

GOD SPEAKS TO HUMAN PREJUDICES

We've heard that truth is stranger than fiction. We see things on the news that really amaze us relative to what has happened to people. We read about adventures people have had and how close they came to dying and sometimes it is hard to believe. I would imagine that people who knew Jonah and had heard about his situation thought it was a really amazing story. Some modern critics have dismissed the account in the book of Jonah as little more than a literary work and have cast doubt on the existence of the person Jonah. He is mentioned in another passage of the Old Testament: 2 Kings 14:25. This reference establishes Jonah as a historical character. Jonah was mentioned several times in the New Testament, each time by Jesus.

We don't usually think of a prophet as a person who is disobedient to God. However, Jonah was such a character.

JONAH 1:1-3a What kind of men were the prophets of old? Listen to what James says of Elijah: "Elijah was a man just like us." [James 5:17] The prophets of the Old Testament were like us. We can more readily believe that when we look at Jonah than if we consider someone like Elijah. Jonah was given a prophetic message and he was to deliver that message for God. This was a gift from God. Prophecy was in operation during the time of the New Testament and because the Holy Spirit has been given to each one who has been born again, then we should anticipate that this gift would be even more prevalent today. God's message is no less urgent nor no less important today than it was 2000 or 3000 years ago.

Perhaps we should be asking ourselves, "What or who is our Nineveh?" I believe God would use each of us to bring His message of salvation to those around us. It may be to those whom we really do not like. This was the situation with Jonah. It may be to a person who might want to harm us. This was the situation with Jonah.

So often we run off to our own Tarshish. Usually we just get involved in the daily routine. Unfortunately, for a lot of us, the daily routine is "far from the presence of God." Just as Jonah did, we fail to realize that we cannot escape the presence of God. We tend to think we have fled from His presence when we fail to recognize and acknowledge Him. Jonah found the truth of the universal presence of God. He thought we was going to the ends of the earth and was surprised to find God was there!

What about us? What happens if we ignore God's urging to say something to someone for whom God has given us a concern? Do we get swallowed by a fish? No! Not anymore than do hypocrites fall down dead at the feet of the preacher as did Ananias and Sapphira at the feet of Peter. What about Sodom and Gomorrah? These things are given to us as examples and a warning. The message from the examples is that God doesn't force us to do His bidding but the consequences of disobedience are drastic. Lest we think that God has changed, we should remember that all judgements of God do not happen in this life. In Jonah's case, God acted in such a way to get Jonah's attention.

JONAH 3:3-4 This time when God spoke to Jonah, Jonah did what God told him to do. Though he was willing, he was not happy about it. Why was Jonah so reluctant? Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, Israel's bitter enemy. The Assyrians eventually defeated the northern kingdom of Israel and scattered the Israelites to distant places in an effort to destroy their influence as a nation. But Jonah did not know that was going to happen. He did know who the enemy was and emotions ran high with regard to enemies.

Jonah walked throughout the city proclaiming his message of the destruction of Nineveh. The city was so large it would take three days to go to all parts and deliver the message. Jonah may have gotten a little pleasure from being able to tell his enemies they were going to "get it." Then, as far as Jonah was concerned, the worst possible thing happened.

JONAH 3:5-9 The people of Nineveh believed God. This is the essence of faith. This same expression was used of Abraham and his relationship to God. What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." [Rom 4:3] How do we know their faith was genuine? Because they took action based on what they believed. They declared a fast for all the city. Everyone from the king to the stable hand participated in the fast and acts of humility in a belief that God would have compassion on them and change His mind. These people seemed to know more about the character of God than Jonah did. The Ninevites were right. God is compassionate and responds to our repentance and humility in a way that is favorable to us.

JONAH 4:1-4 Jonah had been obedient to what God pressured him into doing. However,

Jonah was not in agreement with God in this matter. "Not in agreement" is perhaps stating the issue too mildly. Jonah was just plain mad about how things turned out. As Jonah discusses his anger with God we find that Jonah was sure this very thing would happen. That is why he ran away when God first called him to go to Nineveh. Jonah **did** know the compassionate character of God after all.

How displeased and angry was Jonah? He was so mad he wanted die. It is amazing what prejudice and hatred will do to people. It makes us self-destructive if it is the only way we can destroy our enemies. In fact, it robs us of our joy of living. This can happen to any of us when we focus on others or on circumstances rather than putting our attention on God.

God asked Jonah a question that each of us should consider when we let our emotions get control of us. "Do we have any right to be angry?" Jonah was angry, not because of what the Assyrians had done. Those things had caused hatred. Jonah was angry because God had not destroyed them. In essence, he was angry with God. He was angry because God's compassion was not limited to himself and his own people. He really did NOT have any right to be angry.

JONAH 4:5-9 Jonah was not ready to give up. Perhaps the Assyrians would slip up and God would destroy them. He found an observation point outside the city and sit down to watch. Our hatred will drive us to do things that are pretty silly. Here he is sitting out in the hot sun, miserably hot and uncomfortable. Amazingly, God provided relief for Jonah in order to teach him a lesson. A vine grew very rapidly and provided shade for Jonah. This made Jonah happy. Then a worm killed the vine and God sent a scorching wind that withered the vine and Jonah. Again, Jonah wanted to die. He was angry about the loss of his vine. He was so angry he wanted to die.

The same question came from God, "Do you have any right to be angry?" This time Jonah answered God and claimed he had a right to be angry. Listen to God's response to Jonah's misplaced priorities.

JONAH 4:10-11 Jonah had not invested anything in the vine. He had not tended it. He had just enjoyed the presence of the vine. It came and it went without any help from Jonah. But he was really concerned about the vine. If Jonah could generate that kind of concern for a gourd plant, he should not be surprised that God would have concern for the 120,000 people of Nineveh. We misplace our priorities in many ways even today when we deal with people. We tend to value *things* more than we value *people*. If we are to let God's priorities be our priorities, then we will understand what Jesus meant when He said, "God so loved the world, He sent His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."