

A WHALE OF A TALE (part #2) Jonah 1-2

Last week we began looking at the life of Jonah, the backslidden prophet. We talked about Jonah's call to go and pronounce judgment upon Nineveh. We talked about how God calls every child of His to serve Him in some way. We talked about the three purposes that God has when He calls us. If we obey God's call it will **sanctify** us. It will make us more holy. In Leviticus 8 we read of the consecration of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood. First a ram was killed and the blood was sprinkled upon the altar for the atonement of their sins. And then a second ram, the ram of consecration, was killed, and Moses put some of the blood on Aaron and his sons' right ear lobe, their right thumb, and their right big toe. And this was done that they might be sanctified literally from head to toe, that they might be fit for the calling upon their lives. And God still sanctifies those whom He calls today. Not with literal blood, but through the Holy Spirit He begins to **convict us** of sin, and then **cleanse us** from sin as we repent, and then **conform us** into the image of Jesus that we might be worthy ambassadors for Jesus in this world.

But God not only **sanctifies** us with His call, He also **stretches** us. The call of Jonah certainly stretched his faith, to go to a foreign land to people he despised. And God's call will also stretch us in some way. It may be to reach out and love someone or witness to someone we despise or we are intimidated by. It may be to get involved in a ministry that demands more time and energy than we would like to give, like singing in the choir, or visiting in the nursing home, or going on a mission trip. But it will force us out of our comfort zone to do it. And as I mentioned last week, when God calls and we refuse to obey our comfort zone becomes our sinful zone.

Now, I do not mean that every single day of your life you will wrestle with such a dramatic call. Beloved, the call of God for many is simply to begin obeying Him day by day in the basics of the Christian life. Reading the Word and praying on a daily basis. Regular, sacrificial giving, which begins with the tithe. Some Christians just need to make a commitment to come to church every Sunday. It is just not a high priority to be faithful. The call of God may be to forsake some pet sin. But whether it big or little in the eyes of others, God's call will be a faith stretcher, a comfort buster, and from time to time God will come to every child of His and call them loud and clear. He will come to stir them up, to stretch them with a challenge that apart from His strength is too big for them.

But God's call upon Jonah was not only to **sanctify** him, and to **stretch** him, but also to **strengthen** him. Now, in Jonah's case he had to go through a whole lot before he got to the strengthening part. In fact, the book concludes leaving us to assume that God sanctified Jonah concerning his bad attitude and that he repented and grew in his faith. But King David leaves us no doubt about the strength God

gives when we answer His call. David wrote, “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my God, my strength.....my shield, the strength of my salvation, and my high tower”. And he could testify to God’s power because he had experienced God’s deliverances from bears and lions and a giant and an angry king. And after every deliverance his faith was just a little stronger.

So God has good things in store for all who will answer His call. But as we know Jonah did not immediately answer God’s call, but ran the other way. And when he did he encountered great **calamity**. He paid a premium price. But this should be no surprise. Charles Spurgeon said that God never allows His children to sin successfully and you know what happened to Jonah. After He boarded a boat to run away from God, God sent out a great wind to halt Him in his tracks. Look at verse 4. I want to stop and remind us of something here. As I said last week, the main character of the book of Jonah is not Jonah, it is God. Jonah is named only 18 times, but God is mentioned 38 times and that’s because God plays the leading role! Time after time we read where God intervened with a miracle throughout the book. When you count them up there are seven in all. Seven miracles that God did to show us His great power to fulfill His perfect will. And in all these miracles God had a message that was far greater than just the story about a fish swallowing a man. And that was, **I am a loving God Who seeks to proclaim My salvation in all the earth.**

Now, I want us to look for a few moments at the damage which was brought on by Jonah’s sin. First of all, Jonah’s sin cost him his **walk with God**. From the moment he set foot toward Joppa to catch the boat to Tarshish he was walking all by himself. And when he boarded the first thing that he did was to find his sleeping chamber in the bottom of the boat and go to sleep. And when the storm began crash against the boat Jonah couldn’t care less. Now, it’s hard to imagine that he didn’t at least arouse enough to know that was happening, but when he did he was so disinterested that he fell right back off into slumber, or maybe he went back to sleep to try to escape his guilt, for he knew that the storm was on account of him. And isn’t it ironic that the mariners were praying like crazy to gods who couldn’t hear, and the one man who could pray to the only God Who could hear wasn’t praying at all! But the reason that he wasn’t praying was that he wasn’t on praying grounds. He and God were not on speaking terms.

Friend, there is nothing worse in this world than for a believer to be cut off from sweet fellowship with Jesus! Far better to be cut off from husband or wife or son or daughter or parents or fiancé or best friend than to be cut off from Jesus! The One Who loves you most and the only One who can give life and life abundantly. The only One Who can give real comfort in times of trouble, the only One Who can give real strength in times of weakness, the only One Who can give guidance in times of confusion. But that’s what happens when we run from God’s call. We lose our sweet fellowship with Jesus. And oh, how we suffer for it! And we will continue to suffer as long as we run and refuse to repent.

But we need to understand that when we are out of fellowship with Jesus we not only suffer, but so do others. Jonah's sin caused a whole boat load of people a great deal of grief! But he was not the only patriarch to do that. Genesis tells us that Abraham lied about Sarah being his sister not once but twice, and it brought great harm both times, first to the Egyptians and then to the house of Abimelech. When Achan stole a forbidden object in Israel's defeat of Ai the whole nation suffered a devastating defeat in their next battle. And friends, the same thing happens in a local church. When you are not obeying God but are running away from His call, you are not interested your brothers and sisters in Christ. Maybe your close friends, but that will be about it. For you are too self-absorbed in your own will to worry about anyone else. And you'll not be praying for them nor encouraging them hardly at all.

But Jonah not only lost his **walk with God**, but he lost his **witness for God**. When the sailors cast lots to determine the cause of the storm and the lot fell on Jonah, the sailors asked him, "Tell us what's going on with you that has caused this great calamity". Then Jonah responded with a great testimony about the true and living God: "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land". What a great statement! What a great revelation to those well-meaning heathens. But notice their response to Jonah in verse 10. They were afraid at his words and said, "Why have you done this?" It seems that they accepted Jonah's description of Jehovah, Whom he said was the God of Heaven, Who made the sea and dry land. And then they looked at him and said, "Why have you sinned against such a mighty God?", as if to be saying, "Didn't you know any better?" And they were probably thinking, "You say that you fear the Lord, but you don't really. If you did we wouldn't be in this mess".

Beloved, it is a sad thing to lose your walk with God, but it is just as sad to lose your witness for God. When your actions have spoken so loudly against the love and righteousness of God that what you say to others about Him is mere babble. But beloved, that is what will happen when you run from the call of God. You wind up backslidden, you sin against Him in word and deed, and you lose your witness with many people. That's what happened with Lot. In 2 Peter 2:7 we read that was a righteous man. He was a believer in Jehovah, he was one of God's children. But Lot lost his testimony while living in Sodom, and when he tried to warn his sons-in-law of Sodom's coming judgment, they laughed at him.

A number of years ago when I was pastoring in Aliceville, Pickens County was still a dry county, and several of the surrounding counties were wet, and there was a package store just across the Greene County line. And I was talking to a lady who worked in that store one day and he told me, "You'd be surprised at how many of your church members are my customers". And I had nothing to say. What could I say? But I can tell you this. Whoever those church members were, they had lost their testimony with that woman.

Well, we've seen Jonah's **calamity**. He lost his walk with God and then he lost his witness for God. But I want us to consider now **God's compassion**. And we see God's compassion in two different instances. First of all, we see it in the lives of the mariners. When the mariners finally gave up trying to row back to land and tossed Jonah overboard, the sea immediately stopped its raging. And look at what happened in verse 16. Those pagan sailors saw the power of God in such an unmistakable way that they became believers on the spot. Jonah said in verse 9, "I fear the Lord". But verse 16 says that the sailors feared the Lord exceedingly. What a powerful testimony to God's love for the nations who do not know our God.

But we also see God's compassion in His dealings with Jonah. When the mariners threw Jonah overboard for all practical purposes he was a dead man, and he knew it. And may I say that if Jonah had drowned that day he would have gotten exactly what he deserved. He certainly knew that his rebellion against God was wrong, but he bowed his neck and went right on with it anyway. And he deserved to die, just like Ananias and Sapphira when they lied to the Holy Spirit in Acts 5. And God surely could have raised up someone else to go to Nineveh if He had wanted to. But God loved His backslidden prophet too much to let him die without giving him a second chance. And so God sent a great fish to swallow him and save his life.

Beloved, you may be here this morning and you may have really blown a calling of God on your life. And God has spoken to you about it, but He's not the only one who has spoken to you. The devil has also spoken, and he's told you that you're no good and that you'll never have another chance to make an impact for God's Kingdom, so you may as well just wallow in your guilt and defeat. I want to tell you that that is a lie! Just like God delivered Jonah and turned his life around and gave him another chance, so He will deliver you! And I want us to learn some important things from Jonah about how God delivers us today.

First of all we see that **God's deliverance comes through repentance**. Let's begin reading from 2:1-10. Now, what we have in these verses is actually a prayer that contains a prayer. Jonah prays all of these verses while in the belly of the fish. But in his prayer he describes the prayer that he prayed before the fish gobbled him up. Look at verse 2 again. Jonah was afflicted when he was cast overboard from the ship, would you not agree? Yes, he was! And at that moment he started praying. And the next phrase in verse 2 is just a restatement of his first petition. Once in the water he found himself in the belly of Sheol, and Sheol means the belly of death, not the belly of the fish. And he describes this awful belly of death in verse 3. It was the heart of the seas, and the flood and waves surrounded Jonah, and he goes on even further in verse 5 by saying that the deep closed around him, and the weeds wrapped around his head. And back in verse 2 Jonah says that God answered his prayer and heard his voice. And He's talking about being delivered from drowning by the fish. He says the same thing in verse 6. So when Jonah landed in the belly of the fish, he didn't think it was bad. He knew that it was God's answer to his prayer!

But I want you to notice what Jonah prayed. Look again at verse 4. Now, God's holy temple was a symbol of where God was (v. 7). And when Jonah said, "Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple", he was saying, "Lord, I'm looking to You. I'm looking to You to forgive me and save my life". And within moments God answered Jonah's prayer and he found himself sliding down a slippery slope into the belly of the fish. Beloved, if you have blown that calling of God upon your life and you're being afflicted as was Jonah, do not chaff at your affliction. The Psalmist said, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn your statutes". God has afflicted you that He might restore you and bless you and use you, but as Jonah, you must cry out to Him in your affliction and beg for His forgiveness. And when you do He will answer you!

But there is a second truth from Jonah's deliverance that we can see. And that is, **God's deliverance is sometimes unpleasant**. I doubt Jonah would have chosen that his deliverance come from being swallowed by a great fish. He probably would have said, "Lord, how about sending a Coast Guard cutter, and if possible, let it have a couple of beautiful young shipmates on board to minister to me when they pull me in". But God sent a big ugly fish instead. And I doubt that Jonah's stay in the fish's belly for three days and nights was like staying in an executive suite at the Hilton. You see, sometimes God's deliverance is a good job at a terrible workplace or sometimes it is a terrible termination from a good job. Sometimes it's a long recuperation from a long illness, sometimes it is a long period of counseling. But even if it's unpleasant, God's method of deliverance is always best! And when He sets us on dry land again, we are ready to answer His call. So praise be to God for His unpleasant rescues!

Now, there is one more thing that we must learn from Jonah's deliverance today. And that is, **God's deliverance is God's alone**. Look at verse 9 again. Jonah declared to God that just as soon as he got out of his three day grave he would offer a sacrifice with a prayer of thanksgiving for his deliverance, and he would pay the vows he made to Him. But notice the last words of Jonah's prayer: salvation is of the Lord. Jonah did not dare take any credit for His deliverance. He knew that he was a dead man but by the free, undeserved grace of God.

Friends, there are countless people in this world who are much like Jonah when he was drowning in a raging ocean. But their death will be much worse, for they are drowning in an ocean of sin. And their only hope is the salvation of the LORD. But don't miss this! In your Bibles the name LORD is in all capital letters, which means that the Hebrew name is Yahweh, or Jehovah. Salvation is of Jehovah. And do you remember what the NT translation of Jehovah is? Jesus! Friend, this is the message of a man who was doomed to die. Salvation is of the LORD! God and God alone saved me from death. But Jonah declares to every man who is drowning in sin today, headed for eternal hell, "Salvation is in Jesus!" Jesus alone can save us from sin and death.

