**NINEVEH CALLING**

Major Julie Johnson explores the battle of wills in the first of three studies by the Candidates Unit
JONAH

Questions such as ‘Will you accept this gift?’ or ‘Will you marry me?’ can be music to our ears. Most likely we would be willing to respond. But when God asks, ‘Will you?’, the question might not be answered quite so easily. It can then become a battle of wills.

When God asks, ‘Will you?’ our answer might be: ‘What will...?’ or ‘What if...?’ or ‘How will...?’

The Book of Jonah begins: ‘The word of the Lord came to Jonah’ (v1). This was not the first time God had spoken to him. Jonah was an experienced prophet who knew what God’s voice sounded like (see 2 Kings 14:25). However, when God called Jonah with new instructions, he was not willing to listen and chose to take a different direction instead.

QUESTION - How might you respond if God were very specific about something he wanted you to do?

God called Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh and lead its citizens to repentance. Jonah, however, was having none of it.

Beyond his realisation that God is gracious (see 4:2), we don’t know what his excuses were. There was no love lost between the Israelites and the Ninevites. One thing was certain – Jonah was not willing to respond to the call of God.

He was, however, willing to run away, to board a ship and cross treacherous seas in the opposite direction. He was willing to be thrown overboard. In other words, Jonah was willing to do almost anything other than to obey the voice of God.

It is the easiest thing to sail out of the will of God on a convenient ‘ship’. We can come up with all sorts of excuses for wanting to go our own way or doing our own thing.

QUESTION - Have you known a time when you interpreted a convenient ‘ship’ as God’s plan, which then gave you the perfect excuse for sailing out of his will?

Many people learn the hard way. They run away from God and find they are heading for a storm, not outwardly but deep inside, and they find themselves fighting against the will of God.

Jonah’s convenient ship was storm-tossed and he underwent some soul-searching before he found the calm of God’s perfect will.

For three dark days, the Lord sent Jonah to the school of adversity in a most unusual classroom: the belly of a large fish. There, Jonah learnt some important lessons. First, nothing can drown out God’s call. Second, there is no getting away from God. God is everywhere (see Psalm 139).

QUESTION - When has distress, danger or fear brought you to your knees before God and helped you realign your will with his?

God called Jonah a second time. This time, the unwilling runaway became a willing messenger. Jonah said to God: ‘I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good’ (Jonah 2:9).

We could say that Jonah graduated from his ‘school’ with a diploma in mission responsibility. His journey to Nineveh provided him ample time to reflect and, when he entered the city, his simple message had a powerful impact. The people repented. God’s heart softened and everyone was saved.

Jonah, however, was angry. He thought God should not spare evil people. He learnt again that God’s mercy always outruns his judgement.

Deep within, Jonah already knew this and, struggling to align his heart with the compassionate and forgiving heart of God, he cried: ‘O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my own country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster’ (Jonah 4:2 English Standard Version).

The people of Nineveh experienced the essence of God’s nature and Jonah learnt that no one can sink so low as to be beyond forgiveness.

QUESTION - When have you been quick to judge and slow to love, and failed to show someone grace and mercy?

‘Be the change’ is the Candidates Unit strapline that has inspired many people to respond to the call of God to spiritual leadership. The theme for this year’s Candidates Sunday (16 May) is ‘Be Willing’.

QUESTIONS - What are you struggling with that prevents you from being willing to say yes to God?

Will you be willing?