

Jonah, the Run-Away Prophet

by Albert M. Ewing

The sermon explores Jonah's journey as a reflection on disobedience, repentance, and the mercy of God in the face of human failings.

Scripture: Psalm 50:2

Topics: "Repentance And Obedience", "Faith And Disobedience"

Description

Albert M. Ewing delivers a sermon on the story of Jonah, a backslidden prophet who disobeyed God's call to warn Nineveh, representing the struggle of doing what we do not like to do when God commands it. The narrative emphasizes the importance of confession, repentance, and obedience, showcasing Jonah's willful disobedience and eventual repentance after a harrowing experience in the belly of a whale. The sermon highlights the consequences of backsliding, the need for genuine repentance, and the dangers of fear and unbelief in fulfilling God's purpose.

Transcript

In closing this little volume I cannot refrain from lifting up one more Bible character representing the backslider in heart and that character is Jonah the Prophet.

Jonah was an Israelite of the tribe Zebulun and lived in Gath-hepher a town in lower Galilee in Zebulun near Nazareth where Jesus was born.

His prophetic period was probably sometime during the reign of King Jeroboam B.C. 825-784. His commission as prophet was given to denounce the sins of Nineveh the capital of ancient Assyria, a great and wicked city.

Jonah of course being an Israelite would naturally shun having any dealings with the heathen Gentiles. He evidently had a very deep prejudicial hatred against them.

The test of Christian experience is not in doing what we love to do, but doing what we do not like to do, if God commands it.

The book of Jonah is one of confession, not one of apology. Jonah was strong in his self-condemnation as you will notice. The book exalts God but rebukes and punishes Jonah. He acknowledges fully his wrong doing and when we read the story we think of Peter who went out and wept bitterly.

The book is dealing with a real live story, for Jonah was a real live person.

It is not an allegory, or fish story, as many would have you believe, for the narrative declares that the word of the Lord came unto Jonah commissioning him to go to Nineveh to warn that wicked city; and he disobeyed and went to Joppa to board a ship for Tarshish instead. He had no call to go to Tarshish, the land of minerals and monkeys but he was not looking for, or wanting a call; he already had one that he did not want, and one that he was not going to willingly accept. Disobedience is sin, and sin separates us from God. There is no doubt but at this point of decision, to not obey God's call to go to Nineveh, Jonah broke with God, and became a backslider.

Why does Jonah write the book as confession on himself? Well a true and genuine confession and repentance withholds no truth even against oneself; it overlooks no sin or weakness that would hinder a full restoration.

Jonah in his backsliding was willful and deliberate. "He pays the fare and goes down." Had he gone where God sent him he could have had free transportation and all expenses met, as God always provides for His own. But he refused to ride on a free ticket, or travel on a pass: this being true, he must pay his own fare. Obedience is fruitful and economical, but disobedience is expensive and wasteful. You know sometimes we make little things straight, and leave a lot of big things crooked; making up in pedantry what we lack in principle. Beautiful character, of necessity, must needs be a holy character. "Out of Zion the perfection of beauty, God hath shined." Psalm 50.2.

It is always contrary to good practice to use scripture out of its setting, even in an accommodating sense unless and only when it is made clear that such is being done. It shall be the purpose of the writer to deal with the facts as recorded in the narrative.

Jonah was to undertake a mission of a very remarkable kind, and his call was of a very unusual character. He, being an Hebrew, was ordered to go to a great heathen city to testify against it, threatening it with destruction.

God evidently had a design in such a mission, but He probably did not reveal His purpose to Jonah; but it was very likely, to provoke Israel to jealousy by showing them a great heathen nation, from a king on his throne to a beggar lying prone and prostrate and penitent in the dust, under a single warning, from a single prophet. Such a sight would be a rebuke to Israel that had been favored with so many prophets, and had received such earnest warnings. Should the tribes of Israel continue to reject the faithful warnings of their prophets, their final destruction could not long be delayed. Here is a good spiritual lesson for the Christian of today.

You will remember that the narrative relates that on the prophet's way down to Tarshish, a terrible storm broke upon the ship, and Jonah went down into the sides of the ship, looking for relief and safety. But God knew his movements and the storm continued. Going into hiding did not help matters, but they rather grew worse. His relief was only temporary, and he would soon be called to give an account of himself to the ship's crew. When they had done everything that experienced seamen knew to do and had failed, they unloaded the ship's cargo -- tea, coffee, tin ware, the pork barrel. All this had failed to quiet the storm that was raging, and one more thing was left to do. That was to get all on board the ship together and take a straw vote to find out who the guilty culprit was that was causing all the trouble. They dispatched a committee to wait upon Jonah who was fast asleep down in the steerage, and to bring him forthwith to the upper deck for counsel. They cried unto Jonah, "Awake, call upon your God" but Jonah had quit praying;

he had broken with God, and was a backslidden prophet. He said he was an Hebrew when questioned: "Where did you come from? What is your occupation? Whence comest thou? What is thy country? and of what people are thou?" "I am just a Hebrew."

He did not say that he was a prophet, but he did acknowledge that he feared God that made the sea and the land. Come upstairs they said, and we will cast lots to see who is, or what is, the cause of our trouble. Jonah lost as all backsliders do. This was the deciding voice to Jonah; he needed nothing more. He said to the men of the ship, Cast me overboard into the sea, and your trouble will be over, the storm will cease.

One Achan in the camp, and one Jonah aboard the ship contrary to God's plan, will bring a storm and defeat every time. "Be sure your sin will find you out" Num. 32.23.

Jonah had a horrible experience in coming through by the Whale Express Route, and his schedule running a little behind, by reason of the way he chose, but we say, "It is better late than never." But I would say that, "It is better never late."

Jonah's case was not final apostasy: He could repent, which thing he did before it was too late. Although swallowed by a whale, which without a miracle from God would have spelled his doom, he cried to God, Who will save to the uttermost all them that call upon His name. Jonah called from the belly of the whale, "Have mercy, Lord, and I will obey the call;" and God ordered the whale to take him to land. This little didactic epic will give the story in verse form.

Among the prophets of old, there's a story often told,

Of a disobedient man whom God had sent;

A message to unfold, in a meeting he would hold,

In Nineveh who God called to repent.

The Lord said "Arise and go," but Jonah said "Oh no,"

To run away his mind was fully bent;

Jonah did not think it so, but the story we all know,

Is that Jonah finds at last he must repent.

Down to Joppa he makes haste, for there is no time to waste.

And he finds the ship all ready now to go;

Poor old Jonah thinks he's safe, when he finds that secret place,

Be sure your sin will find you out, you know.

There is no time to sleep, while the storm is on the deep,

Arise and quickly call upon your Lord;

Thus the crowd to him did speak, Jonah feels a little weak,

Please excuse me, sir, just throw me overboard.

Then, they their lots did cast, midst the crashing of the masts, And poor Jonah lost as all backsliders do;
But he confessed at last, and overboard was cast, He said good-bye to Tarshish, worldly crew.

His sin did find him out, and he took another route,

A route that made him willing to repent;

It was no time to shout, but a problem to get out

Before the Landlord came to get the rent.

I had better took the trail, than the stomach of a whale,

The air is foul, the walls are rough and plain;

His heart begins to fail, so he starts to weep and wail,

Let me out, he said, I'll take another train.

He decided to explain, gets permission then to change,

And get a place in Nineveh to park;

While he suffers inward pain, all his plans must rearrange,

For anything beats living in a shark.

My landlord got sick of me, said you can't digested be,

And I'll take you back to land, this very day;

I'll not only set you free, but will collect no fee,

I'll gladly all your boat expenses pay.

By and by he reaches land, then takes Jonah by the hand,

And leads him through the straight and narrow way;

To go forth at God's command, in Nineveh take his stand,

All the precepts of the message to obey.

When holiness evangelism begins to thunder against carnality and backsliding, the modern Jonahs of today begin to hide out, take back seats, and become irregular in attendance at the means of grace. I have seen the front seats empty up in revivals, and folk move back, that served in front trenches before the meeting began. As in Jonah's case, this crowd will ride the top deck the first few days of the meeting until things begin to warm up, then they begin to cool down and move back to a more comfortable position.

As is generally: the first firing goes a little wild of the mark; until the messenger gets his bearings. Until then, only a few feathers are shot off: and this was all too close for lasting comfort, and carnal prudence

would then suggest, "Find safety in retreat" as "self-preservation is the first law of life" and Jonah and Jonah's kind move to what they think is a safe distance from the trouble, and now take a sleep in carnal security. But the fury of the storm increases; the evangelist thunders out in no uncertain sound, "There is too much excess baggage aboard this vessel," and the tried and true sailors all agree and say, "Amen, preach it, brother; that's good preaching." And they began on the externals. This is not a bad place to begin, but a poor place to stop. They threw overboard the wares, and this could mean a lot of things. There is the coffee, they said we won't need that, and, of course, overboard it went. But the whale let it go by, as he did not drink coffee; even if it is not a sin, the whale knew that there was no food in it.

Then there was the tobacco, throw it overboard, It is not fit for anyone to use anyway; and the whale did not use it either, so he let it go by. The pork barrel went over board and, as good as it may be, the great fish let it go by. He was not looking for a substitute, he was looking for a real backsliding prophet and was to refuse any offer of compromise. The trouble was not with the ballast of the ship, and our trouble today cannot be remedied by mere reformation only; it is deeper than that. They had to go down after Jonah and bring him up to a red-hot prayer meeting before the final act of disposing of him. Chapter 1.12. A lot of times we think the externals hinder the meeting, and there is no doubt but they make a bad show in the flesh, and they should be cried out against and disciplined in our churches, and we have license to do so, as Isaiah writes, "Cry aloud and spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet and show my people their transgressions, and the house of Jacob their sins." Isaiah 58.1. In our Jonah case the trouble was not external but internal; it was in the hold of the vessel. A backslidden prophet, backslidden in heart, was down there; and when full confession was made that he was the sole source of the trouble, and a request that he be thrown overboard, and the transaction was fully committed, the trouble was over.

It is remarkable the trouble one backslider can cause, Achan defeated Israel at Ai and caused the loss of many men. Lot's wife not only lost her own soul, but ruined her whole family. Now here is Jonah going to Tarshish, a great trading center; his purpose evidently was to traffic in metals and monkeys; but God would have no monkey business from His prophets, so He quickly intercepts his plans by sending a strong wind that threatened his ship with destruction. The bad man never suffers alone: others suffer with him. They cast forth their wares; here is loss of property, trying to save a bad man. Oftentimes social influence is lost by our complicity with backsliders in their evils.

He said, "I fear God." This could not be reverential fear, as this fear renders obedience. It must have been a fear with misgivings in it; this is implied in chapter 4.2, when he said, "O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled." It seems that Jonah had told the Lord his reason for running away. He said I knew that Thou art a gracious God, and merciful, and if I should go to Nineveh and speak to them the words, that Thou gavest me to say, that they would repent in sackcloth and ashes, and that You would repent of the evil You had thought to bring upon them, and forgive them, and I just could not have my prophecies to fail, so I started to leave the country.

Now that is exactly what happened (see) chapt. 3:10. "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."

"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry." Ch. 4:1. This seems to be evidence sufficient to convict him as a backslider; but there is more that can be added. Why was he angry? All because his prophecy had not been fulfilled. Notwithstanding, God had blessed his message, so that a whole city had repented, and He had forgiven them and saved them, and given Jonah, one of the Bible's

greatest recorded revivals. Enough to have made any Christian rejoice. But Jonah was not in a rejoicing mood. He was angry instead. The Lord said unto him so gently, "Doest thou well to be angry?" 4:4.

In other words, "Do you think this is the right spirit to be angry, because I have had mercy on this poor sinful people" and Jonah went out and made him a booth and sat down under the shadow thereof, that he might see what would become of the city. He was fearful, he was angry, and he was a pouter.

Yes, when you can say that one is guilty of this trinity of evils, you can further say, that they are backslidden in heart, and the old man is still on board. The lopping off of externals is not the remedy for this disease. You can throw overboard your tin ware, (cheap jewelry) coffee pot, tea pot, pork barrel, and what not, and nothing will happen; but like the case of the woman in the Bible, who spent all her earnings on the doctor and was nothing better, but rather grew worse; so will it be when attention is given to nothing more than externals. To tell God, "I will give this or that," unless it is all sin, is nothing more than an offer of bribery. People have tried to starve this condition out, but of course they failed; they have tried to smother it with a piece of bacon, and drown it with a cup of coffee, but it just would not work. It takes repentance with a godly sorrow to get back.

Jonah was fearful that God would not do what he had promised. The Good Book declares, "That the fearful and unbelieving, shall have their part in the lake of fire." Rev. 21:8. Also, "He that feareth, is not made perfect in love" I Jno. 4:18.

And priest, prophet or preacher, that feareth to give God's message because of any misgivings he has about the faithfulness of God, and fear of the people, is headed for the rocks, and will more than likely take his people with him.

What a tragedy that Jonah the prophet is not classed among the heroes of faith, but is only referred to when you want to talk about a backslidden prophet running from God. One of the most regrettable things to follow any minister's life, is to have to say, that he was possessed of misgivings concerning the faithfulness of God: when God would say to him, "Cry aloud, and spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. Isa. 58:1 "I have never seen one that would admit his misgivings, but you can look at their work and observe it, when you can see sin, real sin, walk in at the front door without knocking. He fears to do what God commands lest he hurt someone's feelings. He will say, "I am against sin in the church, and I offer my protest." Yes, so did Pilate protest the crucifixion of Christ. He had power to protest, but he lacked power to resist. It is one thing to have power to protest, against sin; it is quite another thing to have the courage and power to resist sin, and say that it cannot come.

O Preacher! Preach the Word faithfully, resist sin with all the power of your being, and make Peter's admonition, the agenda of your life, by giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.

For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins.

Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.

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