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THE HIGH COST OF DEFERRED OBEDIENCE

Today's Text: Jonah Chaps 1-2

Extracts:

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me." But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish, from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it; to go with them to Tarshish, from the presence of the Lord. But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up [Jon. 1: 1-4]

Dwarika Prasad is a trader in the Indian state of Bihar.¹ In September 2005, he deposited his valuables in a safe deposit with the local branch of the government-owned Central Bank of India, located in the state capital, Patna. The items included 450,000 rupees (US\$11,000) in currency notes, 232,000 rupees (\$5,600) in investment papers and some gold and silver jewellery. On 8 May 2007, the bank wrote a warning to all customers to remove their valuables from the safe deposits because of an invasion of termites. Mr. Prasad did not heed the warning until 29 January 2008. To his shock, there was nothing left in his box except termite dust. Even the shine on the ornaments was also gone. When he filed for compensation, he was informed that the bank was not liable because there was no evidence of a break-in! Prasad's excuse that he did not see the warning was not accepted.

Why did he wait for nine months? Could he not have saved the high cost he had had to bear for his deferred obedience? Prasad's fate seems quite familiar! Many of us receive a word from God concerning our life, work or ministry, among others. For example, some of us have been asked to give up work and go into the ministry. Some people have explicitly been warned not to go into a marriage or business or do other things with long-term implications. Instead of obeying right away, we delay or defer the decision for one reason or the other. In due course, we begin to regret for not acting when we should have. At that time, the damage may have been done and it may look impossible to go back and obey! Happily, God is merciful and He may have left us a window of redemption. Let us find that out from today's lesson.

¹ Based on Amarnath Tewary, "Termites feast on trader's money," *BBC News*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/7334033.stm, published 7 April 2008 at 11:52:36 GMT

1. The concept of deferred obedience

I have not yet seen any research studies that compare the outcomes of “walking by faith” with those of “walking by sight.” To walk by faith is to do in accordance with the will of God. To walk by sight is to follow human wisdom, such as commonsense, tradition or logic. However, I can postulate that people who rely on human wisdom are more likely to have a bigger backyard of broken promises and missed opportunities than those who walk by faith. The few ‘faith-walkers’ that may face a similar situation as “sight-walkers” are likely to be those who disobeyed what God had asked them to do. Disobedience may come in the following forms:

a) *Making the right turn in the wrong place or at the wrong time*

Some people are anxious to obey what God has commanded them to do but at their convenience. For example, if God were to ask you to make a right turn at point B at a specific time but you chose to do it at point C (even at the right time), you would certainly arrive at a destination different from where God would be waiting for you! There is no way that you would not pay a price for it. For example, even in human settings, many people have lost their jobs for coming late to work. Many people have lost their tax reliefs from the tax authorities because they filed late and outside of the statutory time limit.

Two years after Saul had been made king of Israel, the prophet Samuel told him to go ahead of him to Gilgah (for the purpose of burnt offerings) and to wait for him for seven days. While waiting, the Philistines were threatening to attack Israel, and Saul and his troops trembled. On the seventh day, Samuel the priest/prophet that God authorized to perform such duties had not shown up as expected. So, Saul the king went ahead to do it. *Soon after*, Samuel came! Following the king’s explanation that he had had to act to restore his troops’ morale, the prophet said to him, “You have done foolishly (i.e., as one who says in his heart that there is no God); *you have not kept the commandment of the Lord, your God*” [1 **Sam. 13: 5-13**]. The sacrifice was right but it was offered by the wrong person. Second, it was *offered out of fear, not out of faith*. It was a panic measure- as if the efficacy of the sacrifice was in the act instead of in the saving power of God. For that singular act, Saul lost his throne [vv. **13-14**].

b) *Doing the right thing partially*

In this case, we are anxious to obey God by doing whatever He has asked us to do. However, in the process of doing so, we vary part of the requirements without His approval. In God’s sight, it is as good as total disobedience. I recall one particular case from our church in Lagos some

years ago. Through a prophet, the man had been warned that his life was in danger and that God had asked him to spend the following seven days *strictly* in the church premises. He should for no reason step across the street in front of the church, not to talk of visiting his home. The man obeyed, so we thought. However, on the seventh day, when he found himself alone in the church premises, he stole out to buy newspapers from a kiosk across the street. From no where, a stray car knocked him down and he died on the spot! Did he have any compelling reason to go out or was it that he was not convinced about the truth of the message?

In the Scriptures, King Saul did a similar thing. Through the prophet Samuel, God sent Saul to “go and attack Amalek, and *utterly* destroy *all that they have, and do not spare them... kill both man and woman, infant, and nursing child, ox and sheep, cattle and donkey*” in retaliation for what the Amalekites had done against the children of Israel on their way from Egypt [**1 Sam. 15: 1-3**]. Saul did as he had been commanded. But he spared the life of the king of Amalek and his men brought back the best sheep, oxen and lambs [**vv. 4-9**]. His excuse was that they had saved the animals to sacrifice to God! The prophet reminded the king that with God, “to obey is better than sacrifice,” and his action amounted to rebellion which “is as the sin of witchcraft.” For his disobedience, God accelerated Saul’s removal as king of Israel by removing the *Spirit of God* from him and replacing Him with a tormenting *spirit from God* [**vv. 10-28; 16: 14**].

The forgoing suggests the need for us to keep *precisely* to what God has asked us to do. When you exercise grace [out of expediency or presumption] which God has not given you, you have disobeyed Him. You risk a high penalty.

c) *Deferring obedience*

In this case, we choose to *do nothing or to do something that is the direct opposite of what God has asked us to do* or to seek clearer directives from God as proof that He is actually the one sending us on the ‘tough’ assignment. *It may be due less to lack of faith than fear of responsibility.* For example, see how Moses tried to excuse himself out of going to Egypt to lead the children of Israel out of bondage. In fact, it got to a stage that the Lord became angry with him [**Ex. 3: 11-4: 14**]! But when Moses accepted his commission, he did exploits for God before Pharaoh. Gideon was hardly different. During the era of the judges, when the backslidden children of Israel were under the control of the Midianites, the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon to let him know that God wanted to use his valour to rescue Israel [**Judg. 6: 9-14**]. At the time, Gideon was a big coward (like most of his people), hiding to thresh wheat! He did not jump ahead to obey God’s word at once. Instead, he set up one test after another to be convinced that God was in deed the One working with him.

However, as soon as he was sure, he obeyed God's every word [vv. 36-7:25]. Nevertheless, the time to deliver Israel from the Midianites was prolonged.

The concept of deferred obedience is best articulated in the *Parable of the Two Sons* [Matt. 21: 28-32]. There, Jesus told the story of a man with two sons. He asked the first one to go and work in his vineyard that day. The young man refused, saying to his father, "I will not." Later, he repented and went. Their father sent his brother who answered his father, "I go, sir," but he did not go! Jesus asked His listeners, "Which of the two sons did the will of his father?" They answered, "The first." That was the one who first disobeyed, later repented and obeyed.

We can draw a few quick conclusions from the above cases. Firstly, *obedience is not measured by what we say (profession) but by what we do (action)*. Second, *God judges our actions by what He sees in our hearts* for "the Lord does not see as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" [1 Sam. 16: 7]. Therefore, what He may see as disobedience in one person (such as Saul), He may see as deferred obedience in another person, as in the case of Moses and Gideon. Nevertheless, *deferred obedience also carries a heavy penalty*, such as in the case of Zacharias, John the Baptist's father, who was made dumb for questioning the angel's message concerning the birth of his son) [Lk 1: 5-20]. Jonah's story is a good case of deferred obedience.

2. Jonah's journey ended inside the belly of a fish!

God's command to the prophet Jonah was quite clear: "*Go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me*" [Jon. 1: 2]. Let us study his reaction to God's word:

a) *Jonah fled from God!*

Instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah decided to flee from God and go to Tarshish via Joppa [v. 3]. We are not told from what city he took off. However, from his prayer later (while in the belly of the fish), he hoped to "look again toward (the Lord's) holy temple" [Jon. 2: 4] which we assume to be the temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem. In that case, we can have a mental picture of Jonah's journey. Tarshish was most probably in Spain at the point adjoining the Strait of Gibraltar that links Spain to Africa.² The items of trade carried by the ships of Tarshish would confirm this assertion [1 Kgs 10: 22]. Joppa is the same as the modern Israeli city of Yola, better known as Jaffa, on the Mediterranean Sea.³ Nineveh in ancient Assyria was on the eastern bank of River Tigris near the present-

² Tarshish, <http://www.britam.org/Questions/QuesTarshish.html>

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joppa>

day city of Mosul in Iraq.⁴ So, instead of going north-east of Jerusalem to Nineveh, Jonah went west to the Mediterranean coast, hoping to flee to Spain!

Was Jonah running away because He did not believe what God had told him? I doubt. As a prophet, he should know that he could never run away from the ever living and omnipresent God. The likelihood is that he was scared of the magnitude of the assignment. Who was he to go and preach repentance to such a great city? Let God send a more competent prophet. Perhaps, running away from God would create the vacancy!

Only God knows why He sent Jonah. Instead of looking at the size of the assignment, Jonah should have focused on the size of His God. We ourselves do behave as Jonah did. When it is time to claim God's blessings, we want to corner all; but when it comes to doing His will, we give excuses! The family needs us now. The office is expanding and our close attention is required. We are too young or too uneducated or too poor to go. Are those not journeys to Tarshish? Are we not trying to run away from God?

b) *But God 'arrested' fugitive Jonah!*

God allowed Jonah to get to Joppa, pay the fare and board a ship going to Tarshish [**Jon. 1: 3**]. Like a typical fugitive, he went down to the lowest parts of the ship to apparently hide and soon fell asleep there [**v. 5**]. But he could not hide from God. The Lord sent "a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea so that the ship was about to be broken up" [**v. 4**]. In desperation, the mariners threw their cargo overboard to lighten the ship and called on every passenger to pray to his god [**5-6**].

Many of us are today passing through storms of life on account of our deferred obedience. The career we have been pursuing in lieu of doing God's will suddenly takes a nose dive to failure. Every one that tries to help us suddenly suffers one set back or another (like the ship owners in Joppa on Jonah's account). We may suddenly lose favour with family, friends or colleagues at a crucial threshold to success without any logical explanation. God has sent a tempest after you to arrest the fugitive!

c) *Jonah confesses and repents*

After casting lots, the mariners discovered that Jonah was responsible for their predicament. At that point, he confessed, saying, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." He told them that he was trying to escape from doing God's work. He asked them to throw him overboard in order to calm the sea.

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nineveh>

Reluctantly, the mariners obliged him and the sea suddenly became calm [vv. 9-16].

The man that feared to go to Nineveh was not afraid to drown! Was it to die and end it all? Was it to test God's mercy? We may never know. Rather than let him die, God prepared a big fish that swallowed him up. He was in the belly of that fish for three days and three nights [v. 17]. Do you know how many of us God has rescued at the point of committing suicide or compromising our moral integrity? The key lies in repentance and return to the path of fear of the Lord.

d) *God restores Jonah*

While in the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed to God. He acknowledged how his ordeal in the cold and rough sea was like being in "the belly of Sheol," that is, hell [Jon. 2: 2]. He cried to the Lord, promising to pay his vows because "salvation is of the Lord." In answer to Jonah's prayer, God made a great fish to swallow him, and it later vomitted him on dry land [vv. 3-10]. The place was certainly not Nineveh, otherwise, the Lord would not have repeated His earlier command for Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh [Jon. 3: 1-2]. God simply brought him back to Point Zero! Look at Jonah's return trip by 'submarine' to do what he should painlessly have done some time past! In deed, deferred obedience has a high price.

3. Conclusion: Jesus is your great fish!

You may already have travelled too far on the wrong road. You may have lost time, money and prestige. Of late, you have seriously considered returning to God. However, you may be wondering if there is still hope. There is yet one!

When the Scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign, He replied, "No sign will be given to (the evil and adulterous generation) 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* [Matt. 12: 38-40]. Jonah is a figure of the fallen man that could not save himself from sin and error, the man who has kept hiding from God since the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden. Jesus the Son of God took the place of fallen man, became the Son of Man, suffered, died and was buried *in the belly of the earth*. As the great fish made by God, He rose from the dead on the third day and now He has 'vomitted' us on *the shore of salvation* to go and preach the good news to the *modern Nineveh, the whole world!*

So, like Jonah, accept responsibility for running away from God's will all this while. Repent and ask Him to restore you. The same Lord that sent the great fish to bring Jonah back to land has sent His Son, Jesus the Christ, to bring you home to the mansion that He has prepared for you in His Father's house. Welcome home!