

Notes on Jonah

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Chapter 1

God was ready to announce his judgement on Nineveh. The evil of this capital city and the Assyrians was generally clear (Nahum 2:11–12; 3:1, 19).

However, the reason God announces or sends a judgment is to warn people so they can repent of their wrongdoing. 'Is a trumpet blown in a city, and the people are not afraid? ... The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy?' (Amos 3:6–8). But Jonah was not ready to prophesy and he thought he could distance himself from the presence and mercy of the Lord.

Jonah certainly knew that Israel lived because of God's mercy, grace, steadfast love and faithfulness. He also knew that God would not acquit the guilty, that is, the guilty who refused to be warned (Exod. 34:6–7). As the story proceeds, it appears that what made Jonah fear was not the judgment of God on Nineveh. He wanted that! He feared that God would have mercy on them when they repented (4:2). Why would God send him if it were not so they could turn to him?

The pagan sailors showed more eagerness in placating their idols than Jonah did in declaring the living God. It was they who sought out the person responsible for the disaster and then showed mercy to Jonah as they worked hard to avoid throwing him overboard. But neither Jonah nor they could escape 'the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' Jonah's small world was crumbling. He had witnessed the response of these sailors to the living God, and the smallness of his own heart. Now he encountered the water and a large fish.

The sailors had encountered Israel's covenant LORD. They pleaded to him for mercy for having to dispense such rough justice, and feared even more, and worshipped, when the storm ended. Their prayer had been heard by Israel's God.

Prayer

Father, teach us to fear when we hear of your mercy. May our hearts be reformed by the news of grace to us in Christ. May the anger and violence of the world and even their cruelty to us, never harden our hearts against you, or against those whom you have chosen to know your mercy. Hear us, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter 2

Jonah was God's servant to Nineveh, but here, he discovered the heart of the God who had called him. The Lord had interrupted his escapist cruise and taken him to death's door. The memory was vivid: the weeds, the waves, and not just of water but of the Lord's disfavour. He had been expelled from God's presence, and never expected to come before God again (at Jerusalem).

Many times, God's servants have felt abandoned by God (e.g. Ps. 42 and 69), sometimes for their sins and often because of oppression. It seems that the truth God wanted them to know or to proclaim, could not be discovered in an arm chair or proclaimed from one either. When Jesus came, he was made to feel the pain of being deserted by God, bearing our sins and sorrows in their fullness (Mark 15:34). The Son of God, who would bring the news of God's mercy to us, had to be rescued from such a fate himself. Jesus said the only sign that would be given to this evil generation would be his being in the depths of the earth, as Jonah had been in the belly of the whale (Matt. 12:39–41).

Psalm 69 is quoted several times in the New Testament. It anticipated the sufferings of Christ (v. 21).

A sign is always an intervention by God and so, most probably, refers to the resurrection. There was a tradition in Israel that the Ninevites had heard of the miraculous deliverance of Jonah making him a sign to them, just as Jesus would later be to Israel.

Jonah's life was ebbing away when he remembered the Lord and not just the Lord, but his mercy. Did he remember the Psalm: 'He restores my soul'? However, from his temple in Jerusalem, the Lord heard Jonah's cry.

Jonah now knew the vanity of idols, because the Lord had become his deliverer. Any thing less than the worship of the Lord was vanity for any human being. The Ninevites were idolaters, as were the sailors who had tried to save him, but Jonah had been no better than an idolater himself. Now, he knew first hand that the Lord was the living God. He was full of praise and ready to be about God's purpose, though, as we shall see, not yet fully reformed in heart.

Prayer

Father, forgive our ungratefulness! We can live under your covenant of mercy and yet be unaware that you have saved us from death. May the sufferings of your Son, and your love in giving him to us, ever remind us that we owe everything to you. Keep us always alive to your mercy, scornful of our idols, thankful in heart and ready to go wherever you send us. Hear us, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Chapters 3 and 4

There is no other record of a prophet rejecting the Lord's word as Jonah had done, but the word of the Lord came to him a second time. This time, he went. He came to Nineveh and traversed the city proclaiming God's word. Nineveh had only forty days before being overtaken by God's judgment.

Nineveh's repentance is unexplained. They had heard it from one who knew it was impossible to escape from God. They had heard it from someone who knew it was possible to cry out to God after being abandoned. Did he convey this to his hearers? Were they already fearful because of some threat? We will never know. But the Ninevites, from commoners to king, humbled themselves without reserve in hope of a reprieve. They were to turn from evil and from violence, the things that Israel found so abhorrent in these Assyrians.

God changed his mind as Jonah had feared, and the prophet prayed to God a second time, not now for mercy for himself, but in resentment and complaint over God's mercy for the Ninevites.

The story now focuses on Jonah and his anger with God. Did he have reason to be angry? God's change of mind was the revelation of his unchanging mercy. Jonah's anger was out of control as it settled into depression and the desire to die. His life had shrivelled to the point where all that mattered was the satisfaction of his anger and he retreated to a safe vantage point, perhaps hoping that God would still show some vengeance. He provided himself with some shade, and God even aided him with a quickly growing vine. But then, a worm destroyed the vine and his anger over this made him ready to die.

Jonah, like Cain, needed to master his sin (Gen. 4:6–7). He could rage over a vine that related to his personal comfort and not care at all for many of God's creatures. His life had become totally self-focused.

God had in mind not only the repentance of the nations, but also the reformation of his servant. Jonah had been taken to his own depths in order for grace to conform him to the image of God. If the incident of II Kings 14:23–29 occurred after this, it is clear that Jonah was reformed in heart by his encounter with the God of grace.

Prayer

Lord, save us from anger. Save us from ourselves. Save us from our violence and evil, not only the militant and political kind but the violence of resentment and uncaring. Thanks be to you, Father, for your faithful dealing with us all, and for telling us again of your unfailing love for all peoples. May your nature, proclaimed in Christ, be fully formed in us, for the sake of your mercy. Amen.

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