

Jonah

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Section 5 of: **The Minor Prophets**

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Our moral corruption is very deep. It is complete. But at times it will betray itself in very repulsive shapes, from which, with all the knowledge of it which we have, we instinctively shrink, confounded at the thought that they belong to us. Privileges under God's own hand may only serve to, develop instead of curing this corruption.

The love of distinction was inlaid in us at the very outset of our apostasy. "Ye shall be as God," was listened to; to this lust, this love of distinction, we will, in cold blood, sacrifice all that may stand in our way, without respect, as it were, to sex or age, as at the beginning we sacrificed the Lord Himself to it. (Gen. 3)

We take God's gifts, and deck ourselves with them. The Church at Corinth was such an one as that. Instead of using God's gifts for others, the brethren there were displaying them. But the man who had the mind of Christ, in the midst of them, would say, "I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that others might be edified, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue."

The Jew — the favoured privileged Jew — grievously sinned in this way. Rom. 2 convicted him on this ground. His separation from the nations was of God; but instead of using this as witness to the holiness of God in the midst of a revolted world's pollutions, he took occasion to exalt himself by it. He boasted in God and in the law; but he dishonoured God by breaking the law.

Now, Jonah was of the nation of Israel, and among the prophets of God. He was thus doubly privileged. But the nature is quick in him to take advantage of this, and to serve her own fond ends by this. Yea, and Jonah was a saint of God also; but this alone, under pressure and temptation of the flesh does not secure victory over nature.

As a prophet, the Lord sends him with a word against Nineveh, a word of judgment. But he knew, when he received it, that in the bosom of Him who was sending him,* mercy was rejoicing; and he reckoned, therefore, that His word, which was to speak of judgment, would be set aside by the grace that abounded in Him. (See Jonah 4: 2)

*2 Kings 14 had given Jonah proof of this.

Was he prepared for this? Could he, a Jew, suffer it, that a Gentile city should be favoured, and share the mercy and salvation of God? Could he, a prophet, suffer it, that his word would fall to the ground, and that too, in the presence of the uncircumcised? This was too much. He goes on board a ship bound for Tarsus, instead of crossing the country to Nineveh. But surely, When we look at him under such conditions, we may say, it is a proud apostate, another Adam, that is now in the merchant-ship on the waters at the Mediterranean. He was a transgressor like Adam, a transgressor through pride, like Adam; and, like Adam, he must take the sentence of death into himself.

Simple, sure, and yet solemn, all this!

To accept the punishment of our sin is the first duty of an erring soul. We are not to seek to right ourselves by an effort of our, own, when we have gone wrong, lest Hormah (Num. 14) be our portion. Our first duty is to accept, in the spirit of confession, the punishment of our sin, to be humbled under

the mighty or chastening hand of God. (Lev. 26: 41) David did this, and the kingdom was his again. Jonah now does the same. "Take me up and cast me into the sea," said he to the mariners, in the midst of the tempest, "so shall the sea be calm unto you, for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you." And they did so, but with a grace that might well shame their betters, which bespeaks the hand of God with them, as it was against Jonah. And Jonah is soon wrapped among the weeds of the sea, down in the bottoms of the mountains there.

Could Gentile Nineveh be in a worse plight? Was not Jonah's circumcision as uncircumcision? A Jew and a prophet in the depths of the sea, with the weeds wrapped about his head, because of displeasure of Jehovah! Surely, such an one in such a state may well cease his boastings, and no longer despise others. Could any one be well lower? Proud Adam was behind the trees of the garden; proud Jonah is in the bottom of the sea.

The Lord by no means clears the guilty. The Judge of the earth does right. But grace brings salvation. And thus very soon, and it will be only Jonah's sin that shall be in the bottom of the sea, Jonah himself being delivered, as his first father, Adam, left his guilt and his covert behind him and returned to the presence of God.

But Jonah was taught as well as *delivered*. In the belly of the fish he finds out that, Jew as he was, he stood in need of the salvation of God, just as much as any Gentile could need it. Uncircumcised Nineveh had been unclean and despised in his eyes, and he grudged her God's mercy. What would become of himself now but for that mercy? He was in prison, and he deserved to be there. What could do for him, what reach his condition, but mercy — free, full, and sovereign? "Salvation is of the Lord," he has to say. It is not in himself as a privileged Jew, or a gifted prophet, that he will now rejoice, but only in Him to whom it belongs to bring salvation.

And then the exulting question arises, "Is He the God of the Jew only? nay, but of the Gentile also." Our need of salvation, our dependence on the sovereignty and, grace of God, equalizes us all. "It is one God that shall justify the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith." The Jew must come in on the very same mercy that saves the Gentile. (Rom. 11: 30, 31) Jonah must be as Nineveh.

This is the lesson the whale's belly taught Jonah, the Jew. Let Nineveh be what it may, Gentile and uncircumcised, a stranger to the commonwealth of Israel, or anything else, it could not stand more in need of the salvation of God than the favoured Jew and the privileged, gifted prophet at that moment did, being as in hell for his transgression. It was all over with him, but for that. But that he gets, and the fish casts him up on the dry land, when he had learnt, and confessed, and declared, "Salvation is of the Lord."

He was a sign to the Ninevites.

His nation, by and by, will have the like lesson. No sign is now left with them, but that of this prophet: and they will have to find out, as from the belly of hell, or as from under the judgment of God, (where now as a nation they are lying,) that grace and the redemption it works is their only place and their only refuge.

But this salvation of God, in which Jonah is called to rejoice, we know gets all its authority from the mystery of the cross; because One who could do so, for us sinners, went down under the dominion of death, under the judgment of sin, and of whom in that condition, as in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights, Jonah himself in the belly of the fish for the like time, is made the type.

And when we think of this, we may say, Scripture may magnify its office, as the apostle of the Gentiles does his. It has to reveal God and His counsels; and surely it does this in marvellous and fruitful wisdom, delivering forth, as here, pieces of history for our instruction, but at the same time making that history deliver forth samples, and pledges, and foreshadowings; of further and richer secrets for our more abundant instruction.

Jonah, as a sign, suits both the Lord Himself, and Israel as a nation, as the Gospels let us know. Israel must go through death and resurrection. Their iniquity is not to be purged till they die. (Isaiah 22) All scripture affirms this — the valley of dry bones illustrates it. But they will be as a risen people in the day of the kingdom — all thanks and praise to the death and resurrection of the Son of God for this and every blessing! And Jonah's death and resurrection, as I may again say, applies significantly or typically to the history of his nation, and to the history of his Saviour. (See Matt. 12: 40; Luke 11: 29, 30.)*

*Jonah's sin, too, was the expression of the nations. He and they have alike refused the thought of mercy to the Gentiles. (1 Thess. 2: 16) When Paul began to speak of God's mercy to the Gentiles, the Jews would listen to him no longer. (Acts 22: 21, 22)

The story of our prophet is, thus, a fruitful one. True as a narrative, it is significant as a parable; and all of us, the elect of God as well as Israel, may, in our way, take our place with him, as dead and risen, the only character that can be ours as saved sinners.

Returning, however, to the history itself, we may now observe that as one that had been thus taught, taught his need of God's grace, Jonah is sent on a second message to Nineveh. He goes, and with words of judgment on his lips, he enters that great city, that Nimrod-city, the representation, in that day, of the pride and daring of a revolted world. "Within forty days," he proclaims as a herald, "and Nineveh shall be destroyed."

Thus he "mourned." It was his commission. Responsively, Nineveh "lamented." The king rose from his throne, and all the nation put themselves in sackcloth; and in such condition, as humbled under the hand of God, a king of Nineveh shall find the Lord as a king of Israel had before found Him. "I said," says David, "I will confess my transgression unto the Lord, and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." "Who can tell," says this royal Gentile, "if God will turn, and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?" And so it was. "God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them, and he did it not."

"Is he the God of the Jews only," again I ask with the Apostle? and with him again I answer, "'Nay, but of the Gentile also." Grace is divine. Government may know a people, and order them as such; grace knows sinners just as they are, whoever, wherever. The earth has its arrangements, heaven holds its court in sovereignty. Nineveh, like Jerusalem, is spared; the hand of the destroying angel is stayed over the one city as well as over the other. (1 Chr. 21; Jonah 3)

But "tell it not in Gath." Let not the daughters of the Philistines hear of Jonah the Jew in the 4th chap.

Did Lot go a second time to Sodom? Did Hezekiah, after the going back of the shadow upon the sun-dial, sin through pride, with the ambassadors of Babylon? Did Josiah, after his humbling and tender-need, go wilfully to the battle against the King of Egypt? Did Peter, in spite of warnings from his Lord, deny his Lord? Have you and I, beloved, forgotten lessons learnt, and correctings endured? And is Jonah now to be unmindful of the whale's belly? It is passing wonder; a lesson so sealed, so stamped, so engraven, as we would judge, and yet so quickly lost to the soul!

Jonah is displeased. The mercy shown to Nineveh had made a gentile important to the God of heaven and earth; and this was too much for the Jew. The word of a prophet had suffered wrong, as pride suggested, at the hand, of the God of mercy. Jonah was very angry. He cannot exactly again take ship and go to Tarsus; but, in the spirit of him who lately did so, he goes outside the city, and he says, "O Lord, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country; therefore I fled before unto Tarshish, for I know that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil: therefore, now, O Lord, take, I beseech thee, my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

What naughtiness of heart all this was! Was he preparing another whale's belly for himself? He well deserved it. What troubles we make for ourselves? Why did not Lot remain in the holy, peaceful tent of Abraham? and why did he prepare for himself a first and second furnace in Sodom? Why did David bring a sword upon his house, which was commissioned of the Lord to hang over it unsheathed, to the day of his death? "If we would judge ourselves we should not be judged; but when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world." The Lord's voice crieth to the city, and the man of wisdom shall hear; but Jonah was deaf. He has forgotten the lesson of the fish's belly, and he must now be put to learn the lesson of the withered gourd.

Outside the city, Jonah prepares a booth for himself, that he may sit under it, in his moody, bad temper, angry as he was with the Lord. The Lord then prepares a gourd to overshadow Jonah in his booth, and Jonah is very glad because of the gourd. But, then, the Lord prepares a worm that eats and withers up the gourd; and, the sun and the east wind beating on the unsheltered head of Jonah, he is very angry, and wishes in himself to die.

The Lord, then, in marvellous gentleness, turns all these simple circumstances into a page of the profoundest and most affecting instruction. "And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do. well to be angry, even unto death. Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou but not laboured, neither madst it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night; and should not I spare Nineveh, that great city wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle."

The prophet's delight in the gourd is but the faint reflection of the Lord's delight in the mercy that visits the creatures of His hand — be they where they may, at Nineveh, or Jerusalem, or elsewhere, it matters not. And if Jonah would fain have the gourd spared, he must allow repentant Nineveh to be spared. Out of his own mouth he shall be judged: Jonah shall witness for the Lord against himself.

It is, indeed, a precious and an excellent word. Jonah had been sent down to learn the grace of God in one character of it, and now has he been taught it in another: i.e., his need of it, and God's delight in it. The whale's belly, the belly of hell, where he once was, had taught him his own need of "salvation," in that sovereignty of it, in that magnificent height and depth of it, that could stretch, as from the throne of power in the highest heavens, down to the bottom of the seas in the lowest, to deliver a captive there under the righteous judgment of God. The withered gourd now teaches him (as all the parables in Luke 15 have also taught us) how the blessed Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, the Lord of the cattle on the thousand hills, whether in Assyria or Judea, delights in His creatures, the works of his hands, finding His rest and refreshment in the mercy that spares them, when they repent and turn to Him.

