



The call of Jonah

Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-5

Jonah 2:1-10; 3:10 - 4:11; Acts 10:34-48; Matthew 18:21-35

There is no doubt that the story of Jonah shows us a merciful and compassionate God (4:2, 11) embracing all peoples in His pity.

He prayed to the Lord, "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity". Jonah 4:2

Jonah 4:10

But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" Jonah 4:10-11

Compare what Jesus says of His own ministry.

"If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent". Matthew 12:7

The call and the commission are one – **"Arise, go to Nineveh"**. The call of God is not for mere personal benefit. Service is involved. Every disciple has a general commission to make men disciples (Mark 1:16-18). Mission is implicit in the call of Christ. Some disciples have special commission, e.g. that of Paul to the Gentiles. Jonah, who is called to preach to the Gentiles, takes flight from the very spot where Peter was later to receive the vision on the house-top which helped open the door to the Gentiles, i.e. Joppa (cf Acts 10:1ff). Jonah tried to avoid his commission to the city of Nineveh. If he had succeeded, it would have left him immature and ill-equipped in his understanding of God. Fulfilment of God's commission is often the road to a fuller understanding of oneself and of God.

Note, too, that Jonah, who tries to frustrate God's will, is given a second chance (3:1ff).

Jonah gave a very strange reason for not going to Nineveh. He said that God was so merciful that, even though he preached judgment, God would show mercy on Nineveh. Jonah was set on judgment, not mercy. We can contrast this with the attitude of Abraham who interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah and the lengths to which God was prepared to go to make it possible for them to repent (Genesis 18:22-33) .

If the writing of Jonah is dated in 350BC, we need to understand its background against a fierce and intolerant nationalism and separatism. Judaism had little room for anything else but judgment for other nations. Jonah stands as their representative. We have many examples in our day of a like intolerance on the grounds of colour, creed or nation. Such prejudice is very slow to disappear. Even those who pay lip service to the condemnation of such discrimination often maintain it in their heart. The book of Jonah calls us to realise the universal mercy of God and His patience with us. He is seeking to lead us on to a mature and Christian level of thought, practice and concern.

Did God change His mind?

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. Jonah 3:10

God's attitude or decisions do not change. A changeable God might be a nightmare. This is only the writer's simple way of saying that God's word brought about the change. Men repent and God forgives. We know, of course, that the repentance itself is evidence of the working of God's Spirit.

Discussion

1. People take the story of Jonah in three ways:
 - I. History
 - II. Allegory
 - III. Parable

Which is correct? Examine each possibility, making up your own mind.

2. We all may have experiences of God's over-ruling grace in our lives. Share with the rest of the group how God changed the plans that you had for yourself and how it affected your life.