

Abiding Fruit

Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart

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A Gracious God Jonah 4:2

Jonah is about shock tactics from the hand of God. Who ever would have thought that God would have been concerned about barbaric and violent Ninevites? The prophet Jonah knew precisely what God was like and what God would do. He was under no illusions as to the character of God, and so when the call came to go to Nineveh, Jonah headed for the opposite direction. I think Jonah knew that wherever he went, God knew where he was going and why he was going. Jonah was simply making a statement. It's as if he said to God, "I know why you want me to go and preach in Nineveh. You are going to have me preach repentance and then you are going to save those enemies of Israel through my preaching. I'm not going."

So he took off for Tarshish (the opposite direction to Nineveh) from the seaport at Joppa (1:3). The Bible says that Jonah fled the presence of the Lord (1:3). How wrong of this great preacher to flee from God. Where can anyone flee to escape the presence of God (Ps. 139:8)?

On the ship at sea, Jonah experienced the presence of God. In the depths of the sea, when he was thrown overboard, he found God. In the belly of the great fish, there was God. As Jonah sank down into the depths, with the seaweed wrapped around him, there was God. Jonah does not blame the sailors for throwing him overboard. He acknowledges that it was God that threw him into the sea. You almost get the impression that as far as Jonah was concerned – it was just a matter of time before God did something (see 2:2 - 6). Wherever we go, God is already there. In fact, for Jonah God prepared the incredible experience of being swallowed by a great fish (whale or not – it certainly could swallow him). The veracity of Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish is ratified by our Lord Jesus in Matthew 12:40. Jesus even used the experience of Jonah, as being descriptive of the time that He would spend in the grave – three days and three nights. If Jesus treated Jonah as a real person with a real experience in the belly of the fish, why shouldn't we? Scripture teaches us that Jonah was a real prophet who exercised a prophetic ministry in the days of King Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:25). Jeroboam undertook some territorial acquisitions in line with Jonah's preaching to him – *"He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher."*

Gath-hepher was near Nazareth so Jonah was a prophet to the northern kingdom under Jeroboam II (793 – 753 BC). When the Pharisees said that no prophet had ever come from Galilee, they were incorrect, for Jonah was from there (John 7:52). Jeroboam was able to enlarge his borders due to the weakness of Assyria and Syria at this time. Israel was dead spiritually. They just went through the motions of religion. They were bankrupt spiritually, ethically and morally. By 722 BC the Assyrians had reasserted themselves to incomparable dominance, and subsequently removed the ten tribes into captivity. The capital city of Assyria was Nineveh. God was sending Jonah into the lion's mouth. The Assyrians were a wicked, perverse and violent nation. They loved cruelty. It was Nimrod who originally founded the great city of Nineveh in Genesis 10:6 – 12. God recognizes that Nineveh was a great city in Jonah 1:2 (see also 3:2, 3; 4:11). Their evil deeds had risen like a stench in the nostrils of God. God was angry with Nineveh. Jonah was to go and preach God's imminent judgment upon them. He gave them a forty day grace period.

Most people read the book of Jonah and focus on the swallowing of Jonah as the central issue in the book. This is a mistake. It is an important part of Jonah, and certainly the information recorded regarding that experience could only have come from the prophet himself, but it is not the key issue in the book. The key issue is that God was going to do something beyond the ability or comprehension of the prophet or anyone else. God was going to sovereignly intervene in the lives of the Ninevites. How will God do this? He will do it through the preaching of a reluctant prophet.

We often categorize both God and sinners (or their sins). We limit God because we are influenced by the sinner and their sins. We reason that God could not and would not do anything beyond what we would do with respect to the sinner. In one sense this was Jonah. He knew that God was merciful and compassionate, but you sense that in his rebellion, he is saying to God, *"I don't want you to be like that."* Of course, Jonah forgot that God had treated him with mercy in the first place. Jonah just did not want God to be merciful to the Ninevites. They were Israel's enemy, and God should have no business caring for them. This was the reasoning of the prophet. The same is often true of the Church today? We do not want dirty sinners to come to our places of worship – because they are dirty and we are clean. The Church must not be like Jonah – we must view the world the way God viewed the Ninevites.

It took Jonah three days to go through Nineveh. He only started preaching after he had traveled for a day (3:3, 4). The moment Jonah started preaching God's message of repentance, the response from the Ninevites was electrifying and immediate. Jonah preached the grace of God – they had forty days in which to repent. Jonah preached the certain judgment of God – "Nineveh shall be overthrown." The response to Jonah's preaching was that the entire city of Nineveh believed God. It was not Jonah that was important. It was the message he preached and it was God behind and in the message. This is how all true preaching should be. The prophet is nothing, the preacher is nothing, the witnessing Christian is nothing – it is only God that matters. God's message carries its own inherent authority. It does not need the preacher to come up with fancy gimmicks, plays, drama productions or anything else to be authoritative. The Word of God is authoritative completely alone. Some have conjectured that Jonah was so affected by his time in the belly of the fish that his appearance had changed in such a way that the Ninevites responded. But the Bible says the people believed *God*. It was not Jonah they believed, but God. Even the king was affected. He repented, covered himself in sackcloth and sat in ashes. This reflects deep grief (3:6 – 9). He ordered everyone to turn from their sins and their violence, in the hope that God would spare them from his fierce anger. Where did he get these ideas about God? He got them from Jonah's preaching.

Their repentance was genuine and when God saw their repentance He spared them His wrath. This prompted Jonah to become very angry and bitter with God. He sat outside the city of Nineveh waiting to see when God was going to strike them down (4:1 – 10). He contends angrily with God twice. He would rather die than be responsible for the deliverance of the Ninevites (4:2, 3). While he was waiting, God provided shade for him in the form of a plant that grew up (4:6). The next day, God sent a worm which destroyed the plant thus depriving Jonah of his shade. God sent a scorching east wind and the sun beat down on the prophet. Instead of thanking God for the Ninevite's salvation, Jonah was concerned only for his own comfort. He wanted to die because God was gracious to Nineveh, and when his comforts were gone.

God's point comes in Jonah 4:10, 11. Jonah was concerned at the loss of the plant but not at the possible loss of life. He did nothing to bring about the plant – that came from God. God has all the right in the world to save whomsoever he saves. He is not dependent on us to save anyone. He pities the great city of 120,000 people – people who don't know God and are ignorant of God. Jonah needed to understand the gracious compassion of God in its proper perspective. Only such an understanding would deliver the prophet from self-centeredness, and enable him to be a fruitful instrument in the hand of God. It's still the same today!