

The Sign of Jonah



By Doug Batchelor

An Amazing Fact

It has been estimated that 10 billion birds engage in migratory flights every year. For example, one species of shrike wings its way 3,500 miles from Central Asia to the Equator of Africa. The longest recorded flight made by a homing pigeon took place in 1931, when the resolute bird flew from Arras, France, to its home in Saigon, Vietnam. When released, the pigeon flew straight as an arrow for 7,200 miles over unfamiliar territory to its home in only 24 days! But the Arctic tern has the longest migration of any animal: the tenacious tern wings from its nesting grounds in the Arctic North to the Antarctic and back: a roundtrip journey of nearly 25,000 miles!

Animal migration remains one of the great marvels, mysteries and miracles of God's creation. Scientists are still mystified by how migrating animals know exactly where to go and when. How do they unerringly find their way back to the same beach, stream, or feeding grounds that they haven't seen since birth? Here are some more mind-blowing examples: The Monarch butterfly is known for its extraordinarily long migrations. During the summer months, Monarchs can be found fluttering from Canada and throughout the United States to their winter home in central Mexico—traveling in some cases more than 2,000 miles! And the Chinook migrates farther than any other salmon, often traveling up to 2,000 miles inland to spawn in the exact freshwater streams and creeks as did their ancestors.

God's creatures have a wonderful, natural sense of bearing; however, humans, even many Christians, sometimes go the very opposite direction from where the Lord has directed them. The Bible even teaches that in some respects, animals are often more in tune with the Lord than humans. "But now ask the beasts, and they will teach you; And the birds of the air, and they will tell you; Or speak to the earth, and it will teach you; And the fish of the sea will explain to you. Who among all these does not know That the hand of the Lord has done this?" (Job 12:7-9).

Scriptures provide a remarkable account of a reluctant prophet that went in the wrong direction, until God arrested the wanderer's attention using His creatures and the elements. Jesus later tells us that the story of that same wayward prophet serves as a beacon to help the lost find their way home to the Savior.

"Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, 'Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.' But He answered and said to them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks after

a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:38-40).

I recommend that you take a few moments to read the book of Jonah to reacquaint yourself with the adventures of this amazing prophet. (These four captivating chapters take only about 10 minutes to read, and it will greatly enhance your understanding and enjoyment of this fascinating study.)

Jonah: Fact, not Fable

An old woman rode home on a city bus quietly reading her Bible. An atheist sat next to her, cynically observing her devotions. “Madam,” he finally interrupted, “do you actually believe the Bible is true?”

Detecting the sarcasm in his voice, she simply said, “Yes sir. Every word.” He pressed his case. “You mean you believe that God spoke the world into existence in six days?”

Without even glancing up, she replied, “Absolutely!”

“And I suppose you believe that Noah survived a global flood, saving all the world’s creatures too?”

“Yes I do!”

Growing exasperated, the man said, “You probably even believe the story of Jonah?” She nodded and continued reading. “How could a man possibly survive in a fish for three days?”

“I’m not sure,” the old woman responded. “I suppose when I get to heaven, I will have to ask him.”

Mockingly, the atheist asked, “But what if he isn’t in heaven?”

For the first time, the Christian woman looked up at the irritating man and squarely met his gaze. She answered, “Then you will get to ask him!”

It’s a cute story—but let’s face it, few miracles of Scripture have been more doubted and maligned than the story of Jonah. Sure, it seems too incredible to believe that someone could be swallowed whole by a large fish, much less survive for three days in its belly! (The claims that a whale could not swallow a man whole is a myth! But it’s really not an issue either, because the word used in Jonah 1:17, like the one in Matthew 12:40, does not mean whale; instead, it means sea monster.)

I confess that early in my Christian experience, I wondered how the story of Jonah could be

literally true. But then I heard Dr. J. Vernon McGee, on his Through The Bible radio broadcast, cite three credible examples in modern times in which people were swallowed by some type of large fish—and then were later rescued alive!

One story dates back to the late 19th century. The *Star of the East*, a whaling ship operating off the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic, was in pursuit of a large whale. Its harpoon boats were launched, and the whale was successfully speared. However, in the violence that followed, one of the smaller boats capsized — throwing two crewmembers into the sea. One of them was found drowned, but the other, James Bartley, disappeared without a trace. The whale was eventually subdued, and its carcass hoisted onto the ship where the crew began carving it up for blubber.

After a couple of days, they worked down to the stomach, where they noticed something large moving around inside. They cut the stomach open—and there lay James Bartley. He was doubled up, unconscious, and even somewhat digested, but he was alive! They doused him with seawater, put him in the captain's cabin to recover—and after a few weeks of bed-rest, he was back on the job.

Some accounts include a detailed description of what Bartley experienced and felt during his whale of a journey. He said that he remembered flying through the air when the whale struck the boat with its tail. Then suddenly, darkness surrounded him as he slipped along a smooth passage of some sort. He then came into a larger area marked by a slimy substance that shrunk from his touch. He soon realized that he was in the whale. He could breathe, but it was also very hot! He said that later he lost consciousness, and the next thing he remembered was the crew caring for him.

Other accounts say that Bartley's skin was permanently affected by the gastric juices in the whale, and that he had a bleached-white appearance for the remainder of his life. Other versions describe his skin as having a bluish color after his rescue.

Beyond this evidence, we should not forget that the Bible says: "Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (Jonah 1:17). This means that whatever modification this creature needed to accommodate Jonah's temporary residence, God prepared it. Yet even more powerful than these arguments, it should be sufficient for every Christian that Jesus states Jonah's experience was a fact and not a fable (Matthew 12:40).

Three Days and Three Nights

Before addressing the meaning behind the "sign of Jonah," I first want to explain the time interval of "three days and three nights." That is a frequently asked question in connection with this familiar text. Because of a simple misunderstanding, this particular passage in Matthew has managed to cause confusion, frustration and even division among laypersons, clergy and scholars alike. By first dealing with the popular "three days and nights" conundrum regarding the story of Jonah, we'll be able to peacefully proceed through the rest

of this wonderful study.

Jesus says that the Son of Man will “be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” —meaning in the tomb. We’ll assume, as commonly believed, that Jesus died Friday and rose Sunday. Noting this, no matter how you cut it, Jesus was not in the tomb for three nights—even though Scripture distinctly states “three nights.”

Many people I’ve met felt that the Bible just could not be trusted because of this supposed discrepancy. And others attempt to accommodate the “three nights” verse by adopting the belief that Jesus died on Wednesday or Thursday—still others reason that Jesus did not really mean three literal nights.

Frankly, it’s very sad to see Christians expend so much energy struggling to explain something that the Bible clearly explains itself! The problem is not in “the three days and three nights” at all. The problem springs from our misunderstanding of the phrase “in the heart of the earth.” I’ll first address this issue, and then explain what “heart of the earth” means.

Right Time, Wrong Place

This “right time, wrong place” misinterpretation is strikingly similar to a tragic experience the Millerites experienced more than 150 years ago. As the result of his diligent Bible studies, William Miller, a godly Baptist preacher, believed and taught that Jesus would return in 1844. He based this on a verse in Daniel 8:14, which states: “Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.” William Miller then quickly located the starting point of this prophecy, which was 457 B.C. as predicted in Daniel 9:25: “From the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem.” By adding 2,300 prophetic days—a day in prophecy equals a year according to Ezekiel 4:6—he calculated that Jesus would come in 1844. They assumed that the sanctuary must be the earth, which is to be cleansed by fire. Even though they had the right time—they had the wrong place and, in turn, the wrong event.

When the time came and went, and Jesus had not returned as thought, the devastated Millerites tried to find their error. Many continued refiguring dates, even though the problem lay squarely on the place, not the time. The Bible never calls the earth the sanctuary—therefore, the sanctuary in Daniel 8:14 does not mean the earth, which was the Millerites’ blunder.

Indeed, Jesus was not coming to cleanse the earth with fire in 1844. However, He did begin a special work as our High Priest to cleanse the sanctuary in heaven from the sins of His people (Daniel 8:12-14; Hebrews 8:1-6; Leviticus 16:1-17). Christ also began to cleanse His sanctuary, or church, on earth from the false doctrines that had deeply taken root during the Dark Ages.

The Heart of the Earth

Whenever we attempt to gather the meaning of a passage in Scripture, we must compare it with other similar or related passages. This allows the Bible—the inspired Word—to interpret itself. Since the term “heart of the earth” is found only in Matthew 12, and nowhere else in Scripture, we need to find similar verses to reference.

The phrase “in the earth” appears 66 times in the King James Bible, but none of these refers to the grave. For instance, in the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.” Does this mean we’re praying for God’s will to be done in the tomb as it is in heaven? No, of course not! Rather, it means His will among the people of earth—the nations of the earth—as it is done among the angels in heaven.

In the second commandment, we read, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exodus 20:4). We easily recognize here that “in the earth beneath” does not mean in the grave, but rather in the world. Jesus also says, “Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). Does that mean they will inherit the tomb? I think you get my point.

In Matthew 12:40, the word “heart” comes from the Greek word *kardia*, which is where we get the word “cardiac.” According to Strong’s, *kardia* means the heart (i.e., thoughts or feelings [mind]); it also can mean the middle. Additionally, the Greek word for “earth” is *ge*. It literally means soil, a region, or the solid part or whole of the terrene globe (including the occupants in each application)—including country, ground, land, or world.

So the phrase “in the heart of the earth” can easily be translated as “in the midst of the world”—or in the grip of this lost planet—that Jesus came to save!

In other words, in Matthew 12:40, the Lord is telling His disciples that just as Jonah was in the belly of a great fish, so the Son of Man would be in the central clutches of the world.

The Hour of Truth

The life of Jesus is marked by several pivotal moments. When He turned 12, He became aware of His life calling as the Lamb of God and His special relationship with the Father. Then at His baptism, Jesus began His life of public ministry. “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.” (Mark 1:15).

But when exactly were the sins of the world placed upon the Lamb of God? Was it when He died on the cross, or when they laid His body in the grave? The answer is no. These were part of paying the penalty for sin—having died on the cross and placed in the tomb, His suffering had ended. Was it when they drove the nails into His hands? That was certainly part of it, but the starting point was actually before the crucifixion.

According to Hebrew law, the sins of the people were placed upon the Passover lamb before it was slain. During the Last Supper, with the bread and grape juice, Jesus sealed His new covenant to be the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

Soon after the establishment of this new covenant at the Last Supper, Jesus began bearing our guilt, shame, and penalty. It's worth mentioning that Jesus died during the Passover festival. During that week, thousands of sheep were sacrificed in the Temple so that a virtual stream of blood was flowing from the Temple down to the Kidron brook and eventually flowing into the Dead Sea. After the Last Supper, Jesus crossed the stream of blood on His way to Gethsemane.

“When Jesus had spoken these words, He went out with His disciples over the Brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which He and His disciples entered” (John 18:1). Jesus went through the Jordan when He began his ministry, and He crossed the bloody Kidron when he began his sufferings.

Then in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed an intense prayer of surrender three times. On that Thursday evening, Jesus prayed in agony, sweating drops of blood. He said, “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42-44). From that moment on, Christ had sealed His surrender, fulfilling His destiny as the guilt-bearer for the fallen race. The mob came and carried Him away.

Jesus was a captive of the devil. For the first time in eternity, communion between the Father and the Son was interrupted. The scissors of our sin cut the cord that had always linked Him to His Father. He was in “the heart of the earth,” or more clearly: “the depths of the world.” Just as with Jonah, there appeared to be a total and hopeless darkness that surrounded the world's redeemer.

There are five Bible verses in which Jesus refers to Thursday evening as “the hour,” meaning a pivotal transition time in His ministry:

“Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners” (Matthew 26:45).

“Then He came the third time and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and resting? It is enough! The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners’” (Mark 14:41 NKJV).

“And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve apostles with him” (Luke 22:14). “Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone” (John 16:32).

“Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee” (John 17:1).

Hell's Headquarters

A distinct change took place the hour Christ was betrayed into the “hands of sinners”—or we might better say “into the hands of the devil.” Something different began to happen.

You see, before this point in Jesus' ministry, every time a mob tried to capture or stone Him or hurl Him off a cliff, He passed unharmed. He slipped right through their fingers. This was because He was innocent before the Father, and therefore under divine angelic protection. His hour had not yet come. It was not yet His time to suffer for the sins of the world. But after that hour—Thursday evening—when the past, present, and future sins of the world were placed upon the Lamb of God, then it was time.

Sometimes we forget that the penalty for sin is not just death; there is also punishment or suffering that is perfectly measured out according to our works (Luke 12:47; 2 Peter 2:9). Jesus came to take our total penalty, the suffering, and the death (Romans 6:23). When exactly did He begin to bear the sins of the world? It was actually long before that. It began Thursday evening in the Garden of Gethsemane.

From the moment He began bearing the penalty for our sins, Jesus was in the heart of the earth, or more accurately, the headquarters of hell. Soldiers beat Him. The crowds spat on Him. He was dragged from one trial to another—from the high priest to Pilate, from Herod back to Pilate, and then finally to Golgotha. He was in the clutches of this evil world, the clutches of the devil who is the prince of this world (John 16:11).

Also, remember that Jonah was not stationary while he was sequestered in the great fish, as with a dead person in a tomb. Rather, he was like a living captive in a mobile submarine, to go wherever the fish took him. When the fish went up, he went up; and when the fish went down, he went down. In like manner, Jesus was a captive of the devil and his minions. Satan was completely in the control of a demon-crazed mob that took Jesus from place to place, heaping abuse, insult, and physical punishment upon our Redeemer. When He suffered the punishment and penalty for our sins, He was “in the heart,” or in the midst, of this lost world.

Imagine how Jonah must have suffered during his ordeal as a captive in the pitch-black belly of the great fish. Three days in that slimy, stench-filled darkness must have seemed like an eternity. (Have you ever considered that if Jonah could survive alive in that fish's digestive abyss, he may not have been the only creature still alive and squirming around in there?) Yet the suffering of our Lord was infinitely greater than that of the famous wayward prophet. How much Jesus must love us to willingly endure all that to spare us the miserable fate of the lost!

So as we look again at our Bible text, keep in mind that Jesus never said it would be three 24-hour segments, but rather, the suffering to end all suffering would occur over a period of three days and three nights.

Jesus was “in the heart of the earth,” or in the grip of the enemy, over a period of three days and three nights—Thursday night, Friday night, Saturday night.

He rose on Sunday morning.

Jewish Timing

Before leaving the timing issue, let’s look at several passages in the Gospels where it plainly states Jesus would rise after 3 days—or the third day. First, these verses are distinct and separate from the “three days and three nights” verse we’ve already considered.

In Mark 8:31, the Bible records, “And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” Then to add emphasis, “For he taught his disciples, and said unto them, The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day” (Mark 9:31). Some still try to use these texts to lengthen Jesus’ time in the tomb. They feel the story makes sense unless they calculate the time like a 72 hour phone call.

But look at it this way: When playing ping pong to determine who serves, you must volley the ball back and forth over the net at least three times before the rally counts. It doesn’t matter where the ball is on the table, as long as it goes over the net three times. Likewise, if you rent a car for three days, some rental agencies charge for a car each day, not over a 24-hour period. It doesn’t matter how many hours you drive the car—if you have possession for any part of a day, you pay for the entire day. So if you got a car at 6:00 p.m. on a Monday, kept it all day Tuesday, and returned at 5:15 p.m. on Wednesday, you’re charged three full days even though you had the car for less than 48 hours!

In like manner, the Jews reckoned time in such a way that if an event touched on any part of three days, it was considered a three-day event—ending on the third day. Jews also used sundials to keep time, and on cloudy days it was harder to measure exact time in hours and minutes. If you lived in a big city, guards or watchmen would ring a bell or blow a horn to mark off the hours. That’s how the Bible writers could tell us what hour Jesus was crucified and later died (Mark 15:25; Mark 15:34).

Jonah Means Peace

There are many other ways in which Jonah is a type or sign of Christ. Do you remember that just like Jesus, Jonah was asleep in a boat in the midst of a terrible storm? When the captain

found Jonah sleeping, he awoke the snoozing passenger and said, “Arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not” (Jonah 1:6). We can’t miss the striking similarities in these words and the ones that the fearful disciples spoke to Jesus when they awoke Him! The disciples awoke Jesus, as He slept in the stern on a pillow, and asked, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” (Mark 4:38, 39). Jesus is not willing that any of us should perish, but we must call upon Him to awake and save us. “Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord? arise, cast us not off for ever” (Psalm 44:23; 2 Peter 3:9; Romans 10:13).

It is also worthy of mention that both Jesus and Jonah were sleeping in the lowest part of their respective vessels (Jonah 1:5). Jesus humbled Himself more than any other that He might exalt us. In fact, the name Jonah means “dove,” which is a symbol of peace. Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).

When Jesus was sleeping in a boat during the storm, they woke Him up, and then He brought peace to their dilemma. “And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mark 4:39).

Jonah the Sacrifice

Jonah instructed the sailors to throw him overboard if they wanted to survive and have peace. I once wondered why Jonah didn’t volunteer to jump overboard himself. Yet had he done so, the sailors would not have had to take personal responsibility for him. In the same way, we must accept responsibility for the death of God’s son. Like Jesus, Jonah too was a willing sacrifice. The wrath of God was coming upon all those doomed sailors, and Jonah took the wrath by offering himself. In the same way, we must take Jesus and offer His blood as our sacrifice to pass from death to life and have that peace that passes understanding.

Isaiah 53:10 says, “When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.”

Notice the prayer the sailors uttered as they offered Jonah to the raging elements. “Wherefore they cried unto the LORD, and said, We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee” (Jonah 1:14). It is the innocent blood of Jesus that covers our sins (Revelation 7:14).

Now also notice the similarities between Jonah’s prayer from the fish’s stomach and the messianic prayer that David wrote regarding the sufferings of Jesus from the cross.

Jonah prayed: “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” (Jonah 2:3).

David prayed: “I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me” (Psalm 69:2).

Jonah prayed by faith from the bowels of the sea monster, believing the Lord could hear him despite the evidence of his senses—that he was hopelessly separated from God. “Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple” (Jonah 2:4).

In like manner, when Jesus sensed the awful separation from His Father during His ordeal on the cross, He cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). Then by faith, Jesus reached up into the heavenly temple and prayed, “Father, into thy hands I commend [commit] my spirit” (Luke 23:46). This was a tremendous act of faith. Christ was bearing the incomprehensible guilt and sins of a lost world, and He felt the eternal and abysmal separation from His Father.

The Times of Jonah and Jesus

Many believe that the “sign of Jonah” was the three days and three nights. But notice how in the parallel passage found in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus never even mentions the time period. Rather, the emphasis of Christ is on the way His people rejected His ministry, preaching, and prophecy in contrast to the Ninevites, who received and repented at the preaching of Jonah.

Luke 11:29-32 records: “And when the people were gathered thick together, he [Jesus] began to say, This is an evil generation: they seek a sign; and there shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet. For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation. ... The men of Nineveh shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here.”

After Jonah came out of the water, it took him three days to reach Nineveh. He then entered the city one-half day’s journey, or 12 hours, (John 11:9) and preached that after 40 days, the city would be destroyed (Jonah 3:3, 4).

This same time sequence of three and one-half followed by 40 is found elsewhere in Scripture. For example, Elijah hid for three and one-half years during the famine and then fled for 40 days from Jezebel.

Now catch this! Just like Jonah, Jesus came up from the waters of baptism and preached to the Jews for three and one-half years, warning that in one generation (or 40 years), the city and Temple would be destroyed (Matthew 12:41). Because the nation of Israel did not listen and repent, it was destroyed. Only a small percentage of the Jewish people accepted Him and was ready. Could this happen again to the Church at the time of His second coming?

Here is another example that Jonah was a sign, or type, of Christ: Jonah’s first message to the

Ninevites when he came from the water was one of warning, which called them to repentance. This was also the first message of Jesus after His baptism. From that time, Jesus began to preach “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). “I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3)

Jonah Was Resurrected

Jesus told us that He would be a sign to His generation in the same way that Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites (Luke 11:30) . The principle sign of Jesus to His people was the resurrection. “Then answered the Jews and said unto him, ‘What sign shewest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things?’ Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. ... But he spake of the temple of his body” (John 2:18-21).

As Jonah went down the streets of Nineveh, he most likely shared with his audience the highlights of his adventure and his virtual resurrection. No doubt Jonah, like Jesus, bore scars from his ordeal. As he went preaching, his clothes may still have been covered with bits of dried seaweed, and his skin could very well have been scarred with bleached freckles, raw from the digestive juices of the sea monster. Let’s face it, God had, in effect, raised Jonah from a certain death.

Today, every real Christian has, like Jonah, experienced a type of resurrection and new life (Romans 6:4). We are each called to go where God sends us—without consulting our fears—and to preach a message of mercy and warning. Sadly, there are many in the world today, even in the church, who are turning away from these messages of warning. They will not believe unless they see signs and wonders, healings and miracles.

The sign Jesus gave to His generation is still valid today. For three days and nights, He took the punishment through suffering and the penalty through death. Then He rose again from the jaws of the grave. And most important, Jesus gave us His eternal Word to guide us to the kingdom. Christ said, “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

Jonah and the Nation of Israel

This study would not be complete without considering another dimension of Jonah’s story. Many scholars agree that Jonah is also a type of the nation of Israel. God placed the nation of Israel in the Promised Land and located them at the very crossroads of the continents that they might be a beacon of truth—a nation of priests pointing the pagans that surrounded them to Jehovah. “And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). Because of their refusal to preach to the heathen, God visited His people with captivity in Babylon. Jonah became a captive because he refused to preach to the people of Nineveh. Jonah was given another chance, and Israel was also granted emancipation from Babylon.

It is remarkable how in the story of Jonah, everyone seems to listen to God but Jonah. The sailors, the wind and waves, the fish, the Ninevites and their livestock, and even the gourd and the worm all obey God. Everyone and thing obeys but stubborn Jonah, who is supposed to be a prophet of God and yet is the only one who rebels against the Word of the Lord!

One of the central teachings of Jesus and the apostles was that “many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 8:11, 12). Jonah seemed to resent that God heard the prayer of the pagans in Nineveh and forgave them. Likewise, the Jews wanted to kill Jesus when He said that God hears the heathen’s prayers (Luke 4:25-29).

Why is it that the Church, like ancient Israel, seems so blasé regarding the message of warning and love we have been given? The world is yearning for truth; it’s ready to listen. Jesus said, “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few” (Matthew 9:37). The Church, like Jonah, is sleeping as the storm gathers strength. The pagans sailors are praying, and Jonah is snoring. The beggars lay at our gates, longing for a few crumbs of truth while the Church feasts, clad in purple. Unless we rouse to our duty, judgment will certainly come!

Jonah Is a Symbol of the Lost

I want to conclude with the most basic yet most profound message found in Jonah’s story. Jonah’s experience is a message to the lost and to the backslider. The ones who have heard the Word of the Lord are to go east, but they turn from the will of God and head west, thinking they will find some peace from the convicting voice of the Spirit.

Of course, it is a ridiculous thought to think even for a moment that you can hide from God.

“Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me” (Psalm 139:7-10).

The backslider may even sleep for a time bound for judgment, but a storm will come. God sends the storm to save them. It may come in the form of financial reverses or a health or family crisis, but a storm will come to get their attention. One day, they will awake to find they are in the pig pen and come to their senses and pray. They will make that journey to the Father’s house, and as soon as He sees them approach, He will run to meet them. “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you” (James 4:8).

The classic *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville, has a chapter titled “The Sermon.” Within this compelling chapter, beautiful lyrics from an old English sailors hymn regard how God saves

the lost the same way He saved Jonah.

“The ribs and terrors in the whale,
Arched over me a dismal gloom,
While all God’s sun-lit waves rolled by,
And lift me deepening down to doom.
“I saw the opening maw of hell,
With endless pains and sorrows there;
Which none but they that feel can tell -
Oh, I was plunging to despair.
“In black distress, I called my God,
When I could scarce believe him mine,
He bowed his ear to my complaints -
No more the whale did me confine.
With speed he flew to my relief,
As on a radiant dolphin borne;
Awful, yet bright, as lightning shone
The face of my Deliverer God.
“My song for ever shall record
That terrible, that joyful hour;
I give the glory to my God,
His all the mercy and the power.”

The message of Jonah is one of hope and salvation for the lost. You may feel you have wandered too far from God for Him to hear your prayers. But remember, if Jonah could catapult a successful prayer from the lowest and darkest place on earth to the Almighty in His Temple, you can as well! “And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land” (Jonah 2:10). He not only gave Jonah another chance, but He had the sea monster beach himself to place Jonah on solid ground. God is merciful!

You may feel your situation is bleak, but if God saved Jonah from his hopeless circumstances, He can surely deliver you. Also remember, God saved Jonah and then gave him a job to do. The Lord has a mission and ministry for everyone, including you. We come to Jesus in the great invitation, then we go for Jesus in the great commission. Come to him now then say, “Here am I Lord, send me” (Isaiah 6:8).

DOUG BATCHELOR

(There may be some “Jonahs” reading this booklet now. God has called you to do evangelism, but you are fleeing to Tarshish on a stormy sea. Write Amazing Facts now and inquire about the Amazing Facts College of Evangelism, our Bible-training program.)

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