



## Commentary

### Jonah

Jonah is probably the best-known yet least understood book in the Bible.

The true message of this story is found in the last two chapters of this short book. What made Jonah so anxious to avoid this calling? Why did he not want to go to Nineveh? Why did he flee from God? The answer is that Jonah knew God too well. Jonah wanted to see this city destroyed. This was the great enemy of his people. They were brutal and godless and sinful---and Jonah hated them. When God told him to go announce to Nineveh its destruction, he said, "I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people." So he fled to Tarshish.

What a revelation of the knowledge of God and the character of the God of the Old Testament!

This city would take an average of three days to cross. A day's journey was about twelve miles, so a three days' journey would be thirty-six miles. And Jonah came to declare the message that God gave to him. Crying: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!" (3:4)

The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least. (3:5) And when the king heard about it ...he arose from his throne, removed his robe, and covered himself with burlap and sat in ashes. The king and his nobles sent a decree throughout the city to fast, wear garments of mourning, and pray to God. They must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence. And they did it: When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. (3:10) This city was spared.

The message of this book, of course, is not so much what happened to Jonah, but the results in Nineveh when Jonah rose up to preach. If Jonah's face and body confirmed the remarkable story that this man had just gone through the harrowing experience of being swallowed alive by a fish and later vomited out and that God had sent him to proclaim this message, you can imagine the effect upon the city. Jonah was living evidence that God meant what he said and would do it. The city repented and the city was spared. And not until more than a hundred years later did God carry out his judgment on Nineveh and destroy it. But they were spared for now by their repentance at Jonah's preaching.

In the last chapter, then, we have the encounter between Jonah and God. One might think the story would be over with chapter 3, the great city in burlap and ashes, repentant before God. But this is not what this story is after. It is trying to get us into the very heart of God. So we read that Jonah was angry with God. And God asks him, "Is it right for you to be angry about this?" (4:4) Jonah did not even answer. He sat down on the rock above the city and waited to see what God would do. I don't know how much time had gone by, but he must have waited out there a few days.



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The first day ...the Lord God prepared a plant...(4:6) And the plant grew up and covered Jonah's head, evidence of God's gracious provision. But on the second day, God prepared a worm that ...ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away." (4:7) When the sun came up God prepared an east wind that blew the heat of the desert in upon Jonah until he fainted and asked that he might die.

And God said again to him, "Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?" "Yes," Jonah retorted, "even angry enough to die!" (4:9)

You know, it is easy to point the finger at Jonah, but haven't you ever said that to God, too? Haven't you ever said to him, "I want what I want. I don't care what you do. Of course, I'm angry. I don't like the way you're running things."

Now notice what God said:"You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?" (4:10, 11)

And the book ends abruptly. Why? Because that is where it is supposed to take us---to the revelation of the heart of God.

God loves everyone, just as he loved the enemies of Israel and would spare them whenever they repented.

Do you see how the Holy Spirit has insinuated us into this picture? There is a lot of Jonah in all of us and around us are a lot of unsaved people.

He has sent us people to be a sign to this generation. And what is that sign? It is the sign of Jonah, the sign of resurrection, the sign of people who once were dead who have been made alive in Jesus Christ. Isn't that why the Lord said, "As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matt. 12:40)

Isn't that the heart of our proclamation, that here is a God who can bring life from death, who can resurrect those who are swallowed up in the belly of a whale or fish---lost, hopeless---but redeemed? And the witnesses to this proclamation are the resurrected lives of those of us who, like Jonah, declare this message in our day.

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