

ALL IN THE PAST

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.'
³ *But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD (Jon. 1:1-3).*

Jonah! His name means *dove* in Hebrew, but how different from the first dove which flew from the ark to find dry land where the kingdom of God might be re-established after the judgment of the flood.

Jonah! On reflection how little the Bible seems to say about the details of his personal life. His own book identifies him in the briefest and simplest of fashions:

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city . . .'

But these words at least provide a clue to enable us to track down this elusive prophet of God. They identify him with the Jonah who receives honourable mention in the Books of the Kings:

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In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years.²⁴ And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin.²⁵ He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, *according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.*²⁶ For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel.²⁷ But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash (*2 Kings 14:23–27*).

From these verses we are able to put together some parts of the jigsaw puzzle of Jonah's life. When we do so, the impression we are left with is that, living in admittedly dark and difficult days, Jonah was a man who enjoyed a number of invaluable spiritual privileges. In order to understand his flight from God, we will need to consider what these were.

THE PRIVILEGE OF SERVICE

Jonah was God's servant (*2 Kings 14:25*). He was God's bond-slave, called to advance God's kingdom through obedience to his will. But the title 'servant' has a richer meaning even than this. Frequently it appears as a technical term in the Old Testament, for someone who has been specially set apart by God for a unique purpose. That is why the great figure of the Suffering Messiah who emerges from the shadows in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is introduced by God as 'my servant'. In similar vein God speaks through Amos about 'his servants

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the prophets' (*Amos* 3:7). Those words underline for us the nature of Jonah's *privilege* as a prophet; for what Amos wrote was this:

For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.

Jonah belonged to that privileged band of men who had stood in the presence of God and felt the pressure of his will upon their spirits. They heard his unmistakable voice telling them what he was about to perform among the nations.

One of the Old Testament's words for a prophet is 'a seer'. He was a man who had insight, who 'saw' into the purposes of the eternal God, and was divinely commissioned to bring God's people under the practical authority of his Word. Jonah was a man of this order.

While we cannot say for certain whether the passage in 2 Kings refers to a period before or after Jonah's summons to Nineveh, it would more naturally seem to refer to Jonah's *earlier* ministry. If that is so, our picture of Jonah's privileges as God's servant is clarified. For these words suggest that his service was crowned with a measure of fruitfulness and success. People remembered what he preached. His message stuck in their minds and, more important, his prophecies were fulfilled. That was the chief test of whether a prophet was sent by God or not (cf. *Deut.* 13:1 ff.). And in the case of Jonah, history unfolded just as he said it would.

What an extraordinary privilege it must have been to be the mouthpiece of God in this way! But that was only the beginning of his spiritual inheritance.

THE PRIVILEGE OF A SENSE OF DESTINY

In general terms 2 Kings 14 gives us sufficient information to identify the times in which Jonah lived. It was a time of crisis for God's people. Kings 'did what was evil in the sight of the

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LORD' (2 Kings 14:24) with solemn consequences for the nation's life. But those were also days in which God was at work. Jonah's immediate predecessors in the prophetic ministry were Elijah and Elisha. During their lifetime God had broken through the silence of previous generations and was once again raising up his servants to speak his Word with grace and power to the people. Against the dark backcloth of sin and rebellion there stood out little glimmers of light and hope. Jonah appears to have been one of this new order of prophets called by God.

It is characteristic of such men that they are deeply conscious of a sense of destiny. To be a true prophet of God, and to be made aware that God has a destiny for one's life, were almost synonymous in the thinking of the Old Testament. In every age those who have been of service to God's kingdom, whether publicly or privately, known or unknown, have been conscious of this sense of destiny. They have devoted their lives to it.

We find the same consciousness in Paul. He recognized that he was 'one untimely born' (1 Cor. 15:8). By nature he did not fit in to the expected order of things. He was an apostle only because of the special mercy of God in his life (1 Tim. 1:12-16). Over and over again he insisted that it was God who had called him and set him apart for his evangelistic and church-building ministries.

Naturally, such a sense of destiny is a burden. But it is also a blessing. It safeguards us from falling to many temptations. Paul again is an example. From the moment of his conversion God had given him an inkling about the course of his future service (see Acts 26:16-18). He had been called by God to be an evangelist to the Gentiles (see Acts 9:15; 22:15). But it was some time before this took effect when, through the Holy Spirit, the church at Antioch recognized that God was calling him to a very special ministry (Acts 13:1 ff.). In later years, when Paul suffered as a prisoner, and experienced hardship, he was wonderfully sustained by this sense

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of destiny. He recognized that he was a prisoner 'on behalf of you Gentiles' (*Eph.* 3:1). *He knew what he was for!* That knowledge meant everything to him in times of darkness and stress.

Few things are more important for the Christian than to have a conscious sense of God's destiny. That destiny may not be one of spiritual fame. That is of secondary importance. What is important is that we have some sense of what we are *for*.

Joshua, the successor of Moses, had to learn this lesson the hard way. The narrative of the capture of Jericho is preceded by the strange story of Joshua's encounter with 'a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand.' Joshua (naturally enough for the commander of Israel's massive numbers) asks: 'Are you for us, or for our adversaries?' (*Josh.* 5:13). The answer he receives is calculated to turn inside-out his whole way of thinking: 'No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come.' Joshua fell to the ground in worship! The real question was not: Who was this strange figure for? It was: Who was Joshua for? Did Joshua grasp the true nature of his destiny? *Was he for the Lord?*

This knowledge ought to be one of the great motivating forces in our lives. It became that in Queen Esther's. Fearful to intercede for God's people although they faced possible annihilation, she was urged on to serve the Lord by Mordecai's penetrating words: 'And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom *for such a time as this?*' (*Esther* 4:14). It was this question which drew from her lips the vow *to do what God had made her for*: 'and if I perish, I perish' (*Esther* 4:16).

The same kind of motivation sustained Nehemiah. Distracted on every hand, tempted to give up the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, he recognized what God had called him to Jerusalem *for*, 'I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it?' (*Neb.* 6:3).

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There appears to be a direct relationship between our usefulness in the service of God and the sense of destiny we have that, whatever happens, we are doing the work to which God has called us.

Jonah must have known something of this. He was God's man, God's servant, God's prophet. He had come to know God's will for his life. When we meet him in the opening words of the *Book of Jonah*, God is once more making it clear to him what he is *for*. That is a privilege beyond price!

THE PRIVILEGE OF SPIRITUAL FELLOWSHIP

We naturally tend to think that these Old Testament prophets emerged from obscurity. Elijah, for example, strikes us as a kind of 'now you see me, now you don't' figure, as he appears and disappears with the message of God. One day, it seems, Amos is tending the flock, and the next day he is proclaiming God's Word (*Amos 7:15*). Consequently our natural inclination is to see the prophets as isolated stars in the sky, individuals and sometimes individualists (the melancholy Jeremiah, the eccentric Ezekiel).

But God only appears to work suddenly. In fact his movements across the scene of human history are well-planned, long-rehearsed, and constantly inter-related. That is why, whenever we think of Jonah's background, we ought to recall to mind a little phrase which is repeated in the early chapters of 2 Kings. Frequently in these chapters, set probably in the days of Jonah's teenage years, we find references to 'the sons of the prophets' (*2 Kings 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 4:1, 38; 5:22; 6:1*). These words give a hint of what God was doing. He was gathering around the prophets young men, devoted to his name, gifted in his service, and loyal to his servants. They served the prophets Elijah and Elisha, were exposed to their ministry of the Word of God, and bore a relation to them similar to that which Timothy bore to the Apostle Paul. They were trained for the

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advance of God's kingdom in these 'schools of the prophets'. Elisha in particular (himself a 'son' of Elijah) was a leading figure in this new movement of God's Spirit.

There is no way of knowing whether Jonah ever belonged to one of the 'schools of the prophets'. But he belonged to their generation. Indeed an old Jewish legend (and legend, alas it is!) affirms that Jonah was actually the son of the widow of Zarephath, and had been raised from the dead by Elijah for future ministry (*1 Kings* 17:7-24). It seems more than likely therefore that Jonah either was himself one of the 'sons of the prophets', or at least knew many of them. Under these circumstances, he would have made every effort to enjoy the tremendous spiritual encouragements of fellowship with like-minded young men (and women too! – see *2 Kings* 4:1).

Early years of spiritual fellowship invested in study, prayer, discussion, evangelism, and the sheer exhilaration of seeking to discover the will of God for our own lives, and the purpose of God for our fellowship, repay vast dividends in the future. Is there anything to be compared with the friendships forged then in the heat of fellowship? This comradeship lasts, and does not seem to be diminished by distance or by time. We ought to thank God with all our hearts if we have had the privilege of being bound together with fellow Christians like this, to live and to die for Christ and his cause.

Three inestimable privileges: Service, a Sense of Destiny, and Spiritual Fellowship. These form the background to the life of Jonah when we meet him in the opening verses of his book. This Jonah, to whom the Word of God now comes, is a man rich in spiritual blessings. His past life reads like a rare pedigree. But when we come upon him now, despite all his past privileges and usefulness, he is a man who slips, stumbles, and falls. The first lesson we

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learn is not so much the wonder of the privileges we may enjoy, but rather this solemn truth: *No past privilege, nor all past privileges together; no past obedience, nor fruitfulness in service, can ever substitute for present obedience to the Word of God.* Great blessings only bring present fruitfulness when they are met with continuing obedience.

When we first encounter Jonah, therefore, he is no longer the man he once was. The reasons will eventually unravel themselves as we read through his biography. But before we do so, we must recognize the practical importance, and indeed urgency, of directing these questions to ourselves: Am I living with only the memories of obedience in my life? Am I substituting my past spiritual record for the pressing responsibility of present submission to the will of God?

It is possible for men to say to Christ: 'Lord, Lord, did we not do many mighty works in your name?', but, through failure fully and wholeheartedly to serve him to the end, hear these words: 'I never knew you; depart from me' (*Matt. 7:22-23*). Past privileges and blessings serve then only to magnify the shame of our disobedience. How much we need to take to heart that it is one thing to begin, another to continue, and yet another to finish the course.