

Jonah: Behaviour that contradicts belief

Introduction

Matthew 12:38-40 – Jesus speaks more highly of Jonah than any other Old Testament prophet.

God called Jonah to be a prophet to the Jews during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25). However, in the book of Jonah, God is not calling Jonah to preach to the Jews – but Nineveh, a major centre of the Assyrian empire. As the Assyrians increased their zone of influence through the ancient world, they had become renowned for their cruelty and exploitative culture.

1. How behaviour so often contradicts belief

Jonah 1:1,2: *the word of the Lord came to Jonah... Go to Nineveh.* But Jonah does exactly the opposite. He flees from the presence of the Lord. Was he frightened of the renowned cruelty of the Ninevites? That God may not be able to protect him? No. cf v 9 & 12. See also 4:1,2

Similarly, we find it easy to ignore what we know is right and throw ourselves into another activity.

“If I believed that, or even a tenth of that, how could I care which version of the prayer book was used? I would drop my job, sell my house, throw away my possessions, leave my acquaintances and set out into the world with a burning desire to know more. And when I’ve found out more – to act upon and tell others. Far from being puzzled that Mormons and Adventists would knock at my door, I’m unable to understand how anyone who believes what is written in the bible could choose to use his waking hours in any other endeavour” Matthew Parris (The Times)

There was a huge gap between what Jonah believed and how he was behaving. Similarly, there is often also a huge gap between what we believe and how we live. Properly diagnosed, we can learn to respond in the best way.

2. Four ways God confronted Jonah

1. God’s word shows what Jonah’s heart was like (1:1,2)

We reveal a great deal about our attitude to God – by our attitude to the Scriptures. A keen listener to Scripture = a keen listener to God. No time for Bible (read or listen) = no time for God.

2. Unpleasant circumstances (1:4)

God brought on a furious storm and starts to make life very uncomfortable on the ship. God initiated a turn of events as part of his plan for Jonah’s life. Sometimes God brings storms into our lives: Are they consequences of our foolish / disobedient behaviour? God wants us to see the storms he deliberately brings into our lives – not signs of his curse on us, but evidence of his love, bringing us face to face with the consequences of our bad choices and helping us turn back to him.

3. Surprising responses by pagan people

A **challenge** to us in terms of how we think of others around us: God loves whom he wants to love and shows himself to whom he wants to show himself. How much does this challenge you?.

A **comfort** to us: God doesn't actually need us – but chooses to use us. Let us pray for the people around us, then simply live, love and speak honestly. And even then, as he did with Jonah – God will often rescue people round us – even when we are disobeying him in some area of our lives.

4. What looks like a disaster – proves to be God's rescue plan for Jonah

Compare Jonah asleep in the ship with Jesus asleep in the disciples' boat (eg Mk ch 4); and Jonah, three days in the belly of the whale, with Jesus, three days in the tomb.

Jonah has an experience of salvation that is part of God's teaching programme that makes it clear how generous God is to Jonah – even though Jonah doesn't deserve it! He (and we) are just as bad – if not worse – than the people around us – and God saves us!

Conclusion