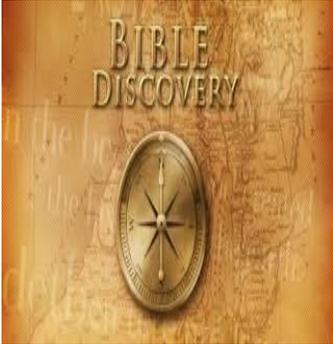


A Whale of a Tale



When we hear of Jonah, we immediately think how he was swallowed by a whale and spewed out onto shore after three days. But is that the only message God wants us to consider from the Jonah account? Personally I accept it as factual because God said it! There's not only the Old Testament account, but Jesus himself refers to Jonah when speaking to the wickedness of his generation, saying, *"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."* [Matthew 12:40] Not only does this indicate the great love Jesus demonstrated but provides further authenticity to the story of Jonah. Don't you agree that Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, was able to distinguish between history and an allegory? The following story's been used to tell of the faith of a young girl and the doubt of her teacher over the authenticity of Jonah's time in the belly of the whale.

"A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales. The teacher told her it was impossible for a whale to swallow a human because although the whale was a very large animal, its throat was very small. The little girl was quite emphatic that Jonah was indeed swallowed by a whale. Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human; it was physically impossible. The little girl said, "When I get to heaven I will ask Jonah." The teacher asked, "What if Jonah went to hell?" The little girl replied quickly, "Then you ask him!"



When we hear the story we all laugh – it's cute and if we're honest it makes us feel a little superior to those in the world. But just like Jonah, this little girl misses God's point. What's missing is Godly love and compassion. What's missing is an aching heart for the teacher. What's missing is a drive to reach out and wrap arms of love around those who don't have God's forgiveness and grace in their lives. What's missing is sharing Jesus! The story of Jonah is, if anything, the trials he suffered in his life so that God could get his attention and Jonah would go and share the good news and give Nineveh opportunity to repent. What lesson might God need to send us to compel us from his word? Wait a minute; I seem to recall that God sent his Son Jesus to take our place! Surely that compels us to tell of God's wonderful love.



Another story includes a wealthy, respectable man coming to Jesus in the dead of night to protect his apparent association with the radical rabbi. Included in the story is perhaps the most famous verse in scripture - John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* We see it displayed at stadiums, along the highway and even quoted on the blackliner above quarterback Tim Tebow's eyes during Florida's championship game a few years ago. But does anyone know

John 3:17-18? Powerful words explain to us God's heart, *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."*

That's God's word! That's the message of the gospel we're called to go and tell. We're brought into the family business as children of God to go prick hearts,



bind up the broken-hearted, draw them to Jesus who alone saves them from their sin. If we see a drunkard lying in an alley we've the choice to either reach out to him giving him our compassion, or judge him leaving him to wallow in his sin. We've the same choice with our neighbours who live well, pay their taxes, never kick their cat and feed and clothe their children without fault. They too need our compassion. They too need us to be Jonah in their lives giving them opportunity to repent of their sin; to turn from condemnation to eternal life.



This whale of a tale's centered on God's wonderful mercy. When Jesus parallels the events of Jonah in the great fish with his own miraculous resurrection we discover our pursuit for an adequate spiritual reason for so great a miracle. God's grace fits that pursuit. Nineveh's to hear their wickedness was known by the Living God and it was to be reported by Jonah. To every generation, to every kingdom, to every nation the message is the same – *"Its wickedness has become known to God"*. Our task is to tell them like Jonah to Nineveh of the imminent judgment, and leave it to each hearer's conscience to judge the why of its coming.

We've a choice to make at that point!

We can choose to reject God's call – run away from his presence; not necessarily in a physical way but certainly spiritually. We become busy with our lives, we take on hobbies, we dig deep into our careers, we socialize – there's so many ways we find to keep us from being available for God. Or we choose to trust in our Heavenly Father's wisdom, in his grace, in his mercy and let him lead us as we live for and in him. Incidentally, notice how Jonah initially chose to run away and what it cost him? Talk about consequences.

Of course, our choices hinge first and foremost on our heart knowledge of the One God has sent to reveal Himself to us. Like Jonah, we must know God beyond doctrine, beyond ritual. We must take time to understand, just as the Ninevites heard and repented, just as the tax collector, who may have been short little Zacchaeus and who Jesus later went to have dinner with, is described in the Temple saying, *"God be merciful to me a sinner"*. In other words he was a total spiritual, social, physical failure, [Luke 18:14] yet he was justified in God's sight rather than the self-righteous, pompous Pharisee. Why? Because as we're told, our Heavenly Father is *"a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity!"* Jonah may have been angered by this God he knew extending such grace to his enemy but

"I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your Father in heaven." [Matthew 5:44]

that's exactly what Jesus tells us to do isn't it? Jesus says, *"I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your Father in heaven."* [Matthew 5:44] That's a conditional promise. Jesus is saying if you really want to be accepted as God's child, if you want to be forgiven and know Christ's salvation, if you want to have eternity with His heavenly Father, *you must love your enemies*. After all– didn't God choose to love us, even die for us while we were sinners; enemies of God?

"A gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" is essentially a quotation from Exodus 34:6-7 which is a central expression of God's character. Its essence is captured by Peter in his second letter. He reminds us that though we often speak of God as a loving God there's so much more. The Hebrew word *"hesed"* expresses God's behaviour within the covenant relationship – it's a word that basically there's no single word in English to adequately express, as Paul instructs us *"in seeking the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high and how deep"* [Ephesians 3:18 NLT], indeed how rich is God's love. We use words such as 'kindness', 'mercy', 'loyalty', 'loving kindness' and 'unfailing love' to amplify our word 'love' but still can't fathom the extent of God's magnificence. Like Jonah then if we find fault with God, it's for who He is, not as we imagine him to be. We become angry that God doesn't side with our petty jealousies, doesn't see the world our way. We're angered when our enemies are blessed. We want our God to be loving for us yet vengeful for those we disagree with.

When we fail to extend graciousness for those who differ from us, when we sit in judgment and decide for ourselves who will live and who should die, do we assume the place of God? We forget there's only One God. Perhaps, like Jonah, we simply doubt our enemies' repentance is sincere. We wait to see their repentance is superficial and transient – it won't last. We fail to come alongside and encourage, support and train those who hurt, those whom God has forgiven, as we should. Perhaps we're in a wait and see mode because we're anticipating something will happen to explain God's benevolent ways with mankind a little more clearly – before we embrace joy for our fellow man's redemption. But God already has – He gave us His only begotten Son so that no one should perish!

It's at such times God's presence comes to us the same way He came to the Ninevites – as Elohim the Lord God. He does this reminding us of the link between Himself as creator, as redeemer, as Lord and each of us, each created in His likeness regardless of creed, nationality, ethnicity, or behaviour - each desperate for a Saviour. Only then can we feel His gracious, compassionate mercy given in the love of His Son Jesus our Lord who died the cruel death of a criminal on the cross at Calvary and willingly, eagerly, enthusiastically extend that bountiful love to all who our Lord sends across our paths.



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Jonah foremost a revelation of God's character and attitude toward his creation



Will we let the wave of God's love extend out of and flowing from hearts changed by Christ?

Quite simply this story of Jonah isn't specifically a call to action of the Christian. The Book of Jonah is foremost a revelation of God's character and attitude toward his creation. How we react to it is the thrust of the point for you and me. Will we let the wave of God's love extend out of and flowing from hearts changed by Christ? As Christians we point to Christ in the grave and rising again on the third day; and recognize such action assures Him of our love – a love called to embrace every one of us. We know in Christ, God's reconciling the world to Himself [2 Corinthians 5:18-19] therefore our response must be to look with renewed eyes on those who've been reconciled. We're to *"recognize no man according to the flesh"* [2 Corinthians 5:16]. In other words, those whom God refuses to regard as his enemies cannot be regarded as enemies by those who profess to belong to God based on our own judgment – that's you and me brothers and sisters! All we have is the knowledge from Christ that apart from Him none can be nor will be saved. Now what will we do about that? What have we to say to those around us? Are you willing

and able to let Christ massage your heart and leave you open to welcoming others into His Kingdom of grace?

During New Testament times of Christ, John the Baptist came preaching repentance and the miracles of Jesus that followed caused what can only be called a great revival of faith. It's true that not everyone repented – many did not. But that did not stop the message of God from being proclaimed. Christ wept for Jerusalem but He still chose to go to the cross. What will be your response today? Will you stand in the gap; will you go and tell; will you live a life of profession to the graciousness and compassion of Jesus Christ your wonderful Lord and Saviour? If you will not, then who will go and how will others hear?

We'd love to hear from you. Give us a call or send us an email today!

Blessings,
Pastor Dave