

May 8th 2011: Jonah #2 :"When God Says 'GO' He Really Means It!"
Jonah 1:4-17

When one stops and thinks about it, this book of Jonah could easily be called "The Book of the Incredible". It was incredible that Jonah, a prophet, would say No to God in the first place, and think he could get away with it. It was an incredible storm that God sent and it was incredible that those sailors first threw Jonah overboard and then became believers in the Lord when the storm suddenly stopped. It is incredible that God sent an incredible fish to swallow up Jonah and it was incredible that after Jonah's preaching the whole city of Nineveh repented of their sins and were saved from God's judgment. It was incredible that after all he had been through Jonah remained cross at God for not destroying the Assyrians, and it's even more incredible that God took the time to open up His own heart to his so stubborn follower in order to persuade him to see things from God's perspective. The whole book is full of incredible's and we shouldn't be surprised at that, because our God is an Incredible and Awesome God.

I have preached a fair bit in the past on this book of Jonah but always with the main emphasis being on Jonah himself. His actions, reactions, and how they affected his life and ministry. This time however I've found myself concentrating more on God and what this story teaches us about Him. His character and the power of His mercy and love towards all people—even the most heathen and cruel.

For in God's reaction to His defiant servant Jonah, we recognize God's passion for mercy. For giving even the seriously bad guys a chance to save their souls.

FOR when Jonah hands in his prophet's badge and boards a boat for Spain; when he shows by his actions that he has no intention of following God's instructions; hardly any time passes before he is forced to learn that "When God Says 'GO' He really means it!" And that's a revelation to us about God's character.

There is a well known comic saying, that is often found in those comedy shows about the second world war. It is used when a German interrogator intends to get information out of his prisoner. He says in an atrocious parody of a German accent—"Ve hav vays of making you talk".

As I considered today's reading from Jonah chapter one my first thought was of our Almighty, Awesome God saying to Jonah, when Jonah decided not to obey God's commands, "I have ways of making you go!". And He surely did.

Look at Jonah 1:4

Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

This wasn't a vengeful thing on the part of God. He wasn't getting back at Jonah because Jonah had done the wrong thing. It was not an angry reaction. Indeed there is no mention of God ever being angry towards Jonah, or speaking angrily to Jonah throughout the whole book. God knew His prophet, and He created a situation in His prophet's life that would lead to Jonah doing the Job that God so wanted him to do.

Jonah knew the implications of being a prophet of God. He knew full well what was expected of him. What he may not have realized was that he couldn't resign from the position just because he didn't like what he was being asked to do.

The same holds true for every Christian. We signed on to honour Jesus as Saviour and Lord. To obey His commands and to be involved in the advancement of His kingdom. We cannot resign from that either. As a follower of Jesus I can disobey, muck things up, get things wrong, but I can't resign. And I shouldn't be surprised either if God sometimes makes life uncomfortable for me as He did for Jonah, in order to channel me in the direction of doing His will, particularly if I have been disobedient or slow to respond

Because that is what God did when He sent that storm. Jonah had no doubt that God's hand was behind it. He in fact said to the sailors before they threw him overboard in v11

"Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

God's heart desire for the heathen in Nineveh came before His desire for Jonah's comfort, and He refused to let Jonah say 'No'.

The good news for Jonah and for us is that God never let Jonah go either. Verse 17 in the NKJV says:

Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

The word **had** is important because we know that God being God did not suddenly think about producing a great fish to rescue Jonah. He had that already prepared for Jonah as a place where Jonah could come to terms with what He must do now as God's servant. It was far from a nice place for Jonah. For three days he was in a place that we would possibly describe as 'hell on earth', but by the end he was declaring according to chapter 2:9:-

***But I, with a song of thanksgiving,
will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good.
Salvation comes from the LORD."***

For although it wasn't a nice place, it ended up with Jonah in the centre of God's will and being most effective in His ministry for His Lord.

There are also times when God needs to take us through hard times, not always to make us obedient, but because that is the only way He can use us.

Think of Paul and Silas in that prison cell in Philippi as recorded in Acts 16. They were severely beaten before they were put in the inner cell with their feet firmly fastened in the stocks and chained. There they sang hymns of praise to God and prayed in such a way that their fellow prisoners were listening to them. Would they ever had had such a receptive audience if they had not been going through such a terrible ordeal? I don't think so.

Then that frightening earthquake which led to the guard's conversion, baptism, and the commencement of a ministry at Philippi which turned out to be the happiest ministry that Paul ever had.

I also can recall times in ministry when it was so hard and unpleasant—when everything seemed to go wrong—that I thought to myself, this cannot be right. Times when I struggled just to see God's finger in it let alone His hand. Yet somehow I sensed that He was still there and as I persevered so He began to use me.

I remember John Johnston, the father of Linda Taylor who is a strong Christian and a teacher at the school next door. When John was Pastor of

the South Perth Baptist Church he was struck down with agonizing back pain that was so bad that he was taken by ambulance to hospital. And he definitely didn't want to be there. He wanted to be ministering in his church not languishing in a bed of severe pain in hospital. He could not see God's hand in it at all and was quite cross with God. But into the next hospital bed came a man in similar pain who needed to talk to someone about the Lord and John was there. It was far from pleasant for John but the heart of God was for that man and the comfort of His servant was at that moment a secondary consideration.

I think of that Chilean miner who went into that mine I believe, as a half hearted Christian yet who through that terrible experience was used by God to be His missionary to those trapped miners.

I don't believe God takes pleasure in making things tough for His followers. He didn't get a perverse satisfaction in causing Jonah to endure the storm and the journey in the fish. He stays close with us when we go through the hard times and He feels with us any hardship we endure.

But God's love for the unsaved is so great that He is prepared to allow his children at times to suffer if, by that suffering, He will be able to use them in some way to meet the need of the ungodly to discover Jesus.

And this should not surprise us. For God willingly allowed His own Son to suffer so that the world should be saved through Him. Hebrews 2:9-10

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰ In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Jonah bought his suffering upon himself because of his disobedience to God's call, and that may well happen to us too. But it is more likely that God will allow us to go through hard times so that He can better use us to help, challenge, or guide the lost into the path of life.

So when things are tough remember what we learn in Jonah about God's character. That He will always rescue you from being destroyed by the evil one. He will be with you in the storms. That the tough times are not signs of His anger but of His willingness to allow you to go through times of

discomfort so that in some way the message of hope will touch others, through your faith and perseverance.

Bill Bright in, A Handbook for Christian Living writes:-

Some years ago at the opening of a disarmament conference, in the midst of a speech of King George of England, someone, tripped over the wires of the Columbia Broadcasting Company, tearing them loose and interrupting service. The chief operator quickly grasped the loose wires in his bare hands, holding them in contact, and for 20 minutes the current passed through him while repairs were being made. His hands were slightly burned, but through them the words of the king passed on to millions of listeners, and were heard distinctly. Without his courage and endurance, the king's message would have failed to reach its destination.

Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, has chosen to send His message of salvation to a lost and dying world through human means. Whatever the cost, the message must reach those who have never heard. Every faithful Christian who is willing is a human instrument through whom the King's voice is reaching the lost with a message of deliverance, freedom and peace (vastly more important than the message from London!).