

The Role of the Church in Mission Advance

The word Jonah means "dove." Peculiarly enough, the man who bore this name is remembered for his famous flight.

1-3 He was a preacher of the (Northern Kingdom) of Israel about the middle of the 8th century B.C. He and Amos were contemporaries, though a date in History is about all they had in common. Amos was a country preacher; Jonah was a city preacher. Amos was an amateur. He was really a shepherd who preached on the side. Jonah was a polished professional.

The long days of meditation that Amos had as he tended his sheep gave him a rare rapport with God. He came to know how God felt about the way the people of the Northern Kingdom were living. They were perfeiting their destiny, but they didn't even know it. It broke God's heart, but they didn't care. What broke the heart of God broke the heart of Amos. He was that close to God.

Jonah didn't think in these terms. He was a respected community leader, and everything seemed to him to be going quite well. He was happy and loved his work--speaking at the Rotary Club, invoking banquets, serving on numerous important committees.

Then one day a most distressing thing happened to Jonah. God called him to go on a preaching mission to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, Israel's most dreaded enemy.

It made no sense! His work was going so well in Israel. The people loved him and he loved them. There were none of the tensions between preacher and people that some men experience. Jonah and his people felt just the same about things. Why should he leave a good situation to go to a ragan place like Nineveh?

Most of all--Jonah couldn't understand God. Why would he want anybody to preach to a bunch of sinners like the Ninevehites?

He made up his mind. He was (not) going to do it! He would quit the ministry first. (Selling insurance) would beat preaching in Nineveh.

He caught a boat for Tarshish. He would leave his field, his friends, God--everything. But that was where he was wrong. You can't escape God. You can refuse Him, but you can't escape Him.

16-4 The ship was hardly out of the port when it encountered a (terrific storm.) All seamen experience storms, but this one scared them! The waves rolled, and the wind blew. I get sea-sick just reading about it!

Every sailor on the boat prayed and worked, but nothing seemed to help. It looked like they would perish for certain. They threw overboard everything that was not nailed down. Finally Jonah sheepishly confessed that he was probably the cause of the storm, because he was running away from God--and they threw him overboard.

That did it! The storm broke immediately. The captain had lost his cargo and one paying customer, but at least he had saved his ship.

17 Before Jonah could drown, which was probably just what he would like to have done, a big fish swam up and swallowed him whole.

What kind of fish was it? Has a sea creature of any kind every been caught that has a throat large enough to swallow a man whole and a stomach big enough to hold him? These are the silliest questions I know for grown, supposedly-intelligent people to waste their time on. God can do some custom building. (If God needed a special star to guide) the Wise Men from the East to Bathlehem, he surely could have made one simply enough. And if he needed a fish to carry a fugitive from Providence, he could make one. If this is too big for you to swallow by faith, I am afraid you are spending your vacation at the wrong place. There are bigger things than this for us to grapple with!

At any rate, here Jonah was in the stomach of a fish with seaweed wrapped around his head, scared to death because he didn't know the end of the story like we do. He didn't know what was going to happen to him, but he knew why it was happening. He had tried to run away from God. He promised God that if he would just rescue him, he would go to Nineveh and preach.

Nothing happened for a while. For three of the longest days and nights in history, Jonah rode around in the abysmal blackness of that Fish's swaying stomach. I doubt if he thought of food.

Then suddenly Jonah felt himself caught in a violent motion. He thought this must be the end! He closed his eyes and braced himself. After being bounced around for a few moments, everything became still. He cautiously opened his eyes, and found himself on a shoreline. His funny jitney was gone.

When Jonah had recuperated a bit from his cruise, God spoke to him again: "Go to Nineveh and preach." This time Jonah went, but he still didn't want to, and it showed in his preaching. It always does. "Forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown," he preached. Wouldn't that thrill you and make you want to know God?

There was nothing of the grace of God and His love for these pagan people. Nothing of what he had revealed at Sinai or through Jonah's experience--only a prophecy of doom: "Forty days and you shall be overthrown."

God did at this time what he has done many another time--he won the hearts of people in spite of poor preaching. The people of Nineveh believed and repented, and God withdrew judgment from them. A revival occurred which touched the lives of countless hundred of the citizens of the great city.

Do you know how (Jonah felt) about it? It made him angry! I want you to hear a couple of verses from the fourth chapter of Johan: "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry. And he prayed, "O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live." (4:1,3)

What would have thrilled the average preacher to death, infuriated Jonah. He wanted to die, and God complied with his wish! He did die. Not literally, but he died on the inside.

Whatever happened to Jonah? The Bible doesn't say. The account ends with him seething in anger that the people of Nineveh had repented and God was not going to judge them. I expect that this is the way Jonah spent the rest of his life, sour, cranky, complaining-- wishing he were dead when he was already dead as far as any usefulness to God was concerned.

The theme of this week's conference is "Advance in Foreign Missions Again." This is exactly what God was trying to get Israel to do through Jonah. God was trying to get preacher Jonah to catch a vision and communicate it to his people. This was not the first time God had tried.

It was at Sinai that God had first told the people of Israel that he had brought them out of Egypt to be a kingdom of priests--a nation of missionaries. Their very destiny as a nation was to proclaim to the world that Jehovah alone was God. Israel became a nation, but never a nation of missionaries. Prophet after prophet tried to get them to sense their destiny and realize it, but few of the people ever got far beyond Jonah's perspective of things.

The destiny of the New Testament church is exactly the same as Israel's. In fact, it is given in almost the same language: "Be ye a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (I Peter 2:9) You know and I know that not many churches have ever been captivated by their sense of missionary destiny. Few ever get beyond preoccupation with buildings and budgets. I am here to talk about the church's role in mission advance, though I suspect you are all convinced by now that I had completely forgotten it.

What is the role of the church in mission advance? It has the most basic role of all. Money and missionaries come from churches. Money goes through state conventions, but it comes from churches. Young people often hear and answer God's call at college or in assemblies, but most of these have been prepared for this call by the R.A., G.A., Training Union, and hopefully, the preaching program of the local church.

It seems to me that the experience of Jonah teaches some fundamentally important things about making our churches missionary.

The first thing it teaches is that a church must have a spirit of missionary destiny. I think this was one of the main things God hoped to accomplish through Jonah. He wanted him to preach forgiveness to the people of Nineveh, but then God wanted Jonah to return to his people with a new vision of the world's need for the knowledge of Jehovah. He wanted the myopic Israelites to catch this vision, for there were hundreds of other cities like Nineveh. God had made a nation of them for the specific purpose of using them as missionaries to the world. God wanted the people of Nineveh to repent of their sins, but I expect he wanted repentance and dedication from Israel even more. More than anything else in the world, God wanted to ignite a spark of missionary zeal in the people of Israel.

This spark--this spirit of missions--is indescribably important. Some churches are old settlers' clubs; some are Bible-study societies, and some are Karate clubs; but churches are supposed to be missionary agencies.

If a church does not have a sense of missionary destiny, the fanciest displays in the world will not get much money and the highest-powered, imported speakers will not get many volunteers. A church has got to have the world on its heart.

That world has got to begin across the street. There is nothing commendable about a sanctimonious Lottie Moon program with the globe being lighted by a bunch of candles in a church where the classes are closed fraternities and sororities. Evangelism and missions are so inseparably bound together that I doubt the sincerity of anybody who has one without the other.

Jonah rebelled against God & he died.

He died the worst way there is to die (in spirit) but not in body. He may have gone on existing for years, but his spirit withered and died just like that gourd vine that God gave him for shade. Here is another of the lessons of his life. To rebel against or simply to disregard God's will and call concerning missions will result in death. This is true for the individual or the church.

I wonder where Paker James Cauthen would be now if he had stayed on as pastor of the Polytechnic Church in Fort Worth years ago when God called him to be a missionary? Something would have died within him. Something dies within any person who says, "no" to the call of God.

Jonah's people died, too. God was not able to awaken them to their destiny as a kingdom of priests. Just a few years after Jonah preached in Nineveh, Assyria, of which Nineveh was capital, conquered Israel. Have you heard of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel? Well, this was when they got lost. When they were taken captives by the Assyrians, they were soon completely amalgamated within the life of the pagan nation. Actually, they were lost a long time before the Assyrians came. They were lost when they forfeited their destiny under God.

The church that does not extend its arms to the lost world will soon find its arms crossed in death. Oh, the church will go on meeting. The lights will burn at night. People will scurry around as if they were doing something, but the soul of a church will die unless missions is its pulse beat.

When I was a seminary student in Ft. Worth, my wife and I attended Broadway Baptist Church. On the way to Broadway from where we lived, each Sunday, we passed a little Primitive Baptist Church. The two churches were only a few blocks apart. The Primitive Baptist Church was on one of the main streets of Ft. Worth. The church's frame building was about 40' X 60'. Broadway covered an entire city block. What could account for the difference between these two Baptist churches in the same area of the same city that studied the same Bible each Sunday? The difference was that one of the churches had a sense of destiny for world missions and the other ignored Acts 1:8. They figured that when God got ready to save the heathen, he would do so without anyone's help. The difference was not where the churches were; the difference was where the church's hearts were.

Let me close with this last truth. Just as surely as rebellion results in death, responding to God's call to missions will result in life. I expect I know what most of you want for your churches. You want your Sunday School to grow; you want people to walk the aisles for Jesus; you want the people of the church to be good stewards of their possessions; you want your young people to surrender their lives to the service of God. I'll tell you how to get these things and more. Forget yourself in deference to a lost world; put missions and evangelism at the forefront of all that you do, and God will bless your church beyond its wildest dreams.