

Truth for Today

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Lessons from the life of Jonah: God Cares

Many years ago, a friend related to me a story concerning an incident he had witnessed. He was walking along a country lane. Another pedestrian traveller was just ahead of him, walking in the same direction. He was evidently an experienced walker, judging by his steady pace and by the way he was dressed. He had a rucksack on his back, which would now be called a back-pack, I suppose. His clothes were of good durable quality, but they had clearly been in use for several years. He wore stout walking shoes, built for hard use. Part of his equipment was a walking stick.

He was vaguely in my friend's line of vision as they approached a fork in the road. As they drew near to the junction, the stranger stopped. He threw his walking stick high up into the air. He made no attempt to catch it, allowing it to fall to the ground. He looked at it for a moment, grimaced slightly, and again threw it high up into the air. He repeated this procedure several times. Eventually, he smiled to himself, and proceeded with his walk, taking the right hand fork in the road. My friend was absolutely fascinated by the whole procedure. He couldn't refrain from addressing the man. "Excuse me. I couldn't help noticing what you did. Do you mind telling what you were doing? What was going on?"

"No problem", said the walker. "That's easily explained. I always do that if I am approaching a junction. I ask for guidance. I follow the direction in which my trusty walking stick falls to the ground." "But", protested my puzzled friend, "why did you throw the stick into the air seven times before you followed the guidance?" "Ah, well," said the walker with a smile. "That's easy. The first six times my walking stick fell down pointing to the left hand fork." "But", said my friend, "if that was the guidance you were given, six times in succession, why didn't you follow that guidance and take the left hand fork?" "Ah, well", was the reply, with a grin. "I didn't want to go that way."

You know, I think Jonah was a man like that. As a prophet, he was committed to relying on guidance from God before he moved in any direction. But the record makes it plain that he wasn't always keen to follow the guidance, or indeed the instructions, he was given. There were evidently times when, in advance of receiving direction from God, he had already made his mind up what he wanted to do, or indeed what he was determined to do.

Think about the sequence of events, as outlined in the Book of Jonah. Appalled at the wickedness of the inhabitants of Nineveh, God had instructed Jonah to go to the city and warn the people of their impending doom. Instead, Jonah ran away. He brought into grave danger the crew of the ship he took from Joppa to Tarshish. He told them, quite rightly, that he was responsible for the danger they were in. He counselled them to save themselves by throwing him overboard, which they eventually did. God then prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. While inside the great fish, Jonah cried out to God and promised to be obedient in future. God caused the fish to eject him onto dry land, and commissioned Jonah a second time. "Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee." This time, Jonah responded and proceeded to Nineveh, and delivered his graphic message. "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Remarkably, all the people repented and cried for mercy. God saw the reality of their repentance and deferred his action. Jonah was aghast at this. He protested to God. "I knew it", he said. "That's why I ran away in the first place. I knew you would show mercy to these heathen people. That's why I ran away." Bitterly, he cried, "That's enough. Take my life away. I cannot take any more." God had to teach Jonah another lesson about the way he provides for the needs of the humblest and least deserving of His creatures. Jonah had then retired out of the city, to observe what would really happen to Nineveh. He sat under the protective shade of a shelter he built, no doubt out of branches and vegetation he found round about. God caused a giant growth, perhaps similar to a vine, to provide adequate shade. Jonah was grateful for this, but the lesson was not complete. At dawn the next day God brought a worm to eat away the protective umbrella of vegetation. Exposed to the hot air and a scorching hot wind, Jonah felt extremely sorry for himself. He again asked God to put him out of his misery and take his life away. "Oh", said God. "I see. You feel sorry for the loss of the vine that was giving you a bit of protection from the sun. Don't you see that it is right that I should be willing to show mercy to a hundred and twenty thousand repentant human beings in Nineveh, and the cattle that gives them a livelihood." The story ends there, but the lessons remain on record for Jonah, and for you and me.

Jonah was happy that he, an intelligent but disobedient servant, should be spared and delivered out of peril in answer to his prayer. "Of course", thought Jonah. "I am a Jew, one of God's people. We have been promised God's

protection. We are special. But, these ignorant, pagan Ninevites? Surely it is right for them to be made to feel and suffer the judgment they deserve." "Not at all", said God. "Why should I not be equally gracious to ignorant Ninevites in answer to their prayer of repentance?"

The practical challenge to us is just as clear. It would be a mockery for us to go through the motions of praying for guidance on a matter about which we have, in reality, already made up our minds as to what we intend to do. It is like asking God to say "Amen!" to what we are already determined to do. That almost amounts to blasphemy.

First of all, we must remind ourselves that, whatever the outward appearance of things, God is always in control. As a poet has said:

*"God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm."*

And again:

*"God moves behind the scenes,
And moves the scenes He is behind'
In all things, in all ways,
He knows, He loves, He cares."*

Together with that, we must accept, that in so many things, we are able to recognise, if we look for it, first of all, God's sovereign disposition to bless. Alongside of that, and without any contradiction to it, we must see man's responsibility to answer to it.

Early in the narrative of the Book of Jonah, in 1:4, we read, 'But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.' The statement is quite clear. God sent the wind. The initiative was His.

As we read this fascinating little book, we cannot fail to be impressed that God works to a grand scale, accomplishing great things:

- In chapter 1, we read about a great city, a great wind, a great tempest and a great fish.
- In chapter 3, twice we are reminded that Nineveh was a great city.
- In chapter 4, Jonah laments that because God is a great God, it was inevitable that He would ultimately show great kindness to the great city of Nineveh, if they repented of their sins.

As we read in the Gospel record, the Lord Jesus Himself affirmed that the people of Nineveh, much against the inclination of Jonah himself, repented at the preaching of Jonah.

At the same time, to balance that, God's infinite care is seen in the preparations He made on behalf of His servant Jonah. Listen to the successive steps.

- In 1:17, we read, 'the LORD had prepared, or provided', first of all, 'a great fish to swallow up Jonah.'
- In 4:6, we learn that 'the LORD God prepared,' secondly, 'a vine, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief.' We are then told that 'Jonah was exceeding glad of the vine.'
- In 4:7, we are told, 'God prepared', thirdly, 'a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the vine that it withered.'
- Then, in 4:8, the narrative states, 'And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared', fourthly, 'a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.'

All these events were steps in God's careful preparation for what Jonah needed to learn, and do.

It reminds us that in his day the Apostle Peter knew, from his own personal experience, what he was talking about when he said, or rather wrote, in his 1 Peter 5:7, 'Cast all your care upon Him; for He careth for you.' And, again, we learn from 1 Kings 12 that Rehoboam, king of Judah, and those over whom he ruled, had to learn from God that the apparently chance and adverse circumstances of life were all part of the training of servants by God Himself. How salutary to be told by the blessed God, "This thing is from Me".

Corresponding to that, we see the way in which Jonah reacted in responsibility by his preparedness to humble himself, to go down, both physically and metaphorically. Within his own self-imposed limits, and up, and sometimes down, to that level, He was eventually prepared to subject himself to the will of God.

Seven times, the text tells us that – ‘He went down’ ...

- First of all, 1:3 says, ‘But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish.’
- Secondly, in the same verse we read, ‘he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it (that is, down into the ship), to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.’
- Thirdly, when the storm filled the crew members with panic, verse 5 says, ‘Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep, perfectly composed.’
- Fourthly, in 2:6, he recalls, ‘I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God.’
- Fifthly, 3:15 states, ‘So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging.’ That is, he went down into the sea.
- Sixthly, we are told in 3:17, ‘Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.’ That is, he went down into the belly of the fish.
- Seventhly, and vitally, in 2:1, we read, ‘Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish’s belly.’ That is, he went down on his knees in prayer. In his distress, he recorded, “I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.”

A well known hymn takes as its theme, ‘God is not a disappointment!’ How true that is to those who know Him. God never disappoints us. He never lets us down. But, have we thought – we never disappoint Him! He is never disappointed in us or with us. But there is a tremendous difference. It is not because we are perfect. Far from it! But, He knows us through and through. He is never taken unawares, either by His own, or by anyone else. With us, disappointment arises when the realisation does not match the expectation. In that sense, God’s expectation of us does not exceed the realisation, because He knows us so well, through and through; much better than we know ourselves. It is also true, of course, that He not only knows us through and through, as individuals, our potential and character. In virtue of His omniscience, He knows exactly what we will do, before we have even thought through our own intentions.

It is often in adversity that God’s care comes to light. In Jonah’s case, it arose because he was disobedient to his Master’s clear command. He just didn’t want to do it. This needs a special kind of care. Even the best of men has his own idea as to how God should help him, or use him. Remember that Naaman certainly wanted to be cleansed of his leprosy, but he wanted God to do it in Naaman’s way. 2 Kings 5 tells us, Naaman had to be challenged, “If the prophet Elisha had asked thee to do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it?” He had to learn that the best blessing comes when we allow God to care for us in God’s own way.

The essence of a good servant is having confidence in his master’s judgment and being prepared to carry out his instructions without question and certainly without objection. It is one thing for a servant to be willing to do something because he understands it. It is another thing altogether to do it when he does not understand it. It is an even more difficult thing for him to be willing to do it when he understands but does not agree with it. The care the Lord showed to Jonah helped him to see that there were larger issues at stake than Jonah’s opinion of things. The Lord carefully led Jonah, stage by stage, through the various lessons that Jonah had to learn.

In general, we have to learn that it is not essential for us to understand, or necessarily agree with what the Bible says. If the meaning is clear, and unmistakable, it is incumbent on us to obey it, even if we do not fully understand it. Even more, we must not feel free, or compelled, to ignore or disobey it just because we do not agree with it, or if it doesn’t appeal to us. So, God led His servant Jonah step by step through the lessons Jonah had to learn. God prepared, firstly, the great fish, secondly, the vine, thirdly, the worm, and fourthly, the east wind, so that his servant would learn to accept the principle and apply it to his own situation and attitude.

The last statement emphasises the longsuffering of God towards both the ignorant sinner, and His disobedient servant. He cares for both, therefore He cares for me, whoever I am, whatever I am, wherever I am between the two extremes of unsaved sinner and committed servant. God knows his man. God trains his servant. The servant on his part must have compassion for those he serves on God’s behalf. He must then operate on the principle God gave to Joshua in his day. “Be strong, and of good courage, and do it.”

God is continually training His servants for the future. We can all improve, under God's care. As long as He leaves us here, there must be something He wants us to do for Him. Let us be willing to be used of God in serving Him in any sphere to which He directs us. In so doing, like Jonah we shall experience for ourselves the constant care of our loving, caring God.

God knows. He loves. He cares. Praise His Name!

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