

*It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.*

**Weekly Edition – November 4, 2016**

Jonah – Chapter 4 – part 1

<sup>10</sup> *When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.*

**4** *But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. <sup>3</sup> Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

**Three Reflections on Today's Text**

**First Consideration: God Repented**

- 1) The turning of God from the evil He spoke of doing is described as a "repentance" – the same word used for human repentance of sin, which is also a turning from bad things.
- 2) So when the LORD repents of doing evil to the people of Nineveh, it means God will have mercy where He had previously threatened to execute justice.
- 3) In the Book of Jeremiah, this "repenting of evil" on the part of the LORD is explained this way: "<sup>7</sup> *If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, <sup>8</sup> and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. <sup>9</sup> And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, <sup>10</sup> and if it does evil in My sight and does not obey Me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.*" (Jeremiah 18:7-10)
- 4) The same point is made in the Book of Ezekiel, where the LORD says, "<sup>14</sup> *And if I say to a wicked person, "You will surely die," but they then turn away from their sin and do what is just and right— <sup>15</sup> if they give back what they took in pledge for a loan, return what they have stolen, follow the decrees that give life, and do no evil—that person will surely live; they will not die.*" The LORD continues by adding this pledge: "<sup>16</sup> *None of the sins that person has committed will be remembered against them. They have done what is just and right; they will surely live.*" (Ezekiel 33:14-16)
- 5) The explanation for this apparent change of mind is the unchanging character of God. "*As surely as I live," declares the Sovereign Lord, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live."* (Ezekiel 33:11)
- 6) Explained this way it is not so surprising that the LORD "repents of the evil" He had formerly announced through His reluctant prophet, Jonah. And we should not be confused in thinking that because God relents, that God is somehow fickle or variable – that He changes His mind on a whim as you and I often do.
- 7) It is true that God threatened to destroy Nineveh, and then did not do it by changing His mind. Yet as we have observed in a previous study, it is impossible to regard the conversion of Nineveh as anything but the LORD's doing and a miracle of grace. It is as if He did for Nineveh what He promised to do for Israel – namely, to give them a new heart and a new spirit to obey His will. (Ezekiel 36:26-27) This is very Good News indeed, because it shows how much God loves His people – even you and me! This is not a last-minute change of heart – but what God intended all along – just what Jonah complains about afterwards!

**Jonah**

**One of the Twelve Prophets**

1. **The Word of the Lord**
2. **Jonah's mission**
3. **Jonah flees**
4. **The storm**
5. **The great fish**
6. **Three days in the belly**
7. **Jonah delivered**
8. **Nineveh repents**
9. **Jonah pouts**
10. **The gourd**
11. **God's mercy**

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**Application:** Here we see two sides of the same coin: God's blessing and God's curse. While God is unchangeable, we can live under His blessing or under His wrath – the choice is ours to make. God clearly wants us to live under His grace – going so far as to send His Own Son to procure for us the way of salvation. Yet the choice is always ours to “do good” or to “do evil” before the LORD. What choice have I made?

### **Second Consideration: Jonah, the Fool**

- 1) Jonah knows all about the nature and character of the LORD and His repentance. And this all displeased Jonah. He was greatly distressed and angry at God.
- 2) What is the great evil that Jonah sees in God's mercy? On the one hand, the enemies of Israel are saved and converted – thus fulfilling Israel's identity, election and calling as a blessing to all nations. Jonah doesn't want the heathen nations coming to *his* God – so we see a certain selfish pride in Jonah – the same pride found centuries later in the Pharisees. On the other hand, Jonah himself is made to look like a false prophet – as the word the LORD gave him to speak succeeds in bringing mercy where it threatened destruction.
- 3) So Jonah, in himself, fulfills the calling of Israel in this time and place – the role of prophecy and of prophets being to speak the word of the LORD to call people to return to Him. Yet this grieves Jonah very much – who sees God's mercy as a great evil. How the LORD deals with Jonah's grieving, and this great evil done by God in Jonah's eyes, is the story of the rest of this little book.
- 4) How can Jonah be so grieved at all this Good News? At the core of it is his feeling that he has been set-up, and made to look like a fool. And in all fairness to Jonah – he has been. Jonah thought he knew what he was saying when he prophesied “forty-days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” But as we saw in our study back then, the Hebrew verb for “overthrow” – as in Sodom and Gomorrah – can also mean “conversion” as being turned into something new – as in being made a new man by the Spirit of God.
- 5) In the same way, Israel looks like a fool too – as the Jews in conspiracy with Rome put Jesus to death on a Cross. Yet, as the Apostle Paul maintains, this is the very secret key to understanding the workings of all creation – the death of a Jew by the Jews procuring for all mankind salvation in the LORD, Jesus Christ. And in this – Israel has fulfilled its identity, election and calling – being the nation from which the Good News of salvation goes out to all mankind. Yet, much like Jonah – they refuse to accept their identity, election and calling as a people – and refuse to accept Jesus as Messiah.
- 6) And this, too, is one of those many-layered signs that we discover as we look into the mystery spoken by Jesus to the Pharisees, “you will be given no sign but the sign of Jonah.”

**Application:** Just like Jonah and God's chosen people, Israel, we each have an identity, election and calling upon our lives. Yet we very often prefer to write our own scripts. How about me? Do I want and choose what better leads to the deepening of God's life in me, or do I frame my choices using some other lens?

### **Third Consideration: Jonah's Prayer**

- 1) Some prayer! Even by Biblical standards, the irony in Jonah's prayer is astounding. Rather than being joyously glad in God's mercy and happy to see the Ninevites welcomed into God's good graces, Jonah is pissed! How can Holy Scripture even begin to call this piece of hateful defiance “prayer?”
- 2) Yet God is exceedingly gentle with Jonah, if not a little amused. It is one of those rare glimpses we get into God's sense of humor. We never get to see Jesus in a deep belly-laugh in the Gospels, but since His first recorded miracle took place at a party in Cana to celebrate a wedding – and it entailed turning water into wine to extend the life of the party – we can see that our Lord knows how to have fun and appreciates a good joke!

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- 3) Jonah prays while he is still in Nineveh – and we are to see this as a parallel to when he prayed from the belly of the fish. Yet now he is in quite different circumstances. Back then, he was plunged down to the depths of Sheol, yet celebrating the Lord's salvation. Now he is comfortably high atop an over-looking mountain, but the LORD's salvation is exactly what he is complaining about! What a reversal!
- 4) Jonah claims that he knew what would happen all along. It is why he fled towards Tarshish in the first place. But we should not take this at face value. It is the typical response when we are embarrassed or caught flat-footed. After all, the text back in Chapter 1 never says anything about Jonah's foreknowledge about all the LORD would later do.
- 5) Furthermore, his description of his actions back then now sound more like a rationalization – given the surprising turn in events – and with the outcome now known – it is easy to say, “well, I knew it all along...” It means that Jonah is lying to God. When we are bent on justifying ourselves in the heat of anger, we will make up almost anything that sounds good to carry the argument – whether or not it is true!
- 6) So Jonah boasts about being tougher and more merciless than God. Jonah's attitude here might even trigger us to remember the story Jesus told about the Pharisee, who stood by himself and prayed: “*God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.*” (Luke 18:11) Jonah wants us to see the great height of his spiritual fortitude – but he is not what he wants us to believe he is – and thankfully, God is not what Jonah wants God to be – at least as it relates to these Ninevites.
- 7) The irony is that Jonah attacks God for being merciful. He is not the only prophet of Israel to complain against God. The prophet Elijah made this complaint to the LORD: “*I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty.....I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.*” (1 Kings 19:14)
- 8) Yet we also see in this something else about the character of God. Recalling that Jonah means “dove” – God's fair one and the apple of His eye – we see that the LORD's patience with His beloved knows no bounds. And this is very good news indeed, because it shows how patient the LORD is with you and me.

**Application:** When have I been angry with God? How did I express my anger? Am I holding on to some anger towards God for something in my life or circumstances right now?