

Life: Return to God

July 3, 2015

• *The Bible Studies for Life lesson for July 19 focuses on Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-5,10.*

I have difficulty thinking about Jonah without envisioning him sitting in the belly of a big fish for three days before it vomited him onto the shore. However, the fish was only a tool God used to bring Jonah to a place where he would be obedient to him. The most notable aspect of Jonah's story is the fact God used this reluctant prophet to save a city.

Ninevah: Modern-day Iraq

More than a century ago, archaeologists discovered the ruins of Ninevah near the present-day city of Mosul in Iraq. In the time of Jonah, Ninevah was an advanced metropolis with public parks, gardens, aqueducts and a magnificent palace for its king. The ancient city of Ninevah—as Mosul—still makes news today as the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) controls it. In 2014, CNN reported ISIS destroyed the presumed site of Jonah's tomb in Mosul. However, the preservation of his story in the Bible provides an example to believers of God's sovereignty over individuals as well as cultures.

Although Ninevah was a "great city," its wickedness angered God. The Lord told Jonah, "go to the great city of Ninevah and preach against it" (Jonah 1:1). Evidently preaching against an entire city—and a powerful, influential one—was not a message Jonah wanted to proclaim. So, he "ran away from the Lord," bought a ticket and embarked on a ship bound for Tarshish.

After being thrown overboard during a storm and spending three days in a fish's belly, Jonah was more amenable to following God's direction. He went into the city proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). The people of Ninevah believed God and put on

sackcloth as a visible confirmation of their repentance. “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened” (Jonah 3:10). God gave the Ninevites a second chance to repent and turn to him, just as he gave Jonah.

Running from God

Like Jonah, God’s people run from him even today. Why? We may be scared of what he has asked us to do. We might be convinced our way is better than his. Or, we might feel the guilt of sin in our lives and paradoxically run from God instead of humbling ourselves in confession and repentance. In Luke 15:11-32, for example, Jesus told a story of a son who left his father to live a life of debauchery. He refused to return to his father until he was so hungry he craved the slop his father fed pigs. Whether we are eating with pigs or trapped inside the stomach of a fish, running from God is costly physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Not too late

However, God gave both Jonah and the lost son second chances. Jonah returned to Ninevah, proclaimed God’s message and saved a city from destruction. The lost son’s father met him with open arms and threw a big party to welcome him home. Likewise, God gives us second chances to return to him. As long as we are alive, we have the opportunity to start over with God.

Second chances are God’s compassionate response to our failures, but they are more than that. Second chances also are opportunities for God to do great things. God’s people bravely sharing God’s eternal truth can change cultures. Individuals, returning to the authority of God in their lives, can bring healing and health to families. A life lived in harmony with the Lord is an adventurous one, characterized by the certainty that “with God, all

things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).