

Jonah's Lessons on Evangelism

"God, Jonah and the Gentiles"

Passages: Jonah 1
Matthew 28:16-20

Do you like to evangelise? Do you like to share the Gospel with people who don't yet know the Lord?

If you don't, then you'll appreciate the story of Jonah! You see, this short story is all about evangelism—it's all about God's unquenchable desire for the nations to hear of His great love that they might turn from the self-destructive patterns of idolatry and discover true life in a relationship with Him.

That's essentially the reason why God takes Jonah, son of Amittai, and calls him to ***"Go to that great city of Ninevah and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."*** Ninevah was the capital of Assyria, and Assyria was, at this time, Israel's greatest threat—its most ruthless enemy.

This is evangelism: It requires that God's people go and proclaim the fact that there is only one true God who is Lord over all. It requires that we go to places which are uncomfortable and which may threaten us. It requires that we enter places of idolatry and evil practices, and speak openly about the falsehoods we find there. Evangelism requires that we bring light into the darkness... and the darkness into the light.

Is this the reason why Jonah ran the other way? Is this why he seemed to hate evangelism so much?

No really! Jonah hated evangelism, **not** because it would make him feel uncomfortable or that he feared speaking out, but because, when all was said and done, he knew that this Gospel of truth he was to share would actually make a difference! He knew that it would convert the hearts and minds of the Assyrians. He knew that they would repent and turn to God and that He would forgive them! As he will later explain to God in chapter 4, ***"...I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity."***

Isn't it interesting? While we may refuse to do evangelism because it makes us feel uncomfortable or makes us feel like we're shoving things down peoples' throats, the only reason why Jonah hated evangelism is because he knew that it works...and he didn't want the Assyrians to be brought into the family of God! No; Jonah wanted them all dead! Of course, this makes a lot of sense—After all, the Assyrians were ruthless warriors who had repeatedly invaded Israel... plundering, raping, pillaging, and destroying things at whim! Jonah hated the Assyrians!

And that's why Jonah refused to go to Ninevah. He didn't think they deserved God's love! In fact, in Jonah's mind, no other nation but Israel was good enough! No other people but his people merited God's favour and forgiveness!

In the end, Jonah had a problem with **racism**!

Before we go any further in the story of Jonah, you need to understand one thing: Although it's clear that Jonah was a real person who lived in Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II (793 BC to 758 BC), **his unique story was preserved in the Old Testament as a *parable* about God's people.** What I mean is, when we read about Jonah's racism and his refusal to obey God's call to evangelise the Assyrians, we need to be aware that there's a bigger story going on here—the story of the nation Israel who was corporately called to evangelise the nations around her, but, just like Jonah, turned her back and kept the Good News of God's love to herself. For, like Jonah, Israel truly believed that no one else was worthy of God's love; that Israel's enemies only merited God's destruction...not His mercy! Like Jonah, Israel was racist. And so, just like Jonah, Israel also ran away from her responsibility to bring light into the darkness and the darkness into the light!

But if the story of Jonah is a parable about Israel, dare I say, **it's also a parable about us!** I mean, do you like to evangelise? According to numerous church surveys, few of us do! Just like Jonah, the game of running continues.

And that's why the story of Jonah was preserved-- to rebuke God's people in every generation and to wake her up to see the open-heartedness of the nations—to the fact that **the nations are waiting and ready to listen and be saved!** While we keep the Gospel to ourselves, fearful of offending

people...thinking that no one wants to hear the Good News or that no one is worthy enough to hear it)...God is already out in the world preparing the hearts of minds of the nations to repent and believe. This is the essential message of Jonah!

Let's look in more detail at the story! I mean, this story is thick with a beautiful **irony!** Here you have Jonah who refuses to evangelise and tries to run the other way. He gets on a ship bound for Tarshish, which is in Spain, near the Rock of Gibraltar...in the exact opposite direction to Ninevah which is in Iraq. But God will not let him (or Israel) get away with this act of disobedience. So, while he's on the ship, God sends a violent storm to rattle Jonah's self-confidence and show him that God means business.

Here is where the first delicious taste of irony comes in—While Jonah is asleep in the belly of the ship (symbolic of Israel's slumber in regards to the nations around her), God is out on the deck, doing His thing! He's got the pagan sailors praying to Him! He's got them recognising His Lordship over the earth and seas. He's got them turning *en masse* to plead for His mercy and goodness. And Jonah? Although he calls himself a true believer in Yahweh and a member of the household of faith, yet he's the only one on the ship who isn't praying! Look at verse 6-

6 The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish."

The point being made is quite funny—pagans are turning to God while the prophet is turning away from God—all because of his racist heart! He wants God or himself! (Israel wants God for themselves!) It is this selfish, racist attitude which has blinded them to the reality which is operating all around them—that God is bringing the nations to Himself in front of their very noses! Jonah (and Israel) are asleep!

Another piece of irony surfaces in verse 9. When Jonah finally does wake up and is quizzed about his background and homeland, he spews out a religious language (words that, obviously, haven't been thought through); words that don't align with his actions! Verse 9--

9 He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

Is that really true, Jonah? Do you really worship your God? Can you worship God and run away from Him at the same time? What's even more funny is that Jonah speaks about God's rule over the seas! Well, guess what? He will soon discover just how true this statement really is! The irony of it all! For as I said earlier, this story is not only about Jonah; it's about Israel as well, a nation who has, for years, recited many truths about God, yet has refused to live in full alignment with those truths! Yes, the irony of it all!

There's one more piece of irony that can be seen in verses 12 to 14. When Jonah does finally wake up and come out on deck, he tells the pagan sailors that he is to blame for the storm and they must throw him into the sea. But the sailors refuse to carry out Jonah's request! Instead, verse 13 tells us that the men try to row the boat to land...without any success. Why did they do this? Why didn't these pagans throw Jonah overboard? **Because they understood that this act would be against God's law!** Indeed, these pagans are surprisingly so aware of God's love for all people...even self-centred racists...that they refuse to violate God's commandment against killing. How did they know that commandment? Because God wrote it on their pagan hearts! The irony of it all! These pagans have a real sense of the sanctity of human life ...and of what's right and wrong..., while the believer (Jonah/ Israel) pouts and wants to die!

And then, when the sailors finally do give in to Jonah's request and throw him into the sea, these so-called pagan sailors immediately display a genuine sense of remorse and contrition towards God! Verse 14.

14 Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased."

Once again, it's the pagans who act like believers and the believers who act like pagans! What irony!

Now that we have chapter one under our belts, what are the lessons we can learn from it concerning *evangelism*? I see four of them:

First, like Jonah (and Israel), we can too easily become selfish in our possession of the Gospel. Indeed, one could even call it a form of racism! For it's too easy to convince ourselves that... *"we are the only ones who "get it"; that no one*

else will really understand or accept the truths that we have discovered--so, why share them? Sure, God obviously meant for us to believe...but those people out there??? They are so pagan...so far away from God! How could they ever be interested, let alone be convinced by the message of God's love?"

That's why we so easily turn and run the other way. We turn from those daily opportunities; we run from those tricky conversations; we hide from those confrontations where the Gospel speaks against sin and evil and calls people to repentance. How much like Jonah (and Israel) we are!

That's lesson number one!

A **second** lesson follows closely behind. To run from evangelism is to run from the presence of the Lord! For the fact is that ***"God desires not the death of any sinner, but that all might turn to Him and live!"*** To renege on evangelism is to deny God's heart! It is to deny His greatest passion—to see the world return to life in His presence. Thus, verse 3 is correct when, twice, it says that ***"Jonah ran away from the Lord!"*** To run from evangelism is to run from the Lord!

There's a **third** lesson about evangelism that surfaces in this chapter. Even as Jonah holds the Good News of God to his chest, keeping it to himself as he sleeps in the cargo hold, he has little (if any) awareness of the fact that *God is going before him*; that He's already softening the soil, preparing hearts, convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. The storm has made the sailors incredibly alert to spiritual realities! They are ripe for hearing the Good News of God! But Jonah can't see this.

How often is this same thing true for us? Because we, like Jonah, would rather go to sleep in the boat, we lack the eyes to see what God is up to! We can't see that He loves the world far more than we ever could, and that He is determined to bring the world to Himself! We fail to recognise His Spirit at work in the people around us! How blind...how asleep... we are!

The **fourth** lesson is as equally painful to admit: Like Jonah and Israel, we are hypocrites in the way our words don't often match our actions. Jonah was quick to declare; ***"I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven"*** (verse 10). But tell me, what is worship? Didn't one of the prophets say, ***"To obey is better than sacrifice?"*** Obedience is at the heart of worship!

Similarly, we say things like “Jesus is Lord!”. We repeat the clichéd expressions of our faith in “the God of all creation, the ruler of the earth and the seas” ...and yet, our disobedience in regards to outreach betrays the fact that we really don’t believe that “Jesus is Lord”! If we did, then we would surely proclaim the glory of God to the world that He has made! We would call the nations to look up and see their God and King *in the person of Jesus Christ crucified!*

Like Jonah (and Israel) we talk the talk, but rarely do we walk the walk.

To sum up, evangelism can only begin when we have big hearts—hearts of love for the nations. Evangelism can only continue when we realise that God goes before us to do the heavy lifting. He is already at work in this world; His *prevenient* grace is already there, in our neighbours and friends and family...so be on the alert and align yourselves with it! Finally, evangelism succeeds when our words about God’s sovereignty match our actions; when they flow from a convicted heart and are lived out with expectancy. Our God is the One who rules the earth and the seas, who will neither slumber nor sleep until all people on earth are drawn into His loving arms. Let us not only speak forth this truth, but may we live it out through the expressions of sacrificial love for all people of every nation, race, tribe and tongue!

The first chapter of Jonah ends with Jonah in the sea...drowning. The sea represents turmoil, uncertainty, confusion, indecision. The sea is the place of suffocation and death. Jonah is there, because he refuses to believe in the simple truth of God’s love. As a result, he must die to his stubborn and arrogant self. He must die to his racism and his Jewish superiority complex. Indeed, Jonah must be reborn into a new way of thinking about this world that God has made.

And so, the final line of today’s passage concludes: ***“And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.”***

Out of Jonah’s death will come his resurrection. Out of the death of Israel will come a new nation of believers, the church of Jesus Christ, who (by the power of the Holy Spirit) can trust in the universal love of God for all people.

This is the basis of evangelism. For when Jesus commanded us to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, he promised to go before us and prepare the hearts of the nations for His coming! We must believe this! We must pray for a new optimism to believe that the nations really are waiting and ready to believe.

After all, God is love, isn't He?

Let's pray.