

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Arise and Go: Jonah - the disobedient servant

Welcome to *Truth for Today*, the Bible Explained. Today we begin a new three talk series named "Arise and Go":

- Talk 1: "Jonah - the disobedient servant, Jonah 1:2";
- Talk 2: "Ananias - the reluctant servant, Acts 9:11"; and
- Talk 3: "Philip - the willing servant, Acts 8:26".

This is a very practical series which I pray will help and encourage every Christian in their desire to serve our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. I don't know about you, but it always amazes me why the Lord is pleased to use me with all my faults and failings. I often think about Jeremiah 18 where the LORD tells Jeremiah to "*Arise and go down to the potter's house*" (Jeremiah 18:2). Jeremiah watches the potter skilfully moulding an imperfect lump of clay into something that is perfect and useable. Dear Christian friend, we have been made perfect through the death of the Lord Jesus. So we can, in the power of the Spirit of God, be usable for the glory and honour of our Lord Jesus Christ in this world.

The story of Jonah is one of the most well known in the Bible. It's a wonderful story. It's a drama, a thriller, a story that has been taught to children throughout generations. In the story of Jonah, we can see a picture of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Jonah was entombed in the fish's belly for three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17) then vomited out (Jonah 2:10). The Lord Jesus went into the tomb and after three days God raised Him from amongst the dead. You may think the story of Jonah is far-fetched! But, if you investigate the New Testament, Jesus Himself refers to Jonah as a picture of His forthcoming death and resurrection in Matthew 12:39-41.

For me, the story of Jonah underlines the greatness of God as He uses His creation to bring Jonah back into line. I see that the purpose of God will always be fulfilled no matter what. I see the ways of God which the Bible teaches us are better than our ways (see Isaiah 55:8-9). I see God's love toward creation, His forgiveness, His abundant grace and His patience towards mankind. For me the key verse in Jonah is Jonah 4:2: "*And he prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.'*" Jonah knew God's heart! I pray that you, too, will come to realise how much God loves you!

Jonah himself was a bigoted Jew, unwilling to testify to a Gentile city, and he was angry that God had spared it. In the Old Testament, we often see that during each generation God has an individual whom He would use to pass on His message to others. Jonah was God's man at this time and God spoke directly to Jonah: "*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me*" (Jonah 1:2). This was a direct instruction from the LORD. Jonah, to be fair, acted immediately and he "arose". But Jonah had other plans! Jonah began acting in his own will. Jonah was concerned about himself, his reputation as a prophet. Jonah was a proud man and knowing the heart of God, Jonah knew that God would show mercy on the people of Nineveh and give them time to repent from their sins. Jonah thought he would look foolish if they did. Jonah was more interested in himself rather than carrying out God's exact instruction. As Christians, you and I are here for God's purpose; it is so easy for us to forget this.

Jonah had real purpose in his stride as he headed down to the port at Joppa. Joppa is one of the oldest seaport cities in Israel with a history that goes back many centuries. Today it is known as Jaffa. Jonah had decided in his heart that he would flee from the presence of the LORD (see Jonah 1:3). He was not going to look foolish in front anyone, especially Gentiles! Jonah found a ship which was going to Tarshish. Jonah paid his own fare and boarded the ship (Jonah 1:3). Tarshish was a port city in the Western Mediterranean (probably in Spain), 2,500 miles from Joppa. Nineveh on the other hand was the capital city of Assyria which was 550 miles inland in the opposite direction! You can see how angry Jonah was with God. Jonah went down into the sleeping quarters of the ship and was able to sleep, and sleep through a vicious storm (see Jonah 1:5). I am not sure how he managed this as normally if you have things on your mind that trouble you, you can't sleep!

I was thinking about what Jonah did and the consequences of his actions toward others. What had these poor sailors done to deserve such a storm? A storm sent by God to highlight His servant's disobedience, stop him in his tracks and bring him to repentance. The sailors and the passengers were innocent, but through this storm God speaks to them and there is blessing. It must have been some storm! Even the experienced men of the sea were afraid (see

Jonah 1:5); their ship was breaking up. They acted quickly; everyone cried to their own god (Jonah 1:5), then they threw some of the cargo overboard to lighten the ship (Jonah 1:5). Jonah was fast asleep, totally oblivious to all this! During your life have you been disobedient like Jonah? Are you oblivious to the fact that you may be affecting others?

Things were getting so bad that even the captain of the ship was on deck trying to keep his ship afloat. The captain awakens Jonah and tells him to call upon his god, hoping that Jonah's god will think about them and stop them from perishing. The crew and all the passengers got together to cast lots to find out who and why the storm had come upon them; the lot fell on Jonah. Jonah was taken to task. *"Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" And he said to them, 'I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'* Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, *'What is this that you have done!'* For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them" (Jonah 1:8-10). Jonah had confessed to everyone on the ship that he was running away from God. I am not sure he told them why he was running away from God! This was a matter between God and Jonah. Have you ever been with people and you failed to tell them that you are a Christian? Sometimes it's awkward; I know! But, it is even more embarrassing if, when they find out they turn to you and say, "You might have told us"!

Jonah knew that he was the one who had been disobedient; he was the one who had sinned (see Jonah 1:10). Disobedience is a form of sin! Jonah admits his sin to the crew and suggests that the only way the seas will calm is if they throw him over the side (Jonah 1:11). Initially this was not an option for the crew; true mariners care for each other. The crew rowed hard, trying to get the ship to the shore, but to no avail (Jonah 1:13). The men's best efforts with their wooden oars were no match for the storm that God sent. The crew had no option! They reluctantly cast Jonah into the sea (Jonah 1:15), while crying to the LORD for forgiveness (see Jonah 1:14). Immediately the sea was calm (Jonah 1:15). Amazing, what a miracle! Seeing this, the people aboard the ship feared the LORD greatly, offering a sacrifice and making vows (Jonah 1:16). God had used the wind and the sea to establish His desired purpose.

What do you think Jonah was thinking as he was thrown into the sea? Did Jonah think he was going to drown? Was it better for him to die than to face the embarrassment of seeing the people of Nineveh repent? I don't know what Jonah's thoughts were; the Bible does not tell us exactly. But one thing for sure is that Jonah never expected God to send a large fish to swallow him and preserve his life! Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of this fish, (Jonah 1:17) which must have been a very unpleasant experience. God was not going to allow Jonah to get out of the task He wanted him to do. Jonah was being taught a tough lesson. You and I, if we are disobedient to God, may face difficulties, experience trouble and be tested.

Jonah's prayer from the belly of the great fish helps us to understand a little as to the experience Jonah had gone through. I think it is possible that Jonah felt as if he was drowning. Or did he drown? Jonah in his prayer to the LORD said, *"The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head"* (Jonah 2:5). This must have been a terrible experience. Just being inside the belly of the fish alone must have been very unpleasant. Jonah speaks about himself being in the belly of hell! (See Jonah 2:2). Jonah felt as if he had gone down to the depths of the mountains and he was surrounded by bars. He was trapped, and he was helpless.

- In Jonah 2:1-2 Jonah prayed to God for help;
- In Jonah 2:3 Jonah accepted God's discipline;
- In Jonah 2:4-5 Jonah trusted in God's promises; and
- In Jonah 2:8-9 Jonah yields to God's will.

Jonah thanks God for hearing his prayer and worships Him. (Jonah 2:1) When Jonah acknowledged that *"salvation belongs to the LORD"* (Jonah 2:9), God instructed the great fish to vomit Jonah out on to dry land (Jonah 2:10). Jonah had come to his senses. It had taken a traumatic experience, but he was now ready to listen to God's instruction and obey. God may have work for you to do for Him! Are you clearly disobeying God's instruction? Is God speaking to you today? If you feel God is speaking to you, humble yourself, be obedient and allow God to use you as He wishes. *"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts"*, Hebrews 3:15. Remember you belong to the Lord. He purchased you at a great price; He died for you. Surely you must be willing to serve Him in whatever ways He desires?

I am not quite sure what state Jonah was in as he gathered himself on the beach or wherever the fish had left him. Did God totally preserve his body? Was his skin repulsive and all disfigured because of the water and the acids of the belly of the fish? We do not know! But, we do know that God wasted no time in speaking to Jonah a second time. The instruction is the same: *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city and call out against it the message that I tell you"* (Jonah 3:2). This time Jonah obeys the word of the LORD. He gets up without protest and heads for the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was a very large city; it took Jonah three days to walk the length of it. The message Jonah was to preach was clear and simple: *"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* (Jonah 3:4). The people of Nineveh had no doubt at all; they all believed God, even the king himself! (Jonah 3:6). The people put on sackcloth and fasted,

(Jonah 3:5). This was to show that they were sorry for their sin. The king issued a proclamation and published it throughout Nineveh: *“By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish”* (Jonah 3:7-9).

What an amazing sight, a city of several hundreds of thousands of people humbling themselves before God! Even the animals were not allowed to eat or drink!

When God saw what the people of Nineveh did, repenting from their evil ways, His heart was moved toward them in compassion, mercy and forgiveness. God spared the city! Think about the mercy God has displayed to a sinful, undeserving world. I am reminded of the words of a hymn:

*“God in mercy sent His Son  
To a world by sin undone,  
Jesus Christ was crucified,  
'Twas for sinners Jesus died.*

*Oh the glory of the grace  
Shining in the Saviour's face,  
Telling sinners from above,  
God is light, and God is love.”*

Hannah K Burlingham (1842-1901)

God's desire is that *“all people should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Timothy 2:4). Where do you stand before God? Have you confessed your sin? Have you accepted God's way of salvation? You can have your sins forgiven by confessing your sin and believing that Jesus died to pay the penalty of your sins. What a wonderful God we have!

Back to Jonah. You would think by this time that Jonah, the disobedient, run away servant, would be absolutely delighted that God allowed him to be involved in such a great work! But not Jonah! Even after all he had been through, Jonah was very unhappy and angry with God. Jonah practically told God, “I told you so”! Jonah said, “That was why I ran away to Tarshish!” *“I know that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster”* (Jonah 4:2). Jonah had had enough! Jonah told God to take his life as it would be far better for him to die than to live (Jonah 4:3). Jonah went into a huff and strop and headed out of the city. He sat down, waiting and watching what would happen to the city (Jonah 4:5). It seems that Jonah had not learnt his lesson! In his mind, “it was all about him!” Never mind the poor people of Nineveh. What a selfish attitude to have! You and I need to take a lesson from Jonah's attitude. As Christians, it's not all about us; it's all about God! It's God's work, not ours. You should be thankful that God allows you to do His work. What a privilege!

God has a further lesson to teach Jonah. He again uses creation. God shows His power over all things. God prepares a plant to grow over Jonah to protect him from the fierce mid-day sun (Jonah 4:6). Jonah was very glad for the shade that the plant gave him. The next day, God appointed a worm to attack the plant, so that it withered (Jonah 4:7). Again, using the elements, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah and he felt faint (Jonah 4:8). Jonah again wished that he was dead (Jonah 4:8). Jonah again said to God, *“It is better for me to die than live’ And the LORD said to Jonah, ‘You pity the plant, for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?’”* (Jonah 4:8-11). Jonah was thinking about himself, whereas God was thinking about others!

To sum up, my thoughts return to two verses in the Bible: Isaiah 55:8-9, *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

Dear friends, I pray that this talk on “Jonah the disobedient servant”, serves as a lesson in service.

- Jonah was disobedient;
- Jonah was afflicted;
- Jonah prayed;
- Jonah was delivered;
- Jonah was re-commissioned;

- Jonah was perplexed and fainting, but he was not forsaken.

God loves His servants, so don't be despondent; "Arise and go".

Thank you for listening to this *Truth for Today* talk in the series Arise and Go, talk number 1076, Jonah - the disobedient servant.

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