

OT LESSON 33  
**SHARING THE GOSPEL WITH THE WORLD**  
by Ted L. Gibbons

**INTRODUCTION:** My 7<sup>th</sup> son just got his mission call. He is going to Indiana, Indianapolis, *Spanish speaking*. The world is changing isn't it. All my missionaries but one have been to Spanish Speaking missions. I wonder what mission call would be the hardest. Are there places that now have no missionaries that would present particular difficulties?

Which scriptural missionaries had the hardest assignments? Abinadi? Lehi? John the Baptist? Alma and Amulek in Ammonihah? Moses? Lesson 33 is in part the account of a missionary that got a call to Ninevah.

I have in my files an article about the atrocities committed in Jonah's day by the Assyrians. Ninevah was their capitol city. The article is entitled "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death" (*Biblical Archeology Review*, January/ February, 1991, pp. 55-61). The article, liberally interspersed with photos and drawings of carvings and etchings from ancient Assyria, depicts the awful way Assyrians treated captive individuals and nations.

Nahum was speaking of Ninevah when he wrote:

WOE to the bloody city! it [is] all full of lies [and] robbery; the prey departeth not; The noise of a whip, and the noise of the rattling of the wheels, and of the pransing horses, and of the jumping chariots. The horseman lifteth up both the bright sword and the glittering spear: and [there is] a multitude of slain, and a great number of carcasses; and [there is] none end of [their] corpses; they stumble upon their corpses: Because of the multitude of the whoredoms of the well-favoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her whoredoms, and families through her witchcrafts (Nahum 3:1-3).

It was to this city that Jonah was called. His experiences getting there and serving there teach 6 great lessons about missionary work.

**1. THERE ARE NO EASY CALLS.**

Two years ago I pulled an advertisement off the Internet. It was filled with reds and blacks and huge fonts. This is what it said:

**IN 1998 60,000 YOUTH SPENT \$10,000 EACH GIVING 2 YEARS OF THEIR LIVES, WORKING 12-HOUR DAYS, 6 DAYS A WEEK, AND CALLING HOME ONLY 4 TIMES. THESE WERE MORMON MISSIONARIES.**

**IN 1999, HOW MANY PENTECOSTAL YOUTH WILL SPEND ABOUT \$2000, GIVE 10 DAYS OF THEIR SUMMER, WORK WITH A LOCAL MISSIONARY, AND CALL HOME AS OFTEN AS THEY LIKE?**

**WE CAN DO BETTER. THE COMMISSION IS POSSIBLE. THE WORLD WAITS . . . THE LORD CALLS . . . WILL YOU ANSWER? YOUTH MISSION!**

The add then listed some of the places where service might be given—places from Trinidad to Texas and gave a number to call.

This might be an easy call. At least it looks easier than the average call sent to these Mormon missionaries. But Jonah's call was not easy. He was to take a message to the bloodiest city on the planet. He was to go alone,

with no companion. And he was not sent with a message of God's love and forgiveness.

Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me (Jonah 1:2).

Cry what?

And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown (Jonah 3:4).

There is nothing here about mercy or additional opportunities for repentance. *In 40 days, God will destroy this city*, was the message. But even a call to serve in Indianapolis cannot be easy. The cost, the hours, the rules: all combine to present an expectation of sacrifice and dedication.

## **2. YOU CAN RUN BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE**

What was Jonah's response to this terrifying call?

But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD (Jonah 1:3). If you can find a map that shows Joppa and Ninevah, you will learn that the direction Jonah ought to have gone was Northeast. But he got on a boat in the Mediterranean Sea and set off for Tarshish, which is probably in Spain. What direction did he go?

Every young man has been called to serve. It is a responsibility one cannot escape.

The question has been often asked, Is the mission program one of compulsion? And the answer, of course, is no. Everyone is given his free agency. The question is asked: Should every young man fill a mission? And the answer of the Church is yes, and the answer of the Lord is yes. Enlarging this answer we say:

Certainly every male member of the Church should fill a mission . . . (Spencer W. Kimball, "Planning for a Full and Abundant Life," Ensign, May 1974, 87).

Doors have been opened to the preaching of the gospel in nations never dreamed of or hoped for just a few years ago. Now the demand for increased numbers of full-time missionaries is greater than ever before. And again we issue the call for every worthy young man to heed the voice of the prophet to serve as a full-time missionary. We call on you bishops and branch presidents to see that every worthy and able young man has an opportunity to go forth into the mission field (L. Tom Perry, "But the Labourers are Few," Ensign, May 1992, 24).

Notice what happened to Jonah as he tried to evade his duty. The storm sent by the Lord. The fish prepared by the Lord, and the humility engendered by his time with the fish all show us that God expects us to do what he has called us to do (see Jonah 1<sup>st</sup>:4-17).

The living God never leaves us alone even when we seek to move away from him. When the living God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, the prophet, out of fear of men, strove to go to Tarshish instead. The living God was not busy elsewhere or slumbering; he delivered Jonah unceremoniously to Nineveh! That is the sort of thing the living God does (Neal A. Maxwell, Things As They Really Are, p.36).

### **3. GOD WILL PREPARE A WAY**

This is the testimony of Nephi, of course. God doesn't give commandments unless he arranges the necessary tools and events for them to be fulfilled.

The problem of how to get Jonah to his mission field was not a problem of transportation but attitude. God meant to get Jonah to change his mind and the storm and the fish worked pretty well. God's preparations are always comprehensive and effective, as Nephi learned, even though they may proceed in unexpected, even unusual ways. Traveling by fish and lopping of heads are not the most obvious ways of getting things done, but they worked. And they teach us something about God. He does not ask or

command without preparing for every eventuality.

Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights (Jonah 2:17).

The fish is in a very real way symbolic of the answer to many questions and concerns about missionary service, in fact any kind of church service.

- < How can I serve? I have no money?
- < What if my girlfriend won't wait?
- < What if my parents won't support me?
- < What if I lose my scholarship?
- < People terrify me!
- < I can't memorize!
- < I can't speak!

In 1985, Dallin H. Oaks, told of an experience of his great-grandfather, for whom God prepared a way, even when it seemed impossible.

In 1895 my great-grandfather, Abinadi Olsen, was called on a mission to the Samoan Islands. Obedient to the call of the prophet, he left his wife and four small children, including my maternal grandmother, Chasty Magdalene, in the town of Castle Dale, Utah. He traveled by train and ship to the mission headquarters in Apia, a journey of 26 days. His first assignment was to labor on the island of Tutuila.

After many weeks of living in what he called a grass hut, eating strange food, suffering severe illnesses, and struggling to learn the Samoan language, he seemed to be making no progress in his missionary work. Homesick and discouraged, he seriously considered boarding a boat back to Apia and telling the mission president he didn't want to waste any more time in Samoa. The obstacles to the accomplishment of his mission seemed insurmountable, and he wished to return to his wife and children, who were struggling to support him in the mission field.

A friend who heard Abinadi Olsen describe the experience some

years after his return, quoted him as follows:

“Then one night, as I lay on my mat on the floor of my hut, a strange man entered and in my own language told me to get up and follow him. His manner was such that I had to obey. He led me out through the village and directly up against the face of a perpendicular solid rock cliff. ‘That’s strange,’ thought I. ‘I’ve never seen that here before,’ and just then the stranger said, ‘I want you to climb that cliff.’

“I took another look and then in bewilderment said, ‘I can’t. It’s impossible!’

“ ‘How do you know you can’t? You haven’t tried,’ said my guide.

“ ‘But anyone can see’—I started to say in objection. But he cut in with, ‘Begin climbing. Reach up with your hand—now with your foot.’

“As I reached, under orders that I dared not disobey, a niche seemed to open in the solid rock cliff and I caught hold. Then with my one foot I caught a toe hold.

“ ‘Now go ahead,’ he ordered. ‘Reach with your other hand,’ and as I did so another place opened up, and to my surprise the cliff began to recede; climbing became easier, and I continued the ascent without difficulty until, suddenly, I found myself lying on my pallet back in my hut. The stranger was gone!

“ ‘Why has this experience come to me?’ I asked myself. The answer came quickly. I had been up against an imaginary cliff for those three months. I had not reached out my hand to begin the climb. I hadn’t really made the effort I should have made to learn the language and surmount my other problems” (Fenton L. Williams, “On Doing the Impossible,” *Improvement Era*, Aug. 1957, p. 554; Dallin H. Oaks, “Reach Out and Climb!” *New Era*, Aug. 1985, 4-6).

For three days Jonah had the opportunity to rethink his priorities. He may

have decided that some things are actually worse than a mission to Ninevah.

And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land. And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee. So Jonah arose, and went . . . (Jonah 2:10; 3:1-3).

#### **4. GOD WILL SPEAK IN A VOICE YOU WILL HEAR**

The fish and the events in Ninevah suggest another lesson. God will speak to us with different kinds of voices. When the invitation to serve failed to motivate Jonah, God spoke with another voice; the voice of the belly of a fish. This time Jonah listened.

Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly, And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice (Jonah 2:1,2).

Perhaps the message of Jonah when he arrived in Ninevah is further evidence of this. Who knows how the Assyrians would have responded if Jonah had pulled out his flip chart and started on the six discussions. Instead he announced that in forty days, God would overthrow the city.

So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them (Jonah 3:5).

The king commanded,

let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that [is] in their hands. Who can tell if we will repent, and turn unto God, but he will turn away from us his fierce anger that we perish not? (Jonah 3:8-9, JST).

The Lord has made it clear that he will try to get our attention. He

mentioned a number of different voices that he might use.

How oft have I called upon you by the mouth of my servants, and by the ministering of angels, and by mine own voice, and by the voice of thunderings, and by the voice of lightnings, and by the voice of tempests, and by the voice of earthquakes, and great hailstorms, and by the voice of famines and pestilences of every kind, and by the great sound of a trump, and by the voice of judgment, and by the voice of mercy all the day long, and by the voice of glory and honor and the riches of eternal life, and would have saved you with an everlasting salvation, but ye would not! (D&C 43:25)

## **5. THE LORD LOVES TO FORGIVE**

One of the superlative messages of this story is the response of the Lord to the repentance of Ninevah. These people were about as awful as anybody ever was, but when they repented, the Lord forgave them. That divine pardon must send a message across the ages to us. The Lord delights in mercy (see Micah 7:18).

Satan whispers to sinners (as we all are!), especially those whose sins seem particularly heinous, that forgiveness will never come. Ninevah shows us this is not true. The infinite reach of the agony of Gethsemane surpasses the depth and breadth of almost any sin.

I have made the mistake in my life more than once of assuming from appearances that someone I had met was beyond hope and the reach of the Savior's mercy. One of those was the husband of the Relief Society President in a branch where I worked for 8 months. In those 8 months I visited with his wife many times, but I never spoke a word to him. He refused to remain in the house when the Elders were there. But we heard from time to time of his furious and unflinching opposition to the Church and its work, and especially to the requirements it made of his wife. President Faust spoke of her in an Ensign article.

She walked over so many cobblestones and on so many sidewalks that she would wear out a pair of shoes each month. Her husband, at that time not a member of the Church but



concerned about the many demands upon the limited resources of the family, asked her, “Couldn’t the Church at least buy you a pair of shoes?” (Ensign, Oct. 1997).

I could not imagine that he would ever change. He was so remote from the meaning of the Gospel that I never considered trying to change him. But in 1995 when I returned to my mission, I went to visit that wonderful Relief Society President who spent so much on shoes, and was greeted warmly in her home by a distinguished man I had never spoken to before. He told me that he had been the High Priest Group Leader in his ward. He mentioned a surgery he was expecting in a day or two and asked for a blessing. What a revelation it was to lay my hands on his head and feel the Lord’s love for a wonderful, repentant, righteous man I had thought was beyond redemption.

Neal A. Maxwell calls this inclination to judge the “Jonah Reflex.”

Surely, as Latter-day Saints we must avoid the *Jonah reflex*. Moreover, knowing of and believing in the prophecies does not relieve us of the responsibility to do all we can to avoid the conditions which, unchecked, will bring them to pass.

Jesus . . . prophesied that in the last days, because of iniquity, the love of many would wax cold (Matthew 24:12). Yet we must not regard iniquity or human hardening and coarsening with a sense of inevitability (Neal A. Maxwell, *Sermons Not Spoken*, p.38).

## **6. DON'T MAJOR IN MINORS**

The gourd in Jonah seems much more significant to me than the fish. We focus so much on the experiences of Jonah under the sea that we may miss the meaning of the book. When Jonah realized that the Lord intended to forgive Ninevah, “it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry” (Jonah 4:1) In fact, Jonah suggests that it was this propensity of the Lord to forgive even Israel’s worst enemies that caused him to flee when first called:

And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore

I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil (Jonah 4:2)

Jonah built a lean to or a shed on the east of the city and waited to see what God would do. What God did was teach Jonah another lesson. First he made his preparation. He prepared a gourd (4:6), a worm (4:7) and a terrible east wind (4:8). When the gourd grew, Jonah rejoiced. When it died from the worm and the wind blew, he wanted to die. The question the Lord asked of him is this one: "Does it make sense to worry more about the death of a temporary plant than 120,000 people? (4:9-11).

The Lord taught an interesting lesson about this inclination to worry too much about the less-important things. The instruction took place at McIlweaine's Bend on the Missouri River. Elders from Kirtland who had traveled to Missouri at the Lord's command were returning to their homes and farms in Kirtland. They had been away for two months and their anxiety is not hard to understand. Two months of absence during the summer for a farmer could be catastrophic. They were hurrying. But the Lord said to them:

[V]erily I say unto you, that it is not needful for this whole company of mine elders to be moving swiftly upon the waters, whilst the inhabitants on either side are perishing in unbelief (D&C 61:3)

Farms matter but souls matter more. This is certainly the lesson of the gourd and the people of Ninevah. Put your effort and emotions into the things that matter most.

A wonderful example of a correct attitude in this matters comes from an experience related by Elder Boyd K. Packer.

I recall not too many years ago riding to the office one morning and turning on the radio as they were excitedly announcing that someone had placed a bomb at the temple. The front doors of the temple had been blown off. Remember that? Most of you don't because it is just not that important—it isn't worth remembering. We were then using the parking lot north of the

Relief Society Building; and as I went to the office, I glanced across the street. There was a lot of action around the temple—people, police cars, fire trucks, and everything. But I was late to a meeting; so I had to resist the temptation to go over and see what was going on. I was in meetings with combinations of the Brethren all day. As I went back that night about 6:30 or 7:00, there was no one at the temple; but there were some big sheets of plywood over the place where the door had been. Then it struck me. All day long in meeting with the Brethren, not once, for one second, was that thing ever brought up. It wasn't even mentioned. And why? Because there was work to do, you know. Why be concerned about that? ("To Those Who Teach in Troubled Times," *Charge to Religious Educators*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, pp. 72-76).

## **CONCLUSION:**

[A]t some moment in the world to come, everyone you will ever meet will know what you know now. They will know that the only way to live forever in association with our families and in the presence of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, was to choose to enter into the gate by baptism at the hands of those with authority from God. They will know that the only way families can be together forever is to accept and keep sacred covenants offered in the temples of God on this earth. And they will know that you knew. And they will remember whether you offered them what someone had offered you. (Henry B. Eyring, "A Voice of Warning," *Ensign*, Nov. 1998, 33)

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