

Jonah

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WE know very little from the Scriptures about Jonah apart from the one great and dramatic incident in his life which is described in the Book which bears his name. We are told that he was the son of Amittai, and, from the second Book of Kings we find that Amittai was a prophet, though Jonah himself is not given that title anywhere in the Old Testament. He lived at the time of Jeroboam II, king of Israel, and this would have been about 800 B.C. It was the time of the great Assyrian empire, when Israel and other small nations paid tribute to Assyria. Jewish legend identifies Jonah with the son of the widow of Sarepta who was raised to life by Elijah, but there is no mention of this in the Bible, nor do we know from whence this legend springs.

The Book of Jonah starts abruptly by saying "that the word of the Lord came to Jonah" calling him to a task which he did not want to carry out. This is described as the conversion of Nineveh, "that great city," which lay in the land of Assyria, far away beyond the great rivers of the Euphrates and the Tigris. Scripture is specific in naming the "great city" but I think that the point of the story lies in the fact that it was a difficult, arduous and dangerous task which lay before Jonah. It involved a long and comfortless journey, leaving behind him all that he knew and loved, all the security, the ways of worship, the land which God had given and the people who were God's chosen people, all the personal associations, friends and supports which had hitherto been his life and with which he had been brought up. It meant going out into a strange country, to a strange people, a nation which he had been led to see as the enemy of Israel. It meant accepting all the dangers and difficulties of a long journey and at the end of it the possibility, not only that these foreigners would not welcome and listen to him, but that they might ill treat him or even put him to death. It is no wonder that Jonah did not want to obey.

We are not told how the word came to him. We only know that an inner voice haunted him and gave him no peace. We do not know at all how he first heard this voice, how he first conceived the idea that there was something he had to do for God. We only know that he came to a certain point of choice, a choice that had to be faced. Whenever we are faced with a choice, even a relatively unimportant one, and we cannot resolve it, we remain in a state of turmoil and ambivalence until we come to a decision which we can accept. To make a decision, however rational and sensible, which some part of us rejects, even if the other part accepts it, invariably means conflict, struggle, unhappiness and division. One can imagine Jonah turning this "call" round in his mind, saying to himself that it was madness to go to Nineveh; why should he go? Why should he be chosen? He was no prophet, he would not know how to preach, what were these people to him? They were not God's people as were the children of Israel; there was plenty he could do for God in his own land. One can imagine all kinds of tumultuous thoughts churning round in his mind; but somewhere deep in his heart was an inner gnawing thought or feeling that he had to go and it would not leave him alone. He could not forget it; it tormented him, tore him apart, tossed him up and down so that he had no rest. He tried to escape from it. Whether or not he actually went to Joppa and "took ship for Tarshish" is immaterial. What stands out very clearly is that the winds and waves within himself still tossed him to and fro and would not let

him be. He could not escape; the torment continued; indeed, it increased in intensity the more he tried to escape from it. Within him was a mighty tempest which he had created and he was powerless to allay it. Then comes a breaking point; "the ship was like to be broken." However much it seemed that it was outside from which the pressures came Jonah knew in his heart that it was his own refusal to face the call which was the cause of the breaking. Even when, for a brief moment, he could lull his tormenting thoughts to sleep the nightmare continued and he was rudely awakened by that inner commanding voice "what meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise." Perhaps in his attempted escape he had thought to leave the Lord behind; perhaps he doubted the existence of God; maybe it was all imagination; no-one had called him; it was but a strange thought in his own mind. He would try to forget it; but he could not. God was still present, however much he denied it; Jonah knew in his heart that the Word had been spoken within him.

But Jonah still did not want to listen. He was tormented beyond endurance, he was in anguish, and he cried out saying "take me up and throw me to the waves and the wind"; let this tempest within me take me and break me; a point must come when it will end, perhaps in death, perhaps in some solution, perhaps in oblivion; but let it come quickly, suddenly, drowning all this misery and torment in one wild moment. Let there be an end, because I cannot endure any more. But Jonah was wrong; it was not an end. God had prepared a different way for him. He was swallowed up in a great darkness beyond anything he could have imagined. He felt himself cast out of the sight of God. He knew hell.

When he first began to resist and resent the word of the Lord, Jonah built up a great barrier between himself and God; he had shut God out of his life, but he knew that God was still there; somewhere behind the mountain he had erected, somewhere hidden from him, was God. But now he was out of God's sight. God's absence could be felt and it was unbearable. Even here God was real, concretely real in His very absence. "The floods compassed me about even to the very soul," "the earth with her bars was about me for ever." And here the conviction comes to him that, although it is he who has brought himself to this place, he cannot retrace his steps, he cannot find the way of return; there is no way back. His anger, his resentment, his disobedience, all fall away and he remembers only that he is at the last extremity of his soul and he turns to God to save him; he remembers there is mercy, "salvation is of the Lord"; he knows also that it was his own "lying vanities," his own fears and doubts, resentments and denials, which had cut this mercy off from him. He makes also a promise; not a very great promise, only that he will offer "a sacrifice of thanksgiving" and "will pay that I have vowed" if only he is saved. But he has given in, he has acknowledged his weakness and turned towards God and God hears him. Relief comes. Quite suddenly (the image of being vomited up is very vivid) he finds himself "on dry land," no longer encompassed by the floods, no longer in the darkness of hell, no longer lost beyond sight. The Old Testament narrative tells us that Jonah was three days and three nights "in the belly of the great fish." Days and nights are often figurative expressions in the Bible referring to long periods of time. In the beginning God was six days in creating the world and we now think of these days as vast eons of time. In the same sense we are, I believe, meant to understand Jonah's three days and nights of darkness and despair in the depths of "the great fish" as a long period of time when Jonah seemed to himself to be without God, lost from the sight of the Almighty. We have no means of knowing how many weeks or days they stand for but to Jonah they seemed an eternity, for where hope is lost time surely seems endless, an unceasing procession of endless hours and days.

But this is not the end. God called Jonah a second time to the same task as before. We do not

know what was Jonah's state of mind when he came to himself "on dry land." We can assume that he must have been exhausted physically and mentally after such a prolonged and agonising struggle with his own inner conflicts. No doubt everything had become exaggerated and distorted in the hell into which he had been cast; perhaps he had forgotten the original call, perhaps it had faded into an insignificant spot, like the light at the far distant opening of a long, dark tunnel so that by comparison with the darkness it seemed no longer real; perhaps there was no room in his mind for anything but the anguish of his own suffering. Perhaps he hoped God had forgotten or had changed His mind. Perhaps he thought "now I have gone through all that He cannot ask any more of me." forgetting that God had never indeed asked this of him. Perhaps he thought that salvation meant an immediate entry into God's Kingdom, a kingdom which would be the exact opposite of that hell from which he had just been released. But it was not like that. Everything began all over again and once more he was faced with the same choice, the same dilemma, the same hard road. This time Jonah decides to follow the call and to go to Nineveh. But it seems that he went in a somewhat grudging spirit, not in the spirit of love but of wrath. His anger was still with him. He hated the Ninevites; they were the cause of all his suffering; they were enemies, conquerors and tax gatherers, men of a victorious and oppressive nation; such men would never be converted; God would destroy them; they did not deserve to be saved. He, Jonah, would stick to the letter of the law and the command, he would do as he was ordered, he would go and he would preach but he could not feel compassion and love for these wicked people.

So we get the picture of Jonah arriving at the great city, carrying out God's command, but in his own way. He who had found mercy, could find none in his heart for the rebellious people to whom he had been sent. He had not yet discovered that the gifts of God cannot be possessed for oneself alone, that a condition of acceptance is that of sharing, of giving again to others, and not only to a chosen few, but to all. No doubt he had given thanks for his own deliverance as he had promised but this was not enough; more was required of him.

Then we have the next picture of Jonah sitting in solitary anger above the city waiting for God to destroy it. He had carried out the word of the Lord on his own terms. He had preached the wrath of God, and God had turned it to good account; God had shown himself as a merciful God and Jonah was full of indignation. Once more there is the same temptation to resent God's ways and to wish to substitute his own. He had not, in fact, made the will of God his own. He had behaved as a hired servant and not as one of God's own people, as one who knew and understood the will of the Almighty Father for His children, and so, when he had completed his task he was disappointed because the result was not as he expected it. So he withdrew and found a nice, cool and shady place where he could enjoy his grievance and settled down to contemplate it; but this state didn't last long. The Lord prepared a worm which gnawed away the root of the gourd which shaded Jonah, and a vehement east wind got up, blowing the dust round him, and the sun shone down with devastating force on his head and he was most uncomfortable. Once again we see an inner state rather than an external happening. Jonah is at the mercy of his own passionate anger and resentment; they scorch him; something gnaws at his heart, something like a little worm, and like the cruel east wind his thoughts swirl round and round and torment him. God says for the second time "doest thou well to be angry?" and suddenly Jonah says "Yes I DO." But this time he is not angry for himself, he is disturbed for the worm, he cared that the plant had been withered up through his own anger and resentment; now there is hope because there is compassion, because Jonah thinks not of his own misery but of the suffering which, through his attitude, he has brought upon another living thing. True, it is only a little thing, a worm, a plant, a gourd. Nevertheless it is enough. Now at last God can speak to him of love, of compassion, of a

love which forgives, which can extend to one's enemies and even to "the cattle within the city." Jonah listens and hears the word of God, no longer as a scourge and a torment, but in a new way, a way which has depth, which penetrates into his heart and makes him no longer the unwilling servant but a true child of the almighty yet merciful God.

Did Jonah live? Did he write the Book himself? Who else could have written it in the intimate detail in which his state of mind is described, except one who had passed through it? If he indeed wrote it, then he had reached to a state of humility which could bare itself, strip itself, with all its faults, all its weakness and then stop short and say no more because the rest does not offer the same lesson which could save others. Just because he writes no more, because he makes no attempt to tell us about the rest of his life, because he shows us his whole human frailty, he is very endearing to us, and it is his privilege to stand as a prototype of Christ Himself so that those three days and nights of hell, the hell of God's absence, have been transfigured into a foreshowing of the three days and nights when the Lord Christ descended into hell before the glory of His Resurrection.