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TRUTH, TEACHING TOOLS AND THE STORY OF JONAH

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We have been asked a few times whether we can trust that all of the stories in the Bible are true. They point to the story of Jonah who was swallowed by a large fish, the miracles preceding the Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea, the flood account in Noah's day, even the Genesis account of creation and sin. Because these accounts are not consistent with the known laws of nature, they raise doubts in the minds of many as to the veracity of the Bible itself, for if it contains false stories, how can the Bible be inspired of God, let alone the word of God?

While there is some archeological and historical evidence that is consistent with the truth of some of these accounts, there is no evidence that unequivocally establishes all of these matters as true historical events. For us living in the 21st century, it is simply a matter of what each person chooses to believe. Unfortunately, that leaves open the possibility, and the probability, that many will reject the Bible altogether since these accounts are not plausible to the modern mind.

However, there is another way to look at these accounts without adopting blind faith, without compromising our intelligence, and without losing faith in the veracity of the Bible itself. We can take a lesson from the ministry of Jesus that will enable us to understand these extraordinary and unusual accounts.

Jesus is the greatest teacher who has ever lived. To this day, his principles are taught throughout the world and throughout religion, even non-Christian religions. He was effective because he understood the human mind. He knew how to skillfully plant truth without arousing man's innate defenses. He taught direct truth to his apostles and immediate disciples, but to the crowds, he utilized teaching tools – parables and illustrations. Parables stimulate the imagination, challenge discrimination and provoke critical thinking. They provide the opportunity to appeal to a variety of different types of people. They enable a teacher to present new and even startling truths while at the same time largely avoiding controversy and outward clashing with tradition and established authority.

It is important to understand that parables are not necessarily true events. But parables do not have to be actual events in order for the lesson to be learned. For example, Jesus gave the illustration about the good Samaritan. (*Luke 10:25-37*) It does not matter whether such a person actually existed and historically performed the good deeds attributed to him. What matters is the lesson being taught, namely, 'Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act.' (*Proverbs 3:27*)

Other examples are the parable of the lost sheep (*Luke 15:4-7*), the parable of the lost coin (*Luke 15:8-10*), and the parable of the prodigal son (*Luke 15:11-24*). It is not necessary that there actually was a flock of 100 sheep and one went missing, or that a woman lost a coin in her home, or that an ungrateful son returned home to a grateful father, in order for us to appreciate the teaching tool and understand the lesson presented. Thus, when considering the hard-to-accept accounts in the Old Testament, we can look at them as valuable teaching tools similar to the teaching tools Jesus used.

We recall that the Bible writers were not mere historians; they were also teachers. These interesting accounts are likely added to the Bible canon, not for their historical value, but for their teaching ability. So when reading such accounts, we can ask ourselves: Why is this account here? What is the lesson to be learned? It does not matter whether the account is true or not. All that is necessary is that there be value and meaning in the story that can enhance our faith and strengthen our conviction to do the Father's will and serve our brothers.

Let's take the account of Jonah as recorded in the book of Jonah. The account says that Jonah was given a commission to take a message to the people in the city of Ninevah. Instead of obeying his commission, Jonah hitchhiked a ride on a boat going in the other direction to the city of Tarshish. While on the boat, the sea became tempestuous and eventually the other men on the boat discovered that the storm was brought about because of Jonah's disobedience. After prayer and failed attempts to save the boat, it was decided that Jonah must be thrown overboard in order to save the boat from catastrophe. Jonah was then thrown overboard and promptly swallowed by a large fish. He remained in the belly of the fish for three days until he repented and determined to obey his commission, after which he was spewed out on dry land.

Even if this is not a factual historical account, what lesson can be learned? Consider this:

The account of Jonah is a lesson about the folly of trying to run away from duty. We all can apply this to our own lives because invariably at one point, we may find ourselves seeking to escape the present duty of living by running away to far-off enticements, including escaping into alcohol, drugs and excessive recreation. We thereby put ourselves in the immediate control of those influences which are not directed by the powers of reason, truth and the forces of righteousness.

The flight from duty is the sacrifice of truth, the escape from which can only result in distressing conflicts with our life duty and the difficult 'whales' of selfishness. This leads eventually to darkness and death unless such God-forsaking 'Jonahs' turn their hearts to seek after God and His goodness, even when in the very depths of despair. And when such disheartened souls sincerely seek for God — hunger for truth and thirst for righteousness — there is nothing that can hold them in further captivity. No matter into what great depths they may have fallen, when they seek the light with a whole heart, the spirit of the Father will deliver them from their captivity. The enslaving enticements and circumstances of life will spew them out upon the dry land of fresh opportunities for renewed service and wiser living.

If we get the sense of the story of Jonah, it need not be an actual historical account. We can accept it as 'useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' as Paul wrote. (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**) And if, in time, some evidence is discovered that establishes the account as an actual historical event, all the better! In the meantime, we can continue to have faith in the veracity and value of the Bible without violating our mental powers and spiritual reasoning.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." — **Philippians 4:4-7**

We welcome your comments.

"Elaia Luchnia"