
Commentary

The Message of Jonah for Today

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The message of the book of Jonah for today is that God's startling compassion for sinners under His judgment should inspire Christians to be genuinely concerned for lost souls and "outsiders" and to repent of any attitudes that dampen our zeal to *"be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear"* (1 Peter 3:15).

Jonah and the Sailors: Salvation is of the LORD

The story of Jonah is familiar to most readers. The prophet receives God's call to "go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against" their wickedness, but instead Jonah gets on a boat "to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (1:2-3).

Jonah's motive is clear: he thinks Nineveh should be destroyed and wants no part in preventing it (4:2). Jonah can sleep perfectly well with the thought of pagans being destroyed while he himself receives God's care and concern (2:2). But Jonah is rudely awakened by the panicked urging of the ship's captain to "*call upon thy God...that we perish not,*" for God hurled a storm on the sea that threatened to break up the ship.

When the sailors learn that Jonah worships "*the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry*

land," they are gripped with fear (1:9-10). Before they hurl Jonah overboard they pray to the true God, and after the sea becomes calm, *"the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows"* (1:16). Meanwhile, God *"prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah"* and *"Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish's belly"* (1:17-2:1). He thanks God for caring for his soul and his life (v. 5-6), he boasts of God's steadfast love that idolatrous pagans forsake (v. 8), he promises to pay what he vowed, and he declares, *"Salvation is of the LORD"* (v. 9).

Let's observe two things so far.

First, consider how Jonah and the sailors responded to the different amounts of light they received. As a Hebrew prophet, Jonah had received greater light and revelation—the Word of God, written (the Torah, Psalms, etc.) and spoken. But

Jonah's response was rebellion. Compare that to the response of the sailors to the smaller amount of light they received—heart-rending conviction and contrition in response to a single storm and a fourteen-word message in Hebrew (1:9).

Jonah's prayer was more eloquent than the sailors' prayer, but the sailors repented while Jonah did not. There is much here for Christians to reflect upon and apply. From our vantage point with the cross of Christ in our past, we have far more light than Jonah had, along with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 13:17). As recipients of light and grace, God calls us only to "*confess [Him] before men*" (Matt. 10:32). It is God who does the hard work of converting people, making their dead hearts alive. Will we, by the Spirit's grace, be faithful to His call?

Second, despite the eloquence of Jonah's prayer and the timeless truths it holds, the prophet still harboured self-righteous and condescending attitudes toward those "others" who seemingly didn't deserve God's mercy (vv. 8-9). The sailors' attitude was different: "Ironically, while the rebellious prophet is making these self-righteous boasts from the fish's belly, the praiseworthy pagan sailors are up above, happy recipients of Yahweh's kindness, doing precisely what Jonah can mostly only promise to do (and what he assumes nobody except faithful Israelites like himself do): they are sacrificing to Yahweh and making vows to him!"

Consider how compassionate and determined God is to save sinners—even in spite of the resistance we find in our hearts to speak to people of Him. "Jonah's anti-missionary activity has ironically resulted in the conversion of non-

Israelites.” The truth of Jonah’s prayer outshines his own actions: “Salvation is”—magnificently—“of the L ORD.”

Jonah and Nineveh: Should Not I Spare...That Great City?

As the story continues, Jonah is spared from the fish and receives God’s second call to go to Nineveh “*and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee*” (3:2). Jonah arrives in the city and preaches a surprisingly terse sermon for a man so eloquent (just five words in Hebrew): “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown*” (v. 4). Remarkably, “*the people of Nineveh believed God,*” and from the king down to the people, and even the livestock, the city repents (vv. 5-9). “*And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not*” (vv. 8-10).

Jonah, however, is exceedingly displeased and “*very angry,*” protesting against God’s mercy and character and requesting that God take his life: “*for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil*” (4:2-3). God must now teach Jonah a lesson.

First, God causes a plant to grow to provide shade for Jonah, and the prophet rejoices (v. 6). Then God destroys the plant and sends a scorching wind that makes the heat unbearable, and Jonah is angry again (vv. 7-8). Father-like in His patience and pleading, God points out that if Jonah is concerned about the short-lived plant, which he didn’t even make grow, shouldn’t he see why God is concerned about an entire city of people?

"Should not I spare Nineveh, that great city?" (v. 11).

Some have compared the story of Jonah with Jesus's parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). God's patient pleading with Jonah to understand His compassion for Nineveh is like the father of the prodigal son pleading with the angry older brother to try to understand his compassion for the younger brother. Jesus's parable develops Jonah's two themes: "hope for the repentant sinner and a plea for understanding on the part of the (self-)righteous faithful—who like rebellious Jonah also need to repent."

The point of this prophecy is not to denounce Jonah, but his "example shows that those who have a close external connection to God...can still persevere in calm, reasoned rebellion against that

same God...despite God's disciplinary actions."

We must examine our attitude toward God's providence, character, and will—not least because of our inestimable privilege of being united to Christ in His death and resurrection by the Holy Spirit and our call to *"shine as lights in the world"* (Phil. 2:15). Israel was commissioned to be a light to the nations (much like Jonah), but they rebelled.

Israel thus underwent God's judgment and restoration (much like Jonah), until the true Israel and *"light of the world,"* Jesus Christ, came to work salvation for His people and to commission His redeemed bride to proclaim the gospel to the nations. As the next book envisions, the nations will one day say *"Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the house of the LORD...that He may teach us his*

ways and that we may walk in his paths” (Micah 4:2). Let us, as recipients of God’s grace, imitate the God who is *“gracious...merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness”* (4:3)—and may He empower us to proclaim His grace to people—from our neighbors to the nations.

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