

## **GOD NEEDS YOUR COOPERATION NOT YOUR UNDERSTANDING!**

**Today's Text: Jonah Chaps. 3-4**

### **Extracts:**

*So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. ... and (he) ... cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.... Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. So he prayed to the Lord, and said, "Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!" [Jon. 3:3-5, 10; 4: 1-2]*

*On the night of Wednesday, 16 April 2008, United Airlines Flight 9 was boarding passengers at the John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York en route San Francisco, California.<sup>1</sup> Two minutes to take-off, an Orthodox Jewish man stood near the lavatories and began to pray. He ignored flight attendants' instructions for him to sit down and the man's friends said that he could not stop until after completing his prayers. The attendants called airport security and the man was ejected from that flight and put on the next one the following morning. In justifying its action, an airline spokesman said that it was important for passengers to listen to the instructions of the flight crew so as not to risk flight delays.*

*The plane needed to leave on schedule so as to vacate the gate for an incoming plane as well as arrive the next destination on schedule. Therefore, the airline was more interested in the passenger's cooperation than his understanding. In like manner, when God commands us to do anything, all He needs from us is cooperation by obeying His every command. So, why then do we question His motives, the means or the outcomes of what He has asked us to do?*

*In this week's lesson, we shall use Prophet Jonah's response to God's call for him to preach to Nineveh as our case study.*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on "Praying passenger removed from flight," The Associated Press, Thurs. April 17, 2008, <http://www.msnbc.com/id/24191236/>

## 1. Background: Jonah reluctantly goes to Nineveh

After an earlier fruitless attempt to run away from God's command for him to go to Nineveh, Jonah heeded the second call. Let us follow the story from there:

### a) *God's message for Nineveh*

Nineveh was "an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent" [Jon. 3: 3]. The city's wickedness had come up before the Lord [Jon. 1: 2] and judgment time had finally come. The old city was "bloody," and "full of lies and robbery." "Harlotries" and "sorceries" were also common features [Nah. 3: 1, 4]. So, as soon as Jonah entered the city, he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" [Jon. 3: 4].

Try to imagine Jonah's mien as he delivered that message. Nineveh represented bad news to him. For that city's sake, Jonah had suffered great hardship. He had tried to run away from cooperating with God by travelling in the opposite direction to Joppa on the way to Tarshish in Spain. God caused a tempest to make the sea trip dangerous to the ship owners who, for their own safety, threw the fugitive Jonah overboard into the sea. In His infinite mercy, God created a great fish that swallowed Jonah up and vomited him ashore presumably in Joppa, after three days and nights in the belly of that fish. Having finally agreed to come to Nineveh, Jonah could not wait to see that great city pay for his own suffering more than for its wickedness before God. He looked forward to what would befall Nineveh in forty days' time! But was that God's plan?

### b) *The city's response*

The people of the city believed the word of God and did something about it as follows [Jon. 3: 5-8]:

- The king of Nineveh led the people, from the greatest to the least of them, to fast and pray;
- Both man and beast were covered with sackcloth and worked to turn from their evil way and from the violence that was in their hands;
- They based their repentance on the hope that merciful God would "relent and turn away from His fierce anger, so that (the people might) not perish."

God is not interested that sinners perish but that they come to repentance [2 Pet. 3: 9]. When sinners confess their sins, God is faithful and just to forgive them their sins and cleanse them from all unrighteousness [1 Jn 1: 9]. Should we expect any less?

c) *God relents but Jonah is angry!*

True to His character, “God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and (He) relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it” [Jon. 3: 10]. But Jonah was exceedingly displeased and became angry [Jon. 4: 1]! He prayed to God and said, “Was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish, for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness; One who relents from doing harm” [v. 2].

After expressing anger over God’s decision to relent, following the people’s repentance, Jonah went out of the city and sat down under a shade to “see what would become of (it)” [Jon. 4: 5]. If Jonah knew that God would always forgive the repentant, why was he so angry that He had acted true to character toward repentant Nineveh? Interestingly, as God’s messengers, we tend to put ourselves in the way. For example, we seem to want to authenticate our importance in the process. A prophet will feel great if and when his prophecy comes to pass, especially for bad. A healer will be more eager to see a lame Moslem walk than lead him to Christ. A televangelist would encourage somebody giving testimony to acknowledge his ministry’s contribution rather than give all the glory to God. But is that God’s idea of our cooperation?

d) *God rebukes Jonah*

God asked the prophet, “Is it right for you to be angry?” [Jon. 4: 4]. In other words, God was saying to Jonah, “Do I owe you any explanation for what I do?” To demonstrate to the prophet the absurdity of his reaction, God prepared a plant to serve as a shade over Jonah’s head “to deliver him from his misery.” He was very grateful for that. However, by dawn the following morning, God prepared a worm that damaged the plant and it withered! Later in the day, as the sun shone overhead, God raised a wind which blew off the withered plant, such that the sun beat directly on Jonah’s head. Jonah grew faint. He became angrier and said, “It is better for me to die than to live” [vv. 6-8].

God said to him, “You have had pity on the plant for which *you have not laboured, nor made it grow*, which came up in a night and perished in a night; and should I not pity Nineveh, that great city in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons which cannot discern between their right hand and their left?” [vv. 10-11]. In summary, God was telling the prophet, “I only need your cooperation. I do not owe you any explanation!”

Take the case of Jeremiah when he complained to God about the prosperity of evil people. Jeremiah prayed as follows [**Jer. 12: 1-4**]:

*Righteous are You, O Lord, when I plead with you; yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously?... But You, O Lord, know me; You have seen me, and You have tested my heart toward You...*

Instead of giving Jeremiah an explanation, God responded with a poser, “If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses?” [**v. 5**]. That is, if Jeremiah was tired of running against foot soldiers, how could he run against horses? God did not owe Jeremiah any explanation. He owes us none. So, what cooperation does He require of us?

## **2. Lessons: What it takes to cooperate with God**

God does not need your opinion! His ways and thoughts are higher than yours. They are as far apart from yours as the heavens are from the earth [**Is. 55: 8-9**]. Therefore, you are not in any position to question His ways or judgments. So, what does it take to cooperate with Him? Here are some important points to note:

### a) *You don't have to understand in order to obey!*

It is already a privilege that God finds us useful vessels for His work. Therefore, you do *whatever* He asks you to do. Out of the many that are called, He has chosen a few [**Matt. 20: 16**] and you happen to be one of them! You did not choose Him; He chose you [**Jn 15: 16**]. That is why God does not take kindly to those who doubt Him. Here, we should differentiate between *justification* and *clarification*. The reactions of Zacharias and Mary to messages through the archangel Gabriel illustrate both concepts quite well.

When the angel appeared to Zacharias to announce to him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, were going to have a son in their old age, the priest asked, “*How shall I know this?* For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.” The angel’s response suggests that Zacharias doubted and seemed to ask God to justify His word. The angel said, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.” Zacharias would remain dumb until the birth of the baby “*because (he) did not believe (the angel's) words which (would) be fulfilled in their own time*” [**Lk 1: 5-30**]. Compare that with the reaction of the teenage virgin girl, Mary, when the same angel announced to her that God had chosen her to be the mother of Jesus. She replied, “*How can this be, since I do not know a man?*” The angel explained to her

that it would be by the power of the Holy Spirit [vv. 26-36]. Zacharias asked for proof (justification); Mary asked for guidance on how the conception would occur (clarification).

Faith plays a crucial role here because we have to first believe and trust the source of the message. We cannot please God if we have no faith in Him and He only rewards those who diligently seek Him [Heb. 11: 6].

b) *Your cooperation may only be to initiate a cause or course and no more!*

All that God may require from us is to serve as the point of contact. The rest is His. Until Jonah cried out to Nineveh, the people did not repent. If he had not come, God might have had to choose another messenger, but repentance would not have been initiated until that first contact.

Take the case of John the Baptist. His role was to serve as Christ's precursor, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "calling on the people of Israel to prepare for the coming of the Messiah [Is. 40: 3; Jn 1: 23]. As soon as John had baptized Jesus, he pointed Him to his own disciples, saying, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" [Jn 1: 25-34]. From that point on, John wound down his ministry, saying of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" [Jn 3: 30]? Jesus eulogized him by saying that no man born of woman was greater than John [Matt. 11: 11]. So, why do you think that God needs you more than merely to gain entrance into one stubborn heart and no more?

c) *You can only plant or water but God alone gives the increase!*

Jonah stayed by the beach, waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh at the end of the forty days. He expected the destruction of Nineveh. It did not happen. Instead, following the people's repentance, God relented and spared the city. However, about a century later, Nineveh backslid and God's judgment came hard on that city [Nahum 2: 1-13]. In the words of Paul, we can only plant or water but it is God that gives the increase [1 Cor. 3: 6]. God knows the end from the beginning. We do not know beyond our noses! Therefore, you should play your part and leave the rest for God.

### **3. Conclusion: Begin by cooperating with Christ!**

Jesus told His disciples, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in Him, bears much fruit; *for without Me you can do nothing*" [Jn 15: 5]. We can rely on Him because he who has seen Jesus has seen the Father [Jn 14: 9]. The ascended Christ that appeared to aged John in exile on the island of Patmos has said, "Behold, *I stand at the door and knock*. If anyone *hears My*

voice and *opens* the door, *I will come in* to him and dine with him, and he with Me” [Rev. 3: 20]. How have you responded to that invitation?

- Jesus is right now standing at the door of your heart and knocking. He cannot force you to open for Him because God has given you free will to do whatever you choose;
- In exercise of that free will, you can choose to hear the knock or ignore it. When you ignore the knock, you have chosen rebellion and condemnation [Jn 3: 17]. But faith in Christ comes by hearing the word of God [Rom. 10: 17]. Faith means that you can trust God and His Christ and do whatever God asks you to do. Once you walk to that door and open it, you have cooperated with God. The rest is His!
- Jesus promises to dine with you and you with Him. You dine with Him by cooperating (doing His Father’s will) and He dines with you (with eternal and earthly blessings). For example, was it not the lunch snack of two fish and five loaves of bread provided by a lad that Christ multiplied to feed over five thousand people, presumably including the lad’s parents [Jn 6: 8-11]? When the risen Christ invited seven of His disciples, including Peter, to “come and eat breakfast” by the Sea of Tiberias, was it not the fish and bread already prepared by Christ Himself that they ate and not from the 153 fish that they had miraculously caught in obedience to His command [Jn 21: 1-12]?

You cannot go far on your own. God needs your partnership to achieve His purposes on earth. He needs your cooperation, not your understanding!