

JONAH – THE CALL, THE FISH AND THE FAST

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The Call

(Jonah 1:1-16)

The story of Jonah is a good example of how God calls people to serve Him in a specific way, how they can refuse this call, and how, later, they can repent of their disobedience and accept the call. Many are called but, due to disobedience, only few are chosen. In fact, the Bible shows us that God enrolls everyone for service at the point of call. Conversion comes first, calling follows in every instance.

To go back to the beginnings, Adam and Eve were created and then mandated to care for God's creation. They were to work for God. If they faithfully pursued their vocation, Eden was their example. The work would result in the world becoming a paradise. The whole earth will be like the garden of Eden. We know how the story went – consequent to their disobedience, sin ruined their chances of carrying out this mandate in God's fashion. The consequences are still with us today. However, God has an answer for us in Christ: He will create a new earth and a new heaven for those who accept His ways now.

Accepting God's ways now implies repentance – we repent of our sin and ask for forgiveness in the name of God's Son, our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Secondly, we accept God's mandate which is to work with Him to make this world a better place – we do this, most importantly, through serving God. There is a call upon us all to serve God, to be co-workers with Him in making this world a better place.

There are seven main branches to serving God in this sense, three of which are primary and involve everyone, the remaining four are specialist and belong specifically within the Church.

The Primary Roles

1. Family role
2. Community role
3. Personal role

In the family and community, we must work with others to create harmony and social cohesion. We are called to support decent values and to uphold God's truth and justice. We are called to promote fairness, equality of opportunity - a culture in which all human life has worth and dignity. As for our personal role, God calls us into a life of dependence upon Him, to worship Him, and to encourage and persuade others to recognise their Creator (God), Redeemer (Jesus Christ) and Sustainer (God's Holy Spirit). As Christians, these primary roles are fundamental to our faith, indeed, the proof that we are born again from above will be found particularly in these roles.

The Specialist Roles

1. Apostles
2. Prophets
3. Evangelists
4. Pastors

No-one can perform well in these specialist roles, unless they are doing well in the primary roles.

In the story of Jonah, we learnt that Jonah's specialist role was that of a prophet. Often a prophet has the gift of knowledge – knowledge, sometimes, of things in the past, things currently happening, and things that are yet to occur. This knowledge is always attributed to the moving of God's Spirit upon the prophet on specific occasions, the prophet hears the word of God, or sees a vision, or has a dream. Sometimes, they have the ability to interpret dreams and visions revealed by God to other people. On many occasions, prophets, however, are mainly preachers, people directed by God to preach the good news of God's willingness to forgive sin, as well as His authority to judge persistent unrighteousness. Jonah was sent to preach this good news to the people of Assyria. He was to go to their capital city Nineveh to warn them of impending catastrophe unless they repent of their wickedness.

Jonah's initial response to God's calling was to run away, he did not want to go to Nineveh. **Why? Try and give some reasons from your understanding of Jonah's action, the relationship of the Assyrians to the Jews (or Israel as a nation), and your understanding of human nature when confronted with the authority of God.**

The Fish

(Jonah 1:17; 2:1-10)

The sea creature that swallowed up Jonah when he was cast into rough waters by fellow mariners has been given many names, including whale, hippopotamus, etc. Some doubted whether this was a real creature. However, Jesus Christ spoke about Jonah's experience as a real event and likened it to what would happen to Himself before His resurrection. Jesus lived in modern times compared with the times of Abraham. If He had no doubt in this story, we should have no doubt at all: God did send a fish to swallow Jonah, not for a meal, but so that Jonah can be preserved. In the belly of the fish, Jonah had a second chance to yield to God's instructions for his life. He repented of his disobedience, accepted his calling and made a covenant with God. The fish was Jonah's **ark**, it took Jonah to his destination, and spat him upon the shores of Nineveh.

Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish teaches us certain things about prayer, about making a vow (or, covenant/promise/pledge) and God's providence. What are these lessons?

The Fast
(Jonah 3:1-10)

Fasting means *temporary abstinence or withdrawal from sensual pleasures*. We enjoy pleasures through our five senses: taste, seeing, feeling, hearing and smelling.

Fasting is an approved way of communicating with God, it always involves prayer and worship, and a deliberate effort to make amends for wrongdoing or any shortcomings. Sometimes, it is not making amends for wrongdoing or shortcomings, the effort is directed towards growth in specific areas of our personal relationship with God, and with our fellow human beings.

The people of Nineveh fasted in a specific way for a specific purpose, in a way that God found acceptable. This resulted in God's forgiveness, and they moved from calamity to security, from the threatened wrath of God to the promised blessing of obedience. Fasting always produces beneficial result when undertaken in faith, according to God's plan. Is fasting painful? Is fasting always done correctly and for the correct reasons? Is fasting necessary on a regular basis for the Christian? Why must we fast, and when, and how? What do we stand to gain?