

Jonah and the Queen of Sheba

In the inspired narrative of Matthew chapter 12, our Lord Jesus Christ berates the Pharisees for their hardness of heart in refusing to receive his teaching. In his response to their request for a sign, the Lord points to 2 Old Testament examples of those who did heed the words of his Father preached to them – and interestingly, both cases are Gentiles:

“He answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall be no sign given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. **The men of Nineveh** shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the teaching of Jonas: and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here. **The Queen of the South** shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the utmost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon: and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here” (Mat. 12:39-42).

We shall consider both examples in turn:

JONAH AND THE NINEVITES

The book that bears the name of the prophet Jonah recounts how that the word of Yahweh came to him, sending him on a mission:

“Arise, go to Nineveh that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me” (Jon. 1:2).

However, Jonah lacked the courage to do as commanded, and instead he took flight, and sought to run away from his responsibilities and the presence of Yahweh:

“But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of Yahweh ...” (Jon. 1:3).

This, of course, was a futile endeavour, for due to Yahweh’s Omnipresence, it is just not possible to flee from Him. As the Psalmist wrote:

“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 *sheol*, behold, thou art there.” (Psa. 139:7-8).

The Almighty is everywhere present by His Spirit, whilst maintaining a specific personal presence in light which no man can approach unto (1 Tim. 6:16). It is not possible to hide, or run from Him, for he sees and hears all things.

Another example of a Prophet who sought to avoid preaching repentance to the wicked is that of Jeremiah. He tried not to prophesy, because of the affliction it was bringing upon him:

“... for since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of Yahweh was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily. Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name ...” (Jer. 20:8-9).

However, Jeremiah found that the Word burned within him, so that he could not help himself from speaking it to those around him:

“ ... but his word was within my heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay” (Jer. 20:9).

We must take heed to the example of both prophets: we ought not to shirk from, or run away from our responsibilities to proclaim the Word to any who might yet hear it and repent. We should be like Jeremiah, with the Word burning within us, so that we cannot do anything else but speak it.

Returning back to the example of Jonah, we find that the ship he was trying to flee on, became subject to a great storm. “Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them” (Jon. 1:5). But Jonah remained fast asleep, being unaware of the danger:

“But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep” (Jon. 1:8).

Again, the prophet provides an example for us to heed. As the Apostle warned: “... therefore let us not sleep as do others, but let us watch and be sober ...” (1 Thes. 5:6). We must be awake, and alert to what is happening around us, rather than to slumber in apathy and indifference.

In his actions, Jonah foreshadowed, and contrasted with the example of our Lord himself. Jesus, however, was not seeking to flee, but needed rest:

“... Behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves: but he was asleep” (Mat. 8:24).

Here, there is a contrast with Jonah. Jesus was a man of like passions as we are: he needed rest in order that he could continue his work. He was not indifferent to the plight of his disciples: rather he had faith in the power that his Father had given him:

“his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us, we perish. And he said unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. And the men marvelled, saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” (Mat. 8:25-27).

Here was a great sign of the extent of his power: even the winds and sea would obey him! He was able to turn a raging storm into a calm sea. As we read in the Psalms:

“he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, Which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: Their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits’ end. Then they cry unto Yahweh in their trouble, And he bringeth them out of their distresses. **He maketh the storm a calm**, So that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; So he bringeth them into their desired haven” (Psa. 107:25-30).

We must seek after the peace of mind of Messiah, who was able to sleep in the midst of a raging storm, even “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding” (Phil. 4:7).

The record of Jonah describes how the Gentile occupants of the ship were afraid at the waves of the storm which threatened their ship. They knew that Jonah was fleeing from the presence of Yahweh his God, for he had told them (1:10). They appeared to understand that the storm was providentially

arranged by Jonah's God, and asked "What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? For the sea wrought and was tempestuous" (1:11). Jonah recognised that only way would be to end his flight, and trust in the power of Yahweh to deliver him. So he answered:

"Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you." (1:12).

In this, again, we have a foreshadowing of Messiah. Jonah was willing to lay down his own life in order to save the Gentiles from the stormy winds of Yahweh's judgments. So, they took up Jonah, and cast him into the sea: "and the sea ceased from her raging" (1:15), and Jonah was swallowed up by the great fish prepared by Yahweh.

Jonah chapter 2 records the prophet's prayer whilst in the whale's belly, the event which formed "the sign of the prophet Jonas" that the Lord referred to. The exposition of this prayer is beyond the scope of our present considerations, but it expresses the hope that Jonah had in being saved, in terms which again make us think of Messiah, and his resurrection:

"... yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O Yahweh my God. When my soul fainted within me, I remembered Yahweh and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple" (Jon. 2:6-7).

Compare this with the example of Christ: "who, in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him out of death. And was heard in that he feared" (Heb. 5:7). But we think also of an example of faith for us to follow. Jonah vowed that "I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving: I will pay that which I have vowed. Salvation is of Yahweh" (Jon. 2:9-10). Even so, the apostle speaks of our situation:

"through him therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name" (Heb. 13:15).

We, like Jonah recognise that "salvation is of Yahweh". We trust in His Son, whose name, Jesus, means "Yah shall save". And we offer the voice of thanksgiving as a sweet smelling sacrifice, acceptable in His Sight.

Such is the sign of the prophet Jonah: being cast into the whale's belly, in *sheol*, yet trusting in the power of Yahweh to save. After being expelled from the great fish, he was sent to the Ninevites a second time – and this time he went in obedience. So they repented at the voice of his words, and at the visible sign of what had happened to him. And according to Messiah, they will rise in judgment in condemnation of those who did not heed the greater sign: that of Jesus being in the grave for 3 days and 3 nights, before being raised to glory.

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

We are told very little about the Queen of Sheba, aside from her long journey to hear the wisdom of Solomon. We don't even know her name! But by contrast to Jonah, who sought to flee far away from the presence of Yahweh, she came from far to listen to Divine Wisdom. Here is the main lesson of her example: Jesus taught that "she came from the **utmost parts of the earth to** hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, a greater than Solomon is **here**" (Mat. 12:42). They had Divine Wisdom dwelling in their midst – he was there with them. They didn't need to go to the utmost parts of the earth to see him: he was already "here".

But here is another example for our learning. In our age, and circumstance in the western world, there is no shortage of copies of the Bible. Anyone can purchase it from virtually any bookshop – it is freely available. But what is our response toward it? Do we diligently search it out of a desire to hear and obtain Divine Wisdom? Do we exert the same diligent effort as the Queen of Sheba, to hear the word of God? It is a strange irony that even so it is so readily available, it is so readily neglected. Such is the perversity of human nature.

The record in 1 Kings 10 describes her visit to Solomon:

“When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon **concerning the name of Yahweh**, she came to prove him with hard questions ... and Solomon told her all her questions, there was not anything hid from her, which he told her not” (1 Kings 10:1-3).

Notice this point: the first thing she heard of was “concerning the Name of Yahweh”. And this was reinforced by Solomon, who declared and showed her the glory of his kingdom, and his means of worship before Yahweh.

The queen brought with her gifts:

“... she came to Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bare spices, and very much gold, and precious stones” (1 Kings 10:2).

And in these matters, she foreshadows the way in which nations will bring gifts to the Greater than Solomon – even King Jesus. So we read of the kings of Sheba thus:

“... the kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: **the kings of Sheba** and Seba **shall offer gifts ...**” (Psa. 72:10)

When the nations come from afar to bring presents to Messiah upon his throne, they shall also be desirous to learn Divine Wisdom. So we read in the well-known prophecy of Isaiah:

“And it shall come to pass in the latter days, that the mountain of Yahweh’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go, and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the Law, and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:2-3).

In the examples of the men of Nineveh who repented at the preaching and sign of Jonah, and of the unnamed Queen of Sheba, we see examples of Gentiles who embraced the word preached to them, and applied it to their life circumstances. In this current generation, we are – for the most part – Gentiles who come to the Son of the Most High in faith. We desire to endure the stormy seas of life, and be brought through the waters of affliction to safety. We earnestly desire to obtain wisdom by the reading and application of the Word which is so freely available to us. The Pharisees to whom Messiah spoke did not heed his words. They scorned his Wisdom and set at nought his Signs. In the resurrection, they will be condemned by these Gentiles of faith, but we are desirous of better things. Our desire for that day, is to be granted the crown of life promised to those who overcome. We desire to remain steadfast in our journey towards the kingdom, so that ultimately, we shall meet the Ninevites, and the Queen of Sheba, and speak with them personally about their acts of faith.

Christopher Maddocks