

Jonah Commentary - James Smith

JONAH COMMENTARY JAMES SMITH

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JONAH 1:1–3 JONAH THE RUNAWAY

This is one of the most romantic of all the books of the Bible. To those who can read between the lines, it is more fascinating than the most popular novel.

I. Who was Jonah? From 2 Kings 14:25, we learn that he was the servant and prophet of the Lord—no mean title. His name means “Dove.” If it was an expression of his nature, then perhaps this is one reason why he fled from great and wicked Nineveh. He was the son of Amittai, but his father’s name is shrouded in obscurity. All great men don’t spring from great parents. Although the world has never missed your father, that is no reason why it should not miss you when you are gone. A tinker may die without much ado, but the name of Bunyan will be held in everlasting remembrance. Don’t trifle with the days of your youth. Jonah was the author of this book which bears his name. Oh, what a revelation he himself gives us of his own faults and follies. Don’t condemn him too severely for being a runaway prophet, for we never would have known about it had he himself not told us. Write down your own faults as Jonah did, and see if your record is not infinitely blacker than his. Would you dare to do it? At anyrate the recording angel is doing it for you. It is clear that in writing this book, Jonah does not seek his own glory. No man can be a prophet of God who does. Self-seeking is the spirit of Antichrist, and with him must be cast into the bottomless pit.

II. His Commission. The Lord said to Jonah: “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it.” This was a sudden and startling call, but all God’s calls are sudden. Look at the city to which he was sent. It had been founded by Nimrod shortly after the confusion of tongues at Babel, and was therefore one thousand years old. It was the greatest city in the mightiest monarchy in the world. It was sixty miles in circumference, and contained streets and avenues twenty miles long; its walls were a hundred feet high, and so wide that three chariots could be drawn abreast on the top. Its population must have been over 600,000. But, moreover, it was great in wickedness, and that wickedness had climbed up to the very throne of God. Little did those wealthy and voluptuous Ninevites think that their secret sins were committed in the face of Jehovah. But so it was, and so it is now. The secret sins of our modern cities cry louder in the ears of God than the roar and rattle of the traffic in the streets. If we had the ears of God, nothing would strike us more, I think, than the longsuffering patience of our God. Friend, think of it, every sin unforgiven is a voice crying to Heaven for vengeance. Nothing can silence that cry but the precious Blood of Jesus. Now look at the purpose for which Jonah was sent to Nineveh. He was to “cry against” it. What a task. One little pebble in the bed of a mighty madly rushing river crying against it. But the prophet was not to be concerned about success, he was simply to obey the call, and leave the consequences in the hands of Him who called him. Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord. Every witness for God must “cry against” the wickedness of their day and generation. The present generation is cursed with dumb dogs which cannot bark. Think of the murderous drink traffic, licensed and protected by law, to make and to bury 100,000 drunkards every year, and men professing to be witnesses for God, refusing to cry against it. Think of the gambling fever that’s flushing the faces of so many of our young men, and hurrying them headlong to eternal ruin. Think of the infidelity and indifference that’s settling down among the people, like a deadly malaria. Oh, that all God’s prophets would “cry against it.” But, say you, they only mock. Well, better be mocked for your faithfulness than your cowardliness.

III. His Disobedience. Instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah fled to Tarshish, at least he tried to. He arose like a pigeon let loose in a strange place, performed the circle of indecision, then darted off in the wrong direction. Perhaps you have treated the call of God in the same way. You have heard His Word, and knew that you ought to believe it, and be saved, but you turned away from it, and fled from the Lord. Jonah was displeased, and, as it were, sent in his resignation as a prophet. It is much easier to resign than to face a stern difficulty. Any craven-hearted fool can refuse to obey. Yes, it is easy to flee from the will of God, when the heart is not in

sympathy with Him and His work. It is easy to refuse hearing the Word of God on a Sunday, when the heart and mind are occupied only with worldly things. Jonah was on the “down grade” to shame and confusion when he went down to Joppa, then down into the ship. If we are seeking to shake ourselves clear of God’s call to repentance and faith, we are as surely on the down grade to spiritual desolation. Think of the sin of it, “fleeing from the presence of the Lord.” Why? Because the presence of the Lord is intolerable to a rebellious will. It is because of this that men will one day cry on the rocks to fall on them and hide them from His presence. Just now God is calling men to arise and flee to Christ, but instead of doing that, they are fleeing to Nineveh, seeking to drown conviction in the pleasures of the world. Jonah having fled, the next thing he had to do was to “pay the fare.” So he “paid the fare and went down.” Ah, but Jonah had more to pay than he expected. The fare is not all paid in advance. Young man, have you ever considered what the fare is, from the presence of the Lord to the land of godlessness? Look at that shattered frame, that bloated face, that blasted character, that man fled to strong drink, and he is now paying the fare. See that miserable miser with greed stamped on his face, and a heart as cold and callous as the gold he hoards; he fled to money, and had to pay the fare of becoming its slave. That young woman who once thought of becoming a Christian, but was hindered through the fear of man, and who has fled from the presence of Christ, is now paying the fare, in a seared conscience and a hopeless life. Truly the way of transgressors is hard. The prodigal in the far country, in rags and wretchedness, staring with hungry eyes at the swine troughs, was just paying the fare to get away from his father. What is the meaning of that weeping and wailing in eternity? It is this: The souls who have fled from the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ paying the fare. What a price. Are you prepared to pay your own fare, or will you trust the price Jesus has paid on your behalf? (1 Peter 1:18, 19).

JONAH 1:4–7

JONAH FOUND OUT

The disobedient prophet fled with all speed to Joppa, Disobedient feet are sure to run quickly. It is always easy running down hill. But God’s messengers are swifter than the feet of any runaway. He sent out the storm as His detective to apprehend His guilty servant. The seamen are dreadfully alarmed, and take to lighting the ship; the wares are cast into the sea. It is the old story. “All that a man hath will he give for his life.” Many who have led godless lives take to lighting the ship when death is staring them in the face. But wares cannot appease the storm of God’s wrath against sin. Let us look at—

I. The Sleeping Prophet. He had a journey of about three days, but being in such a hurry to get away from the presence of God he may have done it in less than two. Being weary with his flight, and having paid the fare, he is soon fast asleep in the ship. How sad. Weary fleeing from God. Truly the way of the transgressor is hard. If the way to Hell is paved with good intentions, it is also sprinkled with many tears. It is full of sighs and heartaches. Sleep is what runaway souls are seeking. They long for complete insensibility to their sins. How many convictions have been drowned in drink, and smothered in the haunts of sinful pleasure. Remember, insensibility is not security. A man may never be more in danger than when he is dreaming of ease. Jonah slept, while his companions on board were in desperation about their lives. I am afraid a good many professing Christians are playing the Jonah here, enjoying selfish ease, instead of seeking to help perishing souls. A sleeping Christian is not only helpless and useless, but is a positive hindrance to others. What was the cause of this great tempest that so oppressed the ship that it was “like to be broken.” It was the disobedience of the servant of God. Think of the solemn responsibility resting upon us as the servants of Christ. It is possible to endanger the souls of others by our uncharitable behaviour towards God. Gospel hardened saints make Gospel hardened sinners.

II. The Arousing Call. “What meanest thou, O sleeper; arise, call upon thy God.” This is the language of the skipper, heathen as he was, he believed in prayer. Our country is crammed with such heathen; men who believe in prayer when the waves of death are wildly dashing about them. Those who think prayer best becomes foul weather. An infidel who scoffed at a minister of Christ on board ship when the wind was fair, prayed: “O God, if there be a God, have mercy on me,” when the storm came. Such fair-weather sailors are common. The drowsy prophet awakened to find that the God he sought to flee from is on his track, and has blocked his way. The seamen thinking the storm has come because some one of them is guilty, cast lots, that he may be found out, and the lot “fell upon Jonah.”

III. Found Out. The runaway is found out. What a great awakening this must have been to him. Be sure your sins will find you out. We see here the proof of an overruling Providence. The lot fell on Jonah. God always puts the cap on the right head. When God comes to dispose of the lot that has been cast into the lap of time, every one will receive their due. “I’ll take my chance,” said a reckless sinner, when urged to accept Christ and be saved. What chance? The chance of escaping detection at the judgment? Remember, the lot “fell on Jonah.” Let us remember that one transgressor may be a great stumbling block to others. One Christian, whose life is not in harmony with the will of God may hinder the cause of Christ. Achan’s sin hindered the whole army of Israel (Josh. 7:8–18). Learn also the folly of attempting to flee from God. As a sinner, you may be permitted to flee into the wilderness of eternal ruin, but as a servant, God is sure to pull you up as it were, with bit and bridle. Judas sold our Lord, committed suicide, and

went to his own place. Peter denied our Lord, but through the prayer of his Master, he wept, and was restored. In hiding from God we are tempting Him to shut us out from His presence—which is life for evermore.

IV. Disobedience Leads to Confusion. What a weakling Jonah was in presence of these heathen sailors. Instead of being a lighthouse and a tower of strength to help them, he was a source of sorrow and perplexity. It is sad to see the prophet of God confused and confounded in the presence of the ungodly. A powerless Christian is a very pitiable object. Salt without savour is a worthless thing. Samson in the power of the Spirit of God is more mighty than a host of Philistines, but as a runaway from his God, he becomes a miserable laughing-stock. A Christian ought to be a man of fearless courage and irresistible power. He would be so if he were not like Jonah, cowardly and disobedient. In the lap of Delilah, Samson was smuggled of his strength. In the lap of the pleasures and gaiety of the world the Church herself is being shorn of her power. The inconsistency of a Christian will not hide any more than Jonah's. It is impossible to be out of fellowship with God and yet have the influence and authority of an obedient servant. Our strength lies in our nearness to God. The nearer the fire we keep the more will its warmth possess us. Moses knew this when he prayed: "If Thy presence go not with us, carry us not up hence." If we have His presence, nothing shall be impossible; if we have not His presence, we have nothing worth having. Jonah fled from God. David fled to God. Whither fleest thou?

JONAH 1:8–15

JONAH OVERBOARD

Now that the skipper has got Jonah thoroughly awake, he is besieged with questions of the seamen. There is something very sad in a prophet of the Lord being asked: "What is thine occupation?" Like a soldier, the proof of his calling should be always manifest. Men did not need to say to Elijah, "What is thine occupation?" or to Peter or Paul? His connection with God was stamped upon his every action. If men have to ask us if we are Christians, after being in our company for a time, it is surely proof enough that we are backsliders.

I. Jonah Makes Confession. "I am an Hebrew and fear the Lord God of Heaven." If he fears Jehovah, why does he not call upon Him? Others have been calling upon their Gods, why is he silent? Perhaps the reason is here, Jonah had sinned, and had not yet confessed his sin to God. Unconfessed sin shuts the mouth of prayer. This is why many give up praying. Sin is in their conscience, they will not confess it, so they cannot pray. "He that covereth his sin shall not prosper." Prayers, once uttered at a mother's knee, are now choked by a guilty conscience. Another heart-searching question is put to Jonah: "Why hast thou done this?"

To this he was speechless. We can always give good reasons for fleeing to God, but who can give a reasonable answer for fleeing from God? Are you a backslider? Have you turned aside from following Christ? Why hast thou done this? What answer can you give to this question? Alas, that the lives of so many should bare the mark of Cain, the mark of those who have gone out from the presence of the Lord, those who once professed to be Christians, but who now deny Him by their wicked works. What wilt thou say when God Himself shall put this question to thee: "Why has thou done this?" Another question is put to Jonah that must have been like a dagger to his soul. "What shall we do unto thee that the sea may be calm unto us?" These men believed in the doctrine of substitution. Why do the heathen practice it? Where did they learn it? It was the first lesson that God taught fallen man in clothing him with coats of skins. But now, in these days, this Divine truth is despised, because of the pride of intellect. We are not now to speak about "the fall of man," it is "the ascent of man." We are not now to teach that God made man in His own image, but that he sprung up from a drop of dirty water, called protoplasm. The apostasy of the last days is among us. Jonah's answer implies—

II. A Noble Surrender. "Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall it be calm unto you." He feels his guilt, and sees in the storm the hand of Divine vengeance. Every child of God can read Providence as none other can. He is willing to offer himself a sacrifice to the God of the tempest that his companions in trial might be saved. It seems that self-sacrifice is the way to true service. Are we willing to be cast out for God that we might be a blessing to others? Jonah confessed that for his sake the tempest was upon them. If we are guilty of bringing others into trouble by our lack of faithfulness to God, don't let us add sin to sin by denying it. But the sailors were, as yet, unwilling to fling the culprit overboard, they were a crew of noble-hearted men, and displayed a magnanimous reluctance.

"Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land." Yes, but their hard rowing will not suffice, where sacrifice is demanded. All the strivings of men will not avert the tempest of God's wrath against sin, there must be a sacrifice. We would rather give to God the work of our hands than the sacrifice of a broken heart. "They rowed hard to bring it to land, but they could not." It is an utter impossibility for us to succeed in the teeth of God's purpose. You, who are seeking by dint of effort to pull your soul to Heaven, will need to give up in despair. If you wish to work out your own salvation you must see that it is God who worketh in you. Finding their efforts useless, they cry unto the Lord that this man's life may not be laid to their charge

III. Divinely Thwarted. "Then they took up Jonah and cast him into the sea, and the sea ceased from her raging." It must have been

with heavy hearts they heaved him overboard. As a passenger he had paid the fare from Joppa to Tarshish, and now he is thrown out of the ship. See how God can thwart our self-made plans. It is sad to bury the dead at sea, but much more sad to bury the living. The terrible plunge would scarcely be heard amidst the rush and roar of the tempest. The sacrifice was made. God accepted the offering, and immediately “the sea ceased from her raging.” The key to all this is found in Christ’s own words. “The Jews require a sign, there shall be no sign given, but the sign of Jonah, the prophet.” Jonah then is a sign. A sign of what? Of death and resurrection. What a picture we have here of a greater than Jonah, who willingly offered Himself a sacrifice that others through Him might be saved. In the storm and the tempest we see the judgment of God, because of sin. The sin was that of disobedience, by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners. The remedy was the sacrifice of a prophet. What a striking illustration of Christ, the great Prophet, who took the place of the disobedient, and allowed Himself to be cast out that the storm of judgment may be averted, and many precious souls saved. “Then the men feared the Lord and made vows.” They made their vows after the storm was over. Many vow to God in the time of affliction, but deny Him when deliverance comes. The vows of the unconverted are usually vows that need to be converted. If you have been saved through Christ plunging into the sea of God’s wrath on your behalf, then make your covenant vows to God, and keep them.

JONAH 2:1–10

JONAH PRAYING IN HIS GRAVE

God has many ways of working. The truant prophet was caught by a storm, swallowed by a fish, and landed safely on shore. What encouragement to those who may be praying for disobedient sons and daughters. You have had no letter for a long time, but trust the God of Jonah. With the rod of affliction He may hook them out of their disobedience and sin, and yet cheer your heart with unexpected tidings of gladness. But did a whale swallow Jonah? Scientific men say that the throat of a whale is too small to swallow a man, and loud mouthed infidelity has been quick to magnify the difficulty. Jonah does not say it was a whale, he says: “The Lord prepared a great fish.” Where the word is used, in Matthew 12:40, it simply means “monster.” In the year 1758, a man went about exhibiting a shark that had swallowed himself. The story is that he left the ship to bathe, and was swallowed by the shark. The captain shot it, the man was vomited up and rescued little the worse of his double dip. The shark was taken and presented to the man who had been swallowed by it. If a shark could swallow and vomit a sailor, what is to hinder it from doing the same with a prophet? Jonah is—

I. A Sign of Christ. The Jews require a sign. Jesus said: “There shall be no sign given but the sign of the prophet Jonah.” They had had many signs. One yet remained to be given—the sign of His resurrection. Jonah is a sign of Christ—

1. IN HIS BURIAL. He was cast forth; so was Christ cast out by His brethren. They led Him outside the gate and then put Him to death. Jonah was buried in the heart of the sea; Christ in the heart of the earth. Notice that the purpose for which they both were cast forth was the same—to make peace. “Cast me forth,” said Jonah, “and it shall be calm for you.” Christ hath made peace through the Blood of His Cross. The sin was in Jonah; the sin was on Jesus. Jonah was also a type of Jesus—

2. IN HIS CONSCIOUS ACTIVITY in the place of death. The seamen buried Jonah in the sea, and doubtless mourned over him as one dead, but he was—

II. Alive After he was Buried. A living, conscious, active soul in the deep. We are not to suppose, as commonly believed, that the great fish devoured the man the moment he was flung overboard. He himself tells us that “the depths closed him round about, that the weeds were wrapped about his head, and that he went down to the bottom of the mountains.” When Christ was buried, His friends mourned Him as dead; but while they were preparing the spices for His body, He was preaching to the spirits in prison, those—we believe—who had died in the faith of His Coming, and who waited His resurrection. When Samuel was brought back from the other world, he was disquieted, because he was in a place of happiness. If the rich man, mentioned in Luke 16, had been raised, he would not have talked about being troubled at the change, he would have been more than thankful. If we could see now the joys or sorrows of our departed dead, it would unfit us for this present life. Jonah was also a type of Jesus—

1. IN HIS RESURRECTION. “The Lord spake unto the fish and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land. He came out of the depths with the same individuality with which he was cast in. It was the same Jesus that rose from the dead, that was buried in the tomb. Neither of them saw corruption. The casting of Jonah upon the dry land is but the earnest of that time when both earth and sea shall vomit out the dead that are in them; some to the sunshine of eternal life, some to the darkness of eternal shame and contempt. Here we might see also—

III. The History of a Soul. The inner experience of Jonah has to some extent been the experience of all who have passed from death unto life, all who have been brought from the bondage of sin into the liberty of the sons of God. Will you notice seven steps in the experience of Jonah.

1. **DISOBEDIENCE.** He deliberately refused to obey what he knew to be the will of God. Who among us has not taken that step?
2. **CONVICTION.** His soul is now encompassed with the horrors of Hell. The weeds are wrapped about the heart as well as his head. Disobedience to God is the straight way into the abyss of despair.
3. **CONFESSION.** He acknowledges the hand of God in arresting him. "Thou hast cast me into the deep." A man is not in a state to be saved until he is prepared to acknowledge the justice of God in punishing transgressors. We must confess our sins if we would hope for His mercy to forgive.
4. **CONTRITION.** "When his soul fainted within him he remembered the Lord." At the remembrance of His goodness the heart is melted. Truth lodged in the mind in early years often proves effectual in later life. If men would only remember the Lord Jesus Christ, how soon would they be delivered from the bitterness of their lives.
5. **PRAYER.** "He cried unto the Lord." Where there is true sorrow for sin it must gush out in prayer to God. A prayerless soul is like a sealed vessel. It took great faith to cry to God from the belly of a sea-monster. There is nothing like the jaws of death for opening the mouth of prayer. Many tempt God by their rebellion to plunge them into the belly of Hell, that they might learn to pray. Better pray in the sunshine than wait till you sink into the depths of despair, and death comes like Jonah's fish to swallow you up.
6. **DELIVERANCE.** Jonah was vomited out upon the dry land. It was to him as it is to every one saved by the Lord—a resurrection from the dead. "A passing from death into life." Some think that nobody can know when they are saved. Did Jonah not know? He shouted: "Salvation is of the Lord." Yes, Jonah had to pay the fare to get away from the presence of the Lord, but he got a free passage back. The Lord was at all the expense of his home coming. It is always so, if you run from God, you must pay your own fare; if you come to God there is nothing to pay. "Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out."
7. **THANKSGIVING.** He said when he got out of the belly of death into the light of Heaven: "I will sacrifice unto Thee with the voice of thanksgiving," and so well he may. Thanksgiving becomes a reality when salvation is enjoyed. If there were more saved souls in our churches there would be less need for musical instruments. There are three states that may include us all.
 - (a) Those who are indifferent about salvation.
 - (b) Those who are praying to be saved.
 - (c) Those who thank God because they are saved. Which is yours? "Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable Gift" (Psa. 40:1–5).

JONAH 3:1–10

JONAH OBEDIENT

There are many questions one would like to ask here, but who can answer them? What did the sailors do after the storm, when their cargo had been pitched overboard? Did they return to Joppa to get it renewed? If so, the story of the storm being hushed by casting a prophet into the sea would doubtless be rapidly circulated, and perhaps reached Nineveh before Jonah did.

I. **The Repeated Call.** "The Word of the Lord came unto Jonah a second time." How gracious God is, to give a man a second chance of serving Him. He might have left him in his disobedience to perish. What hope there is in the Second Man, the Lord from Heaven. Is there one of us who have not had a second call? Yea, a sixth, a seventh, and a seventieth, and perhaps as yet there has been no response. God's right to take vengeance is often denied, but dare you deny His patience and longsuffering? The Law was given, that failed through our disobedience; now humanity's second chance is in His call of grace. Note the changed commission: "Go and preach unto it, the preaching that I bid thee." At the first Jonah was to "Cry against it," now he is just to speak what he is told. The call is repeated, but the commission is altered. Do you notice that the Word of the Lord came to Jonah before he was asked to preach it? Preachers must have a revelation from God. If they have seen no vision, then they have no message. Paul could say: "I have received of the Lord that which I have delivered unto you." We testify of what we have seen, else we are not witnesses. In these days a bold attempt is being made to discredit everything that savours of the miraculous. If there be no miracle, then there can be no mercy.

II. **The Ready Obedience.** "Jonah arose and went." What a task is before him; a journey of over 800 miles, and then to preach in the streets of the mightiest, the gayest, and the guiltiest of cities. But his forty days' journey is much easier than his three days' run to Joppa, because his heart is now right with God. It is easier doing great things for God than little things for the Devil. It was easier for Daniel to go to the lions' den than deny his God. It was easier for our faithful Scottish martyrs to go to the fires than to deny the faith. But where did Jonah learn this obedience? He learned it where most of us have had to learn it—in the depths, when the floods compassed him about, when the waves and billows passed over him, and the weeds were wrapped about his head. We would not always pity the afflicted if we understood the purpose of God. May God plunge many more into the belly of Hell, if so be that it will

bring them to repentance. When God by the hand of death snatched your bright-eyed child from the home, did you understand that He was seeking to bring you into the faith that saves?

III. The Startling Proclamation. "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." A strange message from a strange man. Jonah, footsore and weary, enters the great and mighty city, probably clad in a coat of camel's hair, girded with a leathern girdle. He may seem very small and insignificant in the presence of those haughty gentry, clothed in their gaudy robes, and those high flying chariots, rushing along on the top of the wall, but he has a dignity superior to the King of Assyria. He has a message from God that will bring the guilty and conceited Ninevites to their knees. The mightiest men in the world are those who know God's will, and are courageous as lions in declaring it. Sometimes sermons are characterised as being as destitute of grace as Jonah's. "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Jonah's message was one of mercy and judgment. Yet forty days—forty days' grace to be followed with judgment if these days were neglected. Grace has been reigning now these 1928 years, and will assuredly be followed with judgment in the case of those who despise the mercy offered.

IV. The Confirming Sign. From the Lord Jesus Christ Himself we learn that Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites (Luke 11:30). How could he be a sign to them if they did not know his character and history? This is indeed significant. The Ninevites not only heard the Divine message at his lips, but they saw in himself a proof of God's mighty saving power. Jonah wrought no miracle, but he himself was a miracle. He was as one raised from the dead. Three things the subtle infidelity of to-day seek to deny. Incarnation, Regeneration, Inspiration. But every regenerated soul is in itself a sign, and an evidence of the Divine and the supernatural. What we are will tell more powerfully than what we say. Signs are needed. Men and women who have themselves been saved and taught by God. Is there no such sign beside you or in your own home? To see a true Christian is to see a sign from Heaven.

V. The Grand Result. "Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah." If he had gone with the Gospel of the "higher critics," and hobnobbed with the gentry, he might have got on for chaplain to the king, but Nineveh would never have repented. "By their fruits ye shall know them." The preaching that does not bring sinners face to face with their sins and with God will never produce repentance. There were no sleepers under Jonah's preaching. There are scores who go to our churches for no other purpose than to see and to be seen, and to get a nap. It is interesting to observe the process of their repentance.

1. THEY BELIEVED GOD. It is not said that they believed Jonah, but that they believed God. This ought to be the aim and end of all preaching, to lift the hearts of the people right up to the Lord Himself. What will it avail you although you believe in the kirk and in the minister, if you have no faith in God? I would rather die a heathen Hottentot than an unconverted Church member. Then they humbled themselves, "and put on sackcloth." This is always the result of believing God; faith is accompanied with the sackcloth of confession. Sackcloth is never very fashionable, sealskin is more in vogue. There is nothing like a deep conviction of sin for stripping one of their gaudy garments of pride. Oh, man, if you saw yourself in the light of God's judgment, you would as quickly as Ninevites, put on the sackcloth of a broken spirit. A haughty sinner is the imp of Hell. Never say that you believe in God if you have never been on your face before Him. Then—

2. THEY CRIED TO GOD. Every one was to "cry mightily to God." There is no use telling an awakened soul that God has so bound Himself with fixed laws that he cannot answer prayer. It is as natural for such to cry as the new-born babe. Only those encased in their own conceit can talk so lightly about prayer. No prayer book will suffice when the soul is alive to its true need. Such are like dead men's grave clothes. But they did more than pray, they "Turned every one from his evil ways." No prayer is in earnest as long as sin is indulged. If we are not prepared to forsake our sins, then all our prayers are a mockery (Psa. 66:18). A man once told me that he always said his prayers except when he was drunk. Poor man, he was afflicted with two devils. A drinking one and a self-righteous one. Both are alike unclean. Their prayer was sincere. The result was—

3. THEY FOUND MERCY. "God saw their works and repented, and did it not. What! Does God repent? Yes, I am thankful that He does. In His Character as holy, just, and good, He is unchangeable, and without shadow of turning; but in mercy He turns His face to every penitent seeking sinner. "Draw nigh unto Me," God says, "and I will draw nigh unto you." "Seek, and ye shall find."

JONAH 4:1–6

JONAH DISPLEASED

There is a great difference between mere obedience and sympathy. Every parent sees it when the one child has to be driven to obey, and when the other delights in it, because in full sympathy with the parents' plans and purposes. The elder brother in the parable (Luke 15) had been obedient, but he had no sympathy with the father in making such an ado over the returning prodigal. There are many Christians like this, they obey from sheer necessity, but they have no joy in the will and purposes of God. Such seems to have been the character of Jonah. He obeyed from a powerful sense of duty, but had not entered joyfully into all the mind of the Lord.

I. His Complaint. "It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry," or, as it might be rendered, he was very hot, greatly perplexed and excited. He saw now what perhaps he did not expect to see—Nineveh in sackcloth and prayer. The Assyrians, being the enemies of Israel, he probably was secretly rejoicing in the prospect of their downfall. It is so easy to mix our own selfish motives with the purposes of God, and bring confusion to our own souls. It is here where thousands are making shipwreck, they set up their own opinions and think that God is bound by His honour to conform to their plans. Perhaps Jonah was thinking of his own honour as a prophet when he got so excited. He had been crying, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Now that God was going to spare the city, what would they think of him as a prophet? We are not much use in the Lord's service until we are willing to become fools for Christ. It is ours to obey and to trust. Opinions formed apart from the light of God's Word will sooner or later bring the blush of confusion to your face.

II. His Prayer. "He prayed unto the Lord." If Jonah's heart had been filled with anger against the Lord, how could he pray? No one can pray with anger in their heart. This is the remedy for all unholy passion—get to your knees. It is wonderful how our creeds get corrected in our prayers. Open up your heart to God, and your crooked things will be made straight. In Jonah's prayer there is a revelation. Here we get the reason why he fled from God at the first. He says: "I fled, for I knew that thou art a gracious God." This is the very reason why some of us have fled to Him. What does he mean? Perhaps this: "I knew that Thou art such a merciful God, that although I prophesied its destruction, Thou would forgive them, so my preaching would be in vain, and I would be mocked for my trouble." There was much of both good and evil in Jonah, but something more might be learned from this—

III. His Testimony. His description of God's character is simply grand. "Gracious, merciful, slow to anger, of great kindness, and ready to turn from judgment." How could he be angry at such a God? He is gracious to consider the sinner's need, and merciful to forgive their iniquities. My friend, can you say, like Jonah, "I know Him." He is slow to anger. What a mercy. This is an age of hurry and excitement and "Go." The Devil knows that his days are short, and he is driving this world—"that lieth in the wicked one"—at express speed. The Devil is always in a hurry "The wheels of God grind slow, but they grind exceeding small." God is slow to anger, but He is quick to forgive. "There is life for a look." This is the reason why some of you are spared till to-day, who have been wasting your time in selfishness and sin. "God is slow to anger." Why despise such great kindness, and weary out the patience of God? Oh, remember, that although God is slow to anger, when He does strike, it will be the blow of the Almighty.

IV. His Foolish Request. "O Lord, take my life from me, it is better for me to die than to live" Is it? How do you know? Here again is another manifestation of self. "Better for me." Oh, yes, it is the old story: "Suffer me first." This is the fly in the ointment of much of our Christian service—"Self-seeking." But there is some faith mingled with his faults. If he knew it would be better for him to die, then he had a good hope for the world to come. Would it be better for you? Paul said, "to depart and be with Christ is far better." It takes faith to die in gladness, alone in the midst of heathen.

V. His Watchfulness. "So Jonah went out of the city, and made him a booth." He might have shared the hospitality of the king, but he preferred a booth outside the city. "Moses chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." Those who testify against the world ought not to live as the world. "Come out from among them lest ye perish with them." The command to Lot was, "Flee to the mountains, tarry not in all the plain." He sat under his booth till he might see what would become of the city. Do you know anything about calmly waiting to see what God will do? It is a solemn time. The doctor has given up that child, the mother has committed it to God, and is waiting in silence to see what God will do. There are times in Christian work when we know not what to do; we have to sit down like Jonah till we might see what the Lord will do. God is worth waiting on. Beloved friends, have patience with God. "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength" (Isa. 40:31).

VI. His Great Joy. "The Lord prepared a gourd, and made it come up over Jonah, so Jonah was exceeding glad." How quickly God can turn our sadness into gladness. This gourd is supposed to be the palm-christ, a plant like the running ivy, with broad leaves the shape of a man's hand. Every leaf might remind him of the hand of the Almighty. What a shelter—to be covered with Jehovah's hands—no wonder he was glad. This sheltering gourd was the gift of God—a handful on purpose for a weary, downcast pilgrim. How often has God raised a gourd for us in our day of trouble. It was given for a twofold purpose. (1) To be a shadow over his head. (2) To deliver him from his grief. Is not this what you need—shelter from danger, and deliverance from inward grief. This gourd raised by the Lord seems to be a passing shadow of the Cross. Here sinners find a refuge from the piercing rays of Divine vengeance and deliverance from their sins and sorrows. This double salvation every one of us need. Christian, in the day of your trial, sit under its shadow, and wait and see what God will do. Unsaved one, here is a resting place for you, here is deliverance from your grief. No matter how deep your need, sit here and see what God will do for you. "Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He is "mighty to save."

JONAH 4:7–11

JONAH SILENCED

Every visible thing is stamped with uncertainty. All our earthly comforts will, sooner or later, wither and die. The countenance of nature herself, although governed by unerring law, is continually changing. Kingdoms and nations change. What changes have taken place in our homes, and among our friends. How many old faces are gone, how many new faces have come.

“Change on all around I see,
Oh, Thou who changeth not,
Abide with me.”

When all earthly things shall wax old and pass away like a garment, the unchanging Saviour still remains. “Blessed are all they that trust in Him.” We have here—

I. A Short Lived Pleasure. “God prepared a worm the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.” God can prepare the worm as well as the gourd. While we are enjoying our gourd of pleasure, we are apt to forget that there may be a worm at the root. How many little unseen things may be at work in the night. Receive your mercies with humble thankful hearts. Are there not many whose gourd has suddenly withered. That child which used to be the delight of your eye—God prepared the worm of disease, and it has withered away. That husband that used to cast over you his protecting hands has suddenly withered away. That mother who used to be your gourd, in delivering you from your grief, has been cut down by the worm of death. Oh, this world is strewn all over with withered gourds. Each ruin says to us, “Set not your heart on the things which are seen, for they are temporal.” Every earthly thing has its worm. The worm of time is already working at the root of your present worldly pleasures. That gourd of false profession will turn out a lifeless mass on the day of God’s fierce anger. God has prepared a worm that will bring to ruin every refuge of lies. What an awful discovery to awaken on the resurrection morning, to find our hopes, like Herod’s body, eaten up of worms. The incorruptible Christ has paid an incorruptible price for your incorruptible soul.

“Here everlasting springs abide,
And never-withering flowers.”

The heart that has laid hold on Christ has received a portion that can never fade away.

II. An Overcoming Trial. “And it came to pass, when the sun did rise, that God prepared a vehement east wind, and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah that he fainted.” Alas, for you, if your joys are bound up in your circumstances, instead of in your God. It is so easy and natural to be more anxious about the gift than the Giver. It does seem strange at first sight, how God dealt with Jonah. He prepared a gourd to cover him, then a worm to vex him, then a wind to smite him. We may find fault, but we cannot mend it. The Divine Teacher is not obliged to explain Himself to His stupid pupils. A great and merciful purpose is here. This piercing east wind upon Jonah’s defenceless head was a sore trial. It has been said that “When the wind is in the east, ’tis neither good for man nor beast,” but this does not tally with our own good Scottish proverb: “It is an ill wind that blows naeboddy guid.” The winds are in His fists, and are flung out, not at random, but for a definite purpose. It was by a strong east wind that the Lord divided the Red Sea. The cutting, biting, withering winds of affliction are all for some gracious purpose. I once made the remark to a farmer, that these cold winds would hinder the growth. “Yes,” he said, “they hinder the growth upwards, but they help the growth downwards; they make the roots take a firmer hold.” Then welcome affliction that drives the root of our being deeper into the things of the unseen world, and makes us more fit to stand in the time of tempest. Jonah fainted. Poor fellow, he was like the seed that had no depth of earth, and withered away when the scorching sun fell upon it. David said, “I had fainted, unless I had believed.” If we have no faith in God we have nothing to save us from fainting in the time of trial. To you who are growing faint thinking there is no salvation for you, “Only believe.” Weary workers, remember that “He giveth power to the faint.”

III. A Pointed Question. God said to Jonah, “Doest thou well to be angry?” Jonah’s answer was that of a man who is perfectly honest, but whose heart was likely to deceive him. “I do well to be angry, even unto death.” The great lesson seemingly that God wished to teach Jonah was that “Sin worketh death,” both in the nation and individual. Israel had turned away from God. Idolatry, like the worm at Jonah’s gourd, was eating the life out of the nation. Righteousness exalteth a nation. Now that Nineveh was on its knees seeking mercy and righteousness, God would lift it up. The same principle reigns to-day; the Divine word is, “Them that honour Me, I will honour.” God looketh on the heart. Jonah was more concerned about the gourd of his own comfort than the salvation of the heathen city. Such are certain signs of a staggering faith. Faith in God is the death-blow to all this miserable self-interest.

IV. A Silencing Argument. “Thou hast had pity on the gourd, and should not I spare Nineveh, wherein are more than six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand?” What a wonder, that God should condescend to reason with a man. There is much in God’s dealings with us that we can never understand, and must be received by faith. God uses two powerful arguments to silence the doubts and fears of His servant.

1. THE ARGUMENT OF SOVEREIGNTY. God has a right to do as He will with His own. Proud man would even question this right and show displeasure at God’s dealings, because he cannot comprehend His meaning. It is awful presumption to suppose that the

purposes of God are to be subordinated to the reasonings of men. Paul's argument is conclusive. Nay, Oh man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it: "Why hast thou made me thus?" Then there is—

2. THE ARGUMENT OF PITY. The Lord reminds Jonah that there are sixty thousand persons in Nineveh that cannot discern between the right hand and the left—60,000 babies. What a place the children have in the heart of God; what a claim their utter helplessness makes upon Divine mercy. Nineveh was spared, partly through the mute intercession of these 60,000 infant priests. You cannot tell how much your home has been blessed because of these helpless children. Mothers, make room for the children; every baby is a blessing, a priest that maketh intercession for you. These arguments seem to have silenced Jonah, for we hear his voice no more. He quietly allows God to have the last word. Has God settled all your difficulties and silenced all your arguments? Don't keep up a controversy with the Almighty. Yield your will to Him, and what you cannot grasp with the intellect, believe with the heart. There is a story in ancient history of a monarch who, when some of his subjects rebelled against him, subdued them, then loaded them with precious gifts. One of his nobles asked why he was so kind to his enemies. He said, "I subdued them by my power, I must now win them by my love." It is thus that Jesus Christ, the greater than Jonah, would win us to Himself. By the power of his convicting Spirit He would show us the blackness of our evil hearts, that He might bring us to repentance and confession. Then He lavishly bestows upon us the great gifts of His grace, love, peace, joy, rest, and eternal life. He blesses all he conquers. Has He conquered you?