

Bible Studies for Life for August 23: Are you running from God's will?

August 11, 2009

The Bible lesson this week is a favorite of many. It is about Jonah. Jonah was a prophet, who at first chose to disobey God concerning where he should go and preach. As a result of running from God's will, the prophet found himself in the belly of a big fish.

You might notice the book of Jonah is different from the other prophetic books in the Bible. The difference is, it tells the story of the prophet and does not center on his prophecies. Jesus makes reference to Jonah in Matthew 12:38-42 as a picture of his death and resurrection. Jonah is a historical narrative.

When wills clash (Jonah 1:1-3, 17)

I have heard many preachers say the best place to be is right in the center of the will of God. It is not uncommon for believers to have clear divine instruction but fail to obey that instruction. We must come to terms with the fact we often are tempted not to obey God's will because his instructions differ from our own desires.

Jonah knew exactly what God wanted him to do. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah son Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me'" (vv. 1-2).

What city in America today would you classify as a powerful and wicked city? In Jonah's day, Nineveh was considered an evil, sinful city.

According to the prophet Nahum, Nineveh was guilty of evil plots against God (Nahum 1:9), exploitation of the helpless (Nahum 2:12), idolatry, prostitution and witchcraft (Nahum 3:4). When God told Jonah to go and warn the people of Nineveh about God's judgment, what did he do? Jonah rebelled.

"But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish" (v. 3). Jonah did not want to preach repentance to the Assyrians of Nineveh because, using the words of television character Archie Bunker, "Edith, they are not our kind of people." Jonah was prejudiced because he did not want non-Jews to obtain God's favor.

Even though Jonah tried to flee to the farthest city from Nineveh by ship, he quickly discovered you couldn't hide from God. As he was traveling, a tremendous storm occurred. The storm was so bad, the experienced crew of the ship was sure they were going to die. Jonah knew why the storm had occurred and told the crew, "Pick me up, and throw me into the sea" (v. 12) and when that occurred "the raging sea grew calm" (v. 15).

Jonah did not die when he went overboard as "the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish for three days and three nights" (v. 17).

Are we better off running from God? Saying no to God's call is never in our best interest. We are far better off to follow God's will in the first place.

Concerning grace and second chance (Jonah 3:1-5, 10)

Do you know what a do-over is? Remember playing sandlot baseball as a kid? With no umpires around, how did you decide who was out or who was safe on close calls? Most often, someone would say, "Do over." In other words, the two teams could not agree upon a correct call so the play would be replayed. A second chance was given for the defense to make an out or

the offense to have a safe runner.

Does Jonah get a “do-over?” Yes he does. “Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you’” (vv. 1-2). The second time God called, Jonah obeyed.

After Jonah proclaimed God’s message, “the Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth” (v. 5). When God saw the Ninevites had repented, “he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (v. 10).

The story of Jonah is very encouraging to anyone who believes past rebellion disqualifies you from carrying out God’s will today. Jonah got a second chance to be in the will of God, and a whole city heard the message and repented. When God gives you another chance, take it.

What God cares about most (Jonah 4:5-11)

In Jonah 4:1-2, the prophet reveals why he was reluctant to go to Nineveh. He did not want to see these Gentiles forgiven; he wanted them destroyed. Jonah failed to see what God cares about most. That is, the salvation of all people. Jonah is learning an important lesson about God’s mercy and forgiveness.

God is not pleased with Jonah’s attitude so he teaches him a lesson. “Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city” (v. 5).

God made a vine to shade Jonah. A worm provided by God ate the vine. With the shade gone, God sent a scorching wind to blow on Jonah. “The sun blazed on Jonah’s head, so he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, ‘It

would be better for me to die than to live'" (v. 8).

Jonah wanted to die because he would not see the destruction of Nineveh. Jonah was happy when God saved him from the belly of the great fish but angry when Nineveh was saved.

"But God said to Jonah, 'Do you have the right to be angry about the vine?' 'I do,' he said, 'I am angry enough to die'" (v. 9). God could have destroyed Jonah for his defiant anger. God treated Jonah with mercy and forgiveness, giving him an opportunity to repent, just as he did Nineveh, the Israelites and anyone who will repent and believe.

Jonah was being selfish as he showed more concern for a plant than the salvation of an entire city. The story of Jonah is a reminder for us to check our priorities and make sure our interests are God's, not our own selfish interests.

When we discover and follow God's will for our lives, we join him in fulfilling his redemptive purpose.