

The Internal Sense Of The Word - Part 6: Jonah And The Whale

One of the most extraordinary and best known stories of the Bible is the story of Jonah and (as it is supposed to have been) the whale. It is only a short story and one with which, the outlines at least, you may well be familiar. Jonah was a prophet of Israel and had been commanded by the Lord to go to the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, to teach the people there and to warn them of 'the wrath to come' if they should not turn from their wickedness. "Now the word of the Lord" we read, "came to Jonah the son of Ammittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me". But Jonah was afraid and, at the same time, reluctant to teach the secrets of Judaism to the gentiles. He knew, of course, what usually happened to prophets who proclaimed unpleasant truths to people. They were bound to be unpopular, disliked if not hated and often would be stoned to death by the people. Many were.

So Jonah "rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord". He went to Joppa, a Mediterranean port to the north of Israel and there found a ship which was journeying to his destination. "So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord". And this is where the drama really began. As the ship sailed across the Mediterranean "the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was likely to be broken." The sailors, naturally, were terrified, and threw overboard everything they could to lighten the ship. But Jonah, down in the hold, and apparently blissfully unaware, remained fast asleep.

Before long, however, the shipmaster awoke Jonah that he might at least offer prayers for deliverance. But nothing happened. and sensing that the evil of someone on board might be responsible for the storm, lots were cast to find out who it might be. The lot fell to Jonah. He was questioned as to what he had done and with great reluctance and only after further efforts to bring the ship to land, was thrown overboard. "So they took up Jonah", it is said, "and cast him forth into the sea; and the sea ceased from her raging". (Ch. 1, 15).

Remarkably, and against all odds, Jonah didn't drown, for "the Lord had prepared a great fish, to swallow him. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." And during that time his attitude changed. He saw that he must obey the Lord, and that there was a message to be delivered and a job to be done." So Jonah arose, and went to Ninevah; according to the word of the Lord". (Ch. 3, 3) .

Short as the story is, much is made of the purpose which originally lay behind it, and the message it was meant to convey. It seems to have been directed at the sense of exclusiveness, of which there is evidence, which grew up amongst the Jews in the centuries preceding the coming of Christ. Many people then came to believe that they alone were of concern to the Lord. They saw themselves as set apart and superior to all others. They took no interest in the gentiles and were unwilling to share their religious heritage with them. And the story of Jonah seems to have been written and preserved to counter this point of view, which had grown up amongst the Jews, and to impress upon people that they did have a mission to the gentiles, about whom the Lord was as much concerned as He was with them.

But whatever the original circumstances which gave rise to the book and the point it was then meant to have, what of it now? Isn't this the question we have been asking in each of these talks in this series on the internal sense of the Word? Last week we looked at the prophecy of Haggai and the promises and exhortations there concerning the rebuilding of the Temple after the exile. And we asked the question, what is the Lord saying, to us in those words of promise and exhortation? What is the teaching to be drawn from it? It has been revealed that there is an internal meaning within the Divine Word. What is it here?

The Lord commands everyone of us, as He commanded Jonah, to take His teaching to every remote corner of our living. Just as there were people then who were gentile and unconverted so there are thoughts and feelings we have which are similarly 'gentile' and 'unconverted', not being guided by Divine teaching.

We may not be very good at forgiving, for example. Perhaps we are over ready to judge others and are too inclined to question their motives. Many different things may be involved. And though we know what the Lord asks of us, we try to evade the responsibility. We want to run away from it. There are implications in the Lord's teaching which we know we should take and apply to life but we don't want to face up to them. It is with us, just as it is with Jonah. We tend to think that because we live a reasonably good life in other respects these things will not matter.

We take refuge in a way of looking at things which will save us from facing up to the responsibilities which the Lord's teaching places upon us.

The ship which Jonah boarded represents such an attitude. It represents the philosophy to which people resort when they don't want to face up the implications which Divine truth carries for them. People say 'The Lord's teaching is all very well, but I know that only by being ruthless and self seeking am I going to get on in the world'. This is an attitude they take; a philosophy they adapt, because they are afraid, just as Jonah was afraid, to apply that teaching to life. We all do this. We all try to evade the duty which our knowledge of Divine truth places upon us. We want to run away from it. We pay the fare and find ourselves a comfortable spot within such an attitude as I have described, where we fall asleep as it were. Sleep here speaks of the obscure state (*Arcana Caelestia* 3715) into which we come - if only within ourselves - when we resort to evasion and excuse so far as the implications of the Lord's teaching are concerned.

The Lord never abandons His efforts with us and though we try to flee, He endeavours to bring us back again. Storms and stresses arise with which such an attitude cannot cope. The Lord allows us to come into situations which show up the shortcomings and inadequacies of this particular philosophy and way of looking at things. Crises come upon us and we are forced to recognise, as Jonah did, that the fault for not effectively coping with them lies with ourselves.

Jonah's three days and nights in the belly of the great fish speak of and represent the temptation into which we are plunged as we rethink life's values and our previous unwillingness to apply the Lord's truth to all departments of our living. In his book, "*The Apocalypse Explained*", Swedenborg, wrote that "the belly of the great fish in which Jonah was for three days and nights signifies the hells where the direst falsities areconsequently grievous temptation." (para. 622). We wonder if it is worthwhile. We wonder if we should change. We feel ourselves in a terrible darkness as we sort out the issue and decide what will be.

Temptations are the means by which change is brought about in a person and they are necessary for this reason. As a result of temptations the value and worth of the Lord's teaching can become established in our minds and there dawns upon us a new resolve to apply that teaching to our lives and have it guide to the full, our actions and our thoughts. And so we come out of the temptation, as Jonah came out of the belly of the fish, ready to obey the Lord, changed in our outlook, and willing to carry His teaching to wherever, in our life, He commands.

The teaching which the Lord has for us in the story of Jonah could not be more real or more true to life. We recognise the point as soon as it is explained to us. We realise that the Lord is speaking to us here about a very natural tendency which comes to us time and time again. So very often we know and understand what our reaction to a situation should be, but we try to run away from it. There are circumstances in which we become involved where we know we should be merciful and tolerant, forgiving and understanding, controlled and disciplined. But we don't want to be. We hear the voice of the Lord, speaking to us and telling us what we should do and how we should respond and act. But we don't want to hear it. At that very moment and in that particular situation what the Lord calls us to do comes as something distasteful and irksome and we want to run away from it. We feel that the person who has offended us on this occasion doesn't deserve forgiveness. Or perhaps it is a case where we knowingly and uncaringly pass by someone in genuine need or distress telling ourselves that someone else who has more time can see to them.

But if the Lord's teaching means anything to us this will get us nowhere. Though we may fall in with our inclinations and run away from our duty, yet this in itself precipitates a time of inner torment and conflict as we go back over what we failed to do. And this is what is meant by the storm which arose on the sea and in which Jonah was caught up. If we are willing, the Lord will bring us back so a new start can be made.

The Swedenborg Program – Number 62.

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