

# *Jonah's Anger* *Versus* *God's Mercy*

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God's judgment is not always eye-for-eye. As we approach the Book of Jonah, we are confronted with a book that was written over twenty-eight hundred years ago. Our attitude toward this book should not only be the "then" but also the "now." **We should search this book for relevancy today, not just the historical aspects.** This chapter seeks to capture the overall nature of the book with all of its intrigues before a more detailed study of the book itself is unfolded. Just a casual reading of the book reveals Jonah's anger and God's mercy. The Book of Jonah is one of the most captivating books in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup>

**When we read this fascinating account of God's interest in the salvation of the Ninevites, we cannot help but smile over its enraged prophet brooding under God's provisional vine (4:6).** We cannot help but appreciate the characters in this delightful book—the **religious sailors** (1:11-16), the "**great fish**" (1:17), the **repentant citizens of Nineveh** (3:5-9), the **Ninevite king** (3:5-9), **the vine** (4:6), **the worm** (4:7), **the children** (4:11), and **the cattle** (4:11). Jonah is always good for a few smiles, and we cannot help but value the literary techniques employed in telling the episode of Jonah and Nineveh.

Jonah (782 BC) was an actual figure in history, not a fictional character. This fact of his authenticity is verified by the author of Second Kings:

He [Jeroboam II] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher. (2 Kings 14:25)

Jonah prophesied that God would expand the kingdom of Jeroboam II (782-753 BC). This prediction of expansionism certainly made Jonah a popular preacher to the general public. Also, Jesus the Messiah, over seven hundred years later, verified the historicity of Jonah and the Ninevites in His confrontation with the Pharisees and teachers of the Law (scribes). Matthew

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<sup>1</sup>I am deeply indebted to Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching as Theology and Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 25-27, for the concepts presented in this message.

records this encounter with the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law with Jesus' response to their request for a further miraculous sign to confirm His Messiahship. Listen to Matthew as he captures Jesus' remarks:

A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.<sup>40</sup> For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one<sup>a</sup> greater than Jonah is here. (Matthew 12: 39-41)

## **GOD CALLED JONAH TO PREACH**

During Jonah's ministry, God called him to preach to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire—one of the most dreaded of all nations. The Scriptures record this summons: "The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me'" (Jonah 1:1-2). This call no doubt came as a total shock to him. Jonah did not want this task of preaching to Israel's enemies. In fact, he rebelled against this command of God.

### **Jonah's Reluctance to Preach**

We cannot help but speculate if Jonah thought God was crazy. We can almost hear Jonah say, "Surely, God, you must be joking!" Again, we wonder if he did not say, "No way." He wanted God to zap the Ninevites, Israel's enemies, for their wickedness. The narrator of the Book of Jonah<sup>2</sup> informs his readers:

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. (Jonah 1:3)

Why was Jonah so adamant? Why did he refuse to go? Would we have refused? Do we hear ourselves saying "No"? Are we saying that we would not have refused? Well, before we make up our minds, we should hear the rest of the story.

### **Jonah's Cause of Hesitation**

In the Book of Jonah, Jonah maintains that God can forgive and show mercy to anyone who repents. This granting of pardon and leniency are exemplified in the Book of Jonah. In this treatise, Jonah traces his experiences of frustration and anger, and a reaffirmation of the lessons he already knew about God's love, God's forgiveness, and God's mercy. But to fully interpret

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<sup>a</sup> Or *something*; also in verse 42

<sup>2</sup>Jonah may have written this book in the third person. There is no reason to doubt that Jonah himself wrote this narrative about himself, Assyria, and God.

Jonah's anger at God's willingness to forgive the people of Nineveh, we must sense something of the degenerate and depraved nature of the Assyrians. **The Assyrians were a cruel and heartless people.** They thought nothing of burying their enemies alive, skinning them, or impaling them on sharp poles alive. Assyria was the most greedy and bloodthirsty nation of the ancient world. **They would wipe out entire villages—killing men, women, and children. They would decapitate their victims and pile their heads at the gate of the city to put fear in all that might think to oppose their power.** Assyria had plundered and spoiled their enemies and systematically deported them to other regions. Eventually, the ten northern tribes of Israel would simply disappear into their jaws (721 BC), never to be heard of again.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY REGIMES

### Hitler and Stalin

Do we understand more fully now why Jonah did not want to go, even though God said go? These people were some of the cruelest people on the face of the earth—hard-hearted, pitiless, insensitive, savage, ruthless, unkind, and unfeeling. Do we still say, “If God called me, I would go”? Would we, too, seek to reverse God's call today if he called us to preach to a modern day phenomenon, at least to some event that has occurred in the lifetime of many of us living today? To put this in modern terms, it would be like forgiving **Adolph Hitler** (1889-1945). Since the atrocities of Hitler are so well known, how could God forgive someone like that by his simply saying, “I repent”? This madman was responsible for over six million deaths—men, women, and children. How could God forgive someone like **Joseph Stalin** (1879-1953) who was responsible for over fifteen million deaths? This is the dilemma that Jonah faced. Now, do we understand? Did Jonah have a right to be angry with God? Should they have been destroyed?

Can we not identify with Jonah's anger? Do we want mercy shown to those who deserve punishment? How do we feel about the **Oklahoma bombing**?<sup>3</sup> One hundred and sixty-eight people were killed. Do we think for one moment that the individuals who lost a husband, a wife, or a child would extend forgiveness to the ones responsible? Do we recall the Watergate scandal?<sup>4</sup> What do we think about the **Watergate criminals**? Do we recollect how easily most of these men escaped severe punishment for their criminal behavior against the nation? At least

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<sup>3</sup>This tragic event occurred on April 19, 1995 around 9:03 am. **Timothy McVeigh** (1968-2001, executed June 11, 2001 @ 33) and **Terry Nichols** (b. 1955) were responsible for 168 deaths.

<sup>4</sup>The **Watergate scandal** was a 1972 break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C., the United States by members of President Richard Nixon's administration (1969-1974) and the resulting cover-up which led to the resignation of the President. A number of the perpetrators were from the "plumbers unit", originally set up to "plug leaks," and some were former members of the CIA. Though then-President Nixon (1913-1994) had endured two years of mounting political embarrassments, the court-ordered release in August 1974 of a "smoking gun tape" about the burglaries brought with it the prospect of certain impeachment for Nixon; he resigned only four days later, on August 9, 1974, making him the only U.S. President to have resigned from office [ONLINE]. Available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watergate\\_scandal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Watergate_scandal) (accessed 2 March 2009).

one of these public officials received monetary benefits through the writing of books about his unlawful course of action.

**To bring this message of forgiveness just a little closer home, how do we deal with people who violently go against the grain with us on religious matters?** There they are, walking around, living in luxury, cheerful, indifferent, apparently quite pleased with their own stone-blind theological positions, at least to you and to me, so it seems. We question how God can let such persons be so misguided, so self-assured, so joyful, especially when we see how much damage they do to Christian unity. **How do we feel when someone writes us up in his or her party journal or weekly bulletin?** Do we wish they would get what's coming to them? Is our response, "yes, may the day hasten!" We, often times, are very much like Jonah. We want some justice now, not later. As believers in Christ, we want some evidence that God does not endorse the opinions of those who slander and demean us.

### SALVATION FOR REPENTANCE

In spite of Jonah's wishes, **Nineveh repented**. Everyone in the immoral city, from the king to the common people, repented. As a result of this transformation of heart, God did not bring immediate disaster upon the city. Should they not have been accountable for their sins? They had inflicted horrors on top of horrors upon so many people—sins of an unspeakable nature. But they **turned** and **believed** in God and received forgiveness of their sins. Did they deserve His forgiveness? How do we feel about Charles Colson's<sup>5</sup> (1931-2012) conversion (1974), one of the Watergate men? Did God forgive him? Of course, He did. Thank God for such mercy and compassion. God's mercy and compassion is unbelievable! God forgives because a person repents. It is salvation for turning from darkness to God. This forgiveness to Colson is the same message God gave to Ezekiel about backsliding Israel—turn and live:

Son of man, say to the house of Israel, "This is what you are saying: 'Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of<sup>b</sup> them. How then can we live?'" <sup>11</sup> Say to them, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. **Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?**" (Ezekiel 33:10-11)

God speaks to me; God speaks to you! The message is, "Turn! Turn from your evil ways!" Maybe the modern day Jonahs can learn to live with that and gladly accept God's forgiveness of anyone who turns from his/her evil ways. Jonah knew about God's mercy and forgiveness even before he went to Nineveh.

But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. <sup>2</sup> 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." (Jonah 4:1-2)

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<sup>5</sup>God is still using this child of His in a mighty way to advance His kingdom.

<sup>b</sup> Or *away in*

## THE PROPHET JONAH NEVER REPENTS

**The interesting thing about the Book of Jonah is that the prophet himself never does repent, and yet, throughout the book, he is the constant recipient of God's mercy.** Given the call to preach repentance to Nineveh, he flees from the presence of God—so he thought. We remember the story, do we not? He refuses to go to Nineveh (500 miles east of his residence). He ultimately chooses Tarshish, which is in an opposite direction (2000 miles west) of Nineveh. After he made the decision to, more or less, abdicate his position as God's prophet, he purchased his ticket and boarded the boat for Tarshish. Later, when his clandestine operation came to light, the sailors threw him overboard, at his insistence, but God miraculously saves him from drowning through the rescue of a huge fish He had prepared. **We can see God dealing with Jonah with patience, never in anger. God deals with the irate prophet with calmness.** He painstakingly maneuvers Jonah—sending him to Nineveh, giving him success in his mission. God overlooks his sulking by shading his head in Jonah's gnashing of his teeth. God works through a worm and through the sun to teach Jonah about the marvels of mercy and the unlimited nature of His love.

### Modern Day Jonahs

Jonah, as far as the record goes, does not repent, but God does not give up on him. Modern day Jonahs do not repent, but God doesn't give up on them either. Instead, He sent his Son to reconcile humanity to Himself through Jesus Christ. **His Son goes to Jerusalem to die a death for sinful men and women that do not deserve such compassion and mercy.** In His mercy, He forgives hatred, He forgives pride, He forgives drunkenness, He forgives prostitution, He forgives drug addicts, He forgives the unlovable, He forgives the backslider, He forgives lukewarmness, and He forgives blind inflexibility. The God that exhibited mercy to the Ninevites extends mercy and forgiveness to everyone through Jesus Christ. This story of Jonah has a "ring of truth," not fiction.

### CONCLUSION

What does the story of Jonah mean to us? Do we stand in awe of God's compassion and mercy? Does this story of repentance and forgiveness give us hope? Paul addresses this issue of forgiveness in his Roman Epistle. He forcefully set forth this truth of mercy and compassion and forgiveness when he writes:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: **While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**<sup>9</sup> Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!<sup>10</sup> For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!<sup>11</sup> Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:8-11)

God's love is not "eye-for-eye"—the justice that we all Jonahs deserve. No, God does not render His wrath to those who turn in repentance. When we exhibit remorse and regret for our rebellion against the God of heaven, He withholds His justice and extends mercy. In spite of the fact that everyone is a sinner, Paul declares that Christ died for every person. And for that reason, and that reason alone, everyone who puts his or her trust in Jesus can live. **Thank God for His demonstration of love, mercy, compassion, and kindness toward us Jonahs.**

## GOD CAME TO SAVE SINNERS

Story by Tony Campolo

Do we have an intense yearning for the souls of men and women who do not know God? Are we only concerned about the so-called respectable? How do we feel about drug addicts? How do we feel about prostitutes? How do we feel about alcoholics? The following story is told by Tony Campolo, professor of sociology at Eastern College, which illustrates the concern for the lost, even prostitutes. He tells the story of his visit to Honolulu for a Christian conference. Early in the morning, he ventured out of his hotel to find a coffee shop. He found a tiny coffee shop and walked in and sat down. The following is his description of the events:

The heavysset guy in a greasy apron behind the counter came over and asked me, "What do you want?" I told him I wanted a cup of coffee and a donut. As I sat there munching on my donut and sipping my coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door suddenly opened, swung wide and to my discomfort in marched 8 or 9 provocative and rather boisterous prostitutes. It was a small place and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was garrulous, loud and crude. I felt completely out of place. I was just about to make my getaway when I heard the woman sitting next to me say, "You know, tomorrow is my birthday. I'm going to be 39." Her friend responded in a rather nasty tone, "So what do you want from me? A birthday party? What do you want? Do you want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?"

"Come on," the women sitting next to me said, "Why do you have to be so mean? I'm just telling you that's all. Why do you have to put me down? I was just telling you that it is my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Tony Campolo said, "When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the woman left and then I called over to the counter to the heavysset guy and asked him, 'Do they come in here every night?'" "Yeah," he answered. "The one right next to me", I asked, "Does she come in here every night?" "Yeah," he said, "That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why do you want to know?" "Because," I replied, "I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you say we do something special for her? What do you think about throwing a birthday party for her, right here in the diner?"

A cute kind of smile crept over that heavysset man's chubby cheeks. He answered, "That's a great idea. I like it. That's great. Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind. I don't think anybody has ever done anything nice and kind for her." "Well, look" I told him, "If it is OK with you, I'll be back here tomorrow morning at 2:30. I'll decorate the place. I'll even get a birthday cake for her." "No way," he said, "The birthday cake, that's my thing. I'll bake the birthday cake. "Two-thirty the next morning," Campolo says, "I was back at that diner. I picked up some crepe paper and other

decorations at the store, and made a sign of big pieces of cardboard that read, 'Happy Birthday, Agnes!' I decorated that diner from one end to the other. I had that diner really looking great. The word must have gotten out on the street because by 3:15 that next morning every prostitute in Honolulu was in that place. There was wall-to-wall prostitutes—and me.”

“At 3:30 on the dot the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready; after all, I was sort of the informal master of ceremonies of this whole affair. It was my idea, so when they came in we all jumped up and screamed and we sang, 'Happy birthday, Agnes!' And you know, I've never seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned, so shaken. Her mouth fell open, her knees started to buckle, her friend had to offer her arm to steady her, and I noticed she had started to cry.

When the birthday cake with all the candles was carried out, that's when she just lost it. She started sobbing. Harry, in his gruff voice mumbled, 'Blow out the candles, Agnes, blow out the candles.' Then he handed her a knife, and he ordered, "Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake." Agnes looked down at that cake, and then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I, I mean, if I don't, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?" Harry shrugged and answered, "Sure, Agnes, that's fine, you want to keep the cake, keep the cake, take it home if you want." "Oh, could I?" she asked. Agnes looked at Tony, 'I live just down the street a couple doors; I want to take the cake home, is that OK? I'll be right back, honest.' She got off her stool, she picked up that cake, and she carried it out of that diner like it was the Holy Grail. She walked slowly toward the door, and we all stood there just speechless. When the door closed behind her, there was stunned silence in the place.

Not knowing what else to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray together?" Looking back on it now, it seems more than a little strange that a sociologist from eastern PA would be leading a prayer meeting with a bunch of prostitutes in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning. But I prayed. I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her. And when I finished, Harry leaned over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice he said, "Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of preacher are you anyway? What church do you belong to?" In one of those moments when just the right words came, I answered him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." Harry thought a moment, and then almost sneered as he answered, 'No you don't; there is no church like that. Because if there was one, I'd join it.'"<sup>6</sup>

As we reflect upon this story and the story of Jonah and the Ninevites, we should ask ourselves: What is it that would entice a man to throw a birthday party for a prostitute? We cannot help but wonder if it is not a desire for the Day of Pentecost to stay alive and for others to repent and to be baptized and to receive the Holy Spirit and to be transformed by the power of God's Spirit into a fighting force for the cause of Christ. Is not this kind of behavior the kind of behavior manifested by Jesus in His dealings with sinful humanity and the God of heaven dealing with Jonah and the Ninevites? Following the healing of a paralytic (Matthew 9:1-8), Matthew gives an account of Jesus' reaction to the Pharisees' condemnation of Jesus because He ate with "tax collectors and sinners":

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. <sup>10</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> When

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<sup>6</sup>I am indebted to Brett Blair, "Episode II: Birth of the Church," for this story (cited verbatim). See "Episode II: birth of the Church" [ONLINE]. Available from [www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com) [accessed 14 May 2009, located under SERMONS. To access the sermons on this website, one has to pay an annual fee of 69.00 (Level I).

the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”<sup>12</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.<sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’<sup>a</sup> For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (9:9-13)