

# Moments for YOU

Volume 53, Number 2

Theme: Jonah



## JONAH'S PROBLEM

### WHO WAS JONAH?

*“The word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai”* (Jonah 1:1)

Jonah (which means “dove” in Hebrew) is identified as the son of Amittai. According to 2 Kings 14:25, Jonah was from Gath Hepher, a village about 2 miles northeast of Nazareth. Second Kings 14 also helps us to date Jonah’s life sometime during Jeroboam’s reign from 793–753 B.C.. Some believe that Jonah began to speak on behalf of God about the time the prophet Elisha was concluding his work.

Two keys will prove useful in understanding the real issues in this book. First, the book records Jonah’s mission to Nineveh, but it is written to Israel, who hated Nineveh. Second, Jonah is not the principal character of his own book—God is! God has the first word and the last. He orchestrates the entire drama to show His love for Israel’s enemies.

### JONAH'S MISSION

*“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city”* (Jonah 1:2).

Nineveh, founded by Nimrod, was on the east bank of the Tigris River, about 550 miles from Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It was large, and was protected by an outer wall and an inner wall. The inner wall was 50 feet wide and 100 feet high. This was the time of Nineveh’s greatest glory.

*“Cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before Me”* (Jonah 1:2). Notice carefully that this is a message of judgment, not mercy. God was going to judge the people of Nineveh for their wickedness. He is “Judge of all

the earth” (Genesis 18:25). And He must be recognized as such because, even though He is Saviour, He is also Sovereign.

God as Judge sent a messenger with a message of judgment, but Jonah declined. Instead of accepting his assignment to speak on behalf of God, the prophet decided to make a run for it.

### JONAH'S FLIGHT

*“But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD”* (Jonah 1:3).

Jonah’s response to God’s mission was the opposite of Isaiah’s, who said to the Lord, “Here am I; send me” (Isaiah 6:8). Jonah was told to arise and go, and he did—but in the opposite direction! He headed for Tarshish, which was 2,500 miles west of Joppa on the west coast of Spain.

Jonah thought he was going to be able to “flee ... from the presence of the LORD,” but Psalm 139 makes it clear that it is impossible. Still, Jonah attempted what Adam and Cain had tried before him—running from God’s presence. And he did this rather than obey the Lord’s command.

### JONAH'S PROBLEM

Why did Jonah flee? He understood God’s judgment, but he also understood God’s mercy. And, as we will see, Jonah did not want Nineveh, the capital of an enemy nation, to be forgiven. Because Jonah knew the willingness of God to forgive sin when there is true change of heart, he fled rather than tell the Ninevites of the coming judgment. He didn’t want them to escape God’s wrath.

The evil of Nineveh was legendary in ancient times, and it was often experienced firsthand by the Jewish

people (see Nahum 3:1-5). Still, at the root of Jonah's unwillingness to go to the citizens of Nineveh was a great hatred for them. They had proven themselves again and again to be the enemies of Israel. They were seen as cruel torturers who descended on rival nations like a plague of locusts—destroying and consuming all.

For Jonah to go to Nineveh would have been the moral equivalent of asking a Jewish resident of New York City in the 1940s to go to Berlin and give the Nazis a chance to be forgiven. The racial tension was so intense that, rather than obey, Jonah fled.

### OUR LESSON

It is easier to hate than to love—and some of us may often find ourselves dangerously close to creating our own Nineveh. Perhaps the people that inhabit our “Nineveh” are abortionists, homosexuals, political enemies, cultists, or an ethnic group we are uncomfortable with. The question we must honestly consider is this: will our prejudice cause us, like Jonah, to be guilty of silence, or will we intentionally express the heart of our God? Jonah chose silence and hate rather than obedience and love.

We learn many lessons in the book of Jonah, but the thread that connects them all together is the mercy of God. We see it in His pursuit and restoration of Jonah, His sparing of the sailors, and His miraculous salvation of Nineveh. Also in full view is the spiritual failure of Jonah ...

- who experienced mercy but gave none;
- who received love but returned none;
- who benefited from the patience of God but resented God for showing that same patience to Nineveh.

It's easy to forget that the one who is forgiven much should love much,

and the one who has received mercy should be merciful.

There's an old hymn that says, “There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea.” But even that's not wide enough. The ultimate expression of the wideness of God's mercy is that of the outstretched arms of Christ nailed to a cross and dying for our sins. How each of us responds to that mercy is the issue on which our eternity hangs.

Jonah received God's mercy and even steered others to it, but his great failure was in not wanting others to be allowed to experience that mercy for themselves. God grant that we would succeed in gratefully and obediently taking His mercy to those who need it as much as we do.

—Condensed from “The Failure of Success: The Story of Jonah” by David Sper. Copyright 2004 by RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI.

*Men have been looking so long  
at the great fish they have failed  
to see the great God!*

—G. Campbell Morgan

## THE STORM OF SIN

*“What shall we do ... that the sea may be calm unto us? ... Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you. Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not” (Jonah 1:11-13).*

Jonah's storm was raging as a result of his going his own way, rebelling against the will of God. The storm came to bring him to his senses.

### FIGHTING THE STORM

There are several ways we might react to such a storm. First, the sailors “cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it” (Jonah 1:5). They thought that by getting rid

of the cargo, they could ride out the storm. Many are still trying this today. They try to get rid of certain things in their lives. Some stop hanging out after work at the bars. Some try to stop swearing. Others seek to cease lying. Others give up immorality. We give up this and give up that, but still we have no peace.

Another thing the sailors tried to do was row harder to get to land. Here was a group of men who tried in their own strength to find a solution, *“but they could not”* (Jonah 1:13). The lesson here is that by our efforts alone we can never do or be what God wants us to do or be. We can do our very best, but our best is not good enough. In fact, the Bible says our best is like *“filthy rags”* (Isaiah 64:6). So many of us have found this to be true. We thought we could overcome that temptation and we did our very best, *“but we could not.”*

We must come to the end of ourselves and learn not to trust in our own strength but in the Lord. There was one way the sailors could be saved. Note the way Jonah reacted. *“Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you.”* He offered to be a sacrifice. We see the truth vividly here. Human efforts cannot calm the storm of God’s judgment on sin. There must be a sacrifice.

#### CALMING THE STORM

*“So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly”* (Jonah 1:15,16).

Peace came when Jonah began obeying the will of God. At this point Jonah became a picture, a foreshadow, of our Lord Jesus Christ, who one day would go to Calvary’s cross in order to offer Himself as a sacrifice,

go into the grave, and rise again that we might be saved. *“For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”* (Matthew 12:40).

The storm beat on Jonah’s ship because of sin, and sin must be punished by death: *“The wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23). What a picture we see in Jonah of Jesus who took the sinners’ place. The Bible says, God *“made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him”* (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus *“bare our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed”* (1 Peter 2:24).

Our Lord was cast into the sea of God’s judgment to die and rise again for our redemption. This great ship of humanity was battered by the waves of judgment and was headed for destruction. There was only one way that such a storm could be stilled. Our Lord Jesus was nailed to the cross. *“He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed”* (Isaiah 53:5).

Have you seen this Saviour as your personal substitute? There is only one way we can be saved, and that is to surrender to God and accept the gift of His Son, who took our place on Calvary’s mountain and died our death so we might live His life.

*“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16).

—Condensed from *Jonah: Meeting the God of the Second Chance* by O.S. Hawkins

## JONAH THE PRODIGAL

*“The younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country” (Luke 15:13).*

*“Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD” (Jonah 1:3).*

When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh on an errand of mercy, it was too high a hurdle for Jonah. In the bitterness of his soul, he was out of harmony with God who wanted to extend mercy to this wicked city of Nineveh. God had more difficulty in getting His servant back into fellowship than He did in saving a city.

Judging from the events which followed, one might think that everything was favorable for Jonah’s journey to Tarshish. On arriving at the seacoast city of Joppa, he found a ship ready to sail for Tarshish on which he booked passage. Oftentimes all of us have heard some Christian explain a particular project as having the blessing of God upon it because all difficulties and problems have been removed and everything moves along smoothly. To that Christian, the favorable circumstances seemed to be indicative of the hand of the Lord. On this basis, Jonah could have justified his trip to Tarshish. He could have testified that when he arrived at Joppa, there was a ship ready to sail and God provided the money for the fare. But, my friend, do not always interpret favorable circumstances as the pathway of the Lord. It may be the calm before the storm which is ready to break upon a backsliding servant of God.

God’s servants customarily encounter difficulties and problems as they go along in the pathway of His blessing. Consider the missionary travels of Paul, the life of David Liv-

ingstone and the thrilling records of Judson of Burma and John G. Paton of the New Hebrides. These men met disappointments on every hand and had to overcome handicaps daily. This is the record of God’s servants as seen in Hebrews 11:36-38: “Others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.”

The favorable circumstances were but the calm before the storm indeed, for we are told in the very next verse that “The LORD sent out a great wind into the sea” (Jonah 1:4). Every ship that is carrying a backsliding child of God is heading into a storm, and this ship was no exception. Every prodigal son who leaves the father’s house is on the way to the swine sty, even when he is most unconscious of it.

—Condensed from *Jonah: Dead or Alive* by J. Vernon McGee

***“Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD” (Jonah 1:10).***

To this Jonah 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? Alas, so many who once professed to be Christians now deny Him by their wicked works. What will you say when God Himself shall put this question to you: *“Why have you done this?”*

—Selected

## JONAH'S PRAYER

Jonah's experience 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. Notice these seven things in the experience of Jonah.

**Disobedience** *"Jonah rose up to flee" (Jonah 1:3).* He deliberately refused to obey what he knew to be the will of God. Who among us has not taken that step?

**Conviction** *"I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD" (Jonah 2:2).* His soul is now encompassed with the horrors of Hell. Disobedience to God is the straight way into the abyss of despair.

**Confession** *"Thou hadst cast me into the deep" (Jonah 2:3).* A man is not in a state to be saved until he is prepared to acknowledge the justice of God in punishing sinners.

**Contrition** *"When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD" (Jonah 2:7).* At the remembrance of God's goodness the heart is melted. If men would only remember the Lord Jesus Christ, how soon they would be delivered from the bitterness of their lives.

**Prayer** *"Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly" (Jonah 2:1).* Where there is true sorrow for sin it will burst out in prayer to God.

**Deliverance** *"Salvation is of the LORD" (Jonah 2:9).* After Jonah confessed his sin and trusted God's salvation, the Lord caused the fish to put him back on dry land.

**Thanksgiving** *"I will sacrifice unto Thee with the voice of thanksgiving" (Jonah 2:9).* Thanksgiving becomes a reality when salvation is enjoyed.

—From *Handfuls on Purpose*

## THE RIGHT PLACE

*"The word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee" (Jonah 3:1,2).*

God, in His grace, often gives us second, third, and even more chances to obey Him. After Jonah had disobeyed God's call, he found himself commissioned again by Jehovah to go to Nineveh. This time, Jonah did not venture to reason with his Lord, but he *"arose, and went ... according to the word of the LORD"* (Jonah 3:3). This is as it should be.

Jonah proclaimed his solemn message through the streets of Nineveh. *"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"* (Jonah 3:4). His message was heard with all due gravity. *"The people of Nineveh believed God"* (Jonah 3:5). Jonah's visit to Nineveh, with its amazing results, is perhaps unique in the world's history. The entire population of the greatest city of that time was brought low before God at the simple preaching of one man.

We are of the most use to God when we are where He wants us to be. He knows the right country in which we should serve, and the right town, and the right time. Office, factory, school or home—wherever it may be—if that is His place for us, that is exactly where He wants us to be spiritually useful. God wanted to use Jonah in Nineveh. Where does He want to use you?

Even when we are in the right place, we need the Spirit's guidance every hour as to what we should do or say. These are simple lessons, but essential for us to learn and practice.

—Adapted from *Jonah and His Experiences* by W.W. Fereday

## WHO CAN TELL?

*“Who can tell if God will ... turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?” (Jonah 3:9)*

A certain man was tempted to commit suicide. He reasoned that because of his sin, his fate in Hell was certain. He thought that continuing his life would only increase his sin and add to the misery from which he saw no escape.

With these thoughts in mind, he went to a bridge, planning to jump to his death in the river below. But just as he was about to do it, he seemed to hear a voice saying to him, “Who can tell?” It was just as if the words had been spoken out loud. By these words his plan was interrupted and his thoughts were changed. Now he wondered, “Who can tell if I may find mercy?” “Who can tell whether God will forgive me?”

By such thoughts as these, it pleased God to graciously enable him, through all his doubts and fears, to throw himself by faith on Jesus Christ, humbly desiring and expecting mercy. He was not disappointed, and became a prominent Christian who, from his own experience of the riches of God’s grace, was greatly used in the conversion and comfort of others.

*“All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me; and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37).*

—From *Religious and Moral Anecdotes*

## GOD IN EVERYTHING

Nothing helps the Christian to endure the trials of life so much as the habit of seeing *God in everything*. If we remember, as we start each day, that the hand of our Father can be traced in every scene—if we could see in the smallest, as well as in the most weighty circumstances, traces of the divine presence, how full of deep interest and meaning each day would be!

The Book of Jonah illustrates this truth in a very special way. To see this, we only need to notice one word: “*prepared*.” This word occurs in the book four times, each time as an action of God. When Jonah had been cast forth into the sea, we read that “*The LORD had prepared a great fish*” (Jonah 1:17). A great fish was nothing uncommon; there are many of them in the sea. Yet the Lord prepared one for Jonah in order that it might be the instrument of God’s grace.

Again, in chapter four, we find the prophet sitting on the east side of the city of Nineveh, in sullenness and impatience, grieved because the city had not been overthrown and asking the Lord to take away his life. “*And the LORD God prepared a gourd*” (Jonah 4:6). Men might see a thousand gourds, and even sit beneath their shade, and yet see nothing extraordinary in them. But Jonah’s gourd exhibited traces of the hand of God, and forms a link—an important link—in the chain of circumstances through which the prophet was passing.

“*God prepared a worm*” (Jonah 4:7), and this worm, small as it may be, was as much a divine agent as was the “great fish.” A worm, when used by God, can do wonders. It withered Jonah’s gourd, and taught him—as it teaches us—a solemn lesson. True, its lesson was only learned after “*God prepared a vehement east wind*” (Jonah 4:8), but this only illustrates more strikingly the greatness of our Father’s

mind. He can prepare the worm, and He can prepare the wind, and make them both work together to achieve His great designs.

Jehovah can tell the number of the stars, and while He does so He can take knowledge of a falling sparrow. He can make the whirlwind His chariot, and a broken heart His dwelling place. Nothing is great or small with God. The believer, therefore, must be

mindful that God can use everything to accomplish His purposes in us and for us. We may pass through the same circumstances and encounter the same trials as other people; but we must not meet them in the same way. We should be listening for the voice of God and heed His message in the most trifling as well as in the most momentous occurrences of the day. —C.H. Mackintosh, condensed

## THE LAST WORD

*“Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest 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?” (Jonah 4:10,11).*

In the book of Jonah, God had the last word, as indeed He always will. What a word it is! Jonah was “exceeding glad” (Jonah 4:6) for the gourd because it added to his own comfort, but utterly unconscious of the joy in Heaven over a whole city that had repented. Even more, he was exceedingly displeased and even very angry (Jonah 4:1) because Nineveh had been spared from destruction! Jonah was far more deeply concerned with the fate of a single plant than he was with perhaps a million or more never-dying souls who had just turned to the living and true God.

What a lesson for us today! How many of us are far more deeply concerned over our gardens and our clothes, our houses and our businesses, our cars and our gadgets, than we are with the millions of perishing—yet never-dying—souls all around us. How many of us are “exceeding

glad” for something that adds a little more to our own comfort and ease and luxury, but we are utterly unconscious and without a care or a thought as to whether there is joy, exceeding joy, in Heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10). Furthermore, like Jonah, we are “exceedingly displeased” and even “angry” if anything happens to disturb our comfort and upset the course of our day. The unsaved in their blindness may bow down to wood and stone, for all we care, provided the worms do not get into our gourds and the hot east wind does not blow upon us!

If we are honest, the little book of Jonah hits most of us very hard indeed, but what comfort it may bring to our wounded souls to remember that Jonah’s God is our God. We have to confess that the same patience, grace, and mercy that followed Jonah from start to finish have also followed us from the start, and we are sure that they will continue with us to the end. May He deliver us from our disobedience and self-will, from our pouting and our anger! May He form and fashion us like unto Himself and give us a true estimate of the real value of gourds and souls, and make us vessels which are set apart and ready for the Master’s use!

—Condensed from *Lessons from Jonah* by G.C. Willis