

## JONAH

### **Introduction:**

The prophet Jonah lived during the reign of Jeroboam II over the Northern Kingdom of Israel. *Halley's Handbook* dates Jeroboam at 790-749 BC. Jonah originated from Gad-Hefer, a little city in the area of Zebulon, a few miles from the border with Issachar.<sup>1</sup> Both in II Kings 14:25 as in Jonah 1:1, Jonah is called "Jonah, the son of Amitai." *Halley's Handbook* places Jonah's visit to Nineveh (with a question mark), during the reign of Adad Nirai, who levied taxes from Israel, and who reigned from 808-783 BC. Higher Criticism sees in the book nothing more than a legend, written by an anonymous author before the second century, and who chose the historical Jonah, who lived centuries earlier, as the hero of his story.

The basis for their supposition is, in the first place, the miracle with the fish, and the thought that some words in the book would date from a later period. How such a thesis can be scientifically established is not clear. To consider this book as anything but a historical document would be contrary to our concept of the inspiration of the Bible as the Word of God. One can only place Jonah in the category of fables if one starts out with the prejudice that miracles, such as described in this story, are impossible.

The question remains if miracles in the physical sense of the word occur. The greatest manifestation of supernatural power is the mass conversion of the inhabitants of Nineveh. The storm, the fish, and the tree can all be explained from natural causes.

The book occupies a unique place among the Minor Prophets, because it contains not one direct prophecy, except the sentence: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."<sup>2</sup> And this prophecy was never fulfilled. As far as stories go, the book shows some resemblance with the first six chapters of the book Daniel.

### **Outline:**

An outline is easy to make, when we follow the four chapters in which the book is divided.

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|----|--|-------|
| 1. | Jonah's call, and disobedience                       | ch. 1 |
| 2. | Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving while inside the fish | ch. 2 |
| 3. | Jonah's second call, and obedience                   | ch. 3 |
| 4. | Jonah's discontent, and the divine reprimand         | ch. 4 |

### **1. Jonah' call, and disobedience ch. 1:1-17**

**1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amitai:**

**2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."**

**3 But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.**

**4 Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.**

**5 All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.**

**6 The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish."**

**7 Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.**

**8 So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"**

**9 He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."**

<sup>1</sup> See II Kings 14:25, and Joshua 19:13

<sup>2</sup> Ch. 3:4

- 10 This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)**
- 11 The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"**
- 12 "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."**
- 13 Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.**
- 14 Then they cried to the LORD, "O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased."**
- 15 Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.**
- 16 At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.**
- 17 But the LORD provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.**

The majestic opening of the book reads: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amitai." The almighty creator of heaven and earth speaks to man who is created in His image and likeness. We should not lightly pass over this miracle without paying close attention to it. If we get used to this, we are in a sad condition. When God speaks to man, He uses human language and words that are an expression of His will and being. God shares something of Himself with man. It is hard for us, who live after the fall, to imagine what this would have meant for man for whom the bond with God had not yet been severed. Ever since man sinned there has been an abyss between man and his creator because of which God's speaking has lost its freshness, warmth, and intimacy. God speaks to Jonah over the abyss of sin. In a way, this makes God's speaking even more surprising. God's speaking to sinful man is always an act of grace, which can have redemptive and rehabilitating results. God's Word is always creating and life giving, if we allow it to have its way.

If man allows it, God's Word will change him. Paul wrote: "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."<sup>3</sup> And Jesus told His disciples: "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."<sup>4</sup> And to the Jews of His time He said: "If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came-and the Scripture cannot be broken..."<sup>5</sup>

The difference between the old creation and the new one is that light, and water, and life, obeyed God without any possible opposition. When the Word of the Lord came to Jonah, he disobeyed. Only man has the doubtful privilege of being able to disobey the Word of God. That is the theme of the book Jonah. The Word of the Lord came to Jonah and Jonah refused. This did not mean, however, that Jonah remained the same. We read nowhere in the book that Jonah confessed his sin and received a new heart. But who then wrote the book and where do those intimate details of the story come from? The book itself is a confession of sin, not even softened by the mention of renewal. The confession in itself is proof of the renewal.

The Word of God changes Jonah and makes him a new man but the Word of God doesn't stop at Jonah; it is meant to be passed on. Jonah's change is a byproduct. The actual hearers and receivers are the men of Nineveh. This also was the crux of Jonah's problem. He probably would not have minded if God had spoken to him in order to renew him. He had a right to this as an Israelite. He considered himself worthy of this. But the population of Nineveh was not worthy. The principle of the Word, however, is that it has to be passed on. It has only effect upon us if it streams through us to others. In a sense, we can say that God only speaks to missionaries.

The contents of God's speaking to Jonah consists of a three-fold command and a word of explanation:

1. "Arise" (KJV)

<sup>3</sup> II Cor. 4:6

<sup>4</sup> John 15:3

<sup>5</sup> John 10:35

2. "Go"
3. "Preach", and
4. "because"

"Arise" means that a certain preparation of the person who does the passing on is necessary and that person has to take an active part in this preparation. It is true that God took the initiative in the sending of Jonah but that does not reduce Jonah to a passive role of. He is responsible for the preparation. On the other hand, "arise" is part of God's speaking to Jonah. It is part of the renewal. Without the Word of God, Jonah's preparation would have lacked basis and contents. It is even questionable whether Jonah would have been able to take any preliminary steps without the drawing of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."<sup>6</sup> I don't believe that God creates obedience in us but He creates the grace that enables us to do what we are asked to do. Augustine has said: Give me what you ask and then ask me what you want."

"Arise" consists of both a physical and a spiritual preparation. God wants us to develop the discipline that is necessary for the journey and for the task as well as the academic and spiritual insight needed to do the job. We all need an "outfit" and a "home base."

Then follows the command "Go to the great city of Nineveh." God sent Jonah to a specific place. This also requires initiative on the part of Jonah; it involved Jonah's time and it would cause discomfort. The trip did not promise to be a pleasant one. But God promised His presence and fellowship on the way. To the "great commission" is always added the promise: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."<sup>7</sup>

In Jonah's days, Nineveh was not only a metropolis but also a monument of rebellion against God, of human decadence and corruption. The prophet Nahum called Nineveh "the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!"<sup>8</sup> Sidlow Baxter, in his book *Exploring the Book*, mentions some of the cruelties, such as the skinning alive of people. Such things are beyond imagination. It is quite possible that one of the reasons why Jonah refused to go to Nineveh was that his life would be in danger. The great city that is destroyed in the book of Revelation<sup>9</sup> could just as well have been called Nineveh.

God even gives Jonah the reason he has to go: "because its wickedness has come up before me." I used to think that God never gave reasons for what He does but now I am convinced that God always makes clear why He acts with us the way He does. Our problem is that we usually do not take the time to listen. But that doesn't mean that God doesn't long to take us into His confidence. What Amos said is true: "Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets."<sup>10</sup> God said to Himself: "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"<sup>11</sup> And David said: "He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel."<sup>12</sup> When the Apostle Paul went through deep suffering, he realized why it happened to him. He states: "But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead."<sup>13</sup> And in the same epistle he testifies that the Lord said to him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> John 6:44

<sup>7</sup> Matt. 28:20

<sup>8</sup> Nah. 3:1

<sup>9</sup> See Rev. ch. 18 and 19

<sup>10</sup> Amos 3:7

<sup>11</sup> Gen. 18:17

<sup>12</sup> Ps. 103:7

<sup>13</sup> II Cor. 1:9

<sup>14</sup> II Cor. 12:9

With Abraham and Moses God also used similar expressions in regard to the sins of certain peoples.<sup>15</sup> Jonah received enough information to understand why he had to preach against Nineveh. But yet Jonah refused to go. He obeys only partially. He arises, as he is ordered, but he does this with the intention to do the opposite of what God wanted him to do. We could ask ourselves why Jonah did not simply stay at home. It would have been more than sufficient if he had ignored the command. He would have saved himself a lot of trouble and the result would have been the same.

We are not told specifically why Jonah decided to disobey. Sidlow Baxter, in his book *Exploring the Book*, pictures Jonah as a hero, who is willing to sacrifice himself, his salvation and his prophetic office, in order to save his people. According to Baxter, Jonah knew what Nineveh would do to Israel in the future and he felt that, if God punished Nineveh, it would mean the salvation of his own people. He was willing to be disobedient in order to reach his goal. If this were true, he would have reached his goal without a flight by simply staying at home. If, however, Nineveh repented, the danger Jonah foresaw would be avoided also. By his obedience, Jonah would have saved two nations instead of one. I do not think that Baxter's theory holds water.

Others see in Jonah nothing more than a super chauvinist. Jonah would have wanted to maintain Israel's exclusive position as keeper of God's revelation. Bringing God's Word to the heathen, even in the form of an announcement of judgment, would endanger Israel's position. God's Word was meant for the Jews alone. One would say that God didn't have the right to speak to the heathen.

In both cases, Jonah's behavior shows a clear understanding of the purpose of the announcement of judgment. Jonah understood clearly that, in announcing judgment, God had the conversion of the people in mind. Every time God announced judgment to come, the underlying reason is grace. Jonah knew that if God were determined to destroy Nineveh because the condition of the city was hopeless, He would never send a prophet. The sending of Jonah was an act of compassion. God did not want to cause panic in Nineveh. Jonah's insight into the character of God forms the background of this book.

Jonah expresses this at the end of the book when he says: "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity."<sup>16</sup> That is an impressive testimony! Jonah thought that God was too kind for the nation who had tortured his people. The question, however, is if this was the real reason for Jonah's refusal. It certainly does not explain the reason for his flight.

A man usually does not act on the basis of one single reason only. We are, by nature, creatures with complicated motives. Chauvinism and pride, no doubt, played a role in Jonah's decision but this still does not explain the reason for his panic. Jonah is afraid to go. He fears for his life and he doesn't believe that God is able to protect him in the capital of a hostile nation. There may have been fear for a foreign language and culture. In spite of his ringing testimony in vs. 9: "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" he acts like a man who believes that God is merely a national deity who has no jurisdiction beyond the boundaries of Israel. Jonah lived in a world in which deities were supposed to possess limited territorial power. Although he professes not to believe this himself, his thinking seems to have been influenced by the spirit of his age. This makes Jonah flee from the Lord. It is difficult to keep our minds free of pollution. We read twice in one verse that Jonah fled. It is as if the author wants to express the panic and confusion of Jonah's soul. Fleeing from the face of the Lord may be objectively and theologically nonsense, for Jonah it was a psychological reality. Few people are realists in their spiritual lives. Existentialists refer to religion as an "upper story" experience. They do this easily because it corroborates their experience. We are also seldom realists in regard to our sins. Why would we be realistic in the realm of our living by grace and our daily fellowship with God? The fog of this sinful world in which we live distorts reality. Jonah believed in a God from whom he could flee because he had determined to be disobedient and this clouded his vision. The only antidote to panic is obedience. Obedience to the Word of God is the key to the world of reality.

Jonah obeys the first part of God's command, he arises, but he has another place in mind. *Halley's Handbook of the Bible* suggests that Tarshish may have been Tartessus in Spain. For Jonah this may have been the end of the world. Jonah first made up his mind, then he made a plan to go to Tarshish and after that he found a ship that went where he planned to go. He probably did not go to the harbor to board the first ship

<sup>15</sup> See Gen. 15:16; 18:20; Ex. 3:7,8

<sup>16</sup> ch. 4:2

he saw. He did not want to leave anything to chance. His flight was well planned. Jonah's plan was diametrically opposed to God's plan. When we decide to go our own way, it is never a matter of a small deviation from God's plan for our lives. At the end we will find ourselves at the complete opposite side of the spectrum. Disobedience does not only disrupt our fellowship with God, it will bring us into the camp of the enemy. Since Jonah had broken off fellowship with God, the presence of the Lord became unbearable for him. His conscience bothered him to the point where he couldn't stand it any longer. Adam and Eve must have felt that way when they saw themselves as naked and felt ashamed. So Jonah flees naked and ashamed from the presence of the Lord. Fellowship with God will clothe us with honor. Sin leaves us naked and destitute.

We don't know anything about Jonah's financial situation. How much did the trip cost? What percentage of Jonah's possessions did this amount to? He could not count on God to provide for his needs. He had to pay everything himself. If we are outside the will of God, we travel at our own expense and that is wasted money. Obviously, there was no time for the captain of the ship to reimburse Jonah before he was thrown overboard. Disobedience always has financial consequences. Wherever Jonah goes he is in enemy territory. It is dangerous to flee from the presence of the Lord. This is God's world and God's omnipresence makes any flight impossible. David knows this better than Jonah. He wrote: "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."<sup>17</sup> Those lines may have gone through Jonah's head when the ship pulled anchor and set out for sea. Jonah must have been acquainted with Psalm 139. But it is possible that Bible knowledge was minimal in the Northern Kingdom of Israel at the time of Jeroboam II.

There is a striking parallel between Jonah and his ancestor Adam. Whether it is a fig leaf or a sailboat behind which they hid is of no importance in both cases the flight meant a flight from self. And in the same way God called Adam with "Where are you?" so He calls Jonah here. The voice of God, however, sounds louder here and the waves are swept up by it. A storm at sea reduces a man to size. But this did not overwhelm Jonah too much. We find him fast asleep. The first ones to be overwhelmed by the storm are the crewmembers of the ship. They saw their lives and their ship in danger and they were afraid. The following verses give a touching picture of the condition of man who doesn't know the Truth. Look at the contrast between Jonah who knows the truth but doesn't obey it and the shipmates who do not know it. "Each cried to his own god." This suggests that the crew was composed of different nationalities. It exemplifies the confusion of mankind. The tower of Babel did not only cause confusion of languages but also confusion of theology. Each one ends up having his own god, which he created in his own image and likeness. The storm meant a test for these gods, as well as for the men of the ship. Both fail miserably. The cargo is thrown overboard in order to save the ship. This act made the whole journey useless. There is no point in continuing after this. What will they sell upon arrival?

Jonah's sleep could hardly be called a rest of faith. The flight and the panic had, probably, exhausted him physically and emotionally. Thus he makes a very poor impression on the captain of the ship. His attitude is interpreted as indifference and heartless. In spite of all the difference, there is some similarity between Jesus' sleeping in the boat and Jonah's attitude. Both fell asleep because of exhaustion. But there the comparison ends. Jesus' boat was much smaller than Jonah's seaworthy vessel. The storm on the Lake of Genesareth can hardly be compared with the one that came down upon the Mediterranean. Jonah had gone below; he was hiding. Jesus slept under the open sky. But the greatest difference was between obedience and disobedience. Jonah was fleeing from the presence of the Lord but Jesus' life stood under the banner of "Here I am, I have come--it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."<sup>18</sup> Evidently, the sleep of disobedience can be just as deep as the sleep of obedience. Jonah's going below deck, however, was clearly a demonstration of his panicking. He thought that below deck he would be safe from God.

Sleep is a mystery. But Jonah's sleep was a mystery, particularly to the captain of the ship. What brings Jonah back to reality is the captain's mention of Jonah's God. He probably believed that the living, almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, would be subject to the same test as the idols. Such a challenge always brings the wheels of divine omnipotence in motion, and Jonah was still enough of a prophet to

<sup>17</sup> Ps. 139:7-10

<sup>18</sup> Ps. 40:7,8

experience the result of this motion. In spite of his disobedience and his fleeing from the presence of God, the challenge to God's character irritated him.

The following scene is, to our western eyes, full of superstition and it demonstrates a lack of understanding of the laws of cause and effect that governs nature. We see here how the brain of primitive man works. The animist wants to find a spiritual explanation for every physical phenomenon. We know that this is not right. Even if, as Westerners, we do not believe in the existentialist concept of a closed system, we are confronted with "an act of God", we cannot bring ourselves to see a link between natural disasters and personal sins. In 1977 a dam on the campus of Toccoa Falls College in Georgia broke and swept away houses of students and staff, claiming 39 lives. If someone had suggested that this disaster was caused by people's personal sins, he would have been considered insane. I am, of course, not saying that the animists are correct. If I had been on board of Jonah's ship, I would have protested against the witch-hunt that condemned a man to death by drowning. The problem is that I would have been wrong. God used a situation of primitive superstition and He spoke to people in a way they could understand. We may suppose, therefore, that He is equally able to speak in a way that can be understood to people in an atheistic, nihilistic, and existentialistic world.

When the lot falls on Jonah, the sailors, initially, refuse to believe that Jonah is guilty. They were, evidently, not that convinced of the values of their own beliefs! They realized that they had a prophet on board and that this man had a difference of opinion with his God. That set him apart from normal people. It would have been hard to accept that such a man could be guilty as other mortals are. Jonah's testimony about God, at this point, becomes much more costly and it is so much more humiliating for him than if he had brought the Word of God to Nineveh. If Jonah's refusal had something to do with chauvinism and if he had thought that God's revelation was uniquely for Jews, the testimony he is now forced to give is very painful. The acknowledgment of his disobedience is, in itself, a ringing justification of God whose voice he hears roaring in the wind and the waves. It is hard for us to understand how God manages to use such a vile and negative thing as Jonah's disobedience to glorify Himself. That does not exult Jonah's disobedience but it shows that one cannot outwit the all-wise and all-knowing God.

It becomes also clear what this experience does to Jonah. He has a change of heart. Something like conviction of sin and confession start to take shape within him. "I know that it is my fault...." His flight testified of a bad conscience but that does not, necessarily, involve confession of sin. Jonah, again, had the choice to say, or do, nothing. Why would he have pity on heathen sailors and not with the people of Nineveh? He is now even ready to give his life for them. Jonah's request to be thrown overboard indicates that he is ready to die in order to save the life of others. Up to now, Nineveh had been for Jonah nothing more than a nameless mass of people, which left him unmoved. But the anxiety of the people on the ship, who found no relief in calling upon their god, touched him to the depth of his soul. It pushes him to bring the highest sacrifice a human being can bring. Seeing their need evoked in him a real love for people. Seeing of actual often has that effect upon us.

The men, however, are not willing to accept this sacrifice, at least not without protest. They do their utmost to get ashore under their own power. But their efforts only aggravate the situation. Without realizing this, they learn the deep theological lesson that man cannot save himself. A sacrifice by someone else, brought voluntarily, out of love, is needed for man's salvation. None of the people present understood what God was doing. Jonah became an image of the One to come who, by His sacrifice, His death, and resurrection, would save the shipwrecked people of the whole world. At a later point, we will come to the "sign of the prophet Jonah," as Jesus calls it in Matthew and Luke.<sup>19</sup> We can only recommend these men for refusing Jonah's offer. It shows that they have the moral conscience that tells them that putting Jonah overboard would be murder, which would make them guilty. I wonder what God would have done had these men professed solidarity with Jonah and would have declared themselves ready to die with Jonah. That kind of spirit would probably have calmed the storm also. But we will never be told what would have happened.

The throwing overboard of Jonah has little in common with the hardened, criminal attitude of the Jewish leaders who surrendered Jesus to Pilate to be crucified. Heathen who did not have the law of God turned out to possess more moral understanding than those who had received God's revelation.

The parallel between Jesus' death and the "death" of Jonah becomes more striking if we look deeper into the guilt question. Jesus prayed for His murderers to be forgiven.<sup>20</sup> Here the people themselves

<sup>19</sup> See Matt. 12:39-41 and Luke 11:29,30.

<sup>20</sup> Luke 23:34

pray for forgiveness. In both cases, forgiveness was granted. On the basis of our knowledge of God's righteousness, we would even say that the sailors would be the preferred candidates to receive a pardon.

They are also Jonah's first converts. When they saw what effect Jonah's sacrifice had, they "greatly feared the Lord." In the same way as the sacrifice of Christ put God's wrath over man's sin to rest, so Jonah's sacrifice calms this storm, which was caused by the wrath of God. God's wrath is turned away from these poor people. Without really looking for it, they discovered the secret of God's saving love. Without it, they would have been lost because of a sin they had not committed themselves. They are also saved by a sacrifice they did not bring themselves. They immediately applied the principle to their own lives in that they kill and animal and sacrifice it to the Lord, binding themselves to Him with a promise. This act is accompanied by the right attitude: great fear. He, who has seen God's storm rage, would not think of playing games with the Almighty.

When Jonah disappears in the waves, everybody thinks, of course, this is the end for Jonah. Jonah must have been the first to think this. Even when a sea monster attacks him, he will have thought, in as much as he could do any thinking at this point, that this meant death. What else could it be? He had never died before and he did not know what awaited him. Who had ever heard of a man being swallowed up by a fish and living to tell about it? If Jonah had time to think (sometimes events happen so fast that one doesn't have the time to be scared), he would have asked himself why God did not simply allow him to die. He would not have understood why the ritual with the fish was necessary. Only later, it dawns on him that what he thought to be death, actually, was his salvation. It is a principle difficult to grasp, that what seems to us to be the greatest catastrophe turns out to be the door of salvation. It is only after we surrender to God, without any apparent guarantee, that we discover how totally safe, logical and levelheaded our act of abandon to Him was.

Bible critics, of course, consider the fish to be the greatest obstacle in the book. They see in the book of Jonah a mythological theme about a man who was swallowed by a sea monster and who survived the experience. There are, however, in secular world history several instances of sailors who underwent a similar adventure and lived to tell. In 1758, a sailor is said to have been swallowed by a shark in the Mediterranean and was later vomited back up. A Dutch newspaper "Het Handelsblad" published March 3, 1928, the report about two sailors who had a similar experience.

It is quite possible that the clause "three days and three nights" is a Hebrew idiom and that it means not necessarily a period of 72 hours. In the same was, Jesus was "three days and three nights" in the grave, but in reality it was not more than about 30 hours. The Jewish day started at 6 PM. Each hour preceding that time was counted as belonging to the previous day and every hour after 6 o'clock, to the next day. A period of 26 hours could cover three day according to this way of figuring.

The Lord Jesus speaks about His own death as "the sign of Jonah."<sup>21</sup> The implication is, in the first place as a sign for the inhabitants of Nineveh. Luke mentions ever more clearly that Jesus' words have a multi-dimensional meaning.<sup>22</sup> Jesus was sent to His death by the people of His time. The Pharisees and the leaders of the people were, as a type, the sailors of the ship, although they acted with much less scruples than these sailors. Jesus, like Jonah, gave up His life voluntarily. The great difference is, of course, that Jesus really died, whereas Jonah's "death" was symbolic. "The sign of Jonah" was the greatest offer of grace ever presented to these people with their blinded eyes and hardened hearts. It was the greatest sign ever! Jonah had, obviously, no inkling about his own sign when he went overboard. For him, this meant the end by drowning. But he was wrong! It was not the end. Things are not what they seem to be. Not even death!

## 2. Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving while inside the fish 2:1-10

**1 From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God.**

**2 He said: "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave I called for help, and you listened to my cry.**

**3 You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.**

**4 I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.'**

<sup>21</sup> See Matt. 12:39 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 11:30

**5 The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.**

**6 To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever. But you brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God.**

**7 "When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, LORD, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.**

**8 "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.**

**9 But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."**

**10 And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.**

The prayer Jonah offers is a strange one. It does not resemble the prayer of a man who calls upon the Lord in the hour of death. We get the impression that, as he prays, everything is already finished and that the need he mentions no longer exists. A possible explanation would be that vs. 1 mentions the fact that he prays and that the verses 2-9 do not give the contents of his prayer but a psalm that was composed after everything was over. I used to believe this but I am now convinced that what we have here is Jonah's actual prayer. It is true that Jonah adopts the attitude of someone who has the worst behind him. He acts as if he is completely safe inside the fish. We would suppose, however, that his life was more than ever in danger in the belly of the fish. Obviously, Jonah's sense of security does not rest upon the visible facts. It is true that there has been a change of circumstances in that the water in which he was about to drown can no longer reach him. But this change is of rather relative value. Jonah's sense of security comes from a change in his relationship with God. In chapter 1, he fled from the presence of the Lord. In chapter 2 we read: "Jonah prayed to the Lord, his God." This change reduces the importance of the circumstances.

We can understand the panic of a man who is about to drown. In such an agony, he flashes a prayer to heaven. The prayer he prayed when he was about to drown comes now back to him as he finds himself in the relative safety of the belly of the fish and he comes to himself. It is said that a person who is about to die, sees his whole life replayed in front of his eyes in a matter of seconds. It is also a fact that highly dramatic moments tend to replay themselves for us once they are past and we begin to relax. We see both facets in Jonah's prayer. At the crucial hour of death, he shows that he lived much closer to God than he knew. His soul is saturated with the Word of God. Much of his prayer is a quotation from the Book of Psalms. As he was in the process of drowning, verses of the psalms come to mind. In this also, he is an image of the Lord Jesus Christ who quoted Psalm 22 as He was dying on the cross. Jonah's quotes are from the Psalms 116 and 42. He, who lives in fellowship with God, realizes the miracles of his relationship with the creation of which he is a part. "When I consider your heaven, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him...?"<sup>23</sup> But to the person who flees from the presence of the Lord, the forces of nature are hostile. "All your waves and breakers swept over me." Jonah did not just fall in the water; he fell in God's water, which was boiling with God's storm.

The worst for him, however, was not the danger of death but the fact that he was banished from God's sight and that he would never again see the temple in Jerusalem. The temple Jonah had in mind could not have been the state temple in Bethel, about which Amaziah warned the prophet Amos.<sup>24</sup> Jonah confessed, after 200 years of idolatry, that the place of God's revelation was still in Jerusalem. One wonders how many in the Northern kingdom in the days of Jeroboam II were still of that opinion. The holy temple Jonah mentions in vs. 7 is, undoubtedly, the building Solomon had erected in Jerusalem. The ark was in Jerusalem as a symbol of God's revelation. It was also the place of atonement of sin. There was the physical evidence of the Shekinah glory. The people must have been quite aware of the fact, though, that all this was only an image of the heavenly, eternal glory, which was hidden from man. Jonah knew that he had direct access to the throne of God, in principle, in the same way as we have access to the Father now through Jesus Christ.

The contrast in Jonah's experiences is considerable. There was the deepest despair, which was immediately followed by the greatest glory. Such things are only possible in hours of the deepest crisis. Jonah saw in the fact that the fish swallowed him the proof that God heard his prayer. He drew the

<sup>23</sup> Ps. 8:3,4

<sup>24</sup> See Amos 4:13

conclusion that, if God saved him from immediate drowning by hiding him in the fish's belly, there is no reason for panic. He accepts the sea monster as God's fish and, consequently, he is grateful. We can mark Jonah here as a hero of faith. People who criticize this prayer, or who think that a man in the belly of a fish cannot pray such a prayer, loose sight of the faith factor. This was Jonah's "Finest Hour." Nowhere else in the book Jonah reaches such a pinnacle.

The mention of the worthless idols is not a hit below the belt to other nations. He had just seen on board of the ship the panic of them who did not know God. At this point he didn't know about the change that had taken place in those people. Jonah knew nothing of the stilling of the storm. He prophesied about it but he had not seen it. Jonah speaks in the same breath about the grace of God for those people. God is merciful to them. Jonah obtains here insight in the love of God that spans the world. He understood that already before, which was one of the reasons why he had refused to go to Nineveh.

The last verse of this chapter may be one of the greatest confessions of faith in the Bible. We have to remember that Jonah spoke from the belly of the fish. He believed that God would save him from this situation. Sacrificing with a song of thanksgiving means journeying to the temple of Jerusalem. And the making good of a vow means a determination to obey the call of the Lord. If it only involved a sacrifice without obedience to the call of God, none of this would have any meaning. That Jonah was genuinely honest is carried out by the facts. If Jonah had had ulterior motives, the Lord might not have spoken to the fish to vomit up Jonah. We should refrain from speculations about the experience of the fish. We do not read where Jonah was deposited. It may have been close to the place where he had begun his flight.

Jonah's prayer illustrates the fact that what happens on earth is determined by what takes place in the heavenlies. Jonah's circumstances did not change before a drastic change had taken place within Jonah first. The change in outward circumstances is an immediate result of a spiritual victory. After the resumption of fellowship with God and the breakthrough of the light in Jonah's soul, God speaks to the fish. We see the same kind of rehabilitation in Job's life. "After Job had prayer for his friends, the LORD made him prosperous again...."<sup>25</sup> We understand, therefore, that the same enemy who played such an important role in Job's suffering was also active in Jonah's life. Man is never alone in his disobedience. This doesn't mean that the devil is solely responsible for our disobedience: we are. Even if he does not bring about our disobedience, he will soon enter the door we open for him by our disobedience. Jonah's prayer, his faith, and his praise bind the strong man and that is what opened the jaws of the fish. After all, that is how the resurrection came about also.

### **3. Jonah's second call, and obedience ch. 3:1-10**

**1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:**

**2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."**

**3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days.**

*4 On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."*

**5 The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.**

**6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.**

*7 Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.*

**8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.**

**9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."**

*10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.*

We can say the same thing about God's speaking to Jonah the second time as the first. It is the same creative Word but it does not create obedience in Jonah. We cannot even say that God forced Jonah to obey. The pressure upon Jonah is, perhaps, the heaviest of all the examples we read about in the Bible but when everything is taken into account, Jonah has to produce obedience himself. It is the same call he receives. He has to "arise" (KJV) and get ready for the journey. This causes us to believe that Jonah was not deposed somewhere close to Nineveh. Geographically, that would have been difficult, considering the layout of the oceans. The Suez Canal was not yet in existence at that time. All this is a strong argument against Calvin's doctrine of "irresistible grace." (I don't mean the Suez Canal). Man has the doubtful privilege of being disobedient.

A radical and lasting change has, however, taken place in Jonah's heart. He may have lost some of his victory after the fish deposited him but he does not fall back into disobedience. On the other hand, we can hardly say that he became wholeheartedly obedient. When the pressure diminishes some of the glory also fades. When God called the first time, He only gave the command to preach. This time God hints to the contents of the message that will be revealed to him at a later date. This, evidently, leaves the door open for the conversion of the inhabitants of Nineveh. Jonah listens to the Word of God this time and he acts accordingly.

Some scholars have objected to the description of the size of the city. Critics don't believe that a city could be "three days" big. According to Halley's Handbook, the city was  $3 \times 1 \frac{1}{2}$  miles. But greater Nineveh comprised also Calah, 20 miles to the South, and Korsabad, 10 miles to the North. That would mean a total distance from North to South of about 33 miles. A day's trip is, of course, a flexible concept. A day's travel of a preacher may also be less than that of a traveler.

The contents of Jonah's preaching is given in one sentence: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." That is, obviously, a condensation of a whole message. Jesus calls Jonah "A sign to the Ninevites."<sup>26</sup> This suggests that Jonah's experience with the fish was part of his message. The Ninevites, not only, heard that their city would be destroyed but also about the death and resurrection of Jonah, which was the reason why they believed.

It is strange to see how God used the disobedience of His prophet to bring about the conversion of those men. This speaks of a divine strategy that surpasses our understanding. We do not know whether, at this point, Jonah thought that judgment was irrevocable. There was no word of repentance in Jonah's message. Whether Jonah left this out or if God did this Himself, we do not know. Yet, Jonah understood very well that the purpose of the announcement of judgment was grace. We will return to this point in chapter four. We get, however, the impression that Jonah comforted himself with the illusion that judgment was unavoidable and that repentance, if that took place, would not change anything.

But what guarantee did the men of Nineveh have that their repentance would have any effect? They must have heard something of the real character of God in Jonah's preaching. They took the wrath of God seriously but they detected enough grace in the message to try a mass conversion. This conclusion they may have drawn from God's dealing with Jonah himself. If it had been one of their idols, Jonah would never have had a chance to come through alive, even supposing that idols were able to perform the kind of act God had performed. Added to this, Jonah's preaching made an appeal to their conscience. These people were criminals and they knew it. This confrontation with the truth appealed to their most primitive instincts. They knew the difference between good and evil. They knew the difference between what they ought to have done and what they had actually done. Their own conscience accused them.

It is also interesting to see that the conversion movement begins at the bottom. Before the Word of God reaches the king of Nineveh, the men of Nineveh had already put on their sackcloth. The king's order only made official what was already going on. The decree did not cause conversion. His majesty had probably little choice in the matter himself. It is difficult to exercise evil power over people who have turned to God. Had he opposed this mass movement, he could have lost his crown and his life. Strange is this may sound; sometimes people come to God because they don't want to loose their position in the world.

The unity between man and beast in this matter makes a strange impression upon us as Westerners. It is quite possible that this was typical for the Assyrian worldview. We know from Hinduism that there is a tendency to attribute a divine character to some animals. It could be that this view was prevalent there also. But we can only speculate about this. It would also be difficult for us to see ourselves clothed in sackcloth as sign of repentance. We would consider such a manifestation as superficial. It is true, of course, that real sorrow is an inward matter. But we are wrong if we believe that outward signs of sorrow cannot be real. The

<sup>26</sup> Luke 11:29,30

dress doesn't change the heart but it can express what is inside. Important in the situation in Nineveh was that the people did something about their sins.

Restitution is an important part of conversion but it usually comes after pardon has been received. I believe that it is impossible for a person to try to annul the consequences of his sin without having some sense of forgiveness. If this is true, we see in the lives of the men of Nineveh an exception to the rule. They may have had hope but they had no guarantee that judgment would not come. Their repentance expresses, in principle, that God is right in condemning them when He passes sentence over the city and carries it out. They acknowledge the perfection of God's righteousness. That is the reason God cannot stand it any longer. The pent-up emotions of Joseph at the sight of the remorse of his brothers are small compared to the change of heart of the living God. God's compassion bursts through the sluices of His holiness and floods the city with forgiveness.

This repentance of God is theologically called anthropomorphism. That means that human characteristics are attributed to God, which, in reality, He does not possess. It seems more proper to say that God has an unlimited ability for repentance while man's repentance is a limited shadow of the divine attribute. This is not anthropomorphism as far as God is concerned but Theomorphism for man.

The objection has been made that divine repentance contradicts His immutability. Repentance is an integral part of God's immutability. It is inseparably linked to His holiness, compassion, and love. It is always triggered when, from the side of man, there is that change of attitude that justifies God's repentance. This requires no structural change in the divine nature. The change takes place in the nature of man. It would be very inconsistent for God to maintain His wrath if, from man's side, there is a change from sin to repentance. Then God becomes, like the father of the prodigal son, moved with compassion. God did not cancel His judgment of Nineveh but for them also, He rolled it upon His Son.

#### 4. Jonah's discontent, and the divine reprimand ch. 4:1-11

**1 But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.**

**2 He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.**

**3 Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."**

**4 But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"**

**5 Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.**

**6 Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine.**

**7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered.**

**8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."**

**9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"**

**"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."**

**10 But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.**

**11 But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"**

Jonah's prayer in the verses 1-5 is, undoubtedly, the ugliest prayer in the Bible. Jonah is angry and he slips into a deep depression. This is proof of the fact that man is less prone to forgive than God. But, remarkably enough, we usually suppose that the opposite is true. We generally think that God goes too far in demonstrating His wrath. We believe that, if we were God, nobody would go to hell; certainly not those who never heard the Gospel. There is, of course, no proof for this insinuation. The contrary is true. In those cases where human justice can be placed next to God's, it turns out that God goes much farther in His efforts to save than man. In Genesis, Abraham says to God: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"<sup>27</sup> But in his

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Gen. 18:25

intercession for Sodom, Abraham expresses that, if there would be found less than ten righteous in the city, God would have the right to destroy the city. It turns out that the angel who has to execute judgment can do nothing until the one righteous person who was there, which is Lot, had reached safety.<sup>28</sup> (We can hardly call Lot's wife or his daughters righteous). Verses like I Tim. 2:4 and II Peter 3:9 clearly explain what God desires.

Jonah is angry with God. It now seems that all his experiences and his deep suffering were in vain. The German philosopher Nietzsche has said that if we understand the "why" we can bear the "how" of our experiences. For Jonah, the "why" became void. This made all his suffering a farce. The fact that Jonah was wrong does not diminish his feelings. Jonah's suffering was not in vain. There was, with Jonah, a misunderstanding as to the purpose of it. God had achieved His goal through Jonah's suffering.

Even if his suffering were in vain, it would have been a touchstone of his obedience and surrender, and that is significant. There was significance in Jesus' crisis in Gethsemane. At that point, the purpose of Christ's coming in the world hung in the balance. Facing the question whether he would reach His goal or not, that is the salvation of mankind through His death on the cross, Jesus said: "Not my will, but Yours be done!" In this ultimate test, Jesus learned obedience.

Jonah completely fails his test. What makes Jonah's anger to God so repulsive is his unwillingness to forgive. He reproaches God His grace, compassion, patience, and goodness. Those same divine attributes that brought about his own salvation are now considered objectionable. Jonah reminds us of the slave who received pardon but did not want to pardon others.<sup>29</sup> Worse: Jonah criticizes God. He reproaches God for not having listened to his advice! He justifies his own disobedience by saying that, by it, he had wanted to prevent the present situation. Jonah's attitude is the summit of arrogance.

He is also bloodthirsty and sadistic. He had hoped to witness scenes of panic and slaughter. Now it passes him by. That causes his depression in which he desires to die. The Bible gives us some example of people who suffered from depression: Elijah, Ezekiel, and Jesus in Gethsemane. But how can we have pity on Jonah?

Jonah's insight in God's grace sounds quite convincing. He mentions this as a reason for his fleeing to Tarshish. But again, none of this explains his panic, which means that Jonah cannot have been completely honest in saying all this.

Bible critics, who do not believe in the historicity of the Book of Jonah, see in it an allegory of the attitude of Israel towards their heathen neighbors. Even if we take the book as a historical record, we have to admit that Jonah's attitude was probably typical for the mentality of his people, which is with those who professed to follow the Lord. Those who followed the sins of Jeroboam who had broken with God's revelation in Jerusalem, could hardly have seen more in YHWH than a national deity with nothing more than territorial powers. They certainly did not believe in a compassionate God who would make the mistake of having pity on the Assyrians. One needs to understand revelation in order to come to Jonah's conclusion.

We tend to gloss over our deviations from God's character. Jonah's extreme position scares us off. We have trouble imagining that a prophet of God would harbor such thoughts. Yet, Jonah's attitude is typical of the average person who does not completely surrender to the will of God. It shows the consequences of all disobedience. He who is not constrained by the love of Christ says, in reality: "let the world rot." We may not realize that we say this. What else can we say about Jonah's arrogance? A finite and fallible mortal judges the counsel of the omniscient, wise, and eternal God. He says: "I saw this fault coming up and I wanted to prevent it but you wouldn't listen to me!" Put in this way, it sounds so ridiculous that we can hardly take it seriously.

Whatever happened to Jonah's concept of God? Where is the God who called him, who caused the storm, and who commanded the fish? More than ever Jonah has lost God here. Hatred for the Assyrians has brought him to this point. He may have had ample reason for his hatred. We mentioned earlier that Nineveh was called "the city of blood." It may have been worse than the Nazi terror and the crimes of the Bolsheviks. A reaction of hatred is human. We do not know how much Jonah had suffered personally at the hands of the Assyrians. Without a miracle of regeneration of the heart it is impossible for man to forgive. Corrie ten Boom tells the story of how she met a converted Nazi camp guard after the war and how difficult it was for her to shake hands with him.

<sup>28</sup> See Gen. 19:22

<sup>29</sup> Matt. 18:23-35

Jonah's desire to die is a sure indication of a state of depression. He was too much of a Jew to consider suicide but he prays for God to kill him. Life is no longer worth living for him. In his mind, dying would, probably, not mean a translation to glory with a hope of resurrection but merely a cessation of existence.

Depression is a sickness. The moods of a depressive person have seldom any connection with his circumstances. Jonah's depression, however, had a spiritual cause, although it is hard to establish a direct link between depression and the conversion of the Assyrians. Jonah cannot have had a sense of failure either, as if the fact that judgment didn't come was proof that his prophetic powers had waned. He knew quite well that the cancellation of judgment had to be put on account of God's grace. As a matter of fact, he had been too successful as a prophet. There is probably a demonic element in every depression. This does not mean that Satan causes all depressions but once they exist he manipulates them. People who are depressed loose their sense of reality.

God's method of bringing Jonah back and the way in which Jonah experiences healing is very interesting. It shows that plants can have therapeutic value for man. Initially, it seems as if the medication has no relation to the ailment. We are wrong if we think that Jonah's joy over the growth of the miracle tree was merely an issue of practicality. The tree gave him cool shade in a hot place but this does not provide us with enough reason for the details of the story. There is in Jonah's sorrow over the death of the tree something of sorrow over the death of a living thing. That is the therapeutic value of the tree. It soothed his soul to see growth, and green, and color. It was not merely the fact that the tree gave him shade but that it was a demonstration of life in a place of death that restored Jonah's emotions. He recognized God's smile in the tree. It wasn't only Jonah's nationalism that caused him to be angry about the salvation of Nineveh. We do not read how much evil Jonah saw during the few days of his preaching in the city. The spectacle of "the city of blood" may very well have caused his depression. The conversion of the population of the city did not take place instantaneously. Jonah must have ample opportunity to build up a feeling of repulsion. He saw in those people animals that had let themselves go in their cruel lusts. He did not see them as God saw them. We should make room for Jonah's wounded soul. God looked upon Jonah also as a wounded man who needed healing.

Jonah's last crisis does not take away anything from his initial disobedience. The very fact that we read about all of this is an indication that Jonah saw himself as guilty. Nobody else could have written this story with all these details.

Finally, God was not only gracious, compassionate, patient and full of goodness toward the inhabitants of Nineveh but also to Jonah. The tender loving care with which God nursed Jonah, as well as the shock treatment with the withered tree is just as touching as His deep pity for the little children of Nineveh, people He created in His image and likeness.

The Book of Jonah is the only book in the Bible that speaks about Israel's missionary task in this world. The rest of the Old Testament testifies to the fact that Israel never understood what it means to be "a Kingdom of Priests."