

Sabbath School Lesson #4 – The Jonah Saga – 18-24 Jul 2015

Christ reminded His hearers of the Jonah Saga, which is the object of our Lesson. The cause of the Jonah Saga was lack of what Peter later perceived: “Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him” (Acts 10:34-35). The blessing of the gospel preached to Abraham (Genesis 12), given to Israel, was for the whole world even for Nineveh, but like Peter, Jonah was slow to grasp this truth.

The Jonah Saga is on one hand a lesson to us for ‘mission to the cities.’ That the ancient city of Nineveh was a large city is only described as “an exceeding great city of three days’ journey” (Jonah 3:3). In terms of wickedness, the prophet Nahum presents it as almost a hopeless case, saying, “Nineveh is of old like a pool of water ... Woe to the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery,” and its wickedness overflows to other cities, “for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?” (Nahum 2:8; 3:1, 19). It is for mission to the cities, Jonah was sent, much against his will, to warn the Ninevites, who repented at his preaching.

The first time Jonah is sent, the Lord tells him, “arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me” (Jonah 1:2). Jonah attempted to run away from the Lord, for he “rose up to flee unto Tarshish” (verse 3). The fleeing Jonah found himself in “the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (verse 17) and “Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish’s belly” and he acknowledged that “Salvation is of the LORD” (Jonah 2:1, 9). “And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land” (verse 10). After that, Jonah was ready for mission to the cities.

The second time Jonah is sent, the Lord tells him, “arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee” (Jonah 3:2). No more fleeing this time, he “arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD” (verse 3). Jonah went to Nineveh, preaching, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (verse 4). Jonah verily preached a warning message! In response, “the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them” (verse 5). “And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not” (verse 10).

Jonah had first run away, for like most in Israel, Jonah had lost the missionary purpose of Israel. God blessed Abraham, and in turn that blessing was for Israel, so that all the people of the earth might be blessed. God’s design for Israel was that they should be a blessing to others, and proclaim the gospel to the entire world, even to Nineveh. But Jonah, like most in Israel, thought the blessing of the gospel was only for Israel. Israel assumed that the light, which God had given them, was due to the fact that He loved them better than He did love others, and so they became haughty, and despised others. Jonah did reveal his flawed mindset to the LORD, why he had first run away: “I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil” (Jonah 4:2). Jonah ought to have rejoiced that God would bless Nineveh.

Jonah is not alone in history of the Jews to have misunderstood that the blessing of Israel was for the entire world. It was not until Peter was commanded to go to Caesarea to preach the gospel to the Gentiles that he learnt this truth, and he exclaimed, “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him” (Acts 10: 34-35). This was the first time that Peter had ever perceived that truth, but it was not the first time that this thing was true. It had been a truth as long as God had existed. God never chose anybody to the exclusion of anybody else. The wisdom that comes from above is “without partiality” (James 3:17). In saving the city of Nineveh, God taught Jonah that the blessing of the gospel was for the entire world.

To teach Jonah the lesson that the blessing of Abraham (Genesis 12) was for the entire world, even for Ninevites, as Jonah sat there in the heat of the sun to watch and “see what would become of the city” (Jonah 4:5), “the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head” and just as Jonah enjoyed the free shade, “God prepared a worm” and the worm “smote the gourd” and Jonah was back in the sun-heat with bitterness that he wished to die! Jonah must have learnt his lesson when

the LORD asked him, “thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow: ...” “And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city ...”? (verse 11).

Mission to the cities is still a responsibility the God of Jonah gives us today. Like Jonah, we may attempt to run away, but the word of the Lord still tells us: ‘arise, go unto that city, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.’ Sending Paul to the wicked city of Corinth, the Lord said, “be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city” (Acts 18:9-10). With most of the world’s population living today in the cities, the Jonah saga calls us to preach the warning message to the cities. But how, must we, Seventh-day Adventists, live in these wicked cities in order to preach? “The cities are to be worked from outposts. Said the messenger of God, ‘Shall not the cities be warned? Yes; not by God’s people living in them, but by their visiting them, to warn them of what is coming upon the earth” {CL 30.2}.

The Jonah Saga is on another hand a lesson for ‘leadership in corporate repentance.’ It is a sad contrast Christ made between the inhabitants of Nineveh and the professed people of God in His day: “The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they repented at the preaching of Jonas: and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here” (Matthew 12:41). What a contrast that when Jonah preached to the wicked city of Nineveh, the leaders led out in the corporate repentance of the city, but when Christ preached to the holy city of Jerusalem the leaders led out rebellion to crucify their Saviour!

In Nineveh, when Jonah preached to the wicked city, and “word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes” and “the king and his nobles” led out in the work of corporate repentance of that city, “from the greatest of them even to the least of them” (Jonah 3:5-7). Here we see reformation starting with the leaders. The wicked king of Nineveh called for a reformation, calling the whole city, as a corporate body, to repent and be reconciled to God.

In Jerusalem, when Christ, the Son of God, the one “greater than Jonas,” preached to the holy city of Jerusalem, calling upon the people to repent, the leadership rose up in rebellion against Him, and murdered Him. And by and large, the people followed their leaders into national ruin. We may never know what a blessing it would have been to the nation (and the world) if Caiaphas, their spiritual leader, had followed the example of “the king of Nineveh,” and had risen from his seat of leadership and led the nation into corporate repentance! In that Matthew 12 passage, Jesus appealed to the story of Jonah as an example of the kind of repentance He was calling for, from the Jewish people. But tragically, the Jews refused.

As we reflect on historical good example of “the king of Nineveh” and the bad example of Caiaphas, let us also accept that corporate repentance calls for individual reflection. If you had been an employee of the high priest Caiaphas, supporting your needy family thereby, would you have had the courage to oppose him publicly when Christ, a Galilean Prisoner, stood before him? Remember, even His disciples forsook Him and fled. When the crowd inspired by the religious leaders cried “Crucify Him!” would you have found the strength to stand up and defend Him with your whole soul? Corporate repentance includes repentance for the sin of rejecting and crucifying Christ, for which we are told, “the whole world stands charged today” with that sin “unless we individually repent toward God” for the sin {TM 38.1}.

Only the willfully ignorant will fail to understand what the Lord Jesus means by His call to repentance. We have an illustration of it in His call to the leadership of the Jewish nation of His day. If we find out what He meant then, we know what He means now. The repentance of Nineveh stands in sacred history as the model, and we can easily see the pattern that the Lord Jesus desires to see develop today. “From the greatest of them to the least of them” (Jonah 3:5), the repentance desired in the Laodicean church must spread from our leaders to the laity and throughout the worldwide church. Whilst the message to Laodicea applies to both leaders and laity, it is addressed to the leadership of the church: “unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; ...” (Revelation 3:14). Is there any hope that our leaders like “the king and his nobles” of Nineveh, will understand and embrace the experience that Christ calls for, and cause “it to be proclaimed and published,” or will they like Caiaphas, crucify Christ, rejecting truth? We pray that, like in Nineveh, “the king and his nobles,” “the angel of the church of the Laodiceans,” will stand solidly in support of the experience Christ calls for.