

## Lesson from Jonah

In government circles, it is known as WITSEC – Witness Security Program. We know it better as the Witness Protection Program. It began back in early 1970's for the purpose of protecting state/federal witnesses against organized crime. If these witnesses would testify on what they knew, they were guaranteed a new life/location/identity. There were some stipulations to this new identity – they could never return to their home town or have any contact with any family/friends that were not a part of the program. WITSEC has been highly successful. The U.S. Marshals have protected, relocated and given new identities to more than 8,300 witnesses and 9,800 of their family members, since the program began in 1971.

However, this was not a new concept because many years before, there was a prophet named Jonah who started his own witness protection program. The purpose of his program was not so that he could testify but so that he would not have to testify to the truth. He was trying to run from God. But what he found out to be true was that while you can run from God, you cannot out run God and you cannot hide from God.

Chapter 1 tells about Jonah purchasing a ticket on a ship to Tarshish and as they got out into the sea, a great storm arose and it was decided that it was due to the doings of Jonah. Reluctantly the sailors toss Jonah overboard and the storm calmed. While in the sea, Jonah was swallowed by a great fish that the Lord prepared. While the fish is a significant part of the story, it's not the real message of Jonah. It's not so much on what was going on inside the fish as it was what was going on inside Jonah. In a sense, Jonah is a book written about every one of us because there have been times in our lives when we have gone against and resisted the will of God. Maybe it was out of fear; or maybe it was arrogance, or perhaps it was ignorance.

Chapter 2 has something to say to those running from God as well as those who are tired of running from God. The lesson to be learned is that when you run from God, you are on a dead-end street which will eventually end in misery, heartbreak, and/or sorrow. We see this illustrated to us in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15). Here was a young man who thought he could run away from home and enjoy the good life; but he ended up on a dead-end street. He had no money, no friends and was left to live with the swine. You can run from God but you can't out run Him.

There is a second lesson that we can learn from Jonah which is when you decide to run to God and not from God; then you will be accepted again. You can be forgiven and restored to that place of fellowship because God is a God of second chances. Many people agree that regardless of what you do, you deserve a second chance. But with God that's not technically correct. Fact of the matter is that we don't deserve a first chance, much less a second chance. But God is not only a God of justice; He is also a God of mercy and thru His grace He is willing to give us what we don't deserve – a second chance. So, let us consider how we get that second chance from God and receive a place of restored fellowship. Jonah learned that there were at least three things that he had to do, which applies to us as well.

**First Jonah had to look up.** I really cannot comprehend what it must have been like to be in the belly of that fish. To say the least, it was not a pleasant experience. He was likely engulfed in total darkness and Jonah described himself as being wrapped around by seaweeds (2:5). I expect too that he was in rather confined quarters with not much room to move around. The gastric juices were probably burning his skin with a strong foul odor from other foods that were being digested. His circumstance must have been almost unbearable, but that's where he was.

From the lowest point of earth, out of the belly of that fish, Jonah looked up. Up until this point, he had looked around but he apparently had not looked up because he had been on the run from God. But now he has a

different attitude. *(Jonah 2:1) Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, (2) And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice. (3) For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me. (4) Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.* Up until this point, it seems that God and Jonah had not been on speaking terms. God had been speaking to Jonah, but Jonah had not been speaking to God. Finally, he hit bottom and the only way to look was up. Out of his distress, he cried to the LORD and *said yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.* That was another way of saying; I look toward God because the temple was where you could find God so he was looking in God's direction.

He realized that when you can't look anywhere else, you can look up and when you can't turn anywhere else, you can always turn to God. Again, by comparison, the prodigal son understood that too. He found himself way off in the far country all alone wallowing with the hogs and he came to himself and realized that there was one place he could go and that was home; and there was one he could appeal to when he couldn't appeal to anybody else and that was his father.

Jonah looked to God and when he did, he found that God had been there all the while. *(3) For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about:* We usually think of the sailors who cast Jonah into the sea; but Jonah said it was God. Chapter 1:17 reminds us that it was the LORD that prepared that great fish that swallowed Jonah. And it wasn't just the natural forces of nature that caused that storm to come; rather, it was God who sent the storm. God was responsible for what was happening to Jonah. While Jonah thought he had run away from the presence of God, God was there and knew exactly where Jonah was at all times.

Now this is true with us as well. God is present in every experience of life. And when the storms come into our lives, sometimes they are there to give a push in the right direction and to bring us back to Him. God used a storm and a fish to get Jonah's attention. We can learn from all the experiences of life as they are helping us to grow. Regardless of the storm, realize that God is there with you and will either deliver you from the storm or help you through the storm.

No doubt one of the darkest days in the life of the disciples was the day that Jesus went to the cross. They were devastated and it seems their hopes were dashed as the one they thought was the promised Messiah was put to death like a common criminal; where was God during this dark hour? But later they learned that God was there all along; he had not forsaken them for what seem to them as a day of defeat was really a day of total victory. So, when the problems of life come our way, let us learn to "LOOK UP."

**No. 2 thing that Jonah learned that he needed to do and that was to speak up.** *(Jonah 2:1) Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, (2) And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.* It's interesting that Jonah was reluctant to pray on the bow of the ship in the midst of that storm but he was more than happy to pray in the belly of the fish. Circumstances made a difference. Sometimes people have to be in dyer straight in order to realize the value of prayer.

Once following a major storm, the neighbor of a man said as they were cleaning up the debris, "I'll have to admit, during the storm I prayed like I have never prayed in years." That's the way it is for some. Only during a crisis do they take time to pray. This seems to be the case with Jonah.

While there is the possibility that Jonah had prayed before, there is no indication of such. Back in chapter 1:5-6 when the storm was raging, the sailors prayed to their gods and the shipmaster went down below and found Jonah asleep. He woke him up and said "*call upon thy god,*" but the scripture never said that he did.

What we know is that he told them who he was, that he was running from God, and just throw me overboard. If Jonah had prayed the same prayer on the bow of the boat as he did in the fish, then he probably wouldn't have found himself in the belly of the fish.

I hope that we are not people that use prayer as the last resort instead of the first response. There is no telling how many problems we might avoid if we would only pray before trouble comes. But so often we find ourselves in the middle of a mess before we are willing to pray. The amazing thing is that in spite of Jonah's arrogant attitude, God heard his prayer. Now God didn't owe Jonah anything but by His mercy, God heard. This reminds us that there is only one thing that can keep God from hearing your prayer. It's not location; it's not distance; it's not circumstance. The thing that keeps God from hearing your prayer is sin. **(Psa 66:18) *If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me:*** But if you are willing to humble yourself and stop running from God; submit to His authority; walk in his way; and admit that you have done wrong, then God will hear you. **(2) *And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me:*** we today have the same assurance. **(1 John 1:9) *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*** God's grace comes only to the humble and submissive. God is willing to do that because he is a God of second chance. So, let's learn to look up and also to speak up.

**No. 3 we need to "give up."** Jonah had come full circle in his relationship with God. Notice how he closes his prayer. **(Jonah 2:8) *They that observe lying vanities (false gods) forsake their own mercy. (9) But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed. Salvation is of the LORD.*** Those who rely on false gods forsake/forfeit mercy – there is no forgiveness for them *(they forsake their own mercy)*. Jonah closed with a psalm of thanksgiving. Rather amazing when you consider where he was. Most likely, Jonah was thankful because he was now back in the good graces of God. Now things were right in his relationship with heaven. Now he was ready to do whatever God commanded him to do. ***I will pay that that I have vowed.*** This is all God ever wanted Jonah to do. God wanted Jonah to surrender his will to the will of the Father. Had Jonah done that from the beginning, think about all the heartache and misery he would have been spared.

Being in the belly of that fish was the consequence of Jonah's running. While we can receive forgiveness, there may be lingering consequences to our disobedience with which we have to deal. Long before Jonah, God delivered the people of Israel out of Egyptian bondage. He led them to the borders of the Promised Land, but they rebelled and failed to go in and take the land. Because of their lack of faith, God told them that they were to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Immediately after that they confessed their wrong and asked for forgiveness and said we'll go in now and take the land; but God said no you will not. The consequences of sin lingered. There was a lesson for them to learn, and sometimes, God disciplines us in the same way.

Jonah learned his lesson so he said I will keep the vow unto the LORD. He finally surrendered and gave up his will to God. As a result of this submissive attitude, Jonah received God's grace. **(Jonah 2:10) *And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.*** Every day that we run from God is a wasted day. The best way to live is a life of submission and obedience to God. You do that by becoming a Christian and living the Christian life. To become a Christian, you must be willing to "look-up", "speak-up" and "give-up." Will you obey the gospel today?

Invitation