

Sabbath School Lesson #12 – The Restless Prophet – 11-17 September 2021

Christ would have us appreciate that God is no respecter of persons and is merciful to save. This is reflected in what He asked Jonah. “And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and *also* much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11). At the preaching of Jonah, the whole city repented. 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 will embrace the experience that our Lord calls for, and cause “it to be proclaimed and published,” or will they reject the truth?

Sunday: Running Away – That Jonah, the prophet of God, would attempt to run away from God when asked to take the gospel to the Gentiles, gives insight into the attitude that prevailed by then in Israel. The children of Israel had been called by God to proclaim the knowledge of God to the Gentiles. But Israel did not fulfil its high calling. Unbelief and self-trust deprived them of the prestige with which they entered the promised land. They did not let their light shine, and so in time they themselves lost it. They were content to colonise in Canaan, instead of possessing the whole earth. They assumed that the light which God had given them was due to the fact that He loved them better than He did others, and so they became haughty, and despised others. Nevertheless God ceased not to indicate to them that they were to be the light of the world. The history of the Jews, instead of showing that God was shut up to them, shows that He was continually trying to use them to make His name known to others. Witness the account of Naaman the Syrian, who was sent to the king of Israel to be healed of his leprosy. See the case of the widow of Sarepta, to whom Elijah was sent. The Queen of Sheba came from far to hear the wisdom of Solomon. And for our Lesson, Jonah was sent, much against his will, to warn the Ninevites, who repented at his preaching. Read the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and see how often the various nations are directly appealed to. All of these things show that God was not then, any more than now, the God of the Jews only, but of the Gentiles also. At last, when Israel had utterly refused to fulfil the mission to which God had called them, He sent them into captivity, that thus the heathen might receive some of the knowledge of God, which they would not impart voluntarily. There a few faithful souls were the means of bringing the truth clearly before the heathen king Nebuchadnezzar, who in time humbly acknowledged God, and published his confession of faith throughout the whole earth. King Cyrus, and other Persian kings, in royal proclamations made known the name of the one true God in all the world.

Monday: A Three-Day Rest – Jonah was going directly contrary to the commandment of the Lord, running away from Him, trying to get entirely out of His sight, the Lord arrested him and threw him into the sea, where he was swallowed by a fish. “Then Jonah cried unto the Lord his God out of the fish's belly, and said: I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and He heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice. For Thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about; all thy billows and thy waves passed over me The waters compassed me about, even to the soul; the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever” (Jonah 2:2-6). It would scarcely be possible for one to be in a worse situation than this. It was most literally from the depths that Jonah cried unto the Lord, and he was heard. And he was in the depths entirely through his own fault, too. Now to see that Jonah was not an exceptional case, but that God just as readily hears all who are in the depths because of their folly, let us read the following words to His praise: “He satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness. Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron; because they rebelled against the words of God, and contemned the counsel of the most High; therefore He brought down their heart with labour;

they fell down, and there was none to help. Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and brake their bands in sunder" (Psalm 107:9-14). That is just like the Lord, for "the Lord is good to all; and His tender mercies are over all His works." "The Lord upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all that be bowed down" (Psalm 145:9, 14). God does not forsake us even in the depths, and when we are there as the direct result of sinning against Him. It also shows us that no man can get away from the presence of the Lord. Thank God for that. We have all tried it, have you not? And are you not glad that you did not succeed? Perhaps you think that you have succeeded all too well, and are now sorrowing over it, imagining that you are lost. Do not believe in it for a moment. Listen to one who knows: "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 hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me" (Psalm 139:7-10). No; we cannot get away from the presence of the Lord, even by plunging into the depths. "Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 23:24).

Tuesday: Mission Accomplished – 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 Matthew 12, Jesus appealed to the story of Jonah as an example of the kind of repentance He was calling for, but the Jews refused.

Wednesday: An Angry, Restless Missionary – "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry" (Jonah 4:1). Jonah thought all his credit as a prophet was forfeited. He had told the people that the city should be destroyed, and now the Lord was not going to do it, and he was therefore "very angry." It seems that he had told the Lord as much before he left his own country; for now he says: "O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish" (verses 2-3). From this it appears that when the Lord first told Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh and cry against it, Jonah had said to Him, in substance, 'If I go up Nineveh and tell them the city shall be overthrown, they will stop sinning and turn to the Lord, and then thou wilt not overthrow it; and so if the city is not to be overthrown anyhow, I might as well stay in my own country, or anywhere else; therefore I will flee to Tarshish.' Jonah apparently cared more for his reputation than he did for all the souls in Nineveh, and thought that the Lord should turn a deaf ear to all the cries of the people, so that Jonah's word might be performed in spite of all. We need to have a spirit of forgiving, or else, like Jonah, we may not appreciate God forgiving others. It may be said, 'I want to forgive but I cannot.' Pray for a forgiving spirit: ask God to help you to see the solemn fact that while any trace of bitterness remains in your heart; your condition before God who judges according to the truth, is more hopeless than of the person who has wronged you. Some Christians, like Jonah, think they do well to be angry, or at least think it is one of the minor sins, when the provocation is sufficiently strong. Such a view is wholly wrong. The grace of forgiveness occupies a most important position, if it is absent, or has but a weak and sickly growth, the Christian life as a whole suffers the effect most keenly.

Thursday: A Two-Way Street – It was for the good of Jonah and the Ninevites that God sent him. While God does not want a man to run when he has not been sent (see Jeremiah 23:2), He does want a man to refuse to go when He sends him. It is a terrible thing to refuse to obey the Lord. To beg off from labour to which one has been appointed, is stubbornness.