



Jonah – To Love and Obey

Welcome and Opening Prayer

Reading – Jonah 1:1-17 & 4:1-11 and Hebrews 12:25-29

Most of us will be very familiar with Jonah and the Big Fish/whale. It's a staple Sunday School story which never fails to entertain children.

What will focus on this evening is not the whale or the big fish but on how God used Jonah. God overcame Jonah's considerably flawed character, once again in less than ideal circumstances, to get His will done. We will also see that it is one thing to claim a faith in God Almighty, it is quite another thing to live out that faith in obedience to His will.

We know that God called Jonah to go off to Nineveh to preach to them about their sinfulness, calling them to repentance. This is the only time on the OT where Israel is commanded to actively pursue the Gentiles. God's covenant with Abraham mentioned that through Abraham's descendants God would bless the nations. This is the first time someone of Israel is commanded to go and actively witness about God. The Gentiles were supposed to notice the difference between their society and culture from that of Israel's and be attracted to it. The Old Testament is full of examples of this happening. People from other nations becoming part of the nation of Israel and worshipping YAHWEH – Ruth, Rahab, Jael etc ...

What is Jonah's reaction to God's command? He refuses – he doesn't say anything, he just up and leaves town. It's funny the words used here. It says that Jonah went *down* to Joppa ... Perhaps Jonah should have been warned that things were about to go seriously *downhill* as a consequence of ignoring his Creator!

With Jonah safely onboard with his fellow travellers, God sends a wind, causing the sea to roll and heave. But it is the unbelieving sailors who start to pray (even if they're not sure who to pray to!) while the man of God is asleep below! Jonah's lack of reaction is significant. Sin hardens the heart and makes us insensitive, and here we see that

Jonah is *insensitive* to what God is doing. We also see here the first of many contrasts between the unbelieving and Jonah. Jonah is insensitive to what's going on but these Gentiles know that something out of the ordinary is going on, even if they are praying to false gods.

The unbelieving sailors even had more compassion than so-called 'chosen' Jonah. They did not want to throw him overboard and tried desperately to get to land without having to do that. They begged Jonah's God's pardon for what they had to do; in contrast to the man of God who had no compassion for the people of Nineveh.

God responded by calming the sea – the sailors then recognised that the true God is Jonah's God, so they prayed to YAHWEH. They were probably devotional type vows – saying that they would follow God, love Him and obey Him – unlike Jonah who had disobeyed God in a blatant way.

If we move to later in the story we see the successful outcome of Jonah's struggles with God but how much easier it would have been for him to simply follow and love and obey God in the first place!

Some Questions

1. Do you feel that the general mistrust of authority and the search of individual truth in our culture has had an impact on how people view and trust God?
2. How can we live an obedient and godly life?
3. Think of Bible characters/Christian witnesses. Can we think of examples of how being obedient has proved significant and how being disobedient has proved significant?
4. Think back over your own experience – have you an example in mind of a person (non-believer) displayed more godly character than a Christian colleague or friend?

There's something that stands out to me in this talk of godliness and the idea of obedience. It's the notion of the 'fear of the Lord.' The term seems a bit out dated nowadays but to earlier generations it had a more significant resonance. It was not so much about being afraid of God himself but more about a choice of lifestyle that puts obedience to God first – above and beyond any personal priority.

Most of us will see parallels in our own lives to that of Jonah. God calls us but we often rebel. We sometimes search for life in everything else but God, until we come to a point when we know we have no other choice than to turn back. Knowing that we should never have rebelled in the first place. We realise that our only help comes from the Lord.

Jonah had to be battered into obeying God and it might prompt us to look at responding to God in the small things as well as the big issues. Those little promptings we get when we consider how to deal with a situation – they might well be the nudgings of the Spirit. This is following, loving and obeying God in the little things. It's the beginnings of a life lived pleasing to God. Listening for and responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit when reading the Scriptures is very valuable. These are simple and effective ways of developing the obedient lifestyle.

Although Jonah's story seems like a story of a 'spiritually deaf' man, its also extreme confrontations. The divine blueprint, it seems, never rules out God's chosen vessels – even if they are as stubborn as Jonah. Those who choose to obey God without a bit of a fight aren't ruled out as his chosen instruments. But we see how obedience, how love of God and a commitment to following Him has such a positive impact on our spiritual lives. We don't want to be beating ourselves up for being disobedient. I don't want you all going away thinking you need a Godly time-out but it is perhaps a reminder for us all. But one really important thing we learn is that we have a God so good and gracious and merciful that he always leaves the door open for us when we are willing to come to Him. Our churches should be places where, when we or others stumble, we know we are in a place in which they/we know people will stand alongside us. That is what Christ did after all. He stood beside and alongside those who were caught in sin, who were outcast etc.

Any thoughts/questions?

Closing Prayer