

JONAH

INTRODUCTION

The book of Jonah was written at some time between 800-700 B.C., possibly about 780 B.C., during the reign of Jeroboam II, in the nation of Israel.

Jonah is the author of the book. His name means, a dove, and he is the son of Amittai, from Geth-hepher about four miles northeast of Nazareth in Galilee.

To deny the authenticity of Jonah is to impeach the integrity of our Lord Jesus Christ for He not only verified the historicity of the miracles recorded in the Bible (Matthew 12:39-40) but also the historicity of the prophet's mission to the Ninevites, thus verifying the authorship and veracity of the book.

Israel had become so bereft of any right relationship to the One True God, they had begun to call Jehovah, Baal and Baal, Jehovah. (Hosea 2:16) So, Jonah's mission and the recording of it was to teach Israel that if they would repent God would spare them the judgment that must inevitably come from the Righteous Jehovah, should they continue in wickedness.

If they would not repent, then God had children among the Gentiles who would repent and thus become the vessel God needed to carry out His purpose to redeem the world. Jonah appears to be a narrow-minded, fiercely zealous person. He is jealous for God and desirous of seeing the enemies of God's people destroyed.

The message to be extracted from the book of Jonah is that God is willing and anxious to save even the heathen nationals if they repent.

The book of Jonah could easily be outlined by chapters.

1. Running from God— Chapter 1.
2. Running to God—Chapter 2.
3. Running with God—Chapter 3.
4. Running ahead of God—Chapter 4.

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING FROM GOD— THE COMMISSION OF JONAH

SUMMARY

Jehovah's righteous judgment is about to fall upon Ninevah but He commissions Jonah to go with a final message of repentance, which, if heeded, will bring salvation from the impending judgment.

Verses 1-2

The story of Jonah has a specific purpose to serve.

It reminds the Jews of their election to be a witness to the nations; it proclaims God's sovereignty over all peoples; it typifies the Messiah's humiliation and glorification; and it prophesies Israel's chastening to come.

It is God's trumpet blast warning both Jew and Gentile of their responsibilities toward Him at a critical time in the scheme of redemption.

According to historians, the city of Ninevah was the greatest city of antiquity. It had a population of about 600,000 and was some 80 miles in circumference. Upon its walls, 100 feet high, flanked with 1500 towers each 200 feet high, four chariots could drive abreast.

The first mention of Ninevah is in Genesis 10:11 where it is stated that Nimrod (or Asshur) went out into Assyria and built Ninevah, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen, adding "the same is the great city."

It is very probable that Ninevah of Jonah's day consisted of all these cities in one "great city."

Under the reign of Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.), Ninevah blossomed into beauty and splendor that she had never known.

About 612 B.C. Ninevah was destroyed by a coalition of armies from the Babylonians and Medes. It happened exactly as Nahum, the prophet, predicted it. Its destruction was so complete that even its site was forgotten.

To this cruel, cold-blooded, power-worshiping, materialistic metropolis God sent Jonah. Jonah was commanded to “preach against “the great city.”

Their wickedness cried out to the whole earth and God saw it just as He had seen it before. The wickedness of every man and every nation is a “cry against God.”

Men cry their rebellions against God—God cries His judgments upon men. Whose voice shall be finally heard? The bible says God’s cry will prevail and history confirms it!

But why send Jonah to a foreign nation? Did he not have enough to do in preaching to his own people? No doubt he had preached to Israel time and time again of God’s judgment to come upon them because of their materialism, rebellion and unbelief. But his preaching had fallen upon sin-deafened ears.

If by this one call to repentance Jonah could affect the repentance of this Gentile city, what a lesson that would be to the sin-calloused hearts of Israel. It should reveal to Israel the perverseness and foolishness of their behavior toward her loving God—it should make her ashamed.

If it did not shame her into repentance then there was nothing left for God to do but cast Israel out as one no longer worthy to be called a child and receive and honor the recovered and penitent prodigal, Ninevah.

This is precisely the use Jesus made of the preaching of Jonah at Ninevah and its results. Jesus told the Jews of His own generation that the people of Ninevah would rise up in the judgment to condemn them, because they had repented at Jonah’s preaching; while He, a greater than Jonah, spoke only to cold and unconcerned hearts.

The Ninevites surrendered to the call of God and ceased from their sins while the covenant people despised God's word and His prophet and hardened their hearts fearing Him not.

This is a principle common to all ages. The principle is: God is not now nor was He ever a respecter of persons, "but in every nation he that fears him, and works righteousness, is acceptable to Him. (Acts 10:34)

This is why Jonah was sent. God would use the repentance and salvation of Ninevah as a last effort of a loving father to provoke a reluctant child (Israel) to shame and to a jealousy that would penitently seek the favor of its Father. But Jonah, so intent upon his own opinion as how to best accomplish Israel's repentance was found "running ahead of God."

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING FROM GOD—

THE CONTRARIETY OF JONAH,

Verses 3-10

SUMMARY

Jonah, thinking to relieve himself of the prophetic responsibility if he gets away from the place where this commission was given, flees toward Tarshish. But God arrests him in the middle of the ocean by a storm and the falling of a lot upon him. Jonah then confesses his failure to the ship's crew.

Verse 3

Was Jonah foolish enough to think that he could hide from God? Jonah's intention was not to hide himself from the omnipotent God, but to withdraw from the service of Jehovah. So Jonah, acted as men often do today who do not like God's call upon their lives to special service, by removing themselves as far as possible from being under the influence of God, and from the place where he could fulfill God's command.

All the circumstances which weighed upon Jonah's soul causing such disobedience we are not told. However, he gave us one reason himself near the end of the book. (4:2)

Jonah may have rationalized that if the call to repentance must be proclaimed, let it be at least committed to one better prepared for the toils and difficulties of the undertaking.

Discouragement, the devil's sharpest knife, has stabbed the heart of Jonah and many a preacher of God since, weakening their faith and prodding them into "fleeing from the presence of Jehovah."

Lack of apparent success, unresponsive listeners and discouragement blinded the eyes of Jonah to the power of God and he went with haste to the city of Joppa, one of Israel's greatest seaports, and paid his fare on a ship bound for Tarshish.

Tarshish is probably Tartessus (in Syria) about 2000 miles west of Palestine, and one of the most eastern points of all the Phoenician trade. Jonah was fleeing in as opposite a direction from Ninevah as he could go.

Verses 4-5

His going out from the presence of the Lord did not ensure his escape from the government of the Lord. All the forces of nature are at the command of God, and are pressed into His service when need requires.

The ship started on course, but God sent out a wind. The mariners were heathen—they were polytheists—men who worshiped many gods. When prayer to each one's deity did not avail, they hurled their cargo overboard, but even this did not help. The ship was groaning and creaking, tossed about, and in immediate danger of breaking apart. And Jonah was fast asleep!

Verses 6-7

The "chief sailor" (shipmaster) remembered the passenger who had boarded at Joppa and probably has been informed that he was asleep down in the hold.

Jonah had told them that his purpose for buying passage was to flee from the presence of Jehovah. So the chief “rope puller” (the literal ward for sailor”) awakened Jonah shouting, over the noise of the storm and in the incredulity that he could sleep, “What do you mean sleeping at a time like this” Get up and call upon your God in hope that He will look with favor upon us all that we do not perish.” Now they will try Jonah’s God.

These sailors were at their wits’ end when it occurred to them that this violent storm was the expression of the god’s anger with someone on board. So they cast “lots” to see who that might be.

Stones, pebbles, dice, colored balls, pieces of wood of different lengths, and so on, were used for the “casting of lots.” Because men of old believed that the will of the powers which ruled over man’s destiny could be known in this way, it was a common practice to cast lots for important decisions (coin toss today).

In the case of Jonah here it is very evident that God controlled the outcome of the casting of the lots. The lot fell upon Jonah. It was God’s way of saying, “You are the man!”

Verses 8-9

They inquired about his occupation, because it might be a disreputable one, and one which excited the wrath of the gods; also about his parentage in order that they might deal with him according to his position, or influential friendships.

We cannot but admire the frankness of Jonah’s confession of guilt, and his willing surrender to the claims of justice, when he was tempted sorely to take an opposite course.

This certainly shows that Jonah’s conscience was not seared over. He answers their questions truthfully and at the same time finds an opportunity to bear witness to the One True God.

Verse 10

Now if Jonah's claims were true, it was Jonah's God who had sent the storm.

The sailors were amazed by what Jonah had told them. It was as if they said, "Jonah, if your God is the God of heaven, sea, and land, how could you dare disobey Him and turn away from His command to you?" They also wanted to know why he had involved them in his troubles with his God!

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING FROM GOD—

THE CHASTENING OF JEHOVAH

Verses 11-17

SUMMARY

Jonah knows that this raging storm is God's chastening hand against him. He surrenders to God's justice and commits himself to death for his rebellion. As he is cast into the sea, the storm ceases, and he is swallowed by God's providentially prepared fish.

Verses 11-12

The "lot" having fallen upon Jonah, coupled with Jonah's confession of fleeing from the presence of Jehovah, the men correctly conclude that Jonah must somehow be made to atone for his sin. They know Jonah is a prophet of his God and so they ask him what shall be done. Jonah's reply is that he should be cast into the raging sea, "Because I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you."

Verse 13

Even though Jonah asked the crew to throw him overboard, they were reluctant to do so. They may have reasoned that this powerful God would be more pleased if they could deliver the runaway prophet safe to the land. But row as hard as they might, the storm only increased in fury.

Verses 14-15

These heathen seamen saw that there was no possibility of rowing to land against this storm whose raging increased by the moment, so they began to shout a prayerful cry to Jonah's God.

Jonah must be cast into the sea. They wanted to be sure it was all right with Jonah's God. They did not want to be found in rebellion against a God as this. If such a God could pursue a reluctant prophet to the middle of the sea and bring on such a storm as this, what might He do to these sailors who had never even prayed to Him before?

Their prayer contained two requests.

1. First, they prayed, do not let us perish along with and because of this man.
2. Second, they prayed, do not hold us guilty of willful murder in the case of this man—we are innocent of his blood.

It is all between this man and his God—we are innocent bystanders. We had no control over the falling of the lot upon him and we are not therefore guilty when we throw him overboard.

Having prayed to Jonah's God, the seamen lifted Jonah up and hurled him into the sea. Repentance was beginning to have its way in Jonah's heart. He did not resist. He surrendered to God's will and God's way.

And with fearful, awe-inspiring suddenness, the sea ceased its tossing and churning and became calm.

Verses 16-17

The sudden calming of the sea proved conclusively to the sailors that the storm had come on Jonah's account and that they had not shed innocent blood by casting him into the deep and that Jonah's God had been pleased with their actions. They not only worshiped Jonah's God then but made vows.

Many things are done and many vows are made under stress and strain which, when conditions become more favorable, are soon forgotten. The significant portion of this section is verse 17 concerning the great fish and the three days and three nights.

First, let us take a look the “fish story.” The word in Hebrew is *dag gadol* (fish, great). *Dag* may be a fish of any species, including the whale.

The continuous debate over whether there are fish in the Mediterranean, or any other ocean, that could swallow a man is actually beside the point since it is said that the Lord prepared the fish. There are certain species of sharks in the Mediterranean capable of swallowing a man.

The miracle is not so much the fact that there was a fish large enough to swallow a man, but in the fact that the fish was at the right place at the right time and in the fact that Jonah survived for “three days and three nights.” The event is a miracle.

The three days and three nights are not to be regarded as fully three times twenty-four hours, but are to be interpreted according to Hebrew usage, as signifying that Jonah was vomited up again on the third day after he had been swallowed.

GOD’S MESSENGER RUNNING TO GOD—

THE PRAYER OF JONAH

Verses 1-6

SUMMARY

Jonah’s “soul was sorrowful even unto death” and he “despaired even of life itself.” He was so close to death that he considered himself actually dead. Yet the Lord delivered him back to life.

Verses 1-2

It was because of his afflictions that Jonah was led to cry unto God. This is the purpose of chastening. Our Heavenly Father knows that we have need of chastening and of endurance.

We should rejoice when it comes. (James 1:2-4) It is only when we see our helplessness that we are able to turn to God. It is when we are made weak that we become strong. The salvation of Jonah was the affliction the Lord placed upon him.

Prayer is “an act of worship which covers all the attitudes of the soul in its approach to God.” Some think there are certain postures necessary for prayer, but the Bible shows by example that men may pray in any posture, kneeling, standing, bowing down upon the earth with face between their knees, lying in a sick bed and turning the face to the wall, falling prostrate upon the ground, walking along or standing in public.

Prayer is more an attitude than it is a formula or a ritual. Jonah could easily have prayed in the belly of the great fish without even opening his mouth.

We are to “pray without ceasing and the only way this can be done is to be in an attitude of praise, thanksgiving, supplication and dependence upon God at all times whether, silent, or aloud, whether lying down, sitting up or standing, wherever we may be.

Sheol is the Hebrew word usually translated in the Old Testament “hell.” It is also translated “pit” or “grave.” *Sheol* is equivalent to Hades in the New Testament.

Verses 3-4

Jonah was as good as dead! He had resigned himself to it! As far as he was concerned there was no possibility of saving himself. And this is exactly where God wanted him. One of the great paradoxes of God is that we must die before we can live.

Jonah had first to realize his estrangement from the Father before he could in all humility and dependent faith turn to the Father for help. Jonah, the “prodigal,” recognized this when he said, “I am cast out from before thine eyes,” but when Jonah’s heart turned to God’s Word for its “great and exceeding precious promises” and in faith cried out that he would, God willing, be restored to the presence of Jehovah.

Verses 5-6

The weeds are probably the reeds and grass, the vegetation on the very bottom of the sea. Jonah was down as far as one could go! The word translated “bottoms” is from a verb which means to “cut off,” or to “shear.” It signifies the extreme end. Jonah was at the very bottom of the sea where it seems as if the very foundation of the earth was to be found.

That he lived through this experience is indeed a miracle when one considers the short time it takes to drown and the death that can come from extreme pressures of the oceanic depths.

The “bars” of the earth had clanged into place and he would not be permitted access there now. Jonah thought of the earth as a walled city with its gate shut and locked with a bar, preventing him from ever again entering. From all outward appearances, and as far as he could determine, he would never again see the earth.

Yet, the Lord did bring up his life. He was resurrected from the grave—saved out from death. Thus, he became a sign to his generation and a type of the Messiah Who was a Sign to His generation and all generations.

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING TO GOD—

THE PROMISE OF JONAH

Verse 7-9

SUMMARY

Jonah's experience leaves him with only one place to run for salvation—the merciful promises of God. Jonah turns pledging himself to keep the vows he made to God.

Verse 7

Only when a man is convinced that he cannot save himself—that all other ways, systems and helps are insufficient for his needs—only then will he turn to God.

It is the authoritative statement of God's Word that all men are lost and condemned in sin unless they believe and obey God's Word. The primary objection of Christians then is to convince men of the authority of God's Word, the Bible.

This has not been done by presenting the empirical, historical evidences that the Bible is the Word of God.

God by providential acts upon the course of events oftentimes brings men and women to know their impotency and insufficiency. Then they are ready to turn to Him, but if they do not accept the Bible as His Word, how can they trust in the promises of it?

Jonah knew the Lord—he knew the word of the Lord was true. Now he realizes his insufficiency so he turns back to the promise of the Lord. He prays in his most extreme hour of need and finds the peace which passes understanding.

Verse 8

Jonah is here referring to the heathen who worship idols. When men refuse to have God in their knowledge, they become vain in their reasoning.

The Bible speaks of the gods and idols of man's invention as "vain." (Acts 17:22-29) The word translated "lying" means literally, "a vapor" or "a breath." "Vanity" means empty, void, worthless, useless.

The gods men invent are dumb, speechless, powerless, useless, false, and deceitful. This is also true of religious, theological or philosophical systems invented by men which do not conform to the revealed will of God in our Bible.

When men worship or put their hope in such gods and systems, they "cut off their noses to spite their faces." They willingly turn their backs on the only hope of mercy which is found exclusively in Jehovah God.

Verse 9

The sacrifices with which God is most pleased, offered by Jonah here, are the fruit of the lips given to praise Him and a life surrendered, committed to His service. (Hebrews 13:15-16)

Jonah's vow was not extraordinary or peculiar. It was common for Jews to make vows in time of need with the expectation of keeping the promise after relief was granted. Vows were never regarded as a religious duty even in the Old Testament. But when a vow was made God considered it binding. Vows as such are not required in the New Testament, neither are they prohibited. Jesus mentions vows only to condemn the abuse of them. (Matthew 15:4-6)

But we most certainly must surrender and commit our entire being to the Lord Jesus Christ and we must confess with the mouth that Jesus is Lord to the glory of the Father. (Romans 10:9-10)

The Hebrew word for "salvation" is the same word which we translate Joshua, for it is a contraction of Jehoshua which means "Jehovah is salvation."

The Greek rendering of Joshua is Jesus. Jonah now knew by experience that the help needed could come only from the Lord!

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING TO GOD—

THE PRESERVATION OF JONAH

SUMMARY

Jonah is delivered with a second opportunity to carry out his commission from the Lord.

Verse 10

God has set the whole creation, except man, to function through orderly laws and instincts imposed upon it by His will.

Man, He created in His own spiritual image with a will free, to make moral choice. But God impels by a certain divine and secret power, as animal and inanimate creation to do His will in a miraculous way when it serves His purpose to do so. (Balaam's donkey, Numbers 22:21-30; the star of Bethlehem, Matthew 2:2,9)

The land upon which Jonah was "spewed out" is not known for certain. We assume it to be the coast of Palestine or Syria, (it was near Joppa where he boarded the ship to run away).

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING WITH GOD—

THE COMMISSION RENEWED

CHAPTER 3:1-3

SUMMARY

God gives Jonah another chance to surrender to His will for the prophet's life. Jonah obeys.

Verse 1

Jonah has had a conversion experience! He has been raised to a new life. Physically he had come to the point of no return—except by the power of God he had returned! Spiritually he had died to himself and was raised a new spiritual man.

Jonah describes how he was feeling when in the belly of the great fish, when he had no other place to turn than to turn to God. After his experience in the sea, he probably preached like one raised from the dead. The prophet had died, as it were, and brought back to life again. It always requires an experience like Jonah's to make a good preacher.

So, God called Jonah again to go to Ninevah. God would not suspend his concern for the souls of that great city just because one of His prophets disobeyed. Furthermore, God's mercy and love is long-suffering toward the wayward prophet. God is rich in mercy...the riches of His goodness and forbearance and long-suffering...leads to repentance if we will but respond. (Romans 2:4)

Verse 2

What was the preaching that God bade Jonah preach? At the first command God told the prophet to “preach against” that wicked city. His task was to preach against wickedness. Then we learn from 3:4 that he cried, “Yet forty days and Ninevah shall be overthrown.” All this, of course, was to the end that the people would repent.

This message of repentance still needs to be preached today. Jesus referred to Jonah's preaching comparing it to His message, for His message was, “Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.”

Peter on the day of Pentecost preached, “Repent and be immersed, every one of you”... Paul to the philosophers of Athens preached... Now he commands "all men everywhere to repent..."

The reason these men preached repentance was they “preached . . . the preaching, “which God bade them preach. This is still good advice for all preachers: preach only that which God commands. Preach His Word, from His Book.

Verse 3

This time Jonah went “according to the word of the Lord.” There is no running away this time. There is not even any reluctance. He has learned his lesson...he has a new heart in the matter...he is a new man for God.

Archeologists have not yet found evidence that Ninevah is as extensive a city as three days' journey.

There are a number of possible answers to this alleged problem.

1. The statement could refer to the circumference of the city.
2. The statement could mean that journeying leisurely, stopping to preach at likely spots.
3. More likely, it could mean that a journey across “greater” Ninevah, including its “suburbs” (of which we spoke on 1:20), would take three days.

The city was “great,” not because it impressed God by its size or fame, but because God was concerned with the “many” souls in it which were lost and because it would be an almost overwhelming task, in the days of Jonah, to preach against it.

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING WITH GOD—

THE CRY FOR REPENTANCE

CHAPTER 3:4

SUMMARY

Jonah begins his “doom song” to Ninevah.

Verse 4

Jonah did not go into the city one full day's journey and then began to preach. The text definitely indicates that he started on his first day's journey and then sometime during that beginning of the journey he began to preach.

The word “overthrown” is from the Hebrew word which means literally “destroyed from the very foundations,” and is the same word used in speaking of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The respite granted is fixed at forty days, according to the number which, even as early as the flood, was taken as the measure for determining the delaying of the visitation of God.

What purpose God had in assigning exactly 40 days to Ninevah's period of probation it is idle to speculate. He most certainly would extend His grace long enough for all to hear the message and make response, but His grace would not be extended forever. Ninevah's cup of sin was running over—God's cup of wrath was filled to the brim and about to overflow.

Ninevah had had many opportunities to know and repent and now their judgment was fixed and announced—if repentance did not come with haste, the sentence would be executed.

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING WITH GOD—

THE CONSEQUENCE OF REPENTANCE

CHAPTER 3:5-10

SUMMARY

Verse 5

It is interesting to note that belief came before repentance in this case. In fact, it is a scriptural principle taught throughout the Bible that belief must always precede repentance. How can a man be motivated to perform works of repentance if he does not believe that God is and He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

Too much of the time preachers are guilty of expecting nominal Christians to lead lives of repentance when their belief is only nominal!

Conviction must come before conversion. Persuasion precedes penitence! After assent comes action. Jonah uses the same word for “believed” that is used to describe Abraham’s faith. (Genesis 15:6) It is a word that signifies saying “yes and amen” to God’s Word as it is revealed. A fast was declared by all the people of Ninevah. It was a national penitence.

Men of fame and importance and wealth mourned their sins, as well as the poor and unknown. The sackcloth was a prickly coarse garment woven of goat’s hair. It was usually worn over other garments but sometimes next to the skin. It was designed to be irritating and afflicting to the flesh.

Verse 6

That the mighty king of the mightiest nation on earth would humble himself so is evidence of the tremendous impact of Jonah’s work. Fasting is abstinence from food and drink. It is a form of afflicting or chastening the flesh and in this way chastening the soul.

The second external sign of repentance was wearing sackcloth. The third sign was the use of ashes. All of these religious acts go back to the time of the patriarchs. Ashes placed upon the head signified man's recognition of his own insignificance and was a sign of self-abasement. (Genesis 18:27)

In what respect, then, was Jonah a sign to the Ninevites? Jonah's being a sign of God's punishment of sin on the one hand and God's forgiveness of the sinner on the other hand peculiarly fitted him to be also a type, symbol, sign to a future generation of his own countrymen in respect to the history of the Messiah's work and kingdom.

The Lord refers especially to Jonah's humiliation or punishment (being in Sheol for three days and nights) as being the sign like unto which He Himself would be a sign.

Jonah, whom they justly revered as a true prophet, had been sent to the depths of Sheol, but the Ninevites did not stumble at his humiliating experience—they listened and obeyed his message.

There is another aspect to the sign of Jonah—that of his resurrection. And this is intended to be included in the similarity Jesus makes of Himself and Jonah. He was to become to the world the sign that Jonah was to Ninevah only when He exhibited the power of God at the resurrection.

Verses 7-8

Why were animals involved? They were involved to show total repentance. The beasts were property and as such, were considered a part of the person who owned them. Furthermore, animals live with men and are affected by the deeds of men. Causing the animals to participate in the time of mourning and repentance is an ancient Asiatic custom.

Herodotus relates that the Persians, when mourning for their general, Masistios, who had fallen in the battle at Platea, shaved off the hair from their horses.

Verses 9-10

We come now to one of the most perplexing problems of the Bible. Does God repent? The words “who knows” are as much a question as they are an expression of hope. The very fact that Jonah, a prophet of Jehovah God, had come to warn Ninevah was an indication there would be hope if they should repent. God does not repent or change His mind! His will is immutable.

God is not ignorant, weak, nor fallible. He does not make mistakes which He regrets. He does not change His mind. He knows all things and sees all things from the beginning to the end. But events may take place which appear, from man’s viewpoint, to be changes in God’s mind.

When in Genesis 6:6-7 God is represented as repenting that He had made man, does this mean God suddenly decided He had made a mistake in creating man and now regrets it and wishes He had never done so? No! Whatever God does is right and good. When He made man, he saw that it was good. But being a God of love, He made man with a freedom of choice. What pained the heart of God was that man had made the wrong choice.

Man’s freedom of choice brings us to the second point in this consideration. God’s moral law is immutable and unchangeable.

When man abides within the revealed will of God it is God’s immutable decree that whatever happens to him will turn out for his blessing.

When man, of his own free choice, insists upon rebelling against the will of God it is God’s immutable decree that whatever happens to him shall turn out to his condemnation and judgment. The repentance is up to man—it is man’s responsibility, yes, PRIVILEGE, to change, so long as God shall grant him an opportunity to do so!

Man may change, but God does not for He is perfect in all His ways. To say that God does not change is not to say that God does not act!

Someone will say, “If God does not change, why pray?” Prayer is not to tell God what we need—He already knows that! Prayer is not to change the mind of God—He is unchangeable.

Then what is prayer for? Prayer is both an inward and an outward manifestation of a dependent love for God. Prayer is an expression of relationship. That relationship is one of faith, trust, surrender, dependence, adoration, and gratitude—of abiding in the will of one’s Heavenly Father. That is why prayer is of the utmost necessity!

Man, being free to choose which relationship he will have toward God, must choose the relationship of abiding in His will in order to receive the blessings God has already determined to give him. (1 John 5:14-15)

God knows that we will pray and that we will pray in a spontaneous manner as a helpless child cries to his father or mother.

God has put the universe together on a principle of personal relationships in which He answers prayer. Parents know how to answer petitions of children in anticipation. Even with their limited knowledge parents are able to anticipate the future to a certain degree.

It is interesting to note in verse 10 that “God saw their works.” It was not until the repentance of the Ninevites was manifested through works that their salvation was affected by God! Works are both necessary for salvation and a result of salvation.

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING AHEAD OF GOD—

THE DISPLEASURE OF JONAH

Chapter 4:1-3

SUMMARY

Jonah feels his mission is a failure when Ninevah is not destroyed. He cannot go back and preach to his wicked countrymen with any forcefulness because God is merciful. Jonah would rather be dead.

Verses 1-3

We just cannot bring ourselves to characterize Jonah as a man so full of hate that his primary vexation is due to a cold-blooded desire to see thousands of heathen slain.

The people of Israel in Jonah's day were in a state of terrible degeneracy and profligacy. All the efforts of God (sending them prophets) had thus failed to bring them to their senses and repentance. So, the Lord, before abandoning them finally to their fate, sought once more to move them from their downward plunge, by working upon them through feelings of jealousy and shame while at the same time giving them an example of His mercy and lovingkindness when repentance is shown.

For this purpose God did with Ninevah what He did not usually do with other heathen nations.

Living in the age of ease, comfort, luxury, during national dependency of Jeroboam II when the people were almost totally libertine, Jonah preached in vain month after month, year after year. All the while his own countrymen and neighbors despised everything he was attempting to do on their behalf.

It is no wonder Jonah, like Elijah of old, after waiting month after month for some fearful, sudden, decisive turning point to come in the form of wrath from the Lord, would feel discouraged by the thought of the Lord's mercy.

Then after his own experience in the belly of the sea monster, he might stand in the midst of Ninevah and imagine that in forty days he would at last obtain the very example of the wrath of God upon sin that he hoped would come and that he could take back to Israel and persuade them to turn from their sin.

It requires no stretch of the imagination, then, to see what a disappointment it as for him to see Ninevah spared, and the very weapon snatched from his hand by which he hoped to prevail against the sin of his countrymen.

Jonah was not so much concerned with his own reputation nor so full of hate and vengeance that he would have taken some fiendish delight in the slaying of thousands of people; but he loved his own people so intensely, and was so firmly persuaded that an act of severity was required to shake them from their false security he was grieved and frustrated.

Instead of having the vantage point of a tremendous illustration of God's wrath upon sin he felt his whole purpose in life had been defeated and there was nothing left for him but to die.

Neither Jonah nor Elijah was right. Both of them were out of harmony with God's will. Both of them misunderstood God's plan and had only a partial view of His purposes and therefore made hasty, carnal judgments as to how God should govern. The lesson for us is that God's way is still the best for He sees the end from the beginning, and directs all with infinite skill and unerring wisdom.

If we could alter the plan of God it would not be for the better but for the worse. We must take the attitude of Habakkuk who, when he could not understand why God would use a heathen nation to punish the covenant people, and said, "I will take my stand to watch, and station myself on the tower and look forth to see what he will say to me...behold...the righteous shall live by faith."

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING AHEAD OF GOD—

THE DEMONSTRATION BY JEHOVAH

Chapter 4: 4-10

Verses 4-5

God asks, "Are you certain that your concept of how I should deal with the Ninevites is correct? Are you certain that My dealings with them as I have is grievous?" It would seem that God is giving Jonah opportunity to think, perhaps pray, and learn a new lesson about God's purposes and ways.

The Lord plants the idea in Jonah's heart that he may not be doing well in being grieved. But Jonah could not yet believe that the Ninevites would be allowed to resume their former course of peace and prosperity without a strong demonstration of God's wrath.

Jonah needed still to learn, and what God had not yet shown him, was the largeness of the mercy to be extended to Ninevah—that it amounted to an entire remission of the threatened penalty.

To teach him this, to show him it was reasonable and just on the part of God, yea, even of urgent necessity in the best interest of those whom Jonah loved so dearly, his own countrymen, Jonah's temporary shelter from the burning sun was turned into a school of discipline.

This "booth" which Jonah built was a temporary, small, lean-to affair, built usually of palm leaves, or at other times with any type of leafy tree branch, which would afford shade from the searing desert sun.

Verses 6-8

God knows exactly how to correct Jonah's mistaken concept of the divine purpose for Nineveh's salvation. Jonah needed something that would graphically turn his thoughts from the channel they were in to ideas of God's purpose which had never entered his imagination.

For this purpose, God permitted him to go construct his frail booth near the city and to experience there for a time inconvenience and discomfort. Then suddenly God brought over Jonah, without any exertion on the part of Jonah at all, the shadow of a broad foliage by the growth of the gourd vine. Then, just as suddenly, God made him feel again, in an even more intense way, the scorching sun and parching wind, by causing a worm to destroy the gourd vine.

Jonah suffered a mild sunstroke and fainted from the exposure and said he would have found death itself a happy release.

Verses 9-10

God is leading him slowly but surely to an ever-higher plan concerning the Divine behavior. In other circumstances it would have been a matter of little significance to Jonah what happened to the gourd vine. Situated as he was, however, depending for his comfort and in a sense also for his life on its ample foliage, its sudden destruction necessarily came upon him as a terrible tragedy—a calamity.

This is exactly the relationship God would have him consider concerning Ninevah. Ninevah, a city which feared the name and obeyed the voice of God, God had need of it in this time of extreme necessity in the case of Israel! God's cause would suffer by its annihilation.

If there had been any hope of the people in Israel being still brought permanently to repentance by some great example of the wrath of God, God would have known it and brought it to pass. But this hope could no longer be entertained. Everything of this sort had already been tried with Israel and still their hearts waxed hard and cold.

**GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING AHEAD OF GOD—
THE DECLARATION OF JEHOVAH**

Chapter 4:11

Summary

God reveals to Jonah His purpose in sparing Ninevah.

Verse 11

God must use other means than a demonstration of His wrath upon Ninevah if He is to bring any heartfelt repentance to the calloused Israelites of Jeroboam's day. He must call their jealousy into action.

God seeks to arouse Israel, by the example of this heathen nation spared due to repentance, to the startling consideration that the favor of God was bestowed on those of every race who work righteousness—and of the possibility that the kingdom of heaven might be transplanted to a people more spiritually prepared to receive it!

The singular demonstration of God's mercy and forgiveness and salvation would also furnish hope for the faithful remnant later in captivity.

This concept which the Lord sought to impress even on Jonah personally in his own experience in the sea, and which was taught again in the experience of the gourd, provided for all the faithful among the future exiles a sure ground of consolation and hope. There would be hope for them even in what might seem to be despair and grief.

There are some significant lessons to be learned from the book of Jonah.

1. Beware of letting our ideas of the result of God's work interfere with carrying out His present will for our lives.
2. Beware lest we belittle what can be or what is accomplished for God by our ideas of the significance or insignificance of the place of service.

3. Whatever and whenever God is pleased to manifest His grace and goodness it is our obligation and privilege to acknowledge and rejoice in the manifestation.
4. God's ways are not our ways. God does not change; man must change!