of God. The first lesson is that being a servant of God is a learning process which I believe continues throughout a servant's life. Never is a servant so knowledgeable or so advanced that he or she has nothing further to learn. Jonah had to be taken to rock bottom before his spiritual education could proceed. From the belly of the great fish he proclaimed: "Salvation is of the LORD." In other words, this servant, Jonah, had learned in dramatic circumstances that he was nothing in himself but everything proceeded from God. From that realisation, God could now re-instruct His servant.

However, Jonah was not yet the finished article. Without anticipating chapter 4 too much, we will see from that chapter that the servant Jonah still had much to learn from God. At the stage at which we are at the beginning of chapter 3, Jonah was a more useable servant than at the beginning of the book, but he still had much to learn. How important it is really to take note and learn from the way that God speaks to us! For most of us, God's way of speaking is likely to be far less dramatic than in the case of Jonah but God wants us to learn so that we are of more use to Him. I ask myself, how readily am I learning?

The second lesson I would like to take from the beginning of chapter 3 is the matter of obedience. The crucial aspect of obedience is underlined for us right from the beginning of the Bible. In Genesis 3 sin enters the world because of disobedience against a specific and straightforward instruction of God. In the face of King Saul's disobedience to God, in 1 Samuel 15:22, Samuel states that: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of

rams.” It was only when Jesus came into this world, that someone could truly say, as Jesus did: “I have kept my Father's commandments” (John 15:10).

Jonah had to learn that obedience to God is critical. If a servant obeys God's instructions, blessing will result as it does later in Jonah chapter 3. We are not asked to question but to obey. In Acts 8, Philip the evangelist was being greatly blessed in Samaria but God instructed Philip to move from there to a desert place in the south. What reason could there be for this? But Philip did not question God's instruction. Immediately he obeyed and in that desert place an important man from Ethiopia was converted and baptised. Obedience on the part of Philip resulted in blessing. Later in Acts 16, Paul and his companions were journeying westwards, not sure exactly where to go and only wanting to go where the Lord instructed. Eventually the Lord spoke to them and in verse 10 of that chapter it says that “...immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them.” Paul obeyed and there was great blessing in Macedonia with the first preaching of the gospel in Europe.

And what about me? Do I seek always to obey God's word, the Bible, in every respect? That is what God wants above everything else. My responsibility is first to Him, not first to anybody or anything else. Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh, but it was precisely that place where God wanted him to go. Through staying close to the Lord, I can learn His instructions for me regarding service for Him. Sometimes these instructions can be quite specific as in Jonah's case. Perhaps I may need to take time to see what the instructions for service really are and sometimes the instructions may start with telling me what not to do, as was the case with Paul in Acts 16. Sometimes the instructions may seem to go against natural reasoning as may have been the case with Philip in Acts 8. But always for those who set their mind prayerfully to seek God's instructions, I am convinced that He will make His mind known. And ultimately, obedience to God will result in blessing in God's timing.

The last of the three points I want to take from these early verses of chapter 3 is that Jonah's preaching had to be of the message given to him by God, as verse 2 puts it: “...go unto Nineveh ... and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.” Jonah wasn't asked to like or dislike the message. He wasn't expected to over or under emphasise various parts of the message according to his own inclination. The message was the word of the LORD, not the word of Jonah and the servant had to pass it on exactly as he received it from God.

In this day, what the servant of God has to preach should be wholly based on the word of God, the Bible. It sometimes seems to me that it is judged up to date to pick and choose those parts of the Bible which will be emphasised and to put into the background those parts which are difficult to explain or thought to be less acceptable to the listeners. Right at the end of the Bible there is a very solemn warning to any who either add to or take away from the message of the Bible – see Revelation 22:19.

So today any Christian preaching has to be Bible-based. For example, if I am preaching the Gospel, I have to tell it as God tells it in the Bible: that everyone is a sinner, that God is holy and requires a penalty for my sin, that God also is love and gave His Son Jesus to pay the penalty for my sin, that the only way to heaven is by faith in the blood of Jesus and that Jesus rose from the dead to demonstrate the eternal life that He gives to each person who truly believes in Him. Paul wrote that it is “the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” – 2 Timothy 3:15.

In a few moments we will be reading the remainder of Jonah 3 which demonstrates the power of the word of God which Jonah preached in Nineveh. Of course, God can use His word in power in whatever way He chooses, irrespective of the preacher or the circumstances. But it seems to me that for the servant of God, then or now, this chapter sets out the pattern of blessing which the servant should follow: first, the servant learns the ways of God, the servant obeys the instructions of God and the servant preaches the word of God, and then God adds His blessing.

Now, let us move on and read the second half of verse 3: “Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.” Just a word about Nineveh, the place to which Jonah was sent to preach God's word. The vast majority of the Old Testament prophets brought God's message to the Jews. But Jonah, a Jew himself, was sent to a Gentile city and would take with him his Jewish prejudices about the Gentiles, quite happy to preach God's wrath against the Gentiles but not so happy to see God forgive people who were not Jews.

Nineveh is first mentioned in Genesis 10:11. It was built by the same family who built Babel and those two cities had a history of self-sufficiency and opposition to God. As we have read, by the time of Jonah Nineveh was a huge city, taking three days to travel round it, and having more than 120,000 young children according to the last verse of Jonah. It was the capital city of Assyria. The attitude of the people of Nineveh is summed up in Zephaniah 2:13-15, where in verse 15 it says that their proud view of themselves was: “I am, and there is none beside me.” It was to this place that Jonah was sent with the message of God's judgement. Incidentally, if you have time to read the short Bible book of Nahum, who lived later than Jonah, you will find that it deals exclusively with the prophecy of the ultimate destruction of Nineveh.

Let me now read the remainder of Jonah 3, starting from verse 4. "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 anything: 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."

From these verses we see that as soon as Jonah arrived at Nineveh he did not delay in proclaiming the message which God had given him to preach. This must have been real open air preaching! Jonah preached as he journeyed into the city, his message one of judgement from God which would strike the city in forty days' time. The message had an immediate impact as in verse 5 it states that "the people of Nineveh believed God." And this faith in God applied throughout the inhabitants, from the greatest to the least. Their turning to God in faith was evidenced outwardly by their fasting and clothing themselves in sackcloth, including the king. It was a time of conversion as people turned from their "evil way" (see verse 8) and turned to God. And God in His grace saw their repentance and did not bring His judgement upon them.

May I remind you that the title for today's talk is "The power of God's word"? What a demonstration of that power in this chapter! It was the bringing of God's word to that city which brought about this dramatic change in the inhabitants and in their prospects. None of the credit for the change rests with Jonah; he was just the messenger. It was the message, God's word, which brought about the change.

Now all of this happened not too far short of 3,000 years ago. One of the great benefits of studying the Old Testament is that we can see from it God's principles of working and note that those general principles don't change over time. So today it is God's word that still has the power to change lives dramatically. Preachers come and preachers go, political systems and social systems change over time "But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you" – 1 Peter 1:25.

God's word with its power to change lives is enshrined in the Gospel. Just as at Nineveh, God's word, the Gospel, is preached today with the background of a warning about God's future judgement to come. At Nineveh, the warning was that God's judgement would come in forty days. In the Bible, periods of forty days or years are not too unusual and I think that 40 in the Bible is generally accepted as representing a period of full testing of responsibility. We don't know when God's judgement will fall on this world but it certainly will and at a time when God determines that man has had a full testing of his responsibility to God. Again as at Nineveh, the only way of not suffering God's judgement is by an individual repenting of his or her own sin and turning to God in faith in Him and His word.

If the warning of impending judgement is the background to the preaching of God's word in the Gospel, the good news of the Gospel is that God in His love has poured out His judgement on Jesus when He died on the cross and for anybody who repents of his sin and believes on Jesus as Saviour and Lord, God gives the gift of eternal life. The wonder of this message is summed up in the lovely verse in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The prospect of God's judgement is terrible; the prospect for anyone who has everlasting life is terrific.

Our chapter today in the book of Jonah emphasises the importance for the people of Nineveh of repentance. Perhaps we don't always sufficiently stress the importance of repentance toward God in our Gospel preachings today. Repentance is vital and is no light matter of saying sorry in a superficial way. Repentance involves me recognising that God abhors sin and that I am a sinner and my sin is against a holy God. Conversion involves a deep, deep sense of the awfulness of my sin and a life-changing turning away from it in repentance. As with the people of Nineveh, God sees that repentance and in His grace removes the judgement which my sin deserved.

Let us also remember that the people of Nineveh evidenced their repentance and faith toward God by a change in their behaviour. My conversion to Christ should result in a change of my way of life which should be evident to those around. This is illustrated so often in the four Gospels as the lives of people are completely changed by Jesus. One of the most dramatic illustrations is in the case of Legion in the first part of Mark 5 where that untamed man who spent his time in the mountains and graveyards crying and cutting himself, met Jesus and by verse 15 of that chapter was with Jesus "sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind."

Dear hearer, every conversion to Christ is a triumphant evidence of the power of God's word to change lives. The challenge to me as a Christian is whether I show that inward change by the outward evidence of a changed life.

One final thought from Jonah 3. The generation of inhabitants of Nineveh described in that chapter repented and turned in faith to God. Sadly, history tells us that later generations in Nineveh did not follow God but returned to the sinful ways of the generations which preceded Jonah 3. God's judgement then fell on Nineveh which history tells us was destroyed, as prophesied by Nahum. It is for individuals in each generation to repent and turn in faith to God. The personal faith of individuals in a past generation is an example but is of no value before God for individuals in a succeeding generation. In Britain, we are blest to have many fine examples of Christians who lived here in past generations. Each of us now has to decide for ourselves whether to turn to God in personal saving faith.

I want us to be left with a clear impression of the undiminished power of God's word, both in Jonah's day and now, to change lives and situations. The word of God is the basis of the life-changing Gospel of the grace of God. As Paul wrote, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth ..." Romans 1:16.

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