

RELIGION

Scripture of the Week

Matthew, Chapter 7

Insight on the Word: Jonah, A Lot More Than a Fish Story!

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The Bible text for our Sunday School classes this Sunday will be Jonah 1:1-9, 15-17. Again we're using a little bit of interactive make-believe, with questions about our text and its message from the best known of the "Minor Prophets."

So this week we're studying the story of Jonah and the whale, right? Not quite. There wasn't any whale; the Bible calls it a "great fish" (verse 17), and even the ancients knew that whales (and dolphins) aren't fish. Besides that, the fish only plays a small role in the drama of Jonah. The real action in the first chapter centers on Jonah's desperate attempt to run away from his God.

So who was Jonah, anyway? And why is this fish story in the books of the prophets? Jonah actually was a prophet; one of his prophecies and its fulfillment are recorded in 2 Kings 14:25. That scripture places Jonah before the time of King Jeroboam II of Israel, and thus before Hosea and Amos. Therefore, this book may be one of the earliest books of the writing prophets. If you read the book of Jonah through—try it, it's only four little chapters—you'll see that Jonah had a prophetic message from Yahweh (the Lord) his God, for the city of Nineveh. And it really isn't unusual to find narrative stories in other books of the prophets, such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Hosea. In this case, the story makes up 3/4 of the book, but that's okay.

Do you really believe the whole

story really happened? People have been discounting the story of Jonah for centuries, calling it a legend, or a symbolic myth, or just a folktale. It's hard for people to believe that a man could be swallowed by any fish and live to tell about it. Besides that, some haven't noted that there is absolutely no record that the great city of Nineveh ever repented of its wickedness. It went on to become the violent enemy of Jerusalem (in Isaiah and 2 Kings), and we know that Assyria and its capital Nineveh worshipped idols throughout their later Empire days.

But I do believe this story is historical fact, though quite amazing in its content. Surely if anyone is a Christian, and therefore believes that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead (Rom 10:9-10), she or he ought to be able to accept that God could have prepared a big enough fish to swallow a man. Let's not be guilty of limiting the power of the Almighty.

On the other hand, as we read Jonah through, it reads like a simple history. There are no symbolic connections given, as in the Revelation. There are no allusions to earlier works of Scripture, which would uncover a hidden message in the story. There is a real historical prophet in the starring role of the drama, but not some major figure (like Abraham, Moses, or Elijah) that people might want to counterfeit. A lot of people later wrote fantastic "prophecies" in the names of these and other Old Testament heroes. But none looked like the history of Jonah. All in all, it is

reasonable to believe that Jonah belongs in the Bible, and that it is a historically accurate book.

Most importantly, Jesus himself refers to the book as an accurate historical record (Matt 12:39-41), both in the story of the great fish, and in the repentance of Nineveh. I simply can't believe that the Lord would intentionally mislead people, if he knew these stories were merely legends. He had too much integrity.

All right. All right. So this really happened. Why didn't Jonah just do what the Lord told him to do? Now that is an interesting question. I've asked that question about myself a lot of times—haven't you? God has made his way clear enough that anybody can follow it, if he wants to. But we have a lot of excuses for disobeying the Word of the Lord (see verse 1 in the text?) when it threatens our cherished ideas about "the real world."

In Jonah's case, the causes of his disobedience come out through the rest of the story. Jonah didn't want the city of Nineveh to turn to God (repent), and he wanted them to be destroyed (Jon 4:2). He didn't believe people should help their enemies. He wanted Israel's enemies to be destroyed. And he thought he could stop God from doing His will, by refusing to do his part.

Do you mean he had a problem with prejudice? Precisely. He bought into one of the oldest and ugliest lies Satan ever produced: that some kinds of people are inherently better

than others—smarter, or more honest, or more worthy of God's spiritual blessing.

What exactly did Jonah do? He ran the other way! Literally! Instead of going to Nineveh, north and east of Israel, he went west to Joppa, and got on a ship headed as far west as he could go, to Tarshish. This was probably present-day Spain. He was on a boat with men from various ethnic groups, each with his own gods. We find out about those gods because the ship got into a violent storm, and they all started praying to their own gods for rescue (verse 5). They hoped one god or another would hear them and save them, but none of their gods paid attention.

How could they? Idols aren't really able to save, are they? No, but these people, like many people today, are willing to try anything, even strange new religions, to help them out of life's crisis situations. The idols have changed, but people surely haven't!

Jonah knew better than to call on his God, Yahweh. He knew that Yahweh was the One True God, "the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (verse 9). Under pressure Jonah explained his predicament to the sailors, and told them to throw him overboard.

Jonah knew that the Lord had caught up with him (so to speak), and expected to lose his life. To his credit, he wanted to save the lives of the crew, and thought the Lord might spare them if they threw him into the sea (verse 12). And he might have even helped

save them spiritually as well.

How could a disobedient servant of the Lord have any positive influence on the people around him? That's just the way God's grace works! Jonah didn't deserve to start a revival on board that ship, with all those people of various tribes and tongues. But that's what happened. The sailors did learn to fear the Lord "exceedingly" (verse 16), and they made vows and sacrifices to him. They saw the awesome power, and judgment, and mercy of Jonah's God, and they accepted Him.

The Lord always has a way of bringing glory to His Name. We won't know till eternity whether any of these men really gave up their false gods and clung to Yahweh alone. But I suspect some of them will be in heaven with us one day.

So what's the point about the big fish? I suppose he could tell the other fish back home about the man who got away.

Seriously, please! Okay. The fish wasn't a sign of God's judgment—that was in the raging storm. The Lord prepared the great fish to rescue Jonah, and bring him safely back to land. That was the Lord's mercy and forgiveness at work. Read the prayer song of Jonah in chapter 2, and you'll discover how thankful Jonah was to see the big fish coming.

No matter what mistakes we make, or what sins we're guilty of, the Lord can still bring good out of it, and he can still make something beautiful from our lives.

F.G.P.A.
National Women
Supervisor Sets
Goals For
Womens'
Convention

Missionary Rosemary Daniel

Missionary Rosemary Daniel of Portland has been the FGPA National Women Supervisor for the past three years. During the week of June 21-28 the Full Gospel Pentecostal Association will host its 23rd Convention.

The Women's theme this year is "Christian Women Can Make A Difference", Ephesians 5:1.

Missionary Daniel expects women from each FGPA Church and around the Country to speak on the theme as well as to focus on the women pastors. Pastor Joan Ross and Pastor Lovely of Los Angeles California, Pastor Annie Bacher and Pastor Lisa Bowman Gordon of Seattle Washington, Pastor T Gay of Denver Colorado.

Evangelist Mattie Wells has worked closely with Missionary Daniel, they have planned an inspiring Women's day program in which you will not want to miss.

Missionary Daniel will share the FGPA women's Directory which has been dedicated to Mother Bennie Jackson from Seattle Washington.

The Public is invited to attend.

Congratulations!



Tedaris Harris earned several awards this past year at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School. He and his family are fairly new to the community. Being new has not hindered his ability to excel in his achievements.

Congratulations Tedaris!

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1 Peter 4:11

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