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• EAST AFRICA •

# JONAH

by

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The book of Jonah, at least the account of Jonah in the belly of the great fish, is known by many. The book, however, is relevant to us today. God's sovereignty is prominent from beginning to end. Prayer also is very important in the book. God's character and people's relationship to him (especially compared to our attitudes to other people and our "things") are also emphasized. The Lord is revealed as a God of both justice and compassion. Jonah's own relationship with God is the most instructive relationship and is central to the book. As the story unfolds, the book of Jonah deals with tribalism and racism, extreme nationalism, materialism, our basic values and priorities, and our relationship with God. The conclusion of this book raises four fundamental issues: first, concerning the nature and character of God; second, concerning our relationship with the world and with things; third, concerning our relationship with people who are "different" from us; and fourth, concerning our relationship with God. Finally, APPENDIX 1—JESUS AND THE "SIGN OF JONAH" (MATT 12:38-41; 16:1-4; LUKE 11:29-32)—shows the intersection between Jonah and Jesus, the Messiah.

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## **I. Introduction**

### **A. Author, date, and canonical status**

Jonah, the son of Amittai, was a prophet from the town of Gath-hepher in Galilee (**2 Kgs 14:25**), in the territory of Zebulun (**Josh 19:13**). The name “Jonah” means “Dove” (Stanton 1951: 246). Jonah prophesied while Jeroboam II was the sole king in the northern kingdom of Israel (782-753 BC)<sup>1</sup> and while Azariah (Uzziah) (792-740 BC) was king in the southern kingdom of Judah (see **2 Kgs 14:15-25**). He was a contemporary of Amos and Hosea. Jonah had prophesied the victory of Israel and the expansion of its territory to its original boundaries (**2 Kgs 14:25**). Thus, he probably would have been a popular prophet in Israel.

Two astonishing and unpredictable instances of plot-reversal in the Bible involve the prophet Jonah. In **2 Kgs 14:25-27**, God permitted the expansion of Israel’s borders as prophesied by Jonah, despite the persistent sin of king Jeroboam II and Israel (see **2 Kgs 14:24**); this also went against the prophetic threats of destruction Amos had made against Jeroboam II (see **Amos 7:9-11**). The second plot-reversal was God’s relenting from overthrowing Nineveh as prophesied by Jonah, which is the subject of the book of Jonah. Each plot-reversal was short-lived. God used Nineveh (Assyria) as the rod of his anger to punish Israel (**2 Kgs 17:1-24; Isa 10:5-14**), which was destroyed in 722 BC. Although Nineveh repented at Jonah’s preaching, not long after that it reverted to its sinful and violent ways. All three chapters of the book of Nahum prophesy Nineveh’s destruction, which was accomplished in 612 BC.

The information in the book could only have come from Jonah himself, and Jesus accepted the historicity of Jonah and his book (**Matt 12:38-41; 16:1-4; Luke 11:29-32**). Since Jonah constantly refers to himself in the third person, there is at least the possibility that a third person wrote the account that Jonah gave him.

Although the northern kingdom of Israel had suffered sporadic attacks from both Assyria and Syria during the 100 years before Jonah wrote, “During the reign of Jeroboam II, Israel was living in relative peace and prosperity” (Nettelhorst n.d.: n.p.). In fact, “Both Hosea and Amos had attacked Jeroboam and Israel with oracles of doom for the religious syncretism and social injustice which accompanied that period of prosperity” (Stuart 1987: 447). The period in which the action takes place (782-753 BC) also was a period of relative Assyrian weakness. “During this time, Assyria was engaged in a life and death struggle with the mountain tribes of Urartu and its associates of Mannai and Madai in the north, who had been able to push their frontier to within less than a hundred miles of Nineveh. The consciousness of weakness and possible defeat would go far to explain the readiness of Nineveh to accept the prophet’s message.” (Ellison 1985: 361) Some have estimated that Nineveh, Assyria’s capital, had a population of up to 600,000 (Nettelhorst n.d.: n.p.). Following the seizing of the Assyrian throne by Tiglath-pileser III in 745 BC, Assyria began her period of greatest strength and aggressiveness, which resulted in her taking over the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC and deporting most of its population.

The author of the apocryphal book of *Ecclesiasticus*, Ben Sira, writing approximately 190 BC, recognized the twelve minor prophets, which include Jonah (see *Ecclesiasticus* 49:10). There is no rabbinic tradition that Jonah’s canonical status has ever been challenged (Ellison 1985: 364). Interestingly, there was a historic mosque in the city of Mosul, Iraq (ancient Nineveh) located on the western slope of Tel Nabi Yunus, which is Arabic for “Prophet Jonah,” whose story is mentioned in the Qur’an as well as in the Bible. “Originally built in the early thirteenth century, the mosque probably replaced an Assyrian Church believed to be the burial place of prophet Jonah, called Jonah’s Tomb” (“Jameh Nabi Yunus” 2017-2022: Overview; see also Jones 2014: n.p.). Academic research suggests that Jonah was not, in fact, buried there (“Jameh Nabi Yunus” 2017-2022: Tomb of Prophet Yunus; Jones 2014: n.p.). The mosque was blown up by ISIS in 2014.

### **B. Structure and outline**

The book of Jonah is unlike any other book of prophecy, and Jonah does not act like any other prophet. The book does not consist of lengthy prophetic oracles; in fact, Jonah speaks very few prophetic words. The story, like the book of Job, is largely a dialogue between God and Jonah, who, like Job, does not agree with the way God deals with people.

The book is structured on multiple levels at the same time. On one hand, the book can be seen as very simply structured. “It divides neatly down the middle. Chapters 1-2 deal with the first call to Jonah, his attempted flight and forced return, his reaction to these events; Chapters 3-4 deal with his second call, the successful mission to Nineveh, Jonah’s reaction to it and God’s lesson and final question. . . . Such an analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Jeroboam II had been co-regent with Jehoash from 793-782 BC.

of structure enables us to see a useful parallel between Chapters 2 and 4, whereby the ‘psalm’ and the final discussion with God, both serve to reveal the inner workings of Jonah’s mind.” (Magonet 1983: 55; see also Dorsey 1999: 290-92) This symmetrical design of the book is as follows:

### Part 1

- A. The call of God and Jonah’s response (1:1-3)
- B. Pagans (Phoenician sailors) must consider Yahweh (1:4-16)
- C. God confronts Jonah about his attitude (2:1-9)
- D. God’s compassionate deliverance (2:10)

### Part 2

- A’. The call of God and Jonah’s response (3:1-3)
- B’. Pagans (Assyrians) must consider Yahweh (3:4-10)
- C’. God confronts Jonah about his attitude (4:1-9)
- D’. God’s compassionate deliverance (4:10-11)

On the other hand, beneath that surface structure, the book is structured in a far more complex and sophisticated way. It uses both parallelism and chiasm at the same time, both for the book as a whole and also within each of the chapters. Chiasm is when at least two concepts are repeated in inverted order, i.e., in the pattern: A-B-B’-A’. Chiasm also may include an unpaired central element around which the other elements are arranged, i.e., A-B-C-B’-A’; that central element may be the point of emphasis. Chiasm serves a number of functions: (A) it creates balance and beauty; (B) it helps us to focus on the topic; (C) it helps us to clarify the meaning; (D) it emphasizes the point and helps us to follow the theme with greater ease; (E) it helps us to see new connections or contrasts between things.

Different scholars have discerned somewhat different chiastic and symmetrical structures of the book as a whole and of various episodes in the book. Duane Christensen has outlined the book as a whole chiastically as follows (see Christensen 1985: 135):<sup>2</sup>

- 1:1-2—A. – Jonah’s commission
- 1:3-4—B. – Jonah vs. YHWH: Jonah’s flight and YHWH’s storm (anger’)
- 1:5-13—C. – Dialogue between sailors and Jonah: “fear’ motif
- 1:14a—D. – The sailors’ prayer: “Hold us not responsible for this man’s death”
- 1:14b—E. – YHWH’s sovereign freedom: “What pleases you is what you have done”
- 1:15—F. – The sea ceased its raging (“anger”)
- 1:16—G. – The men feared YHWH with a great fear
- 2:1-2—H. – YHWH appointed a great fish to change Jonah’s mind
- 2:3-10—I. – Song of Jonah: a “proclamation” of deliverance
- 2:11—J. – Jonah’s deliverance
- 3:1-2—K. – Jonah’s commission renewed
- 3:3-4—K’. – Jonah’s response: an oracle of doom to Nineveh
- 3:5-7a—J’. – Nineveh’s repentance
- 3:7b-9—I’. – Decree of king of Nineveh: a proclamation to turn from evil
- 3:10—H’. – God changed his mind
- 4:1a—G’. – A great evil came to Jonah
- 4:1b—F’. – Jonah became angry
- 4:2—E’. – YHWH’s sovereign freedom: “I knew you would repent from the evil”
- 4:3—D’. – Jonah’s prayer: “I am better off dead than alive”
- 4:4-9—C’. – Dialogue between YHWH/God and Jonah: “anger” motif
- 4:10-11—B’. – YHWH vs. Jonah: YHWH’s justification of his compassion
- A’. – Jonah/Israel’s response: an oracle of salvation (implied)<sup>3</sup>

Smaller units within the book may also be structured chiastically. Thus, Christensen outlines chiastic

<sup>2</sup> David Dorsey’s outline of the book as a whole is similar, although not identical, to Christensen’s (see Dorsey 1999: 292).

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Lubeck similarly suggests this ending by saying “we encounter here at the surface level, an unbalanced structure that implies a missing conclusion. . . . While in one sense there is an ‘ending’, it leaves us hanging in mid-air with a question that goes unanswered.” (Lubeck 1986: 108)

structures for **chapters 1-2** and **3-4** as follows (Christensen 1985: 136):

**Chapters 1-2**

- 1:1-2—A.** – YHWH told Jonah to enter the “House of Fish”
- 1:3—B.** – Jonah fled from YHWH (instead of “fearing” him)
- 1:4—C.** – YHWH hurled a great wind to the sea, and a great storm threatened to destroy the ship
- 1:5a—D.** – In fear the sailors prayed to their gods
- 1:5b—E.** – The sailors hurled the ship’s cargo into the sea, but Jonah went down into the ship and fell asleep
- 1:6—F.** – The captain ordered Jonah to pray for salvation
- 1:7—G.** – Jonah is found out by lot
- 1:8—H.** – The sailors asked; “Who are you?”
- 1:9—I.** – Jonah’s confession: “I am a Hebrew, and I fear YHWH”
- 1:10a—I’.** – It is the men who feared—with a great fear
- 1:10b—H’.** – The men asked: “What have you done?”
- 1:10c—G’.** – Jonah’s flight revealed
- 1:11-12a—F’.** – The men asked Jonah what they must do
- 1:12b-13—E’.** – Jonah told them to hurl him into the sea, but the men rowed for shore
- 1:14-15a—D’.** – The men prayed to YHWH: “hold us not responsible for ‘innocent blood’”
- 1:15b—C’.** – The men hurled Jonah to the sea, which “ceased its raging”
- 1:16—B’.** – The men feared YHWH—with great fear
- 2:1-11—A’.** – YHWH appointed a great fish to house Jonah

**Chapters 3-4**

- 3:1-2—A.** – YHWH renewed Jonah’s commission to enter Nineveh
- 3:3-4—B.** – Jonah’s repentance: He proclaimed a message of doom
- 3:5-6a—C.** – Nineveh’s repentance
- 3:6b-7a—D.** – The king’s repentance
- 3:7b-8—E.** – Decree of the king of Nineveh: “Turn from evil”
- 3:9—D’.** – The king’s hope (that God may repent)
- 3:10—C’.** – God’s repentance
- 4:1-11—B’.** – Jonah’s great evil—his anger (re. YHWH’s compassion)
- **A’.** – Jonah/Israel’s response: oracle of salvation (implied)

These “concentric” structures get smaller and smaller as they extend to smaller units within the book.<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Magonet sees the following chiasmic structure within **chapter 1** (Magonet 1983: 56):

- 4-5a—A.** – Narrative – Fear
- 5b—B.** – Prayer of sailors
- 5c-6a—C.** – Narrative
- 6b—D.** – Speech of captain
- 7a—E.** – Speech of sailors
- 7b—F.** – Narrative
- 8—G.** – Speech of sailors
- 10b—G’.** – Speech of sailors
- 9-10a—H.** – Proclamation by Jonah - Fear
- 10c—F’.** – Narrative
- 11—E’.** – Speech of sailors
- 12—D’.** – Speech of Jonah
- 13—C’.** – Narrative
- 14—B’.** – Prayer of sailors
- 15-16a—A’.** – Narrative – Fear

<sup>4</sup> For example, Dorsey sees a chiasmic structure to **1:4-16**, a symmetrical structure to **1:17-2:10**, a chiasmic structure to **3:3b-10**, and symmetrical structures to **4:1-4** and **4:5-11** (Dorsey 1999: 293-95).

Christensen sees a similar pattern in **chapter 2** (Christensen 1985: 138):

- 1-2—A. – YHWH appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah
- 3—B. – Jonah’s prayer from Sheol: a lament
- 4-5—C. – Though driven from YHWH’s presence, Jonah continued to look to his holy temple
- 6-7b—D. – Jonah’s descent “to the foundation of the mountains”
- 7c—D’. – Jonah’s ascent “from the pit”
- 8—C’. – Though his “soul-life had expired,” Jonah continued to turn to YHWH in his holy temple
- 9-10—B’. – Jonah’s prayer in YHWH’s “temple”: a thanksgiving
- 11—A’. – At YHWH’s word the fish vomited out Jonah

A similar structure appears in **chapter 3**:

- 1-2—A. – *God’s speech* commissioning Jonah to go to Nineveh and call out against it
- 3-4—B. – *Jonah’s proclamation* against Nineveh (“Yet 40 days and Nineveh has be overthrown”)
- 5—C. – *Response of the people* (belief in God, fasting, sackcloth)
- 6—C’. – *Response of the king* (sackcloth, ashes, fasting)
- 7-9—B’. – *The king’s proclamation* (“Let everyone turn from his evil way. . . . God may turn and relent . . . so that we may not perish”)
- 10—A’. – *God’s act* in relenting from the disaster he said he would do to Nineveh

There is a symmetrical pattern within **chapter 4** (i.e., speech-speech, act-act; see Magonet 1983: 57):

- 2-3—A. – Speech of Jonah
- 4—B. – Speech of God
- 5—C. – Act of Jonah
- 6a-b—D. – Act of God
- 6c—E. – Jonah happy
- 7-8a—F. – Act of God
- 8b—E’. – Jonah unhappy
- 8b—D’. – Speech of Jonah
- 9a—C’. – Speech of God
- 9b—B’. – Speech of Jonah
- 10-11—A’. – Speech of God

Patterns like this occur even within individual verses. For example, **1:3** (see Assis 2002: 275):

- A. But Jonah rose to flee **to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord**
- B. He **went down** to Joppa
- C. and found *a ship*
- D. **going to Tarshish**
- C’. So he paid *the fare*
- B’. and **went down** into it
- A’. to go with them **to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord**

Additionally, **chapters 1** and **3** clearly parallel each other. Each involves God’s commission to Jonah, using identical wording in both chapters (**1:1-2**; **3:1-2**). Although Jonah’s response to God’s call is different in the two chapters, similar phrasing occurs throughout both chapters, highlighting their parallel structure; the same verbal parallelism occurs between **chapters 2** and **4** (Lubeck 1986: 104-6). The above simple and detailed overlapping structures show the skill and design of the author. The orderly form of the structure reveals that Jonah’s attempted flight from God was premeditated and well-planned; it was “an ideological one, rather than the result of panic” (Assis 2002: 276). Further, the book’s structure highlights a number of themes the author intended.

### C. Themes

The book of Jonah has a number of important themes. First, God’s sovereignty is prominent from beginning to end. “Yahweh is the leading actor who completely dominates the scene” (Stek 1969: 36). He has the first word (1:1-2) and the last word (4:10-11). In 1:4 God “hurled a great wind upon the sea.” In 1:17 he “appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.” In 4:6-8 he “appointed” a plant to shade Jonah, a worm to destroy the plant, and the scorching east wind to beat down on the head of Jonah. Even the pagan sailors recognize God’s sovereignty, call out to him, fear him, and make sacrifices and vows to him (1:14-16). In 1:14 they acknowledge, “You, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.” Second, coupled with God’s sovereignty is an emphasis on God’s character and nature, and people’s relationship to him (especially compared to our attitudes to other people and our “things”) are also emphasized. All people are accountable to God, and the book reveals a God whose mercy and grace extends to all kinds of people, including the pagan sailors (**chapter 1**) and the Ninevites (**chapter 3**). He is shown to be a God of both justice and compassion. Thus, he sends Jonah to Nineveh to preach a message of judgment because “their evil has come up before me” (1:2). Yet the Lord also is a God of compassion. Jonah recognizes that in his prayer from the great fish (2:2-9) and in 4:2. God makes this clear in 3:10 where he relents from destroying Nineveh and in his final speech to Jonah (4:10-11). The Ninevites repent and change their ways, hoping for God’s mercy (3:5-9). Third, prayer is very important in the book. There are prayers in each of the chapters: **chapter 1**, the sailors; **chapter 2**, Jonah; **chapter 3**, the Assyrians; and **chapter 4**, Jonah again. The first three prayers are for deliverance from certain death, and they are answered; the fourth prayer is for death, and it is not answered.

Finally, Jonah’s own relationship with God is the most instructive relationship and is central to the book. That relationship highlights the issues of tribalism and racism, extreme nationalism, materialism, our basic values and priorities, and our relationship with God. Jonah knew that God “is a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (4:2). That is the very reason he fled to Tarshish (4:2). Jonah disobeyed God and fled to Tarshish because his hatred for the Assyrians was so great that he would rather die than obey God and see them delivered from destruction. Throughout the book, Jonah’s attitude and behavior contrasts with all the pagans he encounters. Jonah’s worldview essentially had his own wellbeing and that of his people (Israel) at the center. That also caused him to be insensitive to the situation and pleas of the sailors during the storm at sea. He valued his own comfort and a plant over the lives of thousands of human beings made in the image of God (4:8-11). Placing great value on things with little intrinsic value, contrary to what God values, is the essence of materialism. That is not what God values. God values people and is “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet 3:9), even the Gentiles whom Jonah hated. The conclusion of the book raises four fundamental issues: first, concerning the nature and character of God; second, concerning our relationship with the world and with things; third, concerning our relationship with people who are “different” from us; and fourth, concerning our relationship with God.

## II. Commentary on Jonah<sup>5</sup>

### A. Jonah 1

<sup>1</sup> Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” <sup>3</sup> But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

<sup>4</sup> But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup> Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. <sup>6</sup> So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.”

<sup>7</sup> And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup> Then they said to him, “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” <sup>9</sup> And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” <sup>10</sup> Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him,

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the English Standard Version will be used in this commentary.

**“What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.**

<sup>11</sup> Then they said to him, **“What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.** <sup>12</sup> He said to them, **“Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.”**

<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. <sup>14</sup> Therefore they called out to the LORD, **“O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.”** <sup>15</sup> So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup> Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

<sup>17</sup> And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

### vv. 1-3: God's call and Jonah's response

Although some people may think that the story of Jonah is fiction (especially given the account of his living for three days inside the belly of a great fish), **v. 1** does not simply identify him as “Jonah,” but specifically identifies him as *“Jonah the son of Amittai.”* This is in accord with **2 Kgs 14:25** which speaks of *“Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet.”* Thus, **v. 1** is speaking of a real, historical person and thereby introduces a real, historical event. In fact, as we will see, Jonah portrays himself in a very unfavorable light. “This is the very sort of self-damaging material historians typically look for in assessing the veracity of ancient works” (see Eddy and Boyd 2007: 411; Grant 1977: 176; Maier 1973: 98).<sup>6</sup> The historicity of the book is corroborated in that: (1) on its face, the book presents itself as a straightforward historical narrative; (2) Jews and Christians historically have accepted the book as historical; and (3) Jesus Christ accepted the book as historical, compared himself to Jonah, and used Jonah's three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish as typifying or foreshadowing Jesus' three days in the grave before his resurrection.

Although other prophets had prophesied against pagan nations, Jonah is the only prophet whom God sent directly to a pagan, Gentile nation. He is also the only prophet who directly disobeyed God's commission. In **v. 2**, Nineveh is called *“that great city.”* The word “great” can signify either “large” or “important.” God's statement that *“their evil has come up before me”* recalls his statement in **Gen 18:20-21** regarding Sodom and Gomorrah.

Although some biblical prophets tried to get out of God's call (Moses, **Exod 3:10-4:13**; Jeremiah, **Jer 1:6**), ran away when threatened with death (Elijah, **1 Kgs 19:1-8**; Uriah, **Jer 26:20-23**), complained to the Lord and were depressed to the point of wanting to die (Elijah, **1 Kgs 19:4**; Jeremiah, **Jer 20:14-18**), Jonah is the only prophet who explicitly disobeyed God's call. Instead of obeying God and heading north and east to Nineveh (**vv. 1-2**), Jonah went in the opposite direction, headed south to the port city of Joppa (modern Jaffa), the chief Mediterranean port, and then took a ship to Tarshish in the west (**v. 3**). He did not consider **Ps 139:7-10**, which directly relates to this.<sup>7</sup> The specific location of Tarshish is not clear. It “has been located at

<sup>6</sup> The citations relate to the biblical accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but the principle applies equally to the historicity of Jonah.

<sup>7</sup> In his disobedience, Jonah mirrored the nation of Israel itself. Even though God chose Israel (**Deut 7:6-8**), redeemed Israel out of slavery (**Exodus 13-15**), gave Israel its own land (**Joshua 1-21**), and entered into covenants with Israel (**Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 22:15-18; Exodus 19-24; 2 Sam 7:8-17; 1 Chron 17:3-15**), throughout its entire history the nation as a whole was largely unbelieving (see **Neh 9:1-37; Acts 7:1-53**). Both the OT and the NT record that Israel's history was characterized by unbelief and unfaithfulness toward God.

- *While Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments.* The nation began worshipping a golden calf. So God wanted to destroy them all (**Exodus 32**).
- *When they reached the edge of the Promised Land.* Ten of the twelve spies said that they should not enter the land, and the vast majority of the people rebelled against the Lord. So God made them wander in the wilderness for 40 years, with only Joshua and Caleb from that entire generation being permitted to enter the land (**Numbers 13-14**).
- *After they entered the land, during the rule of the judges.* The people constantly worshipped other gods and *“did evil in the eyes of the Lord”* (**Judg 2:11-13; 3:5-7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1; 17:6; 21:25**).
- *Israel's demand for a king of their own.* That demand was a rejection of God so that they could be like the other nations (**1 Sam 8:1-9**).
- *Before the exile in Babylon.* God spoke through the prophets and summarized Israel's history by saying, *“I will abandon the remnant of My inheritance and deliver them into the hand of their enemies, and they will become as plunder and spoil to all their enemies; because they have done evil in My sight, and have been provoking Me to anger since the day their fathers came from Egypt, even to this day”* (**2 Kgs 21:14-15**).



practically every important Mediterranean trading station known to present-day scholars” (Sasson 1990: 79). Nevertheless, there is considerable evidence to suggest that it was a Phoenician trading center, either the island of Sardinia (between Spain and Italy) or a city and region in southern Spain (“Tarshish” 2022; see also Wolff 1986: 100-101). Consequently, Jonah undoubtedly boarded a Phoenician ship.

In **4:2**, after God spared the city of Nineveh, Jonah stated his reasoning for fleeing from God, *“That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”* Jonah may have been betraying his limited or parochial understanding of God and his nature; he thought that God should only be merciful to Israel and was angry that God’s compassion applies to nations other than Israel, particularly to Israel’s enemies. There may be more to his anger than that. H. L. Ellison elaborates, “Jonah knew full well that his commission showed God’s desire to spare Assyria, something that as ‘Judge of all the earth’ (Gen 18:25) he could not do unless it repented of its sins. With typical human shortsightedness, the prophet could see only one reason for this—that penitent and spared Assyria should be God’s scourge for Israel, which had been threatened by its power at least three times in the past. . . . If Assyria were spared now, it could only be that the doom pronounced at Horeb to Elijah (1 Kings 19:15-18) should go into full effect.” (Ellison 1985: 369) That, in fact, happened in 722 BC.

#### **vv. 4-16: Jonah on the ship**

This section emphasizes the sovereignty of God and the contrast between the pagan, Gentile sailors and Jonah. God is the one driving the action. He is the one who *“hurled a great wind upon the sea”* to cause the storm which nearly caused the ship to break up (**v. 4**). Then, he caused the lot cast by the sailors to fall upon Jonah (**v. 7**; see **Josh 7:14-19; Prov 16:33; Acts 1:26**). When the sailors finally cast Jonah into the sea, God immediately caused the sea to be calm (**v. 15**).

There is a lesson here for us. We all “run from God” when we do things we know we should not do and don’t do the things we know we should do. Such “running from God” can pertain to any area of our lives: money, sex, relationships, forgiveness, confronting someone, etc. Such running from God requires the delusion that we will not be caught. It should be noted that, despite his running from God, Jonah was still a believer. Just as God pursued Jonah, God pursues us, often via unusual means. God pursues us not to “pay us back,” but to “bring us back.” If we would reflect in advance on the facts that God is sovereign, he sees everything we are doing, and he loves us even more than we love ourselves, we could spare ourselves much anguish, heartache, and trouble by continuing to walk in line with him and not going our own way, as Jonah attempted to do.

The contrast between Jonah and the sailors is seen again and again throughout this section. Jonah wanted to get away from and avoid the pagan Ninevites, yet he is surrounded by pagan Phoenicians and even ends up agreeing to die for them (**vv. 11-12**). While Jonah shows no concern for the sailors and even sleeps during the storm (**v. 5**), the sailors show great concern for Jonah—at the risk of their own lives—by trying to bring the ship back to dry land rather than throw Jonah overboard as Jonah had suggested (**vv. 12-13**). As a prophet of God, Jonah should have been the first to pray to God, but instead it is the captain who exhorts Jonah to pray (**v. 6**), and only the sailors are shown to pray to Jonah’s God and then worship him (**vv. 14-16**).<sup>8</sup> Further, although Jonah said that he feared the Lord (**v. 9**), his actions demonstrated that he really did not fear the Lord; it was the sailors who truly *“feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows”* (**v. 16**).

This section also tells us important things about God’s interaction with us and the nature of our faith. First, God can and does use anything—even our sin—to accomplish his purposes (see **Rom 8:28**). Classic

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- *After the return of the nation from exile in Babylon.* Israel’s sin continued, including marriages to pagans (**Neh 13:23-26; Mal 2:11-15**); failure to tithe or otherwise obey the law (**Neh 13:10-14; Mal 2:10; 3:8-10; 4:4**); no concern for the Sabbath (**Neh 13:15-22; Mal 2:8-9**); corrupt priests (**Neh 13:7-9; Mal 1:7-14; 2:1-9**); and general wickedness (**Neh 5:1-13; Mal 3:5**).
  - *Israel’s pattern of unbelief, disobedience, and rejection of God continued up to and after the time of Jesus.* Jesus “came to His own, and those who were of His own did not receive Him” (**John 1:11**). Jesus’ parable of the landowner and the vineyard (**Matt 21:22-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19**) summarized Israel’s history as rejection of God’s prophets and rejection of God’s Son. **Heb 3:7-4:9** concludes that Israel never entered God’s “rest” because of unbelief. Stephen summarized Israel’s history as persecution of the prophets, betrayal and murder of Christ, and disobedience to the law (**Acts 7:51-53**). In **Acts 28:23-27** Paul quotes **Isa 6:9-10** concerning Israel’s blindness and deafness as applying to Israel’s rejection of Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, when the sailors asked Jonah his occupation, where he was from, his nationality, and his people (**v. 8**), Jonah did not answer their first question about his occupation. To have admitted that he was a prophet certainly would have been embarrassing and would have revealed his disobedience in bold relief.

examples of this are God’s using the sin of Joseph’s brothers, who sold him into slavery, to save thousands of people from famine years later (**Gen 50:20**) and God’s using the sin of Pilate, Herod, the Jewish leaders, the Roman soldiers, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, who crucifying the innocent Jesus, to bring about the redemption of humanity (**Acts 2:22-23; 4:27-28**). This in no way excuses or justifies our sin but shows that nothing is outside of God’s providence and plan.

In this case, God used Jonah’s sin of running from God to bring the sailors to faith. Most polytheistic pagans of Jonah’s day had a limited view of the nature of the gods, i.e., there were different gods for different regions or countries. When Jonah revealed, “*I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land*” (**v. 9**), that caused the sailors to become “*exceedingly afraid*” (**v. 10**). This is reflected in their exclamation of shock and horror in **v. 10**, “*What is this that you have done!*”<sup>9</sup> The reason for their fear must be that Jonah was revealing a universal God to them, who was Lord over the land and the sea, regardless of where they were located. God was using this circumstance to bring those sailors to himself. The sailors recognized that to throw Jonah overboard, as Jonah advised in **v. 12**, would constitute the murder of an innocent man.<sup>10</sup> They could not do that in the face of a universal, sovereign God. Thus, they tried to row the ship back to shore (**v. 13**). When that failed, they pleaded with the Lord and acknowledged his sovereignty (“*for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you,*” **v. 14**). Significantly, the sailors’ acknowledgement that the Lord has “*done as it pleased you*” echoes Ps **115:3** and **135:6**. In both of those psalms, Yahweh is contrasted with other, impotent gods and idols (**Ps 115:4-7; 135:5**); **Psalm 135** explicitly mentions God’s rule over the seas. The text itself shows the contrast between the false gods the sailors had worshiped and the true God: each sailor had “*cried out to his god*” in vain (**v. 5**); but when they “*called out to the Lord*” (**v. 14**), God heard them, spared them, and calmed the storm. When the sailors hurled Jonah in to the sea and the sea became calm, the offering of sacrifices and making vows to the Lord indicate that they believed in him and were worshiping him. Jack Sasson states a lesson the sailors learned, a lesson which the Ninevites will later learn, and one which Jonah should have learned and we should learn, namely, “the God who appoints death can also grant life and that unconditional submission to divine will can, in fact, turn fate around” (Sasson 1990: 142).

The sailors’ hurling Jonah into the sea is an important part of the “sign of Jonah” Jesus referred to in **Matt 12:38-41; 16:1-4; Luke 11:29-32**.<sup>11</sup> Timothy Keller states, “As Jesus says in Matthew 12:41, he is the ultimate Jonah, who was thrown into the ultimate deep—of eternal justice—for us. How ironic it is that in Mark 4 the disciples ask, ‘Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?’ (Mark 4:38). They believe he is going to sleep on them in their hour of greatest need. Actually, it’s the other way around. In the garden of Gethsemane, *they* will go to sleep on him. They will truly abandon him. And yet he loves them to the end. See? Jonah was thrown overboard for his own sin, but Jesus is thrown into the ultimate storm for *our* sin. Jesus was able to save the disciples from the storm because he was thrown into the ultimate storm.” (Keller 2015: 79-80)

Additionally, this section is telling us that our faith is to be put into practice for the public good. That essentially is what the captain was calling on Jonah to do in **v. 6**. On the other hand, Jonah was wrapped up in himself, his own people (Israel), and his own view of what God should or should not do with pagan Ninevites (Israel’s enemies). He hated the Ninevites and did not love them enough even to want God to change them. He did not understand that when God called him to go to Nineveh, God essentially was saying, “If you belong to me, you also belong to them.” Jesus articulated what true faith entails when he said, “<sup>43</sup>*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’* <sup>44</sup>*But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* <sup>45</sup>*so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.* <sup>46</sup>*For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?* <sup>47</sup>*And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”* (**Matt 5:43-47**) Ironically, Jonah’s limited faith made *him* the “Gentile” in God’s eyes, not the physical Gentiles who surrounded him.

Jonah’s limited view of the nature of true faith and his fixation only on himself (i.e., by choosing to go to sleep) had the effect of making him unaware of the problem besetting the ship. Consequently, at least until he was prodded by the captain and the sailors, he never used his faith to try to deal with the problems the ship and the sailors were facing. This tells us that when we have an inadequate view of the nature of faith and what that faith entails, it tends to limit our perception in multiple areas—and we have no idea how our lives have been

<sup>9</sup> Their exclamation can be translated as a question, but, if so, it is more of an accusatory, rhetorical question than one simply seeking information.

<sup>10</sup> Note that “Jonah is not making it easy on his shipmates! He is not about to throw himself into the sea just because he recognizes his own culpability.” (Sasson 1990: 124)

<sup>11</sup> See APPENDIX 1—JESUS AND THE “SIGN OF JONAH” (MATT 12:38-41; 16:1-4; LUKE 11:29-32).

rendered ineffective or useless because of it. Many today, particularly (but not exclusively) in the West have the view that faith is only for our “private lives.” The captain correctly was saying that such an idea is untrue. If one’s faith is true, it is to be put into service for all people and is not just for one’s private edification (see **Gal 6:10**).

#### v. 17: God appoints a great fish

**Verse 17** actually begins **chapter 2** in the Hebrew text. The verse says that God “appointed” a “great fish” to swallow up Jonah. The Hebrew (*dahg*) and the Greek which Jesus uses for the creature that swallowed Jonah (*kētos*, **Matt 12:40**) both lack “the precision to identify with specificity the identity of the creature that swallowed Jonah” (Miller 2003: n.p.; see also Lyons 2012: n.p.). Spiros Zodhiates similarly observes, “The term was in that day, as it is today, common parlance for any kind of aquatic creature. Its nontechnical usage would allow for a mammal such as a whale” (Zodhiates 1993: *kētos*, 862). Since God “appointed” this particular fish to swallow Jonah, God certainly could have made it not only capable of swallowing Jonah but preserving him in the belly and then vomiting him out again alive three days later. There are some stories of men being swallowed by a large fish or whale and surviving, but most if not all such stories have been debunked (see Wilson 1927: 630-42; “James Bartley” 2022: n.p.; Turner 2021: n.p.; but see Thomson 2022: n.p.). Regardless of their truth or falsity, such reports are irrelevant to Jonah’s situation, since that clearly was a special fish or whale, specially appointed by God, for a particular purpose, not simply a “natural” occurrence.

“*Three days and three nights*” is an idiom. “The *Babylonian Talmud* (Jewish commentaries) relates that, ‘The portion of a day is as the whole of it.’ The *Jerusalem Talmud* (so designated because it was written in Jerusalem) says, ‘We have a teaching, “A day and a night are an Onah and the portion of an Onah is as the whole of it.”’” (McDowell 1981: 122) Cossi Ahoga summarizes, “Since the Jews reckoned part of a day as a whole day, the statement that *Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights* does not require that he was there for a full seventy-two hours. He may have been there for only one twenty-four hour day plus parts of two other days.” (Ahoga 2006: 1046).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do we have a limited or parochial understanding of God and his nature?
2. How do we “run from God”?
  - How have you “run from God,” and how did God pursue you?
3. Can you think of ways in which God has used your sin or the sin of others to bring about good?
4. James said, “*faith without works is dead*” (**Jas 2:17**). How does the account of Jonah in the ship illustrate that?
  - What are the implications of **Jonah 1:4-16**, particularly as we come into contact and interact with people, especially people who are “not like us”?
5. Can you think of any examples when you became so fixated on yourself and your personal problems that it affected your perception, your faith, and how you acted with others?
6. How might you respond to people who doubt the truth of the Bible because they cannot believe that Jonah could actually be swallowed by a great fish and survive for three days?
7. Discuss Jesus and the “sign of Jonah” (**Matt 12:38-41; 16:1-4; Luke 11:29-32**; see Appendix 1).
  - How does Jesus’ use and understanding of Jonah’s story affect your understanding and appreciation of the story of Jonah, of Jesus, and of the Bible in general?

## B. Jonah 2

<sup>1</sup> Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup> saying, “I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. <sup>3</sup> For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. <sup>4</sup> Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’

<sup>5</sup> The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head <sup>6</sup> at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever; yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God. <sup>7</sup> When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. <sup>8</sup> Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love. <sup>9</sup> But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the LORD!”

<sup>10</sup> And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land.

### vv. 1-9: Jonah’s prayer from the fish

Some believe that Jonah actually died in the sea when the sailors tossed him overboard and then God brought him back to life in the fish (Morris 2003: 75, 79).<sup>12</sup> Most hold that, although Jonah was at the “point of death” (v. 5), he did not actually die. **Verses 2-9** are Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the fish. **Jonah 2:2-9** has been called a psalm (Schrader 1989: 646-47; Ellison 1985: 364).<sup>13</sup> Although that characterization may be questionable, Jonah’s prayer has a large number of quotations from or similarities to many of the psalms, which is not surprising given the fact that Jonah was a prophet:

Jonah	Psalms
2:2	3:4; 18:6; 31:22b; 40:1-2; 120:1
2:3	88:6-7; 42:7
2:4a	31:22a; 88:5
2:4b	5:7; 138:2a
2:5	18:4-5; 69:1-2
2:6b	30:3; 49:15; 56:13; 103:4
2:7a	107:5; 142:3
2:8a	31:6
2:9a	50:14a; 69:30; 107:22
2:9b	22:25b; 50:14b
2:9c	3:8; 37:39

There are several aspects of Jonah’s prayer we should note. First, Jonah prayed “*out of my distress*” (v. 2). As is the case with running from God and God’s pursuing us, praying out of our distress is true of all of us. Coming to the end of ourselves overpowers our intellect, our pride, our priorities, and everything else in our lives. God is gracious. He hears us and responds to us. Although we may forsake him, he does not forsake us. As was the case with Jonah, coming to the end of ourselves often is the result of what God has been doing in our lives. Also as was true with Jonah, the discipline and consequences of our sin help us not to run from God again.

Second, the fact that Jonah prayed “*from the belly of the fish*” (v. 1) shows that God is everywhere (see **Ps 139:7-10**). We do not need to go to a special “prayer closet,” “prayer mountain,” or some “holy place” in order for God to be present and hear us. Jesus said that we ought “*always to pray and not lose heart*” (**Luke 18:1**). Remember that Christ actually is in us by the Holy Spirit (**John 14:17; Col 1:27**) and “*will never leave us or forsake us*” (**Heb 13:5**). Consequently, wherever we are is “holy ground.”

Third, Stephen Schrader points out the parallels between chapters one and two: “Just as in chapter 1 the sailors have a crisis on the sea, pray to Yahweh, are delivered from the storm, and then sacrifice and make vows to Yahweh, so in chapter 2 the prophet has a crisis in the sea, prays to Yahweh, is delivered from drowning, and then promises to sacrifice and make good his vows to the Lord” (Schrader 1989: 646).

Fourth, in v. 3, Jonah says, “*You cast me into the deep.*” Recall that in **1:12** Jonah had told the sailors to “*pick me up and hurl me into the sea,*” and in **1:15** they did so. **Verse 4** recognizes that God is disciplining Jonah and that his disobedience has cut him off from fellowship with God. **Verse 6** acknowledges that God is the one who saved Jonah’s life. In this prayer, Jonah is acknowledging that God is the “prime mover” of what has happened to him. This is in keeping with the fact that the Bible repeatedly presents a *dual explanation* for

<sup>12</sup> Morris takes this position so that the correspondence between his experience and the death and resurrection of Jesus would be complete (Morris 2003: 76).

<sup>13</sup> A psalm is a sacred song or hymn or a sacred poem meant to be sung.

events: God is sovereign and has ordained all events (that, in one sense, is a full explanation for all events); yet that is compatible with and does not in any way diminish people’s responsibility for the choices they make and the things they do, and God’s sovereignty and action does not prevent human beings or other “secondary agents” from being the ones to actually perform the acts to carry out God’s plan (that, in another sense, is also a full explanation for all events). This is known as the doctrine of *concurrency*, i.e., “the co-operation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do” (Berkhof 1949: 187). This doctrine implies two things: “(1) That the powers of nature do not work by themselves, that is, simply by their own inherent power, but that God is immediately operative in every act of the creature. This must be maintained in opposition to the deistic position [i.e., the view that that God created the world but then left it to operate on its own, without his involvement]. (2) That second causes are real, and not to be regarded simply as the operative power of God. . . . This should be stressed over against the pantheistic idea that God is the only agent working in the world.” (Berkhof 1949: 187)<sup>14</sup>

Fifth, both **vv. 4** and **7** refer to “*your holy temple*.” The reference to the temple in **v. 4** possibly can mean the temple in Jerusalem. However, since Jonah was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel and the temple was in the southern kingdom of Judah, he is probably referring to the presence of God himself, whose true temple is in heaven (**1 Kgs 8:39; Acts 7:48-49; Rev 4:1-4**). That certainly appears to be the meaning of his reference to the temple in **v. 7**. In **v. 7** Jonah is saying that, as his life was fainting away, “*my prayer came to you, into your holy temple*.” However, when that happened, he was in fact in the “*belly of Sheol*” (in the belly of the fish),<sup>15</sup> which is where God both heard him and answered him (**v. 2**; in **v. 6**, the “*pit*” is synonymous with Sheol). Sheol was the dwelling place of souls after they died (see **Gen 37:35; Job 7:9; Isa 38:10**). In a sense, therefore, the belly of the fish had become for Jonah God’s temple, since that is where he encountered God. That is in keeping with **Ps 139:8** which says, “*If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!*” (see also **Ps 49:15**).

Sixth, in **v. 8** Jonah says, “*Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love*” (see, e.g., **Jer 2:13**). The word translated “*steadfast love*” is the Hebrew word *hesed*. *Hesed* is a relationship-based act of loving commitment, typically a voluntary act of extraordinary mercy or compassion (“beyond the call of duty”), usually by someone in a more powerful position who, therefore, could choose to do otherwise; over two-thirds of the use of *hesed* in the OT are acts of God’s *hesed* to people (see Younger 2002: 393-96). Jonah is saying that those who place their hope in vain idols are forsaking the *hesed* from God that is available to them. However, other translations state, “*Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness*.” In other words, they abandon their own covenant responsibilities.<sup>16</sup>

Jonah is recognizing that, when you run *from* God you are actually running *to* something. However, when you reach the end of yourself, you realize that what you gave up by running from God was not worth it, since all you get is a worthless idol that cannot give you the significance, security, meaning, protection, or salvation you were seeking. Thus, when you reach the end of yourself, you never pray to the “*vain idols*” you were running after, but see that they were vain, worthless, and futile all along.

Jonah himself has a very ironic relationship to his words in **v. 8**. Daniel Timmer points out, “Since the heathen sailors are prominent in the prior context and the Ninevites in the subsequent context, it is difficult to see how those who ‘forsake the covenant faithfulness which comes to them’ could refer to Israelites here” (Timmer 2008: 165). **Verses 8-9** portray Jonah as being in a healthy relationship with God: **v. 8** speaks of “*those who pay regard to vain idols*,” whereas **v. 9** contrasts such people with Jonah himself (“*But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you*”). Both the prior and the subsequent contexts of the book show that Jonah’s depiction of the state of his relationship with God is not true at all—even after God rescues him from drowning! His disobedience to God’s commission is the essence of idolatry (see **1 Sam 15:23**). Even in the belly of the fish, although Jonah’s prayer shows that he gained some understanding of his own sin, of God’s nature, and of God’s will, his understanding and attitude clearly are incomplete. He does pray a prayer of thanksgiving for having been rescued from drowning, and after he is vomited onto dry land, he does obey the Lord, proceed to Nineveh, and call out against it. Nevertheless, **vv. 8-9** evince a continuing level of self-centeredness, if not hypocrisy, in Jonah. Amanada Benckhuysen notes, “Jonah has not changed his mind about what he wants, and he certainly has not submitted his own will to God’s. The exchange between Jonah and God in chapter 4 bears this out as does the narrator’s comment in 4:5 that Jonah goes to the east of the city to wait and see what will happen. This verse makes sense only if Jonah believes there is still a possibility that God will

<sup>14</sup> This is discussed in detail, along with a table listing over 80 biblical examples of the doctrine of concurrency, in Menn 2021: 108-32.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase “*belly of Sheol*” is unique to Jonah and links it with the belly of the fish.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Barré translates this as “those who hold to faithless practices, who abandon/disregard their covenant fidelity” (Barré 1991: 241).

change his mind (again) and destroy the city. Instead, God seeks to change Jonah’s mind.” (Benckhuysen 2012: 29)

It is the sailors and the Ninevites who demonstrate *hesed*, faithfulness, repentance, and belief in Yahweh, not Jonah. God demonstrates that he exercises his grace to Jonah, to the sailors, and to the Ninevites, wherever he wishes and to whomever he wishes, whether to a disobedient Israelite (who had forsaken his own steadfast love, faithfulness, covenant responsibilities, and *hesed* to others) or to pagan Gentiles. Hence, while on its face the statement in v. 8 appears orthodox, it actually is too restrictive insofar as it is a description of God’s *hesed*. The grace God showed to Jonah while in the belly of the fish should have demonstrated to him that God’s grace extends far beyond the borders of Israel, and it should have helped to change Jonah’s mind about what God might do with the Ninevites—since the universality of God’s grace, regardless of his less than perfect obedience and submission to God’s will, was necessary to save Jonah’s own life!

Finally, v. 9 concludes with the epic statement, “*Salvation belongs to the Lord.*” The word “salvation” can refer to God’s help or deliverance in a temporal sense or salvation in an ultimate sense. A note in the *Gospel Transformation Study Bible (ESV)* explains, “God’s dramatic intervention in the life of Jonah is full of hope—not only for those who seek God, but also for those who, like Jonah, have determined to shut him out. Many people believe God opens the door of salvation and then stands back, leaving it up to us to decide if we want to come in. But if God made salvation possible and then stepped back, refusing to interfere with our choice, then the entire life of believers would be about *us* – our believing, our serving, our following, and our choices to live a good life. In the case of Jonah, imprisoned in the whale’s belly, God was claiming someone who was quite incapable of performing any redeeming work to compensate for his sin. God was not relying on Jonah to save Jonah. If you have trusted God for salvation, he has done more than simply make salvation possible; he has actually *saved* you.” (*Gospel Transformation* 2018: 1357n.2:9; see also **Eph 2:1, 8-9**)

#### v. 10: the fish vomits Jonah onto dry land

Here we see another instance of the fact that God is in charge of and is driving the story. “*The Lord spoke to the fish*” (v. 10), which caused it to vomit Jonah onto the dry land. Just as the actions of the sailors contrasted with Jonah, the same is true of the fish: it promptly did what God ordered as soon as it became aware of God’s will (see **Isa 1:2-3**). The fish presumably vomited Jonah somewhere on the coast of Palestine, but the text gives us no indication where. If deposited near Joppa, where he began his journey to Tarshish, he would have been a little over 600 miles (1000 km) from Nineveh. Even from the Mediterranean Sea’s closest point to Nineveh, he still would have had a few hundred miles to cross.

This episode continues the typological relationship between Jonah and Jesus. Craig Blomberg points out that, with respect to the “sign of Jonah” Jesus refers to in **Matt 12:39-40**, “the sign that Jesus has in mind is not the crucifixion per se, but rather the resurrection. Just as Jonah’s time in the fish would have proved meaningless had he not been spit up onto the shore to continue his appointed ministry of preaching repentance to Nineveh, so also the crucifixion is not the decisive sign of who Jesus was, for his subsequent rescue from death is what vindicated his ministry and enabled his mission to go forward.” (Blomberg 2007: 45)

The centrality of Jesus’ resurrection is indicated by the apostle Paul in **1 Cor 15:14, 17**, “*If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. . . . And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.*” Jesus himself repeatedly predicted his resurrection and said that would be the sign of who he was (see **Matt 16:21-23; 17:22-23; Mark 8:27-33; 10:32-34; Luke 9:18-22; John 2:18-22**). The resurrection, therefore, ultimately is not a matter of philosophy or even theology, but of historical fact: either Jesus rose from the grave or he did not. The identity of Jesus and the truth of the gospel ultimately depend on that fact (see **Rom 1:1-4**). All Christians need to be well-grounded in the reasons why we know that Jesus bodily rose from the grave and is alive today.<sup>17</sup>

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you, or do you know others who, have prayed to God “*out of your distress*”? If so, what was the result?
2. Many people think that they need to go to a special “prayer closet,” “prayer mountain,” or some “holy place” in order for God to be present and hear us. Why do you think this is the case? What does Jonah teach us about that idea?

<sup>17</sup> The factual and historical reasons why we know—beyond a reasonable doubt—that Jesus bodily rose from the grave are discussed in Menn 2020: 30-40.

3. How have you chased after “vain idols,” and what did they do for you?
4. Has God ever brought you to the end of yourself and revealed that you had been chasing after “vain idols”?
  - Can you discuss the circumstances and reveal what insights you had from that experience?
5. How does chasing after “vain idols” cause you to abandon or disregard your own *hesed* or faithfulness to others?
6. Discuss the nature and extent of God’s grace, especially in relationship to people’s (like Jonah’s) less than perfect submission and obedience to God’s will.
  - Does the nature and extent of God’s grace even to people, like Jonah, who are still largely self-centered if not hypocritical excuse their self-centeredness and hypocrisy? Why or why not?
  - If the nature and extent of God’s grace does excuse our self-centeredness and hypocrisy, then why should we try to change those things?
  - If the nature and extent of God’s grace does not excuse our self-centeredness and hypocrisy, then what should we do about those things, and why?
7. What should be learned from the nature and extent of God’s grace for our own attitudes and actions toward others?
8. What are the implications of the fact that God does not simply “open the door” of salvation but then leave it up to us to choose whether or not to enter through the door?
  - How does the fact that God is primary in salvation give us hope, comfort, and assurance?
9. Discuss the significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the reasons why we can know that Jesus did, in fact, bodily rise from the grave.

### C. *Jonah 3*

<sup>1</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” <sup>3</sup> So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. <sup>4</sup> Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” <sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

<sup>6</sup> The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup> And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, <sup>8</sup> but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

<sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

#### vv. 1-10: Structure

In section **I.B. Structure and outline**, above, we looked at proposed chiastic structures of the entire book, **chapters 3-4**, and **chapter 3**. There are other ways that one can outline the structure of **chapter 3**. One of these is a parallel structure based on the “call and response” within the chapter:

#### **A. Call**—God’s call to Jonah (**3:1-2**)

- (1) “Get up and go to Nineveh” (**3:2a**)
- (2) “Proclaim the proclamation I am giving to you” (**3:2b**)

**B. Response**—Jonah’s response to God [Jonah went to Nineveh] (3:3a)

**C. Interlude (reason for call)**—Nineveh was “great to God” (3:3b)

**A.’ Call**—Jonah’s call to Nineveh [which also constitutes his response to the second part of God’s call to him] (3:4)

**B.’ Response**—Nineveh’s response to Jonah [which also constitutes its call to God] (3:5-9)

(1) The people’s response to Jonah (3:5)

(2) The king’s response to Jonah (3:6)

(3) The decree [which constitutes both Nineveh’s “official” response to Jonah and its call to God] (3:7-9)

**C.’ Interlude (reason for call)**—“God might relent and we may not perish” (3:9)

**A.’’ Resolution**—God relents from the harm he said he would do (3:10)<sup>18</sup>

This model is based on changes in the “scenes” of the chapter (primary locations, actors, and actions) and reflects the intricate interplay between the three main actors in the chapter (God, Jonah, and the Ninevites). This again shows the intricacy, complexity, and sophistication of this book. It is far more than just a “fish story.”

#### vv. 1-4: Jonah’s commission and his proclamation

Jonah is the only prophet who had to be given the same assignment twice. The text does not indicate how long it was, after Jonah was vomited by the great fish, before God called Jonah again. Regardless of that, it is an illustration of God’s compassion. Jonah acknowledges God’s compassion in 4:2, but he never acknowledges himself as an object of that compassion. As we have seen before, this also is applicable to us. The *Gospel Transformation Study Bible* observes, “God does not give us one shot at responding in faithfulness to his call. He is the God of second chances. God will never give up and quit on us. God’s grace led Jonah not only to repentance but to useful ministry. Along with forgiveness came restoration. Jonah’s experience of God’s mercy then became the backdrop to his ministry in Nineveh.” (*Gospel Transformation* 2018: 1357n.3:1-2).<sup>19</sup> However, as with the ship captain’s “perhaps” (1:6) and the king’s “who knows?” (3:9), we cannot presume upon the Lord’s grace or put him to the test (see **Deut 6:16; Matt 4:7; Rom 2:4**). There are plenty of biblical examples where a person received no “second chance” (see, e.g., **Num 20:8-12**, Moses; **1 Sam 15:1-29**, Saul; **Acts 5:1-11**, Ananias and Sapphira).

Although in 3:2 the ESV repeats the translation of 1:2 (“*call out against it [the city]*”), there actually is a subtle difference in the wording between the two commissions: in 1:2 Jonah was to proclaim “against” the city; in 3:2 he is to proclaim “to” it.<sup>20</sup> This is not simply the substitution of prepositions reflects a difference in *substance*: it is a “message” instead of a “death warrant” (Sasson 1990: 72-75). That is corroborated by the fact that the reason for God’s call given in 1:2 (“*for their evil has come up before me*”) is not repeated in **chapter 3**. It is also suggested by the wording of the message itself, as will be discussed below. What God actually tells Jonah to do is to “*proclaim the proclamation that I tell you.*” That suggests that only now is Jonah receiving the substance of the message, which he is to speak “exactly” as instructed (Wolff 1986: 127, 139).

Much has been written about 3:3b (“*three days’ journey*”). The issues include whether the “three days’ journey”: (A) refers to the size of Nineveh (and, if so, to its diameter or circumference, or to the circumference of an administrative district controlled by Nineveh, i.e., “Greater Nineveh”); (B) is hyperbole; or (C) refers to the length of time necessary for Jonah to proclaim his message. Since archaeological evidence indicates that Nineveh proper had a circumference of only about 8 miles, those who accept the historicity of Jonah tend to take the “administrative district” (which had a circumference of about 60 miles) and/or “length of visit” position (see Brewer 1912: 50 (diameter); Allen 1976: 221 (diameter); Keil 1977: 404-06 (circumference); Wolff 1986: 147-48 (hyperbole); Stuart 1987: 487-88 (length of visit); Donald Wiseman 1979: 35-39 (length of visit); Schrader 1989: 648 (length of visit)).

Structurally, 3:3b is “a parenthetical aside about Nineveh being a [great] city requiring a three-day

<sup>18</sup> The decree of 3:7-9, although it represents both a “response” and a “call,” is not shown as the beginning of a new “call” sequence (i.e., A.’) because, unlike A. and A.’ (which are addresses by one actor to another), it is directed by the king to the Ninevites (not to God), and is formally part of Nineveh’s “response” to Jonah’s message. The “resolution” is shown as A.’’ rather than as D. because, although nominally a response to Nineveh, the entire episode has been as much about Jonah (and about God himself) as it has about Nineveh.

<sup>19</sup> This statement by the *Gospel Transformation Study Bible* is not strictly correct. Lubeck observes, “The sailors ‘repent’, the Ninevites repent, and even God repents. Someone is missing here. Again Jonah is the odd man out—Jonah is never the subject of ‘repent’, a fact which keeps him in hot water throughout the book” (Lubeck 1986: 134). For more on this, particularly on God’s “repentance,” see discussion below regarding v. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Most translations correctly recognize and translate this.



journey” (Lubeck 1988: 42). This suggests that the primary emphasis is not on the physical size of Nineveh, but on God’s motives for what he is doing, and his attitude versus Jonah’s, because: (1) Although God’s *command* to Jonah from **1:2a** is repeated, the *reason* he gave in **1:2b** is not and, as previously noted, Jonah is now to proclaim “to” the city, not “against” it. (2) “Since we have known from the beginning that Nineveh was a great city, the new information provided by this clause is that its greatness is directed *to* God, setting the stage for God’s subsequent compassion toward it” (Lubeck 1986: 214). That indicates that Nineveh was important to God, but *not* to Jonah (Lubeck 1988: 42n.24).

**Verse 4** contains Jonah’s only prophetic words. Unlike most of the prophetic oracles of the other prophets, Jonah does not preface his statement by saying “Thus says the Lord” or by even naming God. On its face, Jonah’s message, “*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*” seems unambiguous and allows for no exceptions. The number 40 is often used in the Bible in connection with either judgment or testing (see **Gen 7:12, 17; Deut 8:2-5; 25:3; Matt 4:2**). The same word for “overthrow” is used for the “overthrowing” of Sodom and Gomorrah in **Gen 19:25**. That certainly is what would have been suggested to the Ninevites (and what Jonah would have desired). However, the term is ambiguous—it is a participle “which may be understood reflexively as well as passively, i.e., ‘will overturn *herself*’ (‘repent’) as well as ‘will *be* overturned’ (‘destroyed’)” (Bruckner 2004: 91n.5; see also Lubeck 1988: 44-45; Ben Zvi 2009: 13). Just as the 40 days provided the opportunity for repentance, the wording allowed for the possibility that God might choose to relent from destroying the city, while still being true to his word. In essence, God’s message is that “*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion*” (**Rom 9:15**, quoting **Exod 33:19**, the context of which stemmed from God’s choosing not to destroy the Israelites in the wilderness for having worshiped the golden calf). This passage extends the principle of **Exod 33:19** to include Gentile pagans, thus anticipating the full NT revelation of God’s nature. This offends Jonah’s sense of justice and his hatred of the Assyrians. Nevertheless, whether God relents from his announced judgment is based solely on his sovereign choice: the Ninevites recognize that their acts of repentance do not guarantee their being spared. We, too, are challenged by what God is like, what his sovereignty implies, and what his grace really means.

We need to understand the nature of biblical prophecy. OT biblical prophecy was as interested in the present as in the future. The prophets essentially had a two-fold message and ministry: (1) They warned people of the consequences of disobedience to the Lord’s ways by *oracles of judgment*; and (2) They called people back to faithfulness by *oracles of salvation*. (VanGemeren 1990: 78-79) Their message in substance was, “If you do this, judgment will come; if you follow the Lord, blessings will come.” As such, much of OT prophecy was “conditional” on people’s repentance and behavior, even when a prophecy appeared to be unconditional. Sometimes the conditional nature of a prophecy is explicitly stated: e.g., **Jer 18:7-8; 38:17-18; 42:7-17; Acts 27:21-44; Rom 11:17-24**. Sometimes a prophecy is unconditional on its face, but the character of God and the responses of people provide unstated conditionality to the prophecy: e.g., **Exod 32:9-14; 1 Kgs 20:26-42; 21:17-29; Isa 38:1-5; Jonah 3:1-4:2**. Actions taken in response to a prophecy might either postpone or hasten its fulfillment (**2 Kgs 22:14-20; Hab 2:2-3; 2 Pet 3:8-12**). In **1 Sam 23:10-14** David avoided entirely the consequences that God had revealed to him by taking prudent action. As a prophet, Jonah would have known all of this, which accounts for his statement to God in **4:2**, “*O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*”

#### vv. 5-9: the response of the Ninevites

The contrast between the response of the pagan Ninevites to the word of the Lord, compared to that of Jonah, is highlighted in this section. Although Jonah had not even named God, the people clearly recognized God’s voice and, in **3:5**, they “*believed God*.” The Hebrew wording uses the preposition *b<sup>e</sup>* instead of *l<sup>e</sup>*. Generally, the distinction is between “believing *that* something is the case [i.e., accepting a report as true]” (*l<sup>e</sup>*) and “believing *in* someone” (*b<sup>e</sup>*) (VanGemeren, ed. 1997: 431; the NASB correctly translates the phrase as “*believed in God*”). *Elohim*, not *YHWH*, is used to refer to God throughout this section (and in **3:10**). This suggests that the Ninevites were correctly responding to the character of God, subject to the limited knowledge they had of him. “It is almost as if the narrator wanted to say: I have not found such faith in Israel” (Jepsen 1974: 305). Sackcloth was commonly worn when someone was in mourning; it showed humility, i.e., that the people were humbling themselves before God (Ellison 1985: 382; see **Est 4:3**). The people’s fasting indicated the same thing. In other words, their actions were demonstrating the truth of their belief.

The response of the king in **3:6** similarly shows his sincerity and involves powerful wordplay. The Hebrew wording indicates that the king was deeply “touched” or “moved” by the word from “the God” (**3:9-10**), and he reacted in exemplary fashion (unlike Jonah). His removing his robe is “a power word for ‘put away,’ and

is used especially for things which are offensive to Yahweh” (Wolff 1986: 151). Likewise, his covering himself with sackcloth uses the rarer word for “cover, hide” rather than the more common word for “put on” (Wolff 1986: 151). Events obviously moved rapidly. The people’s actions were probably spontaneous; the decree of **3:7-8** gave official sanction to what the people already were doing: **v. 7** lists banned actions and **v. 8** lists required actions. In fact, the Ninevites pray like the sailors (the same word is used in both **1:14** and **3:8**). Further, “in both groups the leaders take the initiative (1:6 and 3:6f.). But above all *the purpose* in both passages is the same: ‘that we do not perish’ (1:6 [14]; 3:9)” (Wolff: 145, 147, 150). Grammatically, the king’s “issuing a proclamation” (**3:7**) is from the same root as the sailors’ “calling out” (**1:5**). There is even historical precedent for the inclusion of animals in similar situations (see Ellison 1985: 383).

**Verse 9** indicates the freedom of God to act as he pleases and the graciousness of God which may be hoped for but never presumed. The “*Who knows?*” of **3:9** is equivalent to the ship captain’s “perhaps” (**1:6**), and occurs in only two other places—**2 Sam 12:22** (regarding David’s fasting for his infant son) and **Joel 2:14** (the people fasting during a locust plague). That question “expresses the theological issue around which the chapter revolves: contingency and divine sovereignty. . . . God alone knew the answer to the question ‘who knows?’” (Stuart 1987: 495) The king also uses the term *HaElohim* (“the God”), which acknowledges that Yahweh is the true God.

#### **v. 10: God’s reply to the Ninevites**

In **v. 10**, God sees the people’s action of “*how they turned from their evil way*” and relents from destroying them. That picks up the language of **v. 8b**. It shows that God’s response corresponded to the people’s hope and demonstrates the validity of the people’s belief in God. The continuing irony of the book is the issue of knowing the will of God, yet disobeying him. Jonah had and knew the word of God, yet did not accept or obey it; in the end, he “obeyed” it only reluctantly. The Ninevites (like the sailors) had only an intimation of what God required, yet they acted fully on what they knew. As we will see in **chapter 4**, the only person in the book who does *not* repent and “turn from his evil way” is Jonah himself. There is a lesson for believers in this. We may miss God’s blessings by our disobedience and by trying to impose limits on God: “While Jonah was praying anxiously for his deliverance, the sailors had been tasting the love of God for three days. Likewise, the people of Nineveh, who repented for their sin, rejoiced that the impending judgment had not come; at the same time Jonah was a miserable man.” (VanGemeren 1990: 149)

The latter part of the king’s decree (**vv. 8b-9**) and God’s reply (**v. 10**) involve intricate wordplay, which is not entirely indicated by the translation. This becomes clearer when we insert the Hebrew words at the key points: “<sup>8b</sup> *Let everyone turn [sub] from his evil [rag] way and from the violence that is in his hands.* <sup>9</sup> *Who knows? God may turn [sub] and relent [naham] and turn [sub] from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.* <sup>10</sup> *When God saw what they did, how they turned [sub] from their evil [rag] way, God relented [naham] of the disaster [rag, “evil”] that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*” Typically, *naham* is translated as “repent,” and many translations of **vv. 9-10** have the word *repent* instead of *relent* for God’s action. However, as James Bruckner points out, “The basic meaning of the Hebrew word [*naham*] is ‘have compassion’ or ‘feel sorrow.’ When *people* feel sorrow, the context of sin often warrants the translation ‘repent’. The ordinary word for repent (*sub*) is also used in this text [**3:10**], but it carries the implication of ‘turning around,’ as in changing the way you live. *Naham* is ‘repentance’ in the internal sensed of sorrow. When *God* feels sorrow, however, the word cannot mean ‘repent’ since God does not sin. Rather, it indicates God’s sorrow for consequences people must face as a natural result of their sin and his justice in the world order. This ‘sorrow’ is expressed in ‘compassion.’” (Bruckner 2004: 94-95) The practical outworking of God’s “sorrow” or “compassion” is that he relents from his previously announced course of action.

What is fascinating is that the combination of a hope that God might “turn” (*sub*) from his “fierce anger” and relent (*naham*) from the disaster he threatened, is found only in **3:9** and in **Exod 32:12** (where Moses pleaded that God would “*turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster*” and not destroy his people in the wilderness). God’s relenting from the threatened harm in **3:10b** (“*God relented [naham] of the disaster [rag] that he had said he would do to them*”) is an almost verbatim repetition of his relenting in **Exod 32:14** (“*And the LORD relented [naham] from the disaster [rag] that he had spoken of bringing on his people*”). This is demonstrating that God’s character, as he described himself in **Exod 34:6-7**, “*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.*” His character is not limited to his dealings with Israel (as Jonah presumed and certainly wanted to be the case) but applies to all people, nations, and nations everywhere.

**Verse 10** shows that there is an intersection between God’s *transcendence* (in his *being*, God is separate

from and greater than his creation; he has a plan in advance and does not change; see **Num 23:19; Heb 13:8**) and his *immanence* (in his *actions*, God is immediately present with his creation; he interacts with people in time and space that thus appears to change). Both God’s transcendence and his immanence are indicated from his name, Yahweh, which is derived from the verb meaning “to be” (Hebrew = *hayah*). Thus, in **Exod 3:14**, when Moses asked God what is his name, “*God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’*”<sup>21</sup> In other words, God is self-existent but reveals himself by interacting with his creation. As the eternally self-existent one, God can see all of eternity as “now,” yet interact with creation in an ongoing way.<sup>22</sup> Another example of this is **Ephesians 1-2**, where God sees believers as dead, buried, sealed, raised, and ascended, but nevertheless deals with us—and with our sin—on a daily basis.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. God is the “God of the second chance.” He gave Jonah a second chance. How has he given you a “second chance,” and what effect did that have?

- On the other hand, how do you deal with the fact that many people in the Bible did not receive a “second chance”?
- Has that ever happened to you? What did you learn from that experience?

2. How do people “presume upon the Lord”? Have you done that and, if so, what did you learn?

3. Jonah recognized that God is compassionate but never acknowledged himself as the subject of God’s compassion. Has that been true of you and, if so, why do you think that is the case?

4. Nineveh was important to God, but not to Jonah. Have you ever been involved in some activity or calling from God that you have either not liked or not found important? Why do you think that was the case?

- As you look back on things, have you changed your opinion about the importance of that activity or calling and, if so, what led you to change your opinion?

5. Many people think of prophecy simply as “predicting the future” and think that once a prophecy has been made, there is nothing that anyone can do to alter it. Is that a true picture of biblical prophecy? How, if at all, does Jonah alter your view concerning the nature of biblical prophecy?

6. Throughout the book, Gentile pagans are contrasted with Jonah, particularly in their responses to God. How have we seen this?

- Why do you think this is the case, and what seems to be the point of this?

7. The king said, “*Who knows? God may turn and relent*” (**3:9**). How would you respond to someone who says, “That indicates a *lack* of faith; if he (or a believer today) has real faith, he or she would say, ‘In the name of Jesus, God *will* relent (or heal the sick person you are praying for, or provide the funds you are praying for, or otherwise positively answer your prayer).”

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<sup>21</sup> The ESV has a footnote that reads, “Or *I am what I am, or I will be what I will be.*”

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Youngblood observes, “Ancient Jewish commentaries on Exodus 3:14 expounded the divine I AM in a way that stressed the supratemporality or eternity of God. They did so in terms of a triple formula, ‘I am who I have been, who I now am, and who I will be in the future,’ as well as in terms of a double formula, ‘I am who I was and will be.’ Such formulae underplay the dynamic presence, the active relationship that characterizes the divine name.” (Youngblood 1972: 149) Sigmund Mowinckel emphasizes the dynamic side of God’s nature by saying, “To the Hebrew ‘to be’ does not just mean to exist — as all other beings and things do as well, — but to be active, to express oneself in active being, ‘The God who acts.’” (Mowinckel 1961: 127). Both sides of God’s nature (i.e., his transcendence and his immanence) are described in a more accurate and balanced way by the four living creatures in **Rev 4:8**, who never cease to say, “*Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!*” (see also **Rev 1:4, 8**). This threefold manifestation of God finds its ultimate fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ.

8. How have you known God's will and yet disobeyed him?

- What effect did that have?

9. How have you missed God's blessings by your disobedience and by trying to impose limits on God?

10. Discuss the intersection between God's *transcendence* (in his *being*, God is separate from and greater than his creation; he has a plan in advance and does not change) and his *immanence* (in his *actions*, God is immediately present with his creation; he interacts with people in time and space that thus appears to change).

- How has Jonah affected or changed your view of the nature and character of God?

#### D. *Jonah 4*

<sup>1</sup> *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.* <sup>2</sup> *And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."* <sup>3</sup> *Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

<sup>4</sup> *And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"*

<sup>5</sup> *Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.* <sup>6</sup> *Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.*

<sup>7</sup> *But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered.* <sup>8</sup> *When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live."*

<sup>9</sup> *But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?"* And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die."<sup>10</sup> *And the LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night."* <sup>11</sup> *And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"*

#### vv. 1-11: Structure

In section I.B. *Structure and outline*, above, we looked at proposed chiasmic structures of the entire book, **chapters 3-4**, and **chapter 4**. As was the case with **chapter 3**, there are other ways that one can outline the structure of **chapter 4**. One of these, as with **chapter 3**, is a parallel structure based on the "call and response" within the chapter (see Dorsey 1999: 294-95):

#### I. Jonah's angry prayer (4:1-4)

A. **Introduction:** Jonah's *anger* (4:1)

B. **Prayer** (4:2-3)

(1) **Complaint about God's mercy:** I said this would happen! (4:2a)

(2) **Excuse for disobedience:** This is why I fled. (4:2b)

(1') **Complaint about God's mercy:** I knew you would act mercifully! (4:2c)

(3) **Concluding request:** Take my life! (4:3)

A.' **Conclusion:** Jonah's *anger* questioned by God. (4:4)

#### II. God's object lesson (4:5-11)

SETTING (4:5)

A. **God prepares a plant for Jonah** (4:6a)

B. **Jonah's response:** He rejoices. (4:6b)

A.' **God destroys the plant** and cause hot wind to blow on Jonah. (4:7-8a)

B.' **Jonah's response:** He is angry and despondent. (4:8b)

A." **God questions Jonah:** Are you right to be angry about the plant? (4:9a)

B." **Jonah's response:** Yes, I am right enough to die! (4:9b)

C. **CLIMAX:** God's lesson (4:10-11)

In section **I.B. Structure and outline**, above, we pointed out in that the book of Jonah is largely a dialogue between God and Jonah, who does not agree with the way God deals with people. The above “call and response” outline accomplishes a number of things: (1) It recognizes that there are two main foci of attention: Jonah’s reaction to God’s sparing Nineveh and the plant. (2) The break between **vv. 4** and **5** takes into account the change of location which occurs at that point. (3) Whereas Jonah “initiates” and God “responds” in **4:1-4**, God always initiates in **4:5-11**.<sup>23</sup> (4) It accounts for the dialogic nature of the chapter as it builds toward the grand finale. (5) It highlights the most important question in the book of Jonah (“*Do you do well to be angry?*” [**v. 4**, repeated in **v. 9**]) and points to God’s climactic question in **vv. 10-11** after Jonah claims that he does “*do well*” to be angry.

#### **vv. 1-4: Jonah’s anger**

This scene reveals that, although Jonah was thankful in **chapter 2** that God had spared his life, he really had not repented of his self-centeredness and hatred of the Assyrians. The word “But” which begins **v. 1** points up the contrast between God’s compassion and Jonah’s displeasure and anger: “At the beginning of the chapter 4, Jonah is angry that *someone* (Ninevites) didn’t die. At the end he is angry that something (the vine) did die.” (Bruckner 2004: 122) Jonah’s prayer in **chapter 4** is placed in parallel with his prayer in **chapter 2**. “Both the psalm and the prayer in Chapter 4 are introduced in substantially the same way with identical verb forms (‘and he prayed . . . and said’). . . . Both refer back to an earlier distress the one praying has experienced. Both are concerned with Yahweh’s action of deliverance, and derive an inference therefrom. Both conclude by having the speaker make a response to Yahweh elicited by the Deity’s merciful action.” (Landes 1967: 16-17) Both use the same key words: *hah’y* (“my life,” **2:6**; “to live,” **4:3**), *hesed* (“steadfast love,” **2:8**; **4:2**), and *nehphesh* (“my life [soul],” **2:8**; **4:3**).

Yet as has been true throughout this book, ironies abound here. It is ironic to call **vv. 2-3** a “prayer.” While we always should be honest with God and not attempt to hide our feelings—including feelings of bitterness and anger—Jonah’s “prayer” essentially is nothing but a diatribe *against* God. The contrast between this and his prayer in **chapter 2** could not be more stark. In **chapter 2**, Jonah speaks of how God “*answered me*” and “*heard my voice*” (**2:1**), speaks of “*your holy temple*” (**2:4, 7**), calls the Lord “*my God*” (**2:6**), speaks of God’s “*steadfast love*” (**2:8**) and of all God has done (**2:6-7**), and concludes with thanksgiving because “*salvation belongs to the Lord!*” (**2:9**). In **chapter 4**, Jonah uses *God’s own* character—which for Israel is the basis to praise and worship God—to attack God and justify Jonah’s own flight and disobedience. The arrogance is breathtaking! The egocentric nature of Jonah’s “prayer” is seen in that “I” or “my” occurs no fewer than nine times in the original (Allen 1976: 229). Although **v. 2** is translated “*this is what I said*,” the actual Hebrew reads “*my word*.” In effect, Jonah is setting “*my word*” against “*your word*.” Further, he is quoting God’s own description of himself in **Exod 34:6-7** against God (see also **Ps 86:15**; **103:8**; **145:8**; **Neh 9:17**; **Joel 2:13**). In fact, there is exquisite wordplay in the Hebrew of **4:1** and **4:3**<sup>24</sup>: “paradoxically and perversely [God’s] very turning away from *rā’â* [“evil,” translated “disaster” in **4:3**] is to Jonah *ra’* [“evil,” translated “displeased” in **4:1**]” (Davies 1977: 109). Davies goes on to observe, “One has the impression that *rā’â*, at least in its sense of ‘evil, trouble’ is something which is thought in the Old Testament to be self-evident. . . . To make a mistake about what is *rā’â* is the height of folly, perversity. . . . Thus by his account of Jonah’s response in **iv 1**, as much as by the words attributed to him in verses 2 and 3, the narrator presents Jonah as not only out of line with the nature and will of Yahweh . . . and out of line with the conception of Yahweh’s mercy . . . but also out of line with the insights and values which are self-evident to all men.” (Davies 1977: 109-10)

That is not all. Jonah even changes the wording of **Exod 34:6** to attack God’s character. **Exod 34:6** concludes “*abounding in steadfast love [hesed] and faithfulness [emeth]*.” Jonah changed that to “*abounding in steadfast love [hesed] and relenting from disaster [niham ‘al-hārā’â]*.”<sup>25</sup> Alan Cooper states, “The substitution is both intentional and polemical [i.e., for argumentative reasons]—renunciation of evil, from Jonah’s perspective, connotes *unreliability* [i.e., *unfaithfulness*]” (Cooper 1993: 154, *emph. added*). We should remember that God’s self-description in **Exod 34:6-7** arose out of the golden calf incident when God had threatened to destroy Israel but relented. Thus, Jonah owed his very existence to God’s being merciful, first for not having destroyed Israel in the wilderness (in which case Jonah never would have existed at all) and then for having mercifully saved Jonah in the great fish. However, Jonah now misuses the Scripture to attack God for his

<sup>23</sup> Jonah’s acts in **4:5** might be viewed as “initiating” something, to which God responds in **4:6a**. Although that nominally may be the case, the real focus in the second scene is the plant—Jonah’s booth is irrelevant, and he is passive (sitting). Thus, **4:5** is best viewed merely as setting the scene.

<sup>24</sup> The literal translation of **v. 1** is, “*But it was evil to Jonah with great evil*” (Ellison 1985: 384).

<sup>25</sup> **Joel 2:13** makes the same emendation of the text of **Exod 34:6**, and may well have been quoting Jonah.

mercy in order to justify himself. God’s mercy, grace, and *hesed* arose in a covenantal context, but Jonah knew the implication (which will be made explicit in the NT, e.g., **Matt 28:18-20; Rom 3:21-31; Gal 3:28-29; Rev 5:9-10**) is that Yahweh’s concern is universal. Jonah preferred fleeing and death to serving a God who didn’t conform to his own theology, and who extended grace to Israel’s enemy. David Dorsey summarizes, “In the first prayer, Jonah praises Yahweh for sparing him—one person—from the punishment he deserved (although he apparently has not repented of his disobedience!); whereas in the second prayer Jonah is angry that Yahweh has spared many thousands of *innocent* children, as well as people who *have* sincerely repented.” (Dorsey 1999: 291) Or, to put in in more personal terms, both Jonah’s theology and practice are fatally flawed because “Jonah wants to receive God’s grace without being changed by it, and at the same time snatch it away from those whose lives *are* in fact changed by it” (Timmer 2008: 170). It brings to mind Jesus’ parable of the king who forgave the debt of a servant the servant never could repay (in Jonah’s case, his life), but that servant then refused to forgive another person who owed him money. When the king heard of it, he said to the unforgiving servant, “*You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?*” (**Matt 18:32-33**)

The fact that Jonah asks God to take his life and says “*it is better for me to die than to live*” (v. 3) reveal his hatred for the Ninevites and how much he does not want to see them come to faith in the Lord—to the point that he would do anything, even die, if that is what it would take for them to be wiped out. This reveals how far down the road of “folly and perversity” such hatred can take us when we abandon God’s word, will, and values for our own. Jonah’s attitude is contrary to that of Moses and Paul, both of whom offered to sacrifice themselves if that is what it would take for Israel to live (**Exod 32:30-32; Rom 9:1-3**). Further, in this respect Jonah is the exact opposite of Jesus Christ, who actually sacrificed himself for people “*from every tribe and language and people and nation*” (**Rev 5:9**), “*while we were yet sinners*” (**Rom 5:8**)! The amazing thing is that, in all of this, Jonah still remained a prophet of God. In this, Jonah in a sense is reflecting Israel and its attitude toward Gentiles and the lost, as will be discussed below.

God’s question to Jonah in v. 4, “*Do you do well to be angry?*” reflects his similar question to Cain, when Cain’s sacrifice was rejected, “*Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?*” (**Gen 4:6**). This question is so important because James says, “<sup>13</sup> *Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. <sup>14</sup> But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. <sup>15</sup> Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.*” (**Jas 1:13-15**) Those verses reveal that the true origin of sin—and the true origin of temptation itself—lie *within us*. Our external circumstances, other people, and Satan himself continually are giving us opportunities to demonstrate either faithfulness or sin. But even powerful circumstances combined with persuasive people working in concert with Satan himself cannot spiritually endanger us *unless and until we make Satan’s suggestions our own*. Temptation is internal, not external. We ourselves are responsible for everything we do, and God legitimately can hold us accountable for our actions. In essence, James is saying what Jesus said in **Matt 15:19**, that “*out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders.*”

Consequently, James Bruckner points out that, in his question to Jonah, “Yahweh wants to know if Jonah’s anger *results in any good*. . . . This is a moral question more than a legal one. . . . Cain was asked a similar question (Gen. 4:6) about his anger. He did not answer but instead went out and killed his brother, Abel. Jonah is at a similar point of moral decision in relation to God.” (Bruckner 2004: 112) This question pertains to everyone. Ultimately, it goes to our fundamental attitudes toward ourselves, others, and our most important values and priorities. Out of those attitudes flow all sins, discord, and evils in our lives and in the world. As a result of that, God will judge us and the world, and “*his judgments are true and just*” (**Rev 19:2**; see also **Rev 16:7**). Yet he would spare us that judgment by causing us to reflect on his question, “*Do you do well to be angry?*” and then amend our attitudes and our actions to bring them in line with his own.

#### **vv. 5-11: God’s interaction with Jonah**

This concluding section of the book brings all of the main issues that have been present throughout the book to a climax. The focus of this section is on God, Jonah, and the plant. Jonah’s attitude of ethnic and personal self-centeredness is now reduced to personal, physical comfort. Paradoxically, by magnifying ourselves, we diminish ourselves. If one’s focus is on this world’s material existence and the things of the world, “only a night’s sleep separates full happiness from abject misery” (Sasson 1990: 316). Jonah’s concern with his personal comfort is contrasted with the sovereignty of God’s ordaining will and concern for people of every “tribe, tongue, and nation.” The chapter thus confronts us “with the complexity of faith in a Lord who cannot be

tamed and whose mercy and forgiveness cannot be controlled” (Bruckner 2004: 112).<sup>26</sup>

**Verse 5** begins, “*Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city.*” Interestingly, Adam and Eve and Cain all went east after their sin (**Gen 3:24; 4:16**). This is one of the subtleties that is telling us something of the significance of Jonah’s sin—but also of our sins—when we know the will and character of God yet choose to disregard and disobey him. We need to remember that our sins are more significant and have greater effects than may be apparent to us. Jonah’s going “*out of the city*” also is a subtlety that does not become apparent until we take into account the NT. Hebrews points out that “*Jesus also suffered outside the gate [of the city] in order to sanctify the people through his own blood*” (**Heb 13:12**). In other words, Jesus also went “*out of the city,*” not to condemn it and save himself but to die and thereby save the city. Our lives are to be patterned on the life of Jesus. As the writer of Hebrews says, “*Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.*” (**Heb 13:13-14**) We are to follow Jesus “*outside the camp*”—out of our “comfort zones,” *whatever they may be*—to model Christ by preaching, teaching, helping, and comforting people, *whoever they may be*—not by looking down on and condemning them. This idea, implicit in Jonah, became explicit in Jesus Christ. The issue that confronts us is: are we like Jonah, or are we like Christ?

Jonah left the city and made a booth for himself and sat under it to “*see what would become of the city*” (**4:5**). Jonah’s leaving the city and building the booth “represent his response to the rhetorical question of Jonah 4:4. This is another non-verbal response to YHWH by Jonah that involves spatial change (cf. Jonah 1:2–3).” (Ben Zvi 2009: 5n.10; see also Magonet 1983: 58) Terrence Fretheim says that “the essence of [God’s question in **4:4**] is: Are you right in passing judgment upon God’s sovereign decision not to be angry? For Jonah, God was not angry when he should have been angry. Jonah in his anger believes himself to be responding rightly to the situation. This is nothing less than a judgment on God’s right to be slow to anger (4 2).” (Fretheim 1978: 233-34) Many see Jonah’s going to the east of Nineveh, making a booth, and waiting to “*see what would become of the city*” (**v. 5**) as his believing that “there is still a possibility that God will change his mind (again) and destroy the city” (Benckhuysen 2012: 29). While that may seem illogical, we must remember Jonah’s equally illogical fleeing from God in the first place and his amazing self-centeredness which allowed him to see the world only in terms of what he wanted to see happen (Magonet 1983: 60). Some see his action even as “an attempt to blackmail God into taking action” (Ahoga 2006: 1048). Others see it as more probable that “Jonah was expecting something to happen that would explain God’s ways with man a little more clearly to him” (Ellison 1985: 387). Regardless of his specific purpose, Jonah “sees” from a totally subjective point of view—he only sees what he wants to see; God sees objectively. God did show him God’s ways more clearly, but not in the way Jonah expected.

Although Jonah himself had made a booth to provide some shelter for himself, the area around Nineveh is hot and sunny with few trees. Consequently, any roof would have been “a leafy roof which afforded only partial protection from the sun and which would soon dry up” (Limburg 1993: 95). God replies to Jonah’s action in deeds, not words, by taking up the issue of Jonah’s comfort, to provide a more substantial roof and shelter: “*the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort*” (**v. 6**). It is unclear exactly what kind of a plant it was. The Hebrew reads a *qiqayon* plant. Some translations and commentators call it a “gourd,” a “castor oil” plant, or a “vine.” The specific kind of plant is not important; the important thing is that God “appointed” it (just as he had “appointed” the “great fish”) and “*made it come up over Jonah.*” Magonet states, “Symbolically, God is saying: You are more concerned with your comfort than the destruction of a city full of people – very well, let us see what the implications of your concern are” (Magonet 1983: 58). God was again intervening and his sovereign power are again at work. Since the plant suddenly appeared and grew up quickly, Douglas Stuart observes that Jonah “could hardly miss the point that this, too, was a merciful gift to him from God” (Stuart 1987: 505). God’s sovereign power and intervention are also indicated in God’s “appointing” the worm to destroy the plant and “appointing” the scorching east wind to make Jonah miserable (**vv. 7-8**). God’s actions were designed to teach Jonah (and us) valuable lessons.

As a result of God’s appointing the plant, **v. 6** concludes, “*So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant.*”<sup>27</sup> However, “*But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so*

<sup>26</sup> At the same time, just as God’s mercy and forgiveness cannot be tamed or controlled, neither can God’s judgment. God used Assyria to punish Israel (**Isaiah 10**); but in 612 BC Nineveh itself was destroyed. One great irony in this is that “if Nineveh could repent, why could not Israel, and then Judah (Jerusalem) have repented, for they too could have survived. To the ironies of the book itself is added the irony of history.” (Magonet 1983: 111)

<sup>27</sup> Note that Jonah’s feeling “*exceedingly glad*” because of the plant (**v. 6**) is the counterpart to his being “*exceedingly displeased*” (**v. 1**) over God’s sparing the Ninevites.

that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live.’” (vv. 7-8)<sup>28</sup> When God has the plant killed, Jonah forgot all of the miracles which God had done on his behalf, including ordaining the plant itself.<sup>29</sup> God’s question in v. 9, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” raises the issue that is central to the whole book, “What right do we have to demand that God should favor us and not others?” (Stuart 1987: 506) This question raised the “other side of the coin” of God’s character and justice: the context of the question in v. 4 was compassion; the context of the question in v. 9 was destruction. Further, this question “broadens the scope of the issue between God and Jonah in relating the discussion to God’s actions of destruction. This demonstrates clearly that the issue between them is not confined simply to the question of the deliverance of Nineveh. The *sphere* of God’s activity under discussion is shown here to be limited not merely to Nineveh, but includes Jonah (Israel) as well.” (Fretheim 1978: 234)

The question placed Jonah on the horns of a dilemma: “To say ‘no’ would be to admit the injustice of his anger. For, after all, he had no claim to the shade cast by the castor oil plant: the joy it gave him was a free gift. But in granting this he would have simultaneously to admit that God was free to pardon Nineveh. On the other hand, if he insisted on his right to be angry because of the castor oil plant, he would then be claiming God’s enduring kindness towards himself, and could hardly deny it to Nineveh.” (Wolff 1986: 506) In answer to God’s question, Jonah repeated that he did do well to be angry, “angry enough to die.” God’s reply brings the issue and the lesson God was teaching to a climax in vv. 10-11: “And the LORD said, ‘You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?’” God is saying that “the plant has come to him as a pure gift (which, in the final analysis, is true of everything). . . . It serves to demonstrate that there can be no question of injustice whatsoever in God’s taking of the plant from Jonah (we cannot even refer to it as Jonah’s plant!). Jonah had no claim on the plant whatsoever. He had no *right* to make any claims regarding it. All of his appeals to justice were simply out of court. Judgments regarding caprice on the grounds of what was due Jonah were not in order.” (Fretheim 1978: 235) The same, of course, is true for us: everything we have, including our very lives, are all gifts from God, to which we have no “right.” He is sovereign because he is the creator, we are creatures; he is the potter, we are the clay (**Isa 29:16; 41:25; 45:9; 64:8; Jer 18:4-6; Rom 9:21**).

**Verse 11** is a lengthy rhetorical question (Ben Zvi 2009: 1-13). As with all rhetorical questions, the answer is implied, in this case, “Yes, of course you should pity Nineveh!” The conclusion of the book is contrasting Jonah’s pity with God’s pity. Jonah’s pity is for a plant, a single plant, a plant with which he had nothing to do concerning its life and its death, a plant which has little intrinsic value even in human terms, and a plant which has no moral or spiritual significance. In contrast, God’s pity is for human beings, more than twelve myriads of human beings and a multitude of cattle whom he created, a great city, a great city of human beings who have everlasting value, a great city of human beings who have moral and spiritual significance and who are morally and spiritually challenged.

Before discussing the lessons of this conclusion to the book, three matters should be clarified. First, although most translations say that Nineveh contained “more than 120,000 persons,” the Hebrew wording is not how one would say 120,000 if it was meant as a literal number. Philip Jenson notes that “ancient readers were more sensitive to symbolic quality than numerical quantity” (Jenson 2008: 93). Kevin Youngblood adds that “this was a standard expression for a multitude or an innumerably large quantity, related to Near Eastern mathematics” (Youngblood 2013: 174).<sup>30</sup> The actual wording is “twelve *myriads*.” The number twelve itself is a conventional number, like when Jesus told Pilate that his Father could send “twelve legions of angels” (**Matt 26:53**). While the Hebrew word for myriad (*ribba*) can be translated as 10,000, its essential meaning is an “immense number” (Koehler and Baumgartner 2001: 2:1178; see **Lev 26:8; Num 10:36; Deut 33:2; Ps 91:7; Song 5:10; Dan 7:10; Rev 5:11**). The point is that God is contrasting a huge population of human beings versus a single plant.

<sup>28</sup> It is possible that the double attack of the wind and the sun correspond to the double shade of the booth and the plant (see Wolff 1986: 171-72).

<sup>29</sup> Once again, irony and wordplay are at work. *YONa* is compared with the *qiqayON*. Further, “God describes the *qiqayon* as having had a lifespan of a single day (4.10b), which corresponds to the amount of time that Jonah had spent in Nineveh (3.4), despite that city’s enormous size. Jonah’s physical presence was as ephemeral for Nineveh as that of the *qiqayon* was for Jonah.” (Cooper 1993:153) Indeed, we are all, in our earthly existence, temporary and passing like grass, like a flower, like the plant (**Ps 37:2; 90:5-6; 102:11; 103:15-16; 144:3-4; Isa 40:6-8; Jas 1:10-11; 1 Pet 1:24**)

<sup>30</sup> In fact, “this same number [“120,000”] occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament to emphasize a great quantity” (Youngblood 2013: 174, citing **Judg 8:10; 1 Kgs 8:63; 1 Chron 12:37; 2 Chron 7:5; 28:6**).



Second, the reference to the “*persons who do not know their right hand from their left*” is not referring to young children, as some believe. The Hebrew word (*adam*) is the typical word for people in general, not the Hebrew word for children (Cary 2008: 160). Rather, it is an idiom meaning people who are morally and spiritually challenged, like when Jesus said from the cross, “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*” (**Luke 23:34**). As the *Gospel Transformation Study Bible* puts it, the phrase means that the people “have lost their moral compass and will soon lose their way and become hopelessly lost” (*Gospel Transformation* 2018: 1359n.4:11; see also Cary 2008: 161 [“the people of Nineveh don’t know the way and therefore wander far from it, destroying all that is around them, including ultimately themselves”]). Third, the reference “*and also much cattle*” goes back to **3:7-8** where even the animals were to wear sackcloth and were included in the required fast to the Lord. Further, as Ellison says, “Jonah had to understand that the fulfillment of his wishes about Nineveh would have involved not only the destruction of innocent human beings but also of ‘many cattle as well’ that had become especially dependent on man” (Ellison 1985: 390). Stuart adds, “God would have every right to spare Nineveh if only because of the dumb animals in it! They *alone* would be worth more by any accounting than the gourd Jonah had become so attached to.” (Stuart 1987: 508)

Now, concerning the lessons that God was teaching Jonah (and us), the conclusion of this book raises four fundamental issues: first, concerning the nature and character of God; second, concerning our relationship with the world and with things; third, concerning our relationship with people who are “different” from us; and fourth, concerning our relationship with God. With respect to the nature and character of God, when God spared Nineveh, “Jonah’s sense of justice was offended. He would have said there are some things that you just cannot forgive” (Freedman 1990: 30). He had powerful reasons for thinking that way. “Wickedness thrives in the world exactly because the Judge of all the earth does not execute the full weight of the law on them” (Bruckner 2004: 128). However, God was revealing something important to Jonah (and to us) about his own character and nature. After all, God was equally “unjust” when he pardoned *us*. He was “unjust” when he sent Christ to the cross. Although most of us think of the “problem of evil” as inexplicable evil that happens to the innocent, Jonah is raising the “other side” of the problem of evil, namely, inexplicable compassion and good that happens to those who are themselves evil.<sup>31</sup> The fact is, “God mercifully *withholds* the eschatological violence [i.e., the judgment] until every chance at repentance and forgiveness has passed. And this causes frustration, suffering, and even death for innocent victims who must wait. To the martyrs who cry, ‘Sovereign Lord, how long?’ God answers: ‘A little longer! . . . until the number of your fellow servants and their brothers and sisters should be complete, who are to be killed as you yourselves have been’ (Rev. 6:10-11). . . . And God’s mercy is such that apparently even two thousand years’ worth of martyrs – and even Crusades and Holocausts! – are not enough to exhaust it. The result of God’s extraordinary mercy in withholding judgment is, of course, *the problem of evil*. Why does God wait while people wound and annihilate other people? Who could have thought he does it out of love? But God replies: ‘Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle’ (Jonah 4:11)?” (Work 2000: 107; see also **Rom 2:4; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9; Rev 2:21**)<sup>32</sup>

Jesus’ parable of the laborers in the vineyard (**Matt 20:1-16**) directly restates this issue and Jonah’s problem with God. Wolff explains, “The laborers who are hired in the first hour rebel against the equal treatment accorded to those hired only at the eleventh. The Lord counters their murmurings, too, with kindly questions: ‘Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’” (Wolff 1986: 177) Yet the word for “pity” God uses in **v. 11** (Hebrew = *hûs*) goes even beyond this. Fretheim states, “The use of *hûs* in the final question pushes beyond the question of God’s rights as

<sup>31</sup> Terrence Fretheim points out, “It cannot be maintained that Jonah’s resistance is related to sharing God’s repentance with the heathen per se [recall that Jonah positively responded to the sailors in **Jonah 1:12** and agreed to be thrown into the sea, so that ‘*then the sea will become calm*’]. The issue for Jonah is not so much the indiscriminate extension to the heathen, as the indiscriminate extension of God’s repentance to those whose cup of evil had filled to overflowing, ‘whose wickedness has come up before’ God (Jon 1).” (Fretheim 1978: 228) The “problem of evil” is addressed in detail at Menn 2021: 108-32.

<sup>32</sup> Significantly, in **4:10-11**, God does *not* cite Nineveh’s repentance as his ground for relenting from judgment (Freedman 1990: 31). Nor did he cite any of the “vocabulary crucial to chapter three [*sub*, turn; *naham*, repent; *rag*, evil]” (Sasson 1990: 318). Jonah himself recognized that it is God’s nature to “*relent from disaster*” (**4:2**). Jonah did not say that God makes repentance necessary for him to “relent” or that God is required to “relent” when repentance occurs. God’s actions toward Nineveh were in the context of the preaching of his word and the repentance of the Ninevites; but “Though God may be motivated to save because of human prayer and penitence, God remains ultimately free to decide whether he will have pity” (Fretheim 1978: 232). God reveals his own character when he says, “*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion*” (**Rom 9:15**, quoting **Exod 33:19**).

sovereign to the way in which his rights are exercised. *hûs* is suffering action, action executed with tears in the eyes. God takes upon himself the evil of Nineveh and bears the weight of its violence, the pain of a thousand plundered cities, including Israel's. God chooses to suffer for Nineveh, perhaps even to die." (Fretheim 1978: 236-37) Although the events of Jonah occurred over 700 years before Jesus came into the world, the pity God showed to Nineveh was a "type" or "shadow" pointing to the greater pity he would show to us by living the life we should have lived, taking the sin we had committed, and the punishment for that sin we deserved, onto himself, and dying for us so that we might have eternal life.<sup>33</sup> We are, therefore, confronted by this text to reassess our views of God, evil, grace, and ourselves.

With respect to our relationship with the world and with things, the episode with the plant shows that Jonah went from being "*exceedingly glad*" to wanting to die within the space of a few hours, all because of events and circumstances to which he had contributed nothing and over which he had no control. God was bringing home to Jonah the condition of his heart.<sup>34</sup> The plant had little intrinsic value. To place great value (as Jonah did) in things that have little intrinsic value is *materialism*. This was not only Jonah's problem, but it was Israel's problem (see **Amos 1:6-8; 4:1-2; 5:11-13; 6:1, 4-6; 8:4-6**), and it is our problem. On the personal level, we take our "blessings" as "givens" and our problems as exceptions. We fail to see that our temporal blessings, like Jonah's plant, result from acts "of pure divine grace" (Stuart 1987: 505). We wrongly trust our feelings and our circumstances, as did Jonah. Both our feelings and our circumstances are fickle and can change radically and precipitously: "When he feels very badly, events will [then] seem to go his way; but when he feels very good, they will deteriorate precipitously" (Sasson 1990: 272-73). We must adopt an eternal perspective. We, like the plant, only last a "day."

This issue is not merely a personal one, but it affects every culture and society in the world. In his survey of the flow of history and culture, *How Then Shall We Live?*, Francis Schaeffer notes, "As the more Christian-dominated consensus weakened, the majority of people adopted two impoverished values: *personal peace* and *affluence*" (Schaeffer 1982: 5:211, *emph. in orig.*) This set of values is not limited to the West. Personal peace and affluence are not necessarily bad values. Yet they (or any other set of values we may espouse) force us to ask the question: Are they Christ's values? Any values or priorities, although good in themselves, if turned into ultimate values or priorities, become forms of idolatry. Such values are centered in the well-being of the self for this earthly life alone. As such, they (along with success, wealth, power, country, tribe, family, or virtually any other set of values) cause us not to critique the prevailing worldview but to become complacent with injustice, oppression, inhumanity, and structural evils, as long as our own well-being is reasonably intact. Therefore, this episode with the plant is confronting us with questions that we need to answer. Those questions include: What do we (culturally and individually) invest value in? What does God invest value in? Does what we invest value in match what God invests value in? What do we invest our time, seriousness, money, and energy in? (So much of what we invest our time, seriousness, money, and energy in has little value *even in a human sense*, let alone in an eternal sense.) These are matters that must be addressed by the churches as well as by the individuals and families who attend those churches.

The issues raised here are even more important than what has just been said. A note in the *Gospel Transformation Study Bible* points out, "God used the worm and the wind to save Jonah from a 'vine-centered' life. A vine-centered person is one who is so taken up with the joy of God's good gifts that he or she ends up loving the gifts more than the Giver. The Bible calls this *idolatry*. If we feel that without a certain person, or position, or achievement, our life would not be worth living, we may be deeper into idolatry than we think. Friends, family, money, ministry, and success are good gifts from God that can be very gratifying. But they are not the purpose of life. Christ died so that 'those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised' (2 Cor. 5:15)." (*Gospel Transformation* 2018: 1358n.4:5-9; see also **Eph 5:5; Col 3:5**)

With respect to our relationship with people who are "different" from us, as we have seen, Jonah was an extreme nationalist who hated Israel's enemies, the Assyrians, to the point that he would rather die than see them converted to the Lord or even shown mercy by the Lord. This raises the issues of tribalism, racism, and extreme nationalism. Most, if not all, people naturally are drawn to their own countries, cultures, and people "like themselves," i.e., people of the same race, tribe, ethnic group, and socio-economic status. The fact is, tribalism, racism, ethnic discrimination, and discrimination based on socio-economic status are absolutely

<sup>33</sup> Even in the OT, God is said to have experienced distress or grief over the sin and evil of his creatures, even when he opposed them (see **Gen 6:6; Isa 42:14; 63:10; Jer 31:20; Hos 11:8**).

<sup>34</sup> Although God did not say that it was wrong for Jonah to have concern about the plant, he was putting matters into proper perspective. He was saying that the *proportionality* of Jonah's jubilation and then anger over the plant were both way out of control and off target, especially compared to God's concern about the human beings of Nineveh.

contrary to the gospel. **Rev 5:9** says that “*by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.*” As Paul says in **Rom 9:25-26**, “*Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’ And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’*” (quoting **Hos 2:23**; see also **1 Pet 2:10**) Consequently, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (**Gal 3:28**). **Col 3:11** similarly says, “*Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.*” “The story of Ruth tells us that Moabite [and, as is clear elsewhere in the Bible, Canaanite] blood flowed in the veins of the Son of God. This blood was then shed for the salvation of Moabites—and every other people group.” (Piper 2010: 134)<sup>35</sup>

This has important practical implications for Christians individually and for the church collectively. In **Acts 10** Peter had been shown that God does not show partiality between Jews and Gentiles. He even testified about this in **Acts 11** to Jews who had opposed his eating with uncircumcised Gentiles. However, **Gal 2:12-13** tells us that “*before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.*” Peter’s external, objective actions did not correspond to his internal, subjective beliefs. He was denying the very gospel he had preached by the way he was living. Consequently, Paul “*opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned*” (**Gal 2:11**), rightly called him a “hypocrite” (**Gal 2:13**), and pointed out that “*their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel*” (**Gal 2:14**). Since this was not just a private matter between Peter and certain individual Gentiles, but the entire church was being affected and the nature of the gospel itself was at issue, Paul did not go to Peter privately (per **Matt 18:15-16**) but rightly confronted him *publicly* (see also **Eph 5:11**; **1 Tim 5:20**).

Paul’s attack went to the heart of the matter, namely, that Peter was not being “*in step with the truth of the gospel*” (**Gal 2:14**). Peter denied the gospel by excluding Gentiles from full participation and equality in the life of the church. He was also denying Gentiles complete acceptance *in his private life* (i.e., in who he ate with) because of the fact that they were Gentiles. In effect, although he knew better, Peter was making the gospel for “Jews only.” This is a complete reversal of the entire movement of salvation history and amounts to overturning the New Covenant, overturning what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and reinstating the Old Covenant. Rich Lusk states, “Because the Old Covenant ceremonial laws were laws of exile and exclusion rather than access and intimacy, laws of promise rather than fulfillment, for Gentile converts to come under these laws would be to take a major step backwards, just as for Jews to remain under them would be to stay in the old age. . . . The essential difference [between Paul and the Judaizers] was Paul’s realized eschatology in Christ vs. the Judaizers’ commitment to ongoing practice of Torah. Paul could say, and his Jewish opponents could not say, that the promised, final, eschatological age has arrived in history, opening the gates of covenant blessing, not merely to all the genetic sons of Abraham, but ultimately to all the genetic sons of Adam. The basic problem in Galatia was a Jewish nationalism, or exclusivism, rooted in a defective understanding of God’s redemptive-historical timetable. Israel turned Torah, which should have been a means to the end of Christ’s coming (cf. Rom. 10:4), into an end in itself, and therefore into a form of idolatry (Gal. 4:8-9; cf. Rom. 2:22).” (Lusk 2003: n.p.)

The same thing occurs any time a church or individual Christian denies people membership, positions of leadership, fellowship, or full equality because of tribal, ethnic, socio-economic, or other similar reasons. This was a big problem not only in Galatia but also in the early church in Jerusalem. In the Jerusalem church, the Hellenistic widows (i.e., those of Greek culture and language) “*were being neglected in the daily distribution*” in favor of the native Hebrew widows (**Acts 6:1**; see also **Jas 2:1-13**). The church did something very rare and pro-active to remedy this ethnic discrimination: the apostles told the church to “*pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty*” (**Acts 6:3**). The church did this, but the most amazing and important thing is that the seven men they chose *all had Greek names!* (**Acts 6:5**). By doing that, they were intentionally saying, “We recognize that we have been treating the Greeks wrongly, and we want to demonstrate our repentance and change of heart by putting them in charge of the distribution.”

This issue continues to be a big problem for the church around the world today. This is also reflected in the lack of fellowship that some denominations have with other denominations. Of course, we all think our own theology is correct and those who disagree with us are wrong. Even if we are correct in our theology, however, we may be correct in the same way that Peter was correct: his internal beliefs about the oneness of Jews and Gentiles in Christ were correct, but since he did not translate those internal beliefs into concrete, positive action

<sup>35</sup> This issue is discussed in more detail in Menn 2022: 19-21.

to ensure that Gentiles were treated as equals, Peter was a hypocrite who was “*not in step with the truth of the gospel.*” He had, in effect, turned his Jewish heritage and traditions into *idols*. This is serious. The gospel is *truth*, and truth necessarily affects how we live as well as what we believe. If churches (and individuals) do not resolutely examine themselves and change their practices to bring them in line with the implications of the gospel, God’s verdict on the day of judgment may be that we were not faithful believers or churches at all but really were nothing but hypocrites and idolaters.

Finally, with respect to our relationship with God, we have seen that Jonah was an Israelite who saw himself as one of the “chosen people.” He therefore felt that he was superior to non-Israelite pagans, like the Ninevites, who did not have or act in accordance with God’s law, morally, spiritually, or in other ways. James stated a principle that would have applied to Jonah and likewise applies to us, “*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness*” (**Jas 3:1**). Jonah also overlooked the principle that Jesus later would articulate, which again applied to Jonah and certainly applies to us since we have “*the whole counsel of God*” (**Acts 20:27**), have been redeemed by Christ (**Eph 2:8-9**), have been given a new heart (**Ezek 36:26**), the mind of Christ (**1 Cor 2:16**), the Holy Spirit who now lives inside of us (**John 14:17**), have been sealed by the Spirit (**Eph 1:13**), and have been adopted into God’s family (**Rom 8:15, 23; Gal 4:5; Eph 1:5**). That principle is, “*Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more*” (**Luke 12:48b**).

Jonah’s attitude toward the Ninevites is the very issue raised by Jesus in the parable of the “prodigal son” in **Luke 15:11-32**.<sup>36</sup> The parable is very familiar to most of us. It is significant to note that, at the beginning of the three parables Jesus told in **Luke 15** (the parable of the “prodigal son” was the third), he was speaking to two groups of people “*tax collectors and sinners*” and “*the Pharisees and the scribes*” (**Luke 15:1-2**). Timothy Keller points out, “These two kinds of people correspond to the two brothers later in the parable. Tax collectors and sinners are like the younger brother in the parable. They have engaged in immoral, irreligious wild living (v.13). They have left the traditional morality of their families. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law, however, are like the elder brother in the parable. They have stayed with the traditional morality of their upbringing. They are deeply devoted to studying and obeying the Word of God. They pray and worship constantly.” (Keller n.d.: “The Two,” n.p.) The Ninevites epitomize the younger brother, and Jonah epitomizes the older brother in the parable.

In the parable, “Jesus shows us a father with two sons, and actually both are equally alienated from his heart. One has expressed alienation by running far away, but the elder brother is just as angry and just as much a stranger to the father. The father must ‘go out’ to each of them to urge them to come in (vv.20, 28). But here’s the remarkable part. One of his sons is a very good person, one is a very wicked person, but in the end, it is the evil son who comes in to the father’s feast and dance, and it is the good son who absolutely will not.” (Keller n.d.: “The Two,” n.p.) But why did the older brother remain outside instead of participating in the feast. The older brother tells us, “It is because all these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed... (v.29). It is not his badness keeping him out, but his ‘goodness.’ It is not his sins that are keeping him from sharing in the feast of the father so much as his ‘righteousness.’ The elder brother in the end is lost, not despite his good record, but because of it.” (Keller n.d.: “The Two,” n.p.)<sup>37</sup>

In other words, there is not just one way of being far from God, but two ways: one way, of course, is to break God’s rules and live a licentious life like the younger brother. The other way to be far from God is to *keep the rules* like the older brother. Why was the older brother so angry? Keller summarizes: “He feels he has the right to tell the father what he should do with his robes, rings, and calves. It shows that he is just as resentful of the father’s control of his goods as was the younger brother. The younger brother went away to get out from under the father’s control of his wealth, but the older brother stayed home and ‘never disobeyed’ as his way to do the same thing. At heart they were absolutely the same. Both were trying to escape the authority of the father, both resented his control and rebelled. But one did it by breaking all the father’s rules, and the other did it by keeping them.” (Keller n.d.: “The Two,” n.p.)

Interestingly, in both the both the parable and the book of Jonah, the younger brother (the Ninevites) are the recipients of the father’s (God’s) mercy and grace. Further, both the parable and the book of Jonah end with the father (God) addressing the older brother (Jonah), explaining the situation, and, in effect, pleading with the older brother to join the younger brother at the feast. But both the parable and the book of Jonah end with the older brother (Jonah) remaining “outside” and refusing to have anything to do with the younger brother. Both

<sup>36</sup> The parable should actually be called the parable of the father and the two sons, since it has as much to say about the father and the older son as it does about the younger (“prodigal”) son.

<sup>37</sup> Leslie Allen points out that “Jonah’s prayer [in **Jonah 4:2**] is reminiscent of the expostulation of the Elder Brother with its similar selfish emphasis and tone of bitter complaint (Luke 15:29)” (Allen 1976: 229).

the parable and the book of Jonah end with an unanswered question or statement of the father (God). We do not know how either the older brother in the parable or Jonah ultimately responded.<sup>38</sup>

This is very important for us to know since, although there are some “younger brothers” in the church, most people in the church are not former prostitutes, drug addicts, thieves, or murderers. Most people in the church are relatively religious, respectable people who try to keep the rules and do the right thing. The issue, however, is *motive*: “The difference between a religious person and a true Christian is that the religious person obeys God to get control over God, and to get things from God, but the Christian obeys just to get God. Religious persons obey to get leverage over God, to control him, to put him in a position where they think he owes them. Therefore, despite their moral and religious fastidiousness, they are actually attempting to be their own saviors. Christians, who know they are only saved by grace and can never control God, obey him out of a desire to love and please and draw closer to the one who saved them.” (Keller n.d.: “The Two,” n.p.)

The thing we must realize is that, as we see in the parable in **Luke 15** and Jesus’ interaction with “tax collectors and sinners” throughout the NT compared to his interaction with Pharisees, it is easier to win “younger brothers” to Christ than it is to win “older brothers.” Jesus and the gospel are more attractive to younger brothers, because they more easily recognize their lostness and need than do older brothers. It is *because* the older brothers keep the rules and are respectable and successful that they do not recognize their need at all (or the hardness of their own hearts). Thus, we must heed Christ’s warning and teach our people that “*the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.*” (**Matt 21:31-32**)

In conclusion, God is free to grant, withhold, and overturn as he sees fit. By holding onto our things, our parochial viewpoints, and our lives, we do not have the “mind of Christ” but are thinking like the unredeemed (**Matt 16:23; 1 Cor 2:14-16**). We must “see” like God does. Our “enemies,” like Nineveh, are “ignorant, but still responsible” (Bruckner 2004: 123). It is our responsibility to tell them the gospel and show them the transformative power of the truth of the gospel in our lives; by doing so, we thereby become God’s instruments to turn enemies into friends and brothers.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Jonah’s prayer at the beginning of chapter 4, including his anger with God and attacking God’s character.

- Have you expressed your anger with God and attacked his character? What did you learn in those situations?

2. How does great anger against God warp our perception and our theology and take us down the road of “folly and perversity”?

- Can you cite any personal examples of this?

3. What do you think of the statements in the text that the true origin or temptation and sin lie within us, not in our circumstances, and that even Satan himself cannot spiritually endanger us *unless and until we make Satan’s suggestions our own*?

4. In the text it says, “by magnifying ourselves, we diminish ourselves.” What do you think of that, and can you cite any examples from your own life or the lives of others where that was true?

5. The text states, “We need to remember that our sins are more significant and have greater effects than may be apparent to us.” Do you know of examples where this has proved to be true?

6. In following Jesus “*outside the camp*”—out of our “comfort zones,” *whatever they may be*—to model Christ by preaching, teaching, helping, and comforting people, *whoever they may be*, the issue that confronts us is: are

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<sup>38</sup> We have hope and might infer that Jonah ultimately responded by having a true change of heart toward both God and the Ninevites. The reason is that the information portraying Jonah in such a bad light only could have come from Jonah himself. By doing so, he may implicitly have been saying, “I get it! I made the right decision in the end! Will you also?”

we like Jonah, or are we like Christ? Give examples.

7. Have you ever done something to try to “blackmail God into taking action” like Jonah may have done by going out of the city, building a booth, and sitting down to see what God would do?

8. When God has the plant killed, Jonah forgot all of the miracles which God had done on his behalf, including ordaining the plant itself. Have there been any instances in your own life where something similar to this has happened?

9. God’s question in **v. 9**, “*Do you do well to be angry for the plant?*” raises the issue that is central to the whole book, “What right do we have to demand that God should favor us and not others?”

- Discuss that question, including such reasons as you may have in the back of your mind (even though you may never say them out loud), like: “I am a Christian; I am one of God’s adopted children; I have been faithfully serving the Lord for \_\_\_\_\_ years; I regularly attend church and give tithes and offerings; I have made many sacrifices for the sake of the Lord; I have never committed adultery or murder or many of the other things that ungodly people do, etc.; therefore, God *should* favor me over others.”

10. Concerning the nature and character of God:

- Why do we tend to point to the issues of “justice” and “fairness” when we see ungodly people apparently “getting away with things,” but tend to overlook the fact that God was equally “unjust” when he pardoned *us* and was “unjust” when he sent Christ to the cross?
- Discuss the fact that God mercifully *withholds* the eschatological violence [i.e., the judgment] until every chance at repentance and forgiveness has passed. And this causes frustration, suffering, and even death for innocent victims who must wait. Who could have thought he does it out of love?
- In **4:10-11**, God does *not* cite Nineveh’s repentance as his ground for relenting from judgment. Jonah himself recognized that it is God’s nature to “*relent from disaster*” (**4:2**), and God reveals his own character when he says, “*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion*” (**Rom 9:15**, quoting **Exod 33:19**; see also Jesus’ parable of the laborers in the vineyard [**Matt 20:1-16**]). What do you think of that? How, if at all, does it affect or change your view of God and his character?

11. Concerning our relationship with the world and with things:

- To place great value (as Jonah did) in things that have little intrinsic value is *materialism*. How are we, our society, and our church affected by materialism?
- How do we tend to take our “blessings” as “givens” and our problems as exceptions and fail to see that our temporal blessings, like Jonah’s plant, result from acts of pure divine grace? What problems does this cause?
- Francis Shaeffer said that most people (and societies) have adopted *personal peace* and *affluence* as their predominant values. What do you think of that? To the extent that is true, how is it manifested in our lives, including in our lives as Christians and as churches, and what problems is this causing?
- The text raised a number of questions we need to consider and discuss: What do we (culturally and individually) invest value in? What does God invest value in? Does what we invest value in match what God invests value in? What do we invest our time, seriousness, money, and energy in?
- Friends, family, money, ministry, and success are good gifts from God that can be very gratifying, but to draw our meaning and purpose from them and place them over Jesus Christ is *idolatry*. How are we, both individually and as churches, in danger of being idolaters, and what can we, both individually and as churches, do to combat and reverse this?

12. Concerning our relationship with people who are “different” from us:

- Most, if not all, people naturally are drawn to their own countries, cultures, and people “like themselves,” i.e., people of the same race, tribe, ethnic group, and socio-economic status. But tribalism, racism, ethnic discrimination, and discrimination based on socio-economic status are absolutely contrary to the gospel. This occurs any time a church or individual Christian denies people membership, positions of leadership, fellowship, or full equality because of tribal, ethnic, socio-economic, or other similar reasons. How are we, both as individuals and as churches, acting contrary to the gospel in these respects, and what can and should be do to combat and reverse this?
- What does the example of the early church in Jerusalem (**Acts 6**), which faced and dealt with this same problem, say to us today in facing similar problems?
- Paul publicly withstood Peter to his face because Peter was not being “*in step with the truth of the gospel*” (**Gal 2:14**). Peter denied the gospel by excluding Gentiles from full participation and equality *in his personal life* (i.e., by not eating with them). This shows that the gospel affects all areas of life, even who we eat with. How are we blind to this, and what steps should we take to make all areas of our lives fully “*in step with the truth of the gospel*”?

13. Concerning our relationship with God:

- How do we tend to feel and act superior to nonbelievers, like Jonah did toward the Ninevites, and even feel and act superior to other Christians of different denominations?
- How is this contrary to what Jesus said, “*Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more*” (**Luke 12:48b**)?
- What can and should we do about such feelings and actions?
- Discuss the statement that there is not just one way of being far from God, but two ways: one way, of course, is to break God’s rules and live a licentious life like the younger brother; the other way to be far from God is to *keep the rules* like the older brother. What can and should we do about that?
- Although there are some “younger brothers” in the church, most people in the church are not former prostitutes, drug addicts, thieves, or murderers. Most people in the church are relatively religious, respectable people who try to keep the rules and do the right thing. It is the “older brothers” who are actually *harder* to win to true faith, because by their respectable behavior (including attending church, paying tithes and offerings, keeping the rules, being successful, and not doing the things “younger brothers” do) they do not see their sin and alienation from God and think that they already are in right relationship with God. Assess that statement. To the extent it is true, what can we, both individually and as churches, do to win the “older brothers” to true, transforming faith?

**APPENDIX 1—JESUS AND THE “SIGN OF JONAH” (MATT 12:38-41; 16:1-4; LUKE 11:29-32)****I. Introduction**

In **Matt 12:38-41; 16:1-4; Luke 11:29-32** when the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and crowds asked Jesus for a “sign,” Jesus replied that the only sign that would be given was “*the sign of Jonah.*” Jonah is the only prophet that Jesus directly compares Himself to. Because this was the only specific “sign” that Jesus promised, and because He specifically compared Himself only to Jonah, it is important to understand the depth of the “sign of Jonah.”

<b>Matt 12:38-41</b>	<b>Matt 16:1-4</b>	<b>Luke 11:29-32</b>
<p><sup>38</sup> Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” <sup>39</sup> But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; <sup>40</sup> for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. <sup>41</sup> The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.</p>	<p><sup>1</sup> The Pharisees and Sadducees came up, and testing Jesus, they asked Him to show them a sign from heaven. <sup>2</sup> But He replied to them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘<i>It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.</i>’ <sup>3</sup> And in the morning, ‘<i>There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.</i>’ Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot <i>discern</i> the signs of the times? <sup>4</sup> An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah.”</p>	<p><sup>29</sup> As the crowds were increasing, He began to say, “This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah. <sup>30</sup> For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. <sup>31</sup> The Queen of the South will rise up with the men of this generation at the judgment and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. <sup>32</sup> The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.</p>

**II. The “Sign of Jonah”**

“Luke 11:30 seems to identify the *person* of Jonah as a sign to the Ninevites and to indicate that in some parallel fashion the person of the Son of Man will be a sign to the current generation; Matt 12:40 connects the sign of Jonah with the *burial* of Jonah in the belly of the fish, such that the parallel is now to the death (and, we may assume, resurrection) of the Son of Man. Further, in both Luke 11:32 and Matt 12:41, it is the *proclamation* of Jonah that is deemed significant. . . . Luke and Matthew agree that the sign of Jonah will be the *only* sign that is given and they both seem to presume the inevitable condemnation of the generation that receives it.” (Powell 2007: 159-60) In **Matt 16:4** the “sign of Jonah” is left undefined. The identification of the *person*, *proclamation*, and *death/resurrection* between Jesus and Jonah—which indicates the depth of the “sign of Jonah”—is seen in the following parallels between Jesus and Jonah:

**A. Identification with Galilee**

Jesus’ was brought up in the town of Nazareth in Galilee (**Matt 2:22-23; 13:54; 21:11; 26:71; Mark 1:9, 24; 6:1; Luke 1:26; 4:14-16, 34; 18:37; John 1:45-46; Acts 10:38; 26:9**). In **John 7:52** the chief priests and Pharisees specifically attacked the idea that Jesus was the Messiah, telling Nicodemus “*You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search, and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee.*” The Pharisees were wrong. Jonah was from the town of Gath-hepher (**2 Kgs 14:25**). Gath-hepher is a small village “about three miles northeast of Nazareth” in Galilee (Merrill 1980: 25).

**B. Identification with the dove**

“The name Jonah means ‘Dove,’ a symbol of peace. Christ is the Prince of Peace and made peace by the death of His cross (Isa. 9:6; Luke 2:14; John 14:27)” (Stanton 1951: 246). Further, at His baptism the Holy Spirit came in the form of a dove and rested on Jesus as a sign that Jesus was the Messiah (**Matt 3:16-17; John 1:32-34**).

**C. Jonah’s being swallowed by the fish and the death and resurrection of Christ**

There are several parallels between Jonah and Jesus concerning the fish, death, and resurrection:

1. The storm at sea (**Jonah 1-2; Matt 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25**). “Jonah boards a boat headed in the opposite direction of the nation to which he had been directed to prophesy; Jesus sets off in a boat toward the ‘other side,’ leaving behind a crowd that presses upon him” (Powell 2007: 160).



The context of both accounts involves the movement from Jewish to Gentile territory. “As Jonah was in the ship it was seized by a mighty wind, and was tossed by ‘a mighty tempest in the sea.’ The sea ‘wrought and was tempestuous,’ and ‘the ship was like to be broken.’ In Matthew 8:23-27 Christ likewise was aboard a ship in a similar situation. There was ‘a great tempest in the sea,’ and ‘the ship was covered with the waves.’ Jonah lay down in the sides of the ship, fast asleep, while the mariners cried out in fear and ‘cried every man unto his god.’ Christ lay ‘in the hinder part of the ship, asleep’ (Mark 4:38) until His disciples awoke Him, saying ‘Lord, save us: we perish.’ How similar is the Old Testament cry, ‘Arise, call upon thy God . . . that we perish not.’ In Jonah we read, ‘and the sea ceased her raging,’ and in Mark, ‘and the wind ceased, and there was great calm.’ (Stanton 1951: 246-47) After the sea was calmed, **Jonah 1:16** (LXX) says, “*And the men feared a great fear.*” Similarly, the Greek of **Mark 4:41** literally says, “*and they feared a great fear.*” Because Jesus is “greater than Jonah,” there are contrasts between the two. In the two accounts of the storms at sea, “Jonah was weary of God’s service. Jesus was weary in God’s service. Also, Christ did what Jonah could not do [but what God did in Jonah’s case]. He rebuked the wind and calmed the troubled sea, so that the men marveled at His mighty power.” (Stanton 1951: 247)

2. Self-sacrifice. “If we bear in mind the connections between Jonah 1 and the stilling of the storm, then we are in a better position to see that ‘the sign of Jonah’ involves more than Jonah’s three-day sojourn in the fish (Jonah 2:1) as a type of our Lord’s resurrection on the third day. *It also involves sacrificial death.* Jonah offered himself (Jonah 1:12) and descended to ‘the belly of Sheol’ (2:3 [2:2 in the Christian Bible]), where his ‘life ebbed away’ (2:8) [2:7 in the Christian Bible] in a kind of death that saved others, who believed and worshiped Yahweh (Jonah 1:15-16). All the more does the sacrificial death of the Son of Man atone for the sins of all humanity, and this salvation is received by all who believe in Him.” (Lessing 2007: 18-19) In this regard, just as in **Jonah 1:14** the sailors acknowledged that Jonah was “innocent blood,” so Judas admitted that he had betrayed “innocent blood” (**Matt 27:4**), and the centurion who crucified Jesus said, “*Certainly this man was innocent*” (**Luke 23:47**).

Nevertheless, Jesus is “greater than Jonah” in his self-sacrifice: “For all the similarities between these two bearers of grace, there is a critical difference. God’s love triumphed *over* Jonah. On the boat he displays the same cynical calculus as Caiaphas, wagering that it would be expedient to sacrifice one man for the life of the group (cf. John 11:50) . . . until he is ready to abandon all Nineveh for the sake of his soul. But Jesus is ‘greater than Jonah’ (Mat 12:41) in that God’s love triumphed *in* Jesus.” (Work 2007: 173) Jesus would not abandon sinful humanity but voluntarily gave Himself to bring reconciliation between sinful humanity and God. Jonah’s sacrifice spared the sailors from physical death; Jesus’ greater sacrifice saves humanity from the everlasting “second death.” “Thus ‘salvation belongs to Yahweh’ (Jonah 2:10) finds its fulfillment in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (Lessing 2007: 18). Timothy Keller summarizes: “How ironic it is that in Mark 4 the disciples ask, ‘Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?’ (Mark 4:38). They believe he is going to sleep on them in their hour of greatest need. Actually, it is the other way around. In the garden of Gethsemane, *they* will go to sleep on him. They will truly abandon him. And yet he loves them to the end. See? Jonah was thrown overboard for his own sin, but Jesus is thrown into the ultimate storm for *our* sin. Jesus was able to save the disciples from the storm because he was thrown into the ultimate storm.” (Keller 2015: 79-80)

3. Descent into Sheol (Hades). “*Sheol* is the opposite theological extreme of Yahweh’s presence and its dominant feature for its inhabitants is their separation from Him. . . . *Sheol* is not the Hebrew term for the underworld which awaits all people. It is exclusively reserved for those under divine judgment. . . . This means that Jonah’s use of *Sheol* in 2:3 [2:2 in the Christian Bible] indicates he is under Yahweh’s judgment.” (Lessing 2007: 12-13) The LXX (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) translates *Sheol* as *Hades*. In **Matt 12:40** Jesus compares Himself to Jonah and says that just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish “so will the Son of Man be . . . in the heart of the earth.” Although some people believe this to be simply a reference to the grave, more appears to be involved: “First, the term *kardias* (‘heart’) occurs in the LXX of Jonah 2:4 [‘*into the depth of the heart of the sea*’], where the reference is associated with *Sheol*. Second, the description of Jonah’s descent into *Sheol* in the LXX of Jonah 2:7 [2:6] is *katebēn eis gēn* (‘I went down to the earth’); here *gēn* = *h’eretz* = *Sheol*. Jesus is referring to His descent into *Sheol*. The primary meaning of the ‘sign of Jonah,’ then according to Matthew 12:40, is the correspondence between Jonah’s descent into *Sheol* and our Lord’s experience of death, especially when He—like Jonah—is ‘driven away from Yahweh’s presence’ (Jonah 2:5 [2:4]) when the Father abandons Him and He cries out, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Matt. 27:46). But this is not all,

for the description of Jonah's experience in chapter two is imbedded in a song of praise for deliverance from judgment. Matthew 12:40, therefore, also implies Christ's resurrection . . . as deliverance from the experience of divine judgment. Jesus will be the one—and how much more so than Jonah—whose cry to the Father from the depths of *Sheol* will be heard and answered, whose life will be brought up from the pit (cf. Jonah 2:3, 7 [2, 6]; Heb. 5:7)." (Lessing 2007: 20-21) In **Acts 2:27-31** Peter refers to Christ's resurrection and quotes from **Ps 16:10** that Jesus was not "*abandoned to Hades.*" The Hebrew of **Ps 16:10** refers to *Sheol*. Here again Jesus is "greater than Jonah": Jonah was three days in the belly of the fish because of his own sin and disobedience; Jesus was three days in the heart of the earth because of his obedience on behalf of the sin of others.

4. **Resurrection.** "The resurrection is God's great sign to Israel, as also seen in the speeches of Acts (2:24, 32, 36; 3:15; 13:30, 34, 37; 17:31)" (Osborne 2010: 486). A Jewish sermon from the 1<sup>st</sup> century "refers to Jonah's emergence from the fish as both 'a sign of rebirth' and as a 'sign of the truth.' To the extent that Jonah is understood to have been in Sheol (see Jonah 2:2), his deliverance is also viewed as a resurrection. Indeed, a widespread tradition identified Jonah as the widow's son raised by Elijah in 1 Kings 17:17-24. As one first-century writing puts it, Elijah raised Jonah from death 'for he wanted to show him that it is not possible to run away from God.' . . . All of this provides a backdrop for what we find in Matthew's Gospel: Jonah's temporary stay in the belly of the fish is a prophetic analogue for the death and resurrection of Jesus (explicit in Matt 12:40 and assumed in Matt 16:4). This should be the only sign Israel requires, but as Matthew tells it, the sign is obstinately rejected. Later in the Gospel (but only in this Gospel), the religious leaders of Israel actually learn of the resurrection of Jesus (Matt 28:11-15). They are thus confronted with the promised sign of Jonah, but they respond not with repentance but with duplicity that only intensifies their opposition to the will and ways of God." (Powell 2007: 161-62) Thus, in His resurrection Jesus again is "greater than Jonah": Jonah was not literally raised from the dead (or, if he actually died in the fish he was only revived and lived to die again); Jesus suffered real, physical death and was truly resurrected to life again, from which He will never die. Further, Jesus is "*the first fruits of those who are asleep*" (**1 Cor 15:20**) and will bring the resurrection of life to all who are in Him (**John 5:28-29; 1 Cor 15:12-23, 50-58**).

5. "**Three days and three nights**" (**Matt 12:40**). The fact that Jesus was buried on Friday evening (**Matt 57-60; Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:31, 38-42**) and rose early on the following Sunday morning (**Matt 28:1-6; Mark 16:1-6; Luke 24:1-6; John 20:1**) does not contradict the reference to "*three days and three nights.*" That phrase is an idiom. "The *Babylonian Talmud* (Jewish commentaries) relates that, 'The portion of a day is as the whole of it.' The *Jerusalem Talmud* (so designated because it was written in Jerusalem) says, 'We have a teaching, 'A day and a night are an Onah and the portion of an Onah is as the whole of it.''" (McDowell 1981: 122) Since "Jewish reckoning considered a partial day to be a full day (cf. Gen 42:17-18; 1 Sam 30:12-13; Esth 4:16; 5:1 [see also 1 Kgs 20:29; 2 Chron 10:5, 12]), so Jesus was in the grave Friday, Saturday, and Sunday; and the terminology fits" (Osborne 2010: 486; see also Delling 1964: 949-50). **Matt 27:63-64** shows the idiomatic usage of "three days" terminology specifically in connection with Jesus' burial: In **27:63** the Pharisees went to Pilate and recalled that Jesus had said, "*After three days I am to rise again.*" Therefore, in **27:64** they requested that Pilate "*give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day.*" "If the phrase, 'after three days,' had not been interchangeable with the 'third day,' the Pharisees would have asked for a guard for the fourth day" (McDowell 1981: 122). That is confirmed in **John 2:18-19** where the Jews also asked Jesus for a sign. Jesus replied, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*" (referring to the temple of His body, **John 2:21-22**). In commenting on that passage Martin Luther noted, "The Lord's reply resembles that recorded in Matt. 12:39-40, where He says that no other sign will be given this evil generation 'except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.' The answer is the same here; only the words and the figure of speech are different. He says: 'This shall be your sign: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'" That is: 'I shall be the Jonah whom you will cast into the ocean and into the jaws of the whale, whom you will crucify and kill; and on the third day I shall rise again.'" (Luther 1957: 2:242)

#### D. The person

Jonah was a sign "*to the Ninevites*" (**Luke 11:30**). In that verse "the name Jonah should probably be taken as a genitive of apposition with *sēmeion* ['sign'] so that he himself is the sign" (Merrill 1980: 24n.13; see also Osborne 2010: 485n.5 [the sign "*of Jonah the prophet*" is "an exegetical genitive, 'the sign that is Jonah

the prophet”]). “The ‘sign’ of Jonah the prophet, then, was like the sign of Isaiah and his sons (Isa. 8:18; compare 20:3), whose very presence in Judah represented the word of the Lord; like the altar and the pillar which were to be ‘a sign and witness’ to the Lord in the land of Egypt (Isa. 19:20); like Ezekiel, whose bereavement became a sign to the Jews in exile (Ezek. 24:24); like Paul, in whom were the signs or marks of a true apostle (II Cor. 12:12). In both the Old Testament and the New, that which calls attention to God’s decision-demanding presence and actions is called a ‘sign,’ whether or not it is described as miraculous.” (Scott 1965: 18-19) Although other prophets denounced ungodliness and pronounced judgment on pagan nations in addition to Israel, Jonah “is the only Hebrew prophet who is said to have traveled abroad to denounce in person the wickedness of a foreign nation and to proclaim its overthrow” (Scott 1965: 20). The fact that he had been swallowed and regurgitated by a great fish probably was particularly important to the people of Nineveh, since Nineveh was called “Fishtown” and myths described it as having been founded by a fish-god (Merrill 1980: 26-30). Similarly, Jesus left His home in heaven and came to earth. Jesus’ coming had been foretold, and the fact that He had come from God was authenticated by His life and the miracles He performed. Further, “Luke’s use of the future tense (‘so the Son of Man *will be* to this generation’ . . . points inevitably to the parousia [see **Matt 24:30** ‘*then the sign of the Son of Man will appear*’]). Thus, for Luke the ‘sign of Jonah’ seems to have been a multivalent [i.e., having more than one meaning] symbol for Jesus himself and for the mission that began with his earthly preaching and would conclude with his glorious return.” (Powell 2007: 162) Here again Jesus shows Himself to be “greater than Jonah”: “*Jonah didn’t so love Nineveh that he gave them God. God so loved Nineveh that he gave them Jonah.*” (Work 2007: 171-72) So with Jesus: “*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life*” (**John 3:16**).

### **E. The proclamation**

On its face, Jonah’s proclamation to Nineveh (“*Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown,*” **Jonah 3:4**) was an unqualified message of judgment. Nevertheless, Jonah himself realized that implicit in the message was a call to repentance and mercy (**Jonah 4:2**). Jesus, unlike Jonah, never fled or required a second call. He began His public ministry by explicitly urging repentance and proclaiming God’s grace and salvation, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*” (**Mark 1:15**; see also **Matt 4:17**). The theme of judgment was implicit. Later in His ministry, Jesus’ proclamation of judgment on Israel became explicit (e.g., **Matt 21:33-45; 23:29-39; 24:1-2, 15-19, 32-34; Mark 12:1-12; 13:1-2, 14-19, 28-30; Luke 11:45-51; 13:34-35; 19:41-44; 20:9-19; 21:5-6, 20-24, 29-32**; and the “sign of Jonah” passages themselves). “As Jonah was saying, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown,’ so Jesus was saying, by implication, ‘Yet forty years, and Jerusalem shall be overthrown’” (Wright 1996: 166n.95). Because He is “greater than Jonah,” Jesus alone offers both grace and new life, or judgment, based on one’s acceptance or rejection of Him. Ironically, although the pagan Ninevites repented at the preaching of Jonah, Jesus’ own people—the nation of Israel—did not repent and believe in Jesus. Jesus therefore argued in **Luke 11:32**: “Those who ignore his words are worse than the Ninevites, who repented at the grossly inferior preaching of Jonah. The note of absurd hyperbole (the Ninevites may end up being their judges in the day of reckoning) indicates that his comments retain the ironic spirit that characterizes the book of Jonah itself. His interest was not to promote the righteousness of Gentiles at the expense of Israel but to shock Israel into the realization that they were not living up to reasonable expectations [cf. **Matt 5:47**, ‘*even the Gentiles*’]. The ‘something greater’ theme would thus apply to Israel as much as to himself: his preaching may represent something greater than that of Jonah, but then the covenant people of God are (or should be) something greater than the people of Nineveh. So there is a double irony: the Son of Man’s preaching is turning out to be less effective than that of the reluctant prophet, and the covenant people of God are revealing themselves to be more obstinate than the notorious Ninevites.” (Powell 2007: 163-64)

### **III. Conclusion: The Relevance of the Sign of Jonah for the Church Today**

The “sign of Jonah” reveals God’s (and Christ’s) concern both for Jews and Gentiles. “God asks Jonah to discern his sovereign redemptive purpose in the display of mercy to the Gentiles. And the purpose of showing mercy is reflexive—to provoke Israel to conviction, humiliation and repentance. God gives repentance unto life to the Ninevites so that a sign will be recorded in the canon of the Scriptures of Israel. God gives repentance to the Gentiles through Jonah in order to anticipate the mission of one greater than Jonah. . . . [Jesus] commissioned his representatives to go to the Gentiles and command men everywhere to repent and believe. And lo, the Gentiles do repent and believe. All of this serves God’s sovereign purpose to provoke Israel to jealousy (Rom. 10:19; 11:13, 14) that she may heed the voice of one greater than Jonah—one in whom the Gentiles come to the light and mercy of the Lord.” (Dennison 1993: 35) Consequently, “We can probably say

that both Luke and Matthew connected the sign of Jonah for their own day with ‘the preaching of the church.’ It would be consistent with the theology of Luke to define the content of the church’s preaching as a call to repentance (Luke 24:47) grounded in a story of Jesus’ life and mission (Acts 1:1). It would be consistent with the theology of Matthew to define the content of the church’s preaching as being more focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus which is what grants him the authority to establish the new community of disciples with whom he abides until the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).” (Powell 2007: 164)<sup>39</sup> That mission will continue until Christ returns since the church is God’s instrument to proclaim the gospel to those whom Christ “*purchased for God with Your blood . . . from every tribe and tongue and people and nation*” (**Rev 5:9**). That mission is even greater today than it was in Jonah’s day because in Christ there is no longer “Jew or Gentile” (**Gal 3:28; Col 3:11**), but “*in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity*” (**Eph 2:15-16**).

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<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, “Drawings of Jonah appear more often in the Roman catacombs than any other Biblical figure” (Lessing 2007: 10). That may reflect that, in addition to Jesus’ saying that His disciples would be “fishers of men” (**Matt 4:19; Mark 1:17; Luke 5:10**), “the sign of Jonah” was behind the use of the “sign of the fish” as the secret symbol used by early Christians to mark meeting places, tombs, and to identify each other.

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