

Home Group study: week beginning 20th September 2020

Jonah: Route back from rock bottom

Have you ever been in a situation where you thought 'your time had come'? What happened? How did you react to it? How come you're still here? How did you react when you realised you weren't actually going to die (assuming you didn't, of course...)?

Read: Jonah 1: 17-2: 10

Discovery

Now let's put aside the old question as to whether this was really a fish or a whale. Probably when this was written about 2,700 years ago they weren't too bothered about a precise species classification and it doesn't make much difference to the events described (in Morris's humble opinion, anyway: not necessarily a reflection of Jubilee Church's theology...). Do you believe this story actually happened as described? Is the length of time that Jonah was in the belly of the 'great fish' significant?

Read Chapter 2: 2-9 again, taking time to consider each phrase carefully. It's a very graphic and detailed description of what happened to Jonah. It reads almost like a Psalm of David, when David was going through troubled times. Discuss how Jonah's physical experience described here is paralleled by his spiritual experience.

Look now at verse 10. What other passages in the Bible can you think of where God speaks and something happens? Does God still work like that today?

Understanding

In Chapter 2 verse 4 Jonah says to God: 'I have been banished from your sight'. Given the fact God had commanded him to do something in Chapter 1 and he had deliberately gone as far as he could in the opposite direction, do you think Jonah is right when he says that? Why does God have mercy on him (see the second part of v4 and v7)? We can sometimes hope that God remembers us in our difficulties: but who remembers whom here?

To what depth has Jonah fallen — physically, morally and spiritually? And whose fault is it that he has reached those depths? How likely might you consider it that God would save you if you had descended to those depths, especially if you knew it was your own fault?

Where is Jonah when he prays this prayer? Just think for a moment what it must have been like for him there. It would be totally pitch dark, not to mention revoltingly smelly and airless. He probably wouldn't even have known what was going on and the most likely

outcome was that he would be slowly dissolved by the acid in the fish's stomach. If you were in that situation might you be tempted to think that having drowned might have been preferable? How is Jonah able to pray, from inside the fish, deep down in the sea and miles from land, 'But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God' (v6)? What other words of faith do we read here?

Look now at verse 10. The Bible is wonderful in its way of understating things. The classic perhaps is the way Genesis 1: 16 drops in the little afterthought in the Creation story: 'He (God) also made the stars'. Here we have just the briefest description of what happened next. Remember, Jonah has been inside the fish for three days: if it was just a case that Jonah had disagreed with the fish's digestive system it would have vomited him out much more quickly than that, and Jonah would've been no better off! So, in practical terms, what would have been involved in the fulfilment of God commanding the fish to vomit Jonah on to dry land?

The way Jonah is effectively brought back to life is really the climax and the turning point of the whole Jonah story. Hopefully we can all think of a parallel event which is the climax and turning point of an even bigger story! Have you ever thought just how understated the story of Jesus' resurrection is? Why might that be?

Application

When we go through really tough times we need to cling on to the fact that God always wants the best for us and it is often through suffering that God enables us to grow.

What lesson has God taught Jonah? Is it just about forgiveness, or is there more to it than that?

How completely is God able to forgive Jonah, and to reinstate him, even though he has turned completely away from God? What are the steps Jonah takes to receive God's forgiveness? What lesson is there for us?

We can see that the moment we turn back to God he turns right back to us. It may be, like Jonah, that the only route back is through even darker times. How did Jonah react when he was inside the fish, a place of even greater darkness and uncertainty than being in the sea? How can we find hope on those occasions when things seem to get even worse when we pray? God spoke a word to that fish to save Jonah. From what we know of Jonah, did he receive special favour from God because he was far more 'saintly' than we can ever be? So is there any reason why God can't save each of us when we go wrong in life?