

THE MESSAGE OF JONAH

(Tom Constable)

The Book of Jonah does not contain the record of a prophet's message as much as the record of a prophet's experience. That feature makes Jonah distinctive among the prophetic books. This prophet's experiences are what we need to look at to learn the message of this book. That is also true of the Former Prophets books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. They, too, teach by recording selected experiences more than prophetic oracles (divine pronouncements).

There are many incidental features of this story, such as the ship, the storm, the fish, the gourd, the worm, the hot wind, and even Nineveh. They are important parts of the revelation, but they do not give us the message of the book. It is the major characters of the story that do that. The major characters are God and Jonah.

God's dealings with Jonah are even more important than His dealings with the Ninevites, from the standpoint of the book's revelation. These dealings reveal God's attitude and activity toward the nations, and toward His own people—for the nations' sake. We have here a revelation of Yahweh and a revelation of the responsibility of Yahweh's representatives.

One of the characteristics that marked the Israelites was their exclusivity. During the reign of Jeroboam II, when Jonah ministered, Israel was expanding geographically, and she was forming alliances with her neighbor nations. However at the same time, she was more exclusive religiously than she ever had been. The Israelites believed that their privileged relationship with God needed guarding, so that the Gentiles would not take it from her, as they had taken so many other things.

But the Israelites also projected their hostile attitude toward the Gentiles onto Yahweh. They thought of Him as hostile to their enemies too. Jonah epitomized that attitude. God gave His people this book to teach them that His attitude toward those outside the covenants and promises was quite different from theirs, and theirs should be different too.

The major revelation of Yahweh in this book comes through in His dealings with Nineveh and in His dealings with Jonah. Note, first, what this book reveals about the LORD (Yahweh) from His dealings with Nineveh.

Rather than having a superior, exclusive attitude toward the Ninevites, God's attitude was compassion. We can see this attitude at the beginning of the book, when God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh. We see it again in God's patient persistence, as He brings His prodigal prophet to repentance. We see it again when He sends Jonah there a second time. The clearest revelation of God's attitude toward Nineveh, however, comes through in the last two verses of the book (4:10-11).

Jonah was probably the first of the eighth-century writing prophets (ca. 780 B.C.). Other eighth-century prophets who ministered to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, beside Jonah, were Hosea (760 B.C.), who emphasized the love of God, and Amos (760 B.C.), who emphasized the righteousness of God. Isaiah (740 B.C.) stressed the holiness of God, and Micah (735 B.C.) the leadership of God to the residents of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Jonah reveals the compassion of God primarily. It is an important balancing revelation among these other prophetic messages.

The Hebrew verb *hus*, translated "had" or "have compassion," in 4:10 and 11, means "to spare by sheltering." The idea is that of covering, and so shielding from danger. Jesus said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37). Jesus expressed the same attitude toward Jerusalem that God did toward Nineveh. In Jesus' words we see



God's attitude toward sinning cities: great groups of people. This is the attitude that has driven evangelists and missionaries throughout the ages. It is God's attitude of compassion.

All of God's activities in this book proceeded from this basic attitude. We might conclude that God sent Jonah to preach against Nineveh only because He was angry with it, because of its sin. Certainly it was under His judgment for its sins, but the last verse reveals the underlying motive of God: His compassion.

Seen in this light, the troublesome statement that God relented, in 3:10, becomes less problematic. The Hebrew word used here, *nacham*, carries the connotation of being relieved and comforted. We should hear God sighing in relief when we read this verse. When Nineveh repented, God saw that judgment would not be necessary, and this made Him very happy. When people turn from their sin, God turns from judging them.

Turning to what this book reveals about God's dealings with Jonah, we see two things:

First, *God needs messengers*. In one sense, God needs no one and nothing, because He is self-sufficient. However in another sense, He has chosen to send His messages through people. The New Testament expression of this truth is: "How are they to hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14). God has chosen to use human messengers to carry most of His messages to other humans, though God Himself spoke directly to some people in the past.

The second thing that we see, as we examine God's dealings with Jonah, is that *because God needs messengers, He is persistent and patient with the messengers He selects*. We see this in that God did not abandon Jonah when he boarded the ship to go to Tarshish. We see it in God preparing a fish to preserve and transport him back to dry land. We see it in God re-commissioning Jonah. We see it in His providing a gourd to shelter the prophet. We see it in God's patient teaching when Jonah was burning up with heat and anger. We see it in God's attempts to bring Jonah into sympathy with His merciful purpose. In all these instances, we see God lovingly persuading the prophet to share His fellowship by sharing His attitude.

What about the revelation of the responsibility of God's representatives in this book? Positively, that responsibility is to *represent God*. Jonah did not rebel against God and become angry with God because He failed to appreciate God. He knew God quite well, as 4:2 makes perfectly clear: "I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God ". God sends people to represent Him who know Him. Jonah rebelled and became angry because he hated the Ninevites. We should be able to appreciate this because all of us hate violence and cruelty in people when they direct their wrath against people who do not deserve it.

To represent God, *His servants must be obedient*. His orders must take priority over their desires. God's purposes must override our prejudices and our preferences. If this does not happen, then the messenger experiences estrangement from God. However, there must be shared attitudes, as well as obedient actions, for true fellowship to exist. Jonah was not an acceptable representative until his attitude mirrored God's attitude, even though he had conceded to do God's will.

Jonah gives us the negative example in his attitude toward Nineveh. Jesus gives us the positive one in His attitude toward Jerusalem. Think of all the teeming cities of the world, where cruelty and corruption reign, and then remember that God has compassion on their inhabitants. Do we have more concern for plants than for people? I enjoy gardening, but I am learning to put people before plants—and other projects. We will never have a missionary heart until we come into close fellowship with the God of compassion. When we not only know about Him, but walk with Him, then we will share His fellowship. When Jesus looked on Jerusalem, He wept over it.

This book teaches its readers how God feels about His people, as well as how He feels about the teeming masses who do not know Him. *He needs us to take His message of compassion to the lost*. God is always in need of messengers to do this. His Word must become incarnate before it becomes impressive. That was true in Jesus' case, and it is true in ours. It is good to send Bibles all over the world, but God's primary method always has been to send preachers with His Word. When people receive the witness of someone whose life God has persuaded to trust and obey Him, the message of repentance becomes persuasive.

God still needs us, and He still sends us (Matt. 28:19-20). Every Christian man, woman, boy, and girl can identify with God's call to Jonah to go to Nineveh. Why must we lift up our voices and cry against the Ninevehs of our day? Their wickedness has come up before the LORD, and it is damning them. God wants to save them. Judgment is forever God's "unusual task" (Isa. 28:21). What is usual for God is compassion, deliverance, and salvation. Therefore, we must announce God's judgment so that people have an opportunity to repent.

Notice that when Jonah was disobedient to God, there was still much about him that was commendable. This is often true of us in our disobedience, and it often encourages us in our disobedience. Jonah went down to Joppa and found a ship waiting. Often when we disobey God we find that circumstances seem to accommodate us and cooperate with us. Jonah evidently paid his own fare. If he did, that was commendable responsibility.

Nevertheless, all these circumstances that Jonah could have viewed as indications that he was doing the right thing, clearly were not indicating that. After all, Jonah never reached Tarshish. God did not allow him to go that far. God gave him some freedom, but He eventually brought him up short. Likewise, God does not remind us at every turn that we are disobedient, but He will bring us to the point of acknowledging our disobedience eventually (cf. 1:7). He will not take His hand off of us.

The church's failure in evangelism and missions is not due primarily to our failure to know God and His compassion. We know Him. We have even experienced His compassion in our own lives. Our failure is due mainly to our dislike for those under God's judgment: our Ninevites. Perhaps we need to admit that we really do not want to see the world saved. The evidence of this is that we are much happier enjoying the spiritual comforts of being God's chosen people than we are reaching out to the lost. Some Christians hate the lost, just as Jonah did. Why do we not reach out to the "city" in which we live? Perhaps it is because we do not like the people who live there.

How can we overcome this problem? We will not overcome it by trying to love those whom we hate. That is humanly impossible. What we must do is what Jonah did. We must begin by simply obeying God, by doing what He has told us to do, namely, go to them with the message of deliverance. In other words, we should love our LORD even though we may not love the lost. When we obey Him, as Jonah did, God will begin to deal with our attitude toward those under His judgment (cf. John 21).

The Book of Jonah deals with the problem of exclusivism: the sin of concluding that if we have received God's compassion, it is for ourselves alone. What we need to do is begin obeying the commission that God has given us. Hopefully our obedience will arise out of love for Him, but it may arise out of our learning that disregarding that commission can result in much pain for us. In any case, we need to obey. Then God will begin to teach us love for the unlovely. That, too, may be a painful learning process, but God will be very tender with us as He teaches us, as He was with Jonah. We will also enter into true fellowship with our Savior, who wept over Jerusalem, because we will share His heart of compassion.

The message of Jonah then is that God will give us His heart of compassion for the lost as we execute the commission that He has given us.