

# Becoming Missional

## Jonah 4:1-11; Luke 4:18-27; Acts 9:6-16



“We are a missions-minded church.” The words are easy for a Baptist congregation. It is part of our DNA to state those words, almost as an obvious declaration. We have almost over-used the phrase so that it has lost much sense of meaning. After all, what does being missions-minded have to do with our daily lives? Is it more than praying for missionaries and giving of our excess to support denominational programs? How do we go from “missions-minded” to missional living—embracing a purposeful sense of mission and purpose?

Jonah did not enjoy the task before him. He was anything but eager to take up the missional challenge. He fought the direction God set before him, heading the opposite way. When God delivered him to Nineveh anyway, Jonah got on with the task at hand. He rushed through the city with ill will, doing his least to fulfill *Yahweh*'s mandate, and relishing none of the task. He did not want the people spared. They were enemies of his own nation. They were scum and wholly unloved.

Nineveh was known for mistreating prisoners and enemies, even by the standards of the day. It was ruthless against any deemed in opposition. Built near what we know as Mosul in Iraq, Nineveh was a symbol of cruelty and wickedness to Israel and Judah. From a Hebrew perspective, Jonah's ill will for the nation was well-deserved. This was a capital of Assyria, a power laying waste nations in a fierce grab for power. There was no love for Nineveh within Israel. Jonah stood in good company, holding forth the banner of praying for judgment upon such despicable adversaries. If God's attitude was love, Jonah's was unmitigated hate.

The prophet could not have cared less for Nineveh, but God's perspective was love unceasing. Jonah could not comprehend any sane rationale for God's wanton love, grace, and mercy. Likely it was this very failure of understanding that prompted *Yahweh* to send Jonah. Beyond caring for Nineveh, God wanted Jonah to grasp some measure of love. It was a practical lesson for Jonah's own growth toward godliness. Jonah's nationalist interests lost value in contrast to God's care for a much larger world of people. Unworthy as were the Ninevites in Jonah's eyes, they were lovely to their Creator. Jonah was to love them as God did. This was a stretch for Jonah, and more so for the nation. Desire for selfish revenge stood in the way of recognizing and accepting God's purpose of reconciling love.

Jesus' words did not always thrill his audiences. Sometimes He made an audience downright angry. Such was this occasion in Nazareth. To begin with, the people were eager and receptive to Jesus' words, for he was commenting on a familiar and beloved text. Things got ugly quickly when this beloved text was read in a different light.

They wanted to hear consolation amid concerns for their own plight. They were under oppression by Rome and earnestly desired release from foreign domination. They had been set upon and it was God's duty to redeem them, restoring the nation to its glory days under David. They were disappointed at Jesus' words. Rather than stroking their sense of worth and central place in God's plan, Jesus turned his attention to needs beyond the chosen nation. They wanted blessings for themselves. Jesus pointed to needs beyond their own.

They had been very happy with Jesus up to this point. Jesus was the hometown success story that had given them a sense of worth. They were caught up in revelry at this local boy achieving celebrity status around the nation. They had their hearts set on basking in Jesus' glory and reaping the benefits of association. That Jesus' message might focus aid toward the oppressed beyond their sense of community was too much to take. They were not so interested in this larger perspective of mission. They wanted Jesus to solve their own pressing local needs.

Nazareth was the underdog! Jesus had no right to take away their sense of desperation with words about the needy in some other corner! Nazareth was the insignificant town bearing the brunt of ridicule by their own countrymen. Jesus should stand up for them and raise them up from this lowly place on the national scene. He didn't.

Rather than offer pity for their lowly state, stroking wounded homeplace egos, Jesus pointed them toward a larger mission. He pointed their attention off themselves and toward the needs of the larger world of God's love. If Jonah had a chip on his shoulder against an enemy people, Nazareth had a chip on its shoulder against its own nation. They felt they had been set upon for too long and looked to Jesus to justify their sentiment and elevate their importance. Jesus wouldn't play along. He pointed them toward issues of God's larger mission and purpose. It almost got him killed.

God's task for Ananias was rather unsettling. Here he was, minding his own business, when God asked him to seek out a man intent on torturing and killing Christians! What did God have against him? What had he done to deserve this assignment? God said, "No it's no punishment. I just want you to experience the radically transforming nature of the gospel. I want you to be part of expanding the reach of grace and salvation to the entire world."

I can't help but picture Ananias about as uncomfortable as Jonah, walking down to deliver a message of grace to this heinous villain of legalistic Jewish zealotry. How could he picture this as anything more than a trap? God said, "Go anyway, and trust Me. I have chosen Paul to become my servant to extend the gospel among the nations of the world beyond Judaism."

Paul's commission was the beginning of a radical change in his life. It was a radical change for believers as a whole. Ananias' reticence to meet Paul was but a foretaste of the church's reticence to accept the mission laid upon this newest of apostles. The Jewish believers would have to lay aside their animosity toward the Gentile world. They would have to lay aside their sense of just revenge on behalf of their oppressed status. They would have to accept God's love for peoples they utterly despised.

Paul's was a life of missional intent. He focused living upon fulfilling God's world mission of love. He set aside his own interests to view the nations as objects of God's love, grace, and mercy. Where Jonah needed to learn God's love for enemies, Paul accepted missional living. Where the Nazareth population was focused on their petty needs and desires to rise above the stigma of unimportance, Paul set selfish interests aside to embrace missional living. Where Ananias embarked on faith amid the uncertainties of hostile retribution, Paul cast his life upon God's mercy to live God's call.

We know we should be missions-minded. The difference in knowing and being is what makes our lives missional. Can we let go of selfish aims to become missional? There is a world of 6.5 billion people out there. Will the love of our lives make any difference? It should.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*