

THE RUNAWAY SERVANT OF GOD

By
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"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 preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here" (Matt. 12:40,41).

The story of Jonah *is* a true story recorded by the Holy Spirit, and the Lord Jesus Himself made reference to it while He was speaking to the Pharisees. We find many lessons in this short story. The first great lesson is how the God of love shows His love and patience in His own way in seeking us till we come to Him and learn to understand His ways. But we, in our folly, want to run away from Him. We think that we shall be better off by running away from God, than by obeying Him.

God gave Jonah the great task of going to Nineveh to preach repentance (Jonah 1: 1, 2). It is indeed an honor to be God's co-workers. But Jonah did not realize what a great honor and privilege God was conferring on him. Rather than being thankful, Jonah ran away! Suppose a clerk is suddenly promoted to be the governor of a state, would he refuse it? No, he would accept it gladly and thankfully. Yet, just as Jonah ran away from the honorable task given to him by God, many young people run away from God's command for the sake of some worldly gain or pleasure.

We do not know the real reason why Jonah ran away at that time. May be he thought that the people would not believe him? May be other people gave him wrong advice. Many servants of God run away when they are told to go to a place, which is not convenient to their families because of the persuasion of their wives. Some wives look very quiet and simple, yet their husbands have to tremble before them. This may not be true in your case, but it might have been true in Jonah's case. How many young men have been called by the Lord for His service, but they thought that by taking up some secular job they would be in a position to serve Him better. Only afterwards have they learnt how much loss they incurred by their disobedience to God. It is quite clear that the Lord had commanded and commissioned Jonah to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. He was a God-fearing man, as he himself testified (Jonah 1: 9). But he disobeyed God and ran away from His presence. Those who do not have a deep experience of God fail to understand what He speaks to them, and so they do not obey Him fully. Jonah imagined certain things about God and was angry with Him. He did not understand God's ways and purposes, so he disobeyed God. In the same way, many people fear God, but they do not understand His ways or His will, so they do many things against God's will.

The God of love, mercy and grace, lovingly and patiently brought back Jonah into His perfect plan. For this purpose, first of all, He sent a tempestuous wind, and this grew into a great storm on the sea. It appeared as if the whole ship would sink. But God's hand was on the people who were in the ship. God loves us, and uses many ways to draw us to Himself.

When the Lord sent a tempestuous wind, all the passengers in the ship began to cry and shout. They even called upon their gods, but nothing happened. The storm did not abate. We do not know how many there were in the ship. They all cried and prayed, but the storm only grew worse. It is only those who know God by personal experience that can pray with faith, and have the confidence and assurance that their prayers would be answered. Though Jonah was a backslider, he was far better than the others in the ship. He feared "the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land"(Jonah 1: 9).

The shipmaster went to Jonah and said, "What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not" (Jonah 1: 6). But Jonah had to confess to the men that he was the cause of that storm (Jonah 1: 8-12). He told them how he was running away from God's command. He humbled himself. He was ready for any punishment, which God would send upon him. He realized how much loss and suffering he had brought upon all those who were in the ship. Those who desire to walk according to God's Word, know by experience how disobedience on their part involves the lives of others and causes them undeserved suffering.

Jonah humbled himself and told the shipmaster that he was running away from God. Then he added, "Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you". The men were afraid to do as he suggested. They redoubled their efforts to save the ship, all the more so because they were now anxious to save Jonah as well. But the wind became still more boisterous (Jonah 1:13). Finally, they cast him into the sea. The sea ceased from raging, and became calm. But what about Jonah? What happened to him? Scripture says "...the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah 1: 17). We see how God has power over all creation. He can command, not only the sea and the waves but also, all the creatures whether they are in the sea, or on the land, or in the air; they all obey Him. The Lord Jesus during His stay upon the earth commanded the sea, and it became calm (Luke 8:24,25). He commanded the fishes and they obeyed Him (Matt.17: 27; Luke 5:6).

God's love for Jonah was unchanged though he had disobeyed Him. God wanted to bring Jonah under His discipline, but He did not allow the whale to do him any harm. God commanded the fish saying: "I am not giving Jonah for you to eat. He is not for your breakfast or lunch. I am using you to protect him from being drowned, and to take him to the place where I want him to be". Jonah was in the fish's belly for three days and three nights. In some rare cases fishermen. Who have been swallowed by whales were brought out alive after some hours but their bodies were disfigured and discolored because of the action of the gastric juices in the whale's stomach. Yet no harm came to Jonah even after three days. Thus we find that God's Word is true, "...he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of his eye" (Zech.2:8).

What a temptation it must have been to the whale to make a meal of Jonah when he was in it's belly! Suppose for three days and nights you sit at a table laden with all your favorite dishes, such as chicken, ice cream etc., but with clear instructions that you should not eat any of those things, how would you feel? The fact that there is no one to prevent you from eating would make things all the more difficult for you. But what a mystery! Jonah remained undigested in the whale's belly. How wonderful is God's love! He may chastise us, and send storms in our lives. He may take us through unpleasant situations, but no harm will come to us. In fact,

you will find yourself in a better position after you are tested than before. The whale must have taken Jonah, here and there, to different parts of the sea during those three days and nights, but Jonah was safe and unharmed inside. Further, see how this experience of being in the fish's belly brought about true repentance in the heart of Jonah (ch.2). Jonah did not hide his sin from the people in the ship, then how could he hide it from God? When the work of repentance in Jonah was deep and complete, God commanded the whale to throw him right on the spot where God wanted Jonah to be. In the same way, God allows storms in our lives to bring us to true repentance and real confession; Likewise, He lovingly brings us to the place where He wants us to be and where He can use us.

God was trying to teach many lessons to Jonah of which the wonderful meaning of the power of resurrection was one. That is why when the Pharisees and Sadducees asked our Lord for a sign, He replied, "...there shall no sign be 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" {Matt.12: 39,40}.

We see an instance of God's provision for His servants in the way He commanded the fish to throw Jonah on dry land. When Jonah ran away he had to pay his fare (Jonah 1: 3). But when he repented, the whale took him to the shore free of charge! God became responsible: for all Jonah's expenses. How many God's servants weep and complain when they have no money! They do not realize that they are suffering because of their disobedience in some matter, and have to repent. All our needs will be met by God when there is true repentance and whole-hearted obedience.

Jonah arose and went into Nineveh and preached; "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be over thrown!" So the people repented and turned from their evil ways. God forgave them and Nineveh was not destroyed. Once again Jonah failed to understand God's ways and became angry with Him for not overthrowing Nineveh.

Jonah became angry with God for sparing Nineveh. How inconsistent Jonah was! On the one hand, he admitted the goodness of God, but on the other hand, he was angry with Him for saving Nineveh and said, "I knew thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness", Then why should Jonah be angry? He was angry because his pride was hurt. He thought of himself and his own importance: "I preached in God's Name that the people of Nineveh would be overthrown. But God has forgiven them, and Nineveh still stands! What will the people think of me?" Jonah was concerned only about his own honor and self-respect, Just like Jonah, many servants of God think more of their own name and honor than of God's honor and Name; and consequently much of their ministry is only "in the flesh, and not in the Spirit". Jonah ought to have been thankful to the Lord for using him, even though he was so disobedient. On the other hand, he was angry with God because he thought his honor was affected.

Jonah was angry with God for another reason. He was full of ill feeling towards the people of Nineveh whom the God of grace and mercy had forgiven. He should have said, "Oh God, Your ways are higher than my ways; your love is higher than my love; that is why Nineveh is saved". But he did not; jealousy prevented Jonah from understanding God's ways. In the same way because of jealousy towards others, many servants of God murmur against Him.

Jonah went on a "death strike" against God, somewhat like "hunger strike" against the Government, so common in our days. He left the city and pitched a booth outside it, towards the east; and sat down. He was like some children who when they fail in their examinations refuse to take food. When their parents lovingly prepare them tasty food and to persuade them to eat, they get angry with them. Instead of apologizing to their parents for not working hard enough, they become angry with their loving parents.

The God of love knew that Jonah needed better protection from the sun than what the booth provided for him. In a matter of minutes, God "prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief" (Jonah 4:6). Jonah did not thank the Lord for His loving and wonderful provision of the gourd, nor did his anger against God abate in the least degree. Very patiently God took steps to bring Jonah to his senses.

"But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, ...And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted" (Jonah 4:7,8).

Jonah had not yet learnt the lesson provided by the gourd, and was still angry, thinking that God was wrong and he was right. We see the marvelous patience of our loving God Who tenderly rebuked him. "Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not labored...should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:10,11).

The Lord never makes a mistake. He uses many means, as He did with Jonah, to bring us back to Himself. When we run away from Him, He allows storms to overthrow us, but provides safety in "a whale". He shows marvelous loving kindness to us even when we create our own problems, and "go on strike" against Him. He suddenly provides "a gourd to protect our head", and as suddenly removes it to show us our utter dependence upon Him. When we obey God, He supplies all our needs and pays for all our expenses. But when we disobey Him, He uses both simple as well as extraordinary means to bring us to our senses, so that we may learn to live in the presence of God and be His co-workers.

May the Lord bless this message to our hearts.