

Jonah Study:
Salvation Belongs to the Lord

by

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Salvation Belongs to the Lord: Jonah and God's Unexpected Mercy

This 6-week study of the book of Jonah is a verse-by-verse look at this one of the most powerful declarations of God's judgment and mercy. The purpose of the book of Jonah is to show God's people that His plan is exceedingly compassionate (God is gracious) and exceedingly certain (God is sovereign).

The title of the study—"Salvation Belongs to the Lord"—comes directly from Jonah 2:10. This is the central theme of the book of Jonah: that God loves in freedom.

Session 1—Introduction to Jonah

Session 2—Literary Aspects of Jonah

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Salvation Belongs to the Lord: Jonah and God's Unexpected Mercy

Session 1: Introduction to Jonah

Jonah: the Book and the Prophet

The purpose of the book of Jonah is to show God's people that His plan is exceedingly compassionate (God is gracious) and exceedingly certain (God is sovereign). In other words, "salvation belongs to the Lord" (Jonah 2:10). This is the central theme of the book of Jonah: that God loves in freedom. We should desire to understand, accept, and love God's sovereign grace, rather than oppose it or be resentful of it. The book of Jonah stresses the freedom and primacy of God and God's initiative and grace toward humanity. Christians, applying the theology of Jonah to the person and work of Jesus, could claim that Jesus Christ is the freedom of God acting in love toward humanity.

The story of Jonah is one of the most well-known Bible stories of all. The reluctant prophet, Jonah, is commanded to go and preach to the Ninevites, Israel's sworn enemies, so that destruction might not fall upon them. Jonah would love nothing more than to see Nineveh destroyed, but he knows that God is compassionate and will forgive them if they repent, therefore he boards a ship heading the other direction away from Nineveh. God's wrath follows the ship, until Jonah is thrown overboard by the other sailors and swallowed by a giant fish. While in the belly of the fish, he repents of his own disobedience and is delivered back onto shore, at which point he preaches against Nineveh's sin and commands them to repent. They do, in wholehearted fashion, and God relents from destroying them. The book ends with Jonah waiting in vain for Nineveh to be destroyed, bitter that God would show such kindness to a people who are at war with His own.

We learn from 2 Kings that Jonah was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II, 786 - 746 B.C. The book of Jonah is unique among the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Rather than being a collection of the oracles of the prophet, it relates episodes in his life. In the Old Testament, the prophet Jonah is mentioned outside the book only in 2 Kings 14:25, Matthew 12:38-41, Matthew 16:4 and 17, and Luke 11:29-32. Although the prophet lived in the eighth century BC there is dispute on the correct dating of the book. It is written in the third person, and no author is identified anywhere in the Bible.

Outline of Jonah

Part One

- I. First Commission and Jonah's Response is to Flee (1:1-16)
- II. God's Response to Jonah and Jonah Repents (1:17-2:10)

Part Two

- III. Second Commission and Jonah's Response is to Obey (3:1-10)
- IV. God's Response to Jonah and Jonah Resents (4:1-11)

Major Themes

1. Mercy—God's compassion extends even beyond what we would like, even to those whom we ourselves show no mercy.
2. God's Sovereignty—God's plan will be carried out and cannot be avoided.
3. Resentment—The book is a vivid portrait of what bitterness and resentment against other people and against God's plan can do to a person's soul—even the soul of God's own prophet.

Studying the Book of Jonah

The study of Jonah should be done should be understood as a historical, literary, and theological discipline. Our goal is to determine (historical study), discover (literary analysis), and describe (theological formulation) what the text meant to its original audience and to explicate what it means today.

The historical study of Jonah bridges the gap between the ancient reader (the original audience) and us (the contemporary reader). But our investigation of Jonah must not stop with history. We should also incorporate the themes, categories, motifs, and concepts from the text itself. Attention given to the literary aspect of texts can lead to an additional perspective on the authorial intent for writing a text. In addition to history study and literary analysis, our understanding of Jonah should also be theological. This means that the themes and teachings of one text are to be analyzed by the doctrines and tenets of other Biblical passages.

When these three aspects are taken into account there are significant themes that are brought into focus. First, Jonah was both an object and an agent (reluctantly) of God's mercy. This teaches Israel and Christians their mediatorial role to proclaim God's grace and forgiveness those outside the community. Second, Jonah also displays God's freedom, resourcefulness, and undeviating effort to instill mercy and express wrath in judgment. An important theme in Jonah that was neither unprecedented nor frequently mentioned in the Old Testament was the inclusiveness of God's mercy.

This study on Jonah will first look at the historical aspects of Jonah, both the prophet and the book. Second, will be on a focus the literary devices and sophistication of the book of Jonah, such as parallelisms, symmetry /asymmetry, and the repetition of key words. Third, we will look at the themes found in Jonah as they relate to the rest of Scripture. The themes will be traced throughout the Old Testament. Fourth, we will trace the themes in Jonah throughout the New Testament. The main themes that will be investigated are 1) the wide scope of God's mercy and 2) the intentional scope of the mediatorial role. These two themes are not predominant in the OT except for a few passages and the book of Jonah, but they are significantly more central to the teaching in the NT.

When these three perspectives—the historical, theological, and literary significance of texts—are applied to the book of Jonah, various themes are centralized, such as the mercy of God and His desire to have His people serve as mediators of His grace. The book of Jonah, while being a complete book in itself, does not stand on its own. It is a part of the canon, and as such it is viewed in light of the other books of scripture.

Historical Study of Jonah

The book of Jonah demonstrates the scope of God's mercy as He receives other nations and the mediatorial role Israel was to fulfill. The book of Jonah focuses on Israel's prophetic role to the nations. This focus is expressed in the two central themes of the book: the universality of God's mercy (and by implication, the universality of His judgment) and the mediatorial role of Israel. Included in these two themes of God's freedom and resourcefulness are His undeviating effort to instill mercy, His right and ability to express wrath in judgment against other nations, and the inclusive nature of God's mercy and forgiveness. The two main themes, along with their sub points, will be developed through historical and literary analysis of the text.

Jonah's ministry took place in the 8th century BC – sometime between 780 and 755 BC. We see him mentioned in 2 Kings 14:23-25 as predicting the expansion of Israel's territory during the reign of Jeroboam II. Remember that this was a time when the Israelites had divided their nation into to

separate kingdoms—the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. They continued to worship the same God, but they were two separate kingdoms. We see here that Jonah is from the town of Gath Hopher, which was in the territory of the tribe of Zebulun – not far from Nazareth. He was clearly a prophet of respect and stature. And so it makes sense when God sends him on a mission. The language is the usual prophetic formula—“the word of the Lord came to Jonah.”

It is important and helpful for the process of interpretation to observe the historical setting of the book of Jonah, specifically the Jewish-Assyrian relations. Before the destruction of Nineveh by Babylon in 612 B.C., Assyria brutalized Israel. Nineveh's evil ways are described in the book of Nahum (2:11-12; 3:1,19). In Nahum, the intent is to suggest the cruelty of Assyria as a whole- not just the capital city. Hence, Nineveh stands as a synecdoche for the brutally oppressive Assyrian empire itself. Assyria's atrocities were so notorious that the narration hardly needed an explanation or elaboration.

An understanding of this historical setting adds to the significance of Jonah's desire to neglect God's message to preach to the Ninevites and of God's desire to send a prophet to Nineveh. Jonah did not want to preach to Nineveh because he knew that there was a possibility that God would relent and forgive the brutal and cruel nation that oppressed his people. God wanted to send a prophet to Nineveh in order to warn them that judgment was near if they did not repent. The book of Jonah mocks Jonah for his self-righteousness and hypocrisy, while it celebrates God's mercy and compassion as He offers forgiveness to a brutal heathen nation that is both His enemy and the enemy of His people. The original audience was to learn from the Jonah narrative that they too were both objects and agent of God's mercy.

Historical Book or Parable

The incredibility of some of the events related in the text has prompted some scholars to identify the book as allegory or parable. The book, however, is presented to us as a historical account. It is ascribed to a historical prophet (2 Kings 14:25), and it contains no authorial comments or literary clues that suggest it is a parable.

Nevertheless, some have questioned the historicity of the book, especially because of the miraculous events surrounding the fish. At times, the odd structure and ending of the book have been used to support this theory, since the book does not follow a normal form for historical narrative. And some have pointed out that the poem in chapter 2 cannot possibly be a historical account of Jonah's experience in the fish.

First, if we accept the reality of miracles, there is no reason to think the basic events of the book could not have happened as stated. The book does not tell us whether or not Jonah died in the fish, although this is a possibility (Jon. 2:6). If he did die and return to life, it would correspond well with Jesus' mention of Jonah (Matt. 12:39-40). But in either case, divine intervention makes all things possible.

Second, the odd structure and ending of the book are actually good arguments against this book being a parable. The book is far longer than any other parable in Scripture, and it is cumbersome in its arrangement. Besides this, it names an actual historical figure as its main character. All of these facts point away from Jonah being a parable.

Third, the poem in chapter 2 does appear to be a later rendering of Jonah's experience in the fish. Probably this is a poetic summary of Jonah's fear and panic in the fish, and of a vow he made to the Lord for salvation from the fish. It is likely that this poem was composed to attend the payment of the

vow upon Jonah's return to Israel. This does not cast any doubt on the historicity of the events portrayed in the poem.

Finally, Jesus indicated that his death, burial and resurrection would take place "just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites" (Luke 11:30). He also indicated that on the Day of Judgment the Ninevites would condemn the unbelievers of Jesus' generation (Luke 11:32). Both of these details – especially the second – indicate that Jesus believed that the story of Jonah was historical. This alone ought to convince us of the historicity of Jonah.

Other interpretations of Jonah have also been offered, such as it being allegory or parable. With regard to allegory, there are no textual cues that it is an allegory, and Jesus did not treat it as such. Moreover, if it is an allegory, most of its details are far from intuitive, so that it would be a highly unusual and indeed rather useless allegory.

We can conclude that the story told by the book of Jonah is historical.

Salvation Belongs to the Lord: Jonah and God's Unexpected Mercy

Session 2: Literary Aspects of Jonah

The book of Jonah demonstrates the scope of God's mercy as He receives other nations and the mediatorial role Israel was to fulfill. The book of Jonah focuses on Israel's prophetic role to the nations. This focus is expressed in the two central themes of the book: the universality of God's mercy (and by implication, the universality of His judgment) and the mediatorial role of Israel. Included in these two themes of God's freedom and resourcefulness are His undeviating effort to instill mercy, His right and ability to express wrath in judgment against other nations, and the inclusive nature of God's mercy and forgiveness.

An aspect of the book of Jonah that is significant for the interpretive process is the question of genre; and closely tied to the issue of genre is the topic of historicity. The scope of this research does not lend itself to an exploration of the various possibilities, but at times the book hints toward a historical reading of the text while at other times it points toward a parabolic interpretation. Even if Jonah is to be read as a historical account, there is no doubt that the text is highly stylized. The author strengthened his message with keen awareness to literary style. Blenkinsopp comments that the book's level of literary sophistication is manifested in its use of ironic contrast, deliberate exaggeration and distortion, symmetry, and deployment of key words. The author, continues Blenkinsopp, was obviously a trained hand at writing and was well versed in the historical, scribal, and prophetic heritage of Israel. He was writing to a specific audience to communicate a specific message.

It is beneficial to understand the larger structure of the Jonah narrative before making specific comments on the general themes found in the book. The book of Jonah is divided into two main parts, both parts having two episodes. The repetition of God's commission to Jonah (1:1-2 and 3:1-2) serves as a literary introduction for both parts. Here is a summary outline of the book:

Part One

- V. First Commission and Jonah's Response (1:1-16)
- VI. God's Response to Jonah (1:17-2:10)

Part Two

- VII. Second Commission and Jonah's Response (3:1-10)
- VIII. God's Response to Jonah (4:1-11)

The outline of the book shows the similarity of part one and part two. There is a large structural parallelism between parts one and two, episodes I and III, and episodes II and IV. An exploration into the more specific aspects of the story reveals a noticeable symmetry throughout the entire text. The following is a chart reflecting the external design and symmetry of the book of Jonah:

Part One: Chapters 1-2

1. Word of Yhwh to Jonah (1:1)
2. Content of the word (1:2)
3. Response of Jonah (1:3)

Part Two: Chapters 3-4

1. Word of Yhwh to Jonah (3:1)
2. Content of the word (3:2)
3. Response of Jonah (3:3-4a)

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| <p>4. Report of impending disaster (1:4)</p> <p>5. Response to impending disaster (1:5)
-by the sailors
-by Jonah</p> <p>6. Unnamed captain of the ship (1:6)
-efforts to avert disaster by
*action
*words to Jonah
*hope</p> <p>7. Sailors and Jonah (1:7-15)
-sailor's proposal (1:7ab)
-sailor's action and its results (1:7cd)
-sailor's questions (1:8)
-Jonah's reply (1:9)
-sailor's response (1:10)
-sailor's question (1:11)
-Jonah's reply (1:12)
-sailor's action (1:13)
-sailor's prayer (1:14)
-sailor's action (1:15ab)
-result: disaster averted (1:15c)</p> <p>8. Response of the sailors (1:16)</p> <p>9. Yhwh and Jonah (2:1-11)
-Yhwh's action and its result (2:1)
-Jonah's prayer (2:2-10)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">-Yhwh's response and its result
*by word (2:11a)
*by nature: fish (2:11b)</p> | <p>4. Report of impending disaster (3:4b)</p> <p>5. Response to impending disaster (3:5)
-by Ninevites</p> <p>6. Unnamed king of Nineveh (3:6-9)
-efforts to avert disaster by
*action
*words to Jonah
*hope</p> <p>7. Ninevites and God (3:10)

-Ninevites action (3:10ab)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">-result: disaster averted (3:10cd)</p> <p>8. Response of Jonah (4:1)</p> <p>9. Yhwh and Jonah (4:2-11)

-Jonah's prayer (4:2-3)
-Yhwh's question (4:4)
-Jonah's action (4:5)
-Yhwh's response and its result

*by nature: plant (4:6a-d)
-Jonah's response (4:6e)
-Yhwh's response and its result
*by nature: worm, sun, and wind
(4:7-8abc)</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">-Jonah's response (4:8d)
-Yhwh's question (4:9a)
-Jonah response (4:9a)
-Yhwh's question (4:10-11)</p> |
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Symmetry and Asymmetry

One will notice that this chart reflects symmetry and asymmetry. Both are rather significant in the exploration of the main themes of this text. A very obvious and blatant symmetrical arrangement draws attention to certain aspects of the narrative and emphasizes the point the author is communicating. Symmetry produces rhythm, contrast, emphasis, and continuity while asymmetry disrupts rhythm to give contrast and emphasis through discontinuity. George Adam Smith calls asymmetry "symmetrophobia" which is defined as "an instinctive aversion to absolute symmetry, which, if it knows no better, will express itself in arbitrary and even violent disturbances of the style or pattern of the work, Rather than asymmetry destroying symmetry, it confirms it. Difference enhances similarity, but within symmetry asymmetry also flourishes. These literary devices keeps the reader's mind alert. Phyllis Tribble writes of Jonah: "All in all, an exquisitely designed story begins to disclose its treasures for the readers."

When noting the symmetry and asymmetry of Jonah one finds various points being emphasized. This analysis of symmetry and asymmetry in Jonah will focus only on the themes previously mentioned: universality of God's mercy and the mediatorial role of Israel. First, will be an exposition of the themes found in the symmetry of the text and following that will be the themes expressed in the asymmetry of the text.

The symmetry and the repetition of God's commission to Jonah both divide the narrative into distinct parts, but also emphasize the mediatorial role Jonah was to fulfill. This repetition establishes symmetry, sets the tone, and provides meaning. Commentators disagree on the significance attached to the parallelism between 1:1-3 and 3:1-3. Regardless of the debate, the symmetry, at the least, highlights God's desire to send a prophet to the depraved Gentile city of Nineveh. This is evident by the repetition of three verbs to Jonah, "arise," "go," and "call."

Units 4, 1:4 and 3:4, give two accounts of impending disaster. One involves a ship of Gentiles and the other a city. This is an indication of the universality of God's judgment. While God is the God of Israel, He is also the God of the universe and He has the ability and right to initiate judgment.

Associated with the reports of impending disaster are the responses by those in threat of judgment (units 5). Each response is described by three verbs. The pagan sailors respond to the disaster sent by Yahweh. Three verbs in the discourse describe their response: "they feared," "they cried," and "they threw." Likewise, the response of the Ninevites is also described by three verbs: "they believed," "they called," and "they put on." Though the verbs are different they match in number, order, and kind. The first verb in each response was an inward response, the second verb was an articulated response, and the third verb was an outward response. Units 5 have equivalent length, verb forms, characters, themes, and locations within the external design. The parallelism of units 5 emphasize the universal aspect of God's mercy as the Gentiles in imminent danger of wrath respond with inward, vocal, and outward responses. The narrator contrasted the responses of the foreigners to the response of Jonah, God's prophet.

Not only do the Gentiles respond, but they express a theology of hope. The leaders of each group, the captain and the king, offer a speech with an attitude that anticipates, but does not guarantee salvation. The captain says to Jonah, "Perhaps your God will be concerned about us so that we will not perish." The king's words are similar, "Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish," This theology of hope proclaimed by the foreign leaders reveal the inclusiveness and universality of God's mercy also extended to the Gentiles also. It also expresses the freedom of God's mercy as He gives hope of salvation to pagans and Gentiles. The hope of salvation is manifested in units 7. They both end in the shared theme of averted disaster (1:15 and 3:10). The sea was calmed from its raging and God relented concerning the calamity He proclaimed He would bring them.

The difference in units 9 are remarkable. Unit 9 in part one is Jonah's prayer is a psalm of thanksgiving for his salvation from drowning (2:2-9). His response to God in 4:2-3 is a prose speech

that contains the ancient credo found in Exodus 34:6. The difference in genre matched the difference in tone and content. This offers contrasting portraits of Jonah. He is one who is an object of God's mercy but is hesitant at being an agent of God's mercy.

There is asymmetry found in units 9 as divine questions (part two) replace divine imperatives and divine power (part one). The outcome is still open. Tribble comments on this asymmetry: "Viewed from the perspective of the whole, the juxtaposition of the ending show theological movement from a god of distance to a god of dialogue; from a god of power to a god of persuasion, from a god of rigidity to a god of rhetoric." It is Yahweh, not Jonah, who has the last word. The endings to both part one and part two contrast even as they correspond. As asymmetry vies with symmetry, God's mercy is highlighted when he asks, "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh?"

There is significant asymmetry also found in units 5. The asymmetry is expressed in the form of a gap. The response to the impending disaster in part one involves a response from both the sailors and Jonah. In part two, the impending disaster is announced by Jonah and it threatens only Nineveh, not Jonah. The narrative keeps the focus on Nineveh as it moves from the humble response of the citizens and shifts immediate focus to the similar response of the king. This literary structuring highly emphasizes the universality and inclusiveness of God's mercy.

Disparity

Adele Berlin comments on two different types of disparities found in "the poetics of point of view." There is the disparity between two characters and the disparity between character and narrator/reader. Jonah uses the disparity between a character and the narrator/reader. The reader is not told until the end of the story why Jonah rejected his prophetic commission and fled away from Nineveh. The reason was clear from the start for Jonah. Jonah 3:10-4:3 states:

God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. This displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said. I pray thee, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I hastened to flee to Tarshish. For I knew thou art a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and of great kindness and repentest thee of evil.

Jonah knew that all along his prophecy was likely to be wrong and that the despised enemy of his people may encounter the graciousness and mercy of Yahweh. The main question of the book is why did Jonah neglect God's commission.

Since Jonah had the answer the whole story, this is only the reader's question. The reader comes to understand the reason only after it has happened (Jonah 4:2). By the use of disparity, the themes of the inclusiveness of God's mercy and the mediatorial role of Israel are highlighted and reinforced.

Salvation Belongs to the Lord: Jonah and God's Unexpected Mercy

Session 3: Jonah chapter 1—God's Judgment and Mercy

The main theme of chapter one is Yahweh and Yahweh's care for Gentiles. This chapter reveals the universality of God's mercy and how God uses His people to be messengers of this mercy. Jonah was an object of God's mercy and objected to being an agent of God's mercy.

Object and Agents of God's Mercy

This chapter highlights God's desire to send a prophet to the depraved city of Nineveh. This is evident by the repetition of three verbs to Jonah, "arise," "go," and "call" (1:2 and 3:2). One of the main ways God brings mercy to others is through those who have received mercy. Israel was called to be a "light to the nations." Read Isaiah 51:3-5, Isaiah 60:2-4, and Zechariah 8:20-24. Notice that it is the receiving of God mercy that attracts others to God's mercy. Those who have received mercy (Israel, Jonah, and us) are invited to be messengers of the very mercy they needed (Isaiah 52:7 and Romans 10:14-15).

God's Judgment

Jonah 1:4 gives an account of impending disaster. This is an indication of the universality of God's judgment. While God is the God of Israel, He is also the God of the universe and He has the ability and right to initiate judgment.

Below is a chiasm in chapter 1. Notice that it highlights God and their response.

- A- The sailors are afraid: the sea rages (4-5a)
- B- The sailors cried to their gods (5a,b)
- C- Attempts to save the ship (5b,c,6a)
- D- Jonah is exhorted to help (6a,b)
- E- The sailors ask the cause of their plight (7a)
- F- The lot fell upon Jonah (7b)
- G- Jonah is asked to explain (8)
- H- *I fear YHWH, the creator* (9,10a)
- G'- Jonah is asked to explain (10a,b)
- F'- They knew Jonah was fleeing from YHWH (10c)
- E'- The sailors ask the remedy to their plight (11)
- D'- Jonah gives instructions that will help (12)
- C'- Attempts to save the ship are in vain (13)
- B'- The sailors cry to YHWH (14)
- A'- The sea ceased from its raging: the sailors feared YHWH (15-16)

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 1:7). Fearing the Lord is the recognition of the Creator/creation distinction. God is infinite, perfect, and holy. We are not. Fear of the Lord is being awed by a view of God's majesty, greatness, holiness, righteousness, and power. Yahweh has the right and power to judge. Because of the distinction between us and God, fear is the appropriate response to God. However, we should also have hope, because God is also merciful, patient, and gracious (Exodus 34:6-7).

God's Mercy

Associated with the reports of impending disaster are the responses by those in threat of judgment. Each response is described by three verbs. The pagan sailors respond to the disaster sent by Yahweh.

Three verbs in the discourse describe their response: “they feared,” “they cried,” and “they threw.” The first verb was an inward response, the second verb was an articulated response, and the third verb was an outward response.

Not only do the Gentiles respond, but they also express a theology of hope. The leader of the group, the captain, offers a speech with an attitude that anticipates, but does not guarantee salvation. The captain says to Jonah, “Perhaps your God will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.” This emphasizes the universal aspect of God's mercy as the Gentiles in imminent danger of wrath respond with inward, vocal, and outward responses.

This theology of hope proclaimed by the foreign leader reveals the inclusiveness and universality of God's mercy, which is extended to the Gentiles also. It also expresses the freedom of God's mercy as He gives hope of salvation to pagans and Gentiles. The hope of salvation is manifested in 1:15, when the disaster is averted. The sea was calmed from its raging.

“Arise” and other word repetitions

The Hebrew word for “rise up” (*qûm*) is repeated frequently in chapter one. In 1:2, God tells Jonah, “Arise, go to Nineveh.” The next verse begins in a way that would lead us to expect a typical command-fulfillment pattern “and Jonah rose up...” But instead of completing this sentence with the expected “to go to Nineveh,” the verse says “to flee to Tarshish.” In 1:6 we see the word again in an irony manner. While the pagan sailors are trying to save the ship, Jonah is asleep. The pagan captain repeats the same verb when speaking to Jonah—“Arise and call upon you god.”

Also notice the other repetitions: “great” (1:2, 4, 10, 13 and 3:2) and “go down” (1:3,6, and 2:6). The word “to appoint” or “to provide” (1:17, 4:6 and 8) is noteworthy as it teaches that God is the God of the universe, not just the God of Israel. Throughout the story, Jonah tries to escape, but God utilizes his creation to bring him back. God provides a great fish (1:17), a vine (4:6), a worm (4:7), and a scorching wind (4:8) to show Jonah that there is no way he can escape God. Yahweh is the God of Israel, the God of Nineveh, and the God of the entire creation.

Compassion, the Fish, and Jesus

Chapter one focuses on God's compassion for those outside Israel. The chapter contrasts spiritually sensitive pagans with the reluctant Israelite prophet. The sailors shake before God's wrathful storm while Jonah sleeps. They are concerned that God not hold them accountable for Jonah's death when they cast him overboard.

Not only did God amazingly extend mercy to the Gentile sailors, but he also saved Jonah in the midst of his intentional rebellion to God. The fish was not an instrument of God's judgment, but rather of his salvation, since it saved Jonah from death by drowning.

The NT proclaims that Gentiles can come to God and be part of God's people. Jesus was sent to the world (John 1:6-14). Jesus even compared his ministry with the ministry of Jonah (Matt 12:38-45 and Luke 11:24-32). He was asked for a miraculous sign, and in response he said he would be three days and three nights in the earth. He compared this with Jonah's stay in the belly of the fish. His reference was to the time between his crucifixion and resurrection (Luke 24:46). He is “greater than Jonah” (Luke 11:32), because while Jonah reluctantly preached to save a city against his will, Jesus freely gave up his life to save many (Matt 20:28, Mark 10:45, John 10:11, 17-18, and Philippians 2:5-8).

Salvation Belongs to the Lord: Jonah and God's Unexpected Mercy

Session 4: Jonah chapter 2—God's Salvation

The main theme of chapter two is found in verse 10: "Salvation belongs the Lord." This brings together major points of the book of Jonah—that God's plan is exceedingly compassionate (God is merciful) and exceedingly certain (God is sovereign). Another shorthand for this is that God loves in freedom.

The poem in chapter two represents what Jonah prayed in the fish's belly. Jonah 2:2-4 seems to indicate that the quote in verse 4 is the only thing he really prayed, and that perhaps not verbatim. He was probably too panicked to be very eloquent. His prayer seems primarily to have been a desperate plea for mercy. Notice that Jonah affirms his loyalty to God in the most profound way in the psalm, but then in the following chapter he is the reluctant prophet once again. Indeed, in the last chapter he is antagonistic toward God as well.

Chapter two is clearly a thanksgiving psalm. The fish was not an instrument of God's judgment, but rather of his salvation, since it saved Jonah from death by drowning. Jonah was not complaining about his predicament inside the fish. Rather, he was thanking God for delivering him. Notice in 2:1, 6, and 9 how he talks as if he is already saved. When you read this prayer, keep in mind that when Jonah refers to the distress of the past he means the time he spent in the water, not the time he spent in the fish. The water is the threat of death. The fish is the refuge of salvation. The cry of distress is past tense (in the water!); the voice of confidence and thanks is present (in the fish).

Jonah fully recognized himself as an undeserving recipient of God's grace. Even though Jonah knew that he was guilty and even though he knew he deserved death, in the moment when death was imminent Jonah remembered that the God whom he had served so imperfectly was still "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and repenting of evil" (4:2). And he cried out to the Lord for mercy and God appointed a fish for Jonah's rescue.

Jonah 2:1-2 is the simple statement that sums up what happened when Jonah sank in the water: he cried out to God and God answered him by sending the fish. There is a lot of encouragement for us here. The general point is that God answers his children when they cry to him in distress. But we can unpack this a bit.

First, God answers us in spite of our guilt. Jonah was not on his way to Nineveh when he fell overboard. He was running from God. He was guilty of disobedience. That's why he was in the water. His distress was the fruit of his guilt, but God answered him and gave him mercy. That is not an isolated teaching in Scripture. Read Psalm 107:10-15. If your disobedience is the cause of your distress, repent and cry to the Lord. He will answer you in spite of your guilt.

Second, God answers us in spite of his judgment. Notice verse 3: "For you threw me into the deep." According to 1:15, it was the ship's crew who picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea. But Jonah knows that it was all of God, but yet he still ventured to pray for deliverance from the very God who threw him into the water. And the God who threw him in heard his prayer and performed a miracle to save him. Even when God is displeased with us he never brings us into affliction merely for the sake of punishment. His purposes always include redemption. Job 36:15 says, "God delivers the afflicted by their affliction and opens their ear by adversity." Adversity is redemptive, not merely punitive. Even if

you have felt as though the very hand of God is against you in your distress, do not despair to call upon him. He answers his children in spite of his own judgment.

Third, God answers us and delivers us from impossible circumstances. Verses 5 and 6 describe the extremity of Jonah's plight. It would be a terrible thing to fall overboard and be left behind when the sea is placid. How much worse to be thrown into a raging storm with twenty or thirty foot waves and feel yourself sucked so deep you know you're going to die. And, as if that were not enough, as you struggle toward the air you hit a mass of seaweed and it tangles all around your head and neck. It's a terrifying scene. God let the circumstances become impossible before he delivered Jonah. Often circumstances develop to the point where we can't see any way out. But then we need to remember Jonah's plight. It was impossible. But not with God! (Mark 10:27). When we cry to the Lord in our distress he answers us and delivers us from impossible situations.

Fourth, God answers us in God's timing and sometimes that is at the last minute. Verse 7 says: "When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to thee into thy holy temple." More starkly we would say, "As I was losing consciousness I remembered the Lord." Jonah was still praying without an answer in sight just before he blacked out. In fact, he probably did black out and regained consciousness several days later, realizing he had been spared in the belly of a fish. This is similar to Habakkuk's experience: "O Lord, how long will I cry for help, and will you not hear?" (Hab. 1:2). But Jonah gives us courage to be unrelenting in our prayer, to keep on crying out to God even as we go unconscious, and to believe that God will answer in his timing.

Fifth, God answers our cry of distress in order to win our loyalty and praise and to fill us with thanksgiving for his mercy (verses 8 and 9). The answer to Jonah's prayer has produced its proper effect. It has filled Jonah with wonder that anyone would forsake the Lord and keep idols. God taught Jonah that if you leave the Lord you leave mercy. And he has filled Jonah's mouth with thanksgiving. God answers prayers in order that thanksgiving will abound to his glory. God said in Psalm 50:15, "Call upon me in the day of trouble; and I will deliver you and you shall glorify me."

Finally, God answers us in our guilty distress to help us become merciful like he is. We are objects of mercy in order to also be agents of mercy. In chapter three, after Jonah is back on land, God sends him again to Nineveh. Jonah goes and preaches judgment. And in 3:5 it says, "The people of Nineveh believed God." Then 3:10 gives God's response, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it." Now look what's happened in the first three chapters. Jonah disobeyed God. God put him under the threat of destruction. Jonah cries out in his distress and God answers him and gives him a new lease on life. So with the Ninevites. They disobeyed God (1:2). God put them under the threat of destruction (3:4). They cry in their distress and God answers them and gives them a new lease on life. God showed mercy to Jonah so that Jonah would learn to show mercy to the Ninevites.

God answers us in mercy to make us merciful.

Salvation Belongs to the Lord: Jonah and God's Unexpected Mercy

Session 5: Jonah chapter 3—God's Free Will

The focus of chapter three is the wide scope of God's mercy. Nineveh is Israel's sworn enemies and Jonah is called to preach to them so that destruction might not fall upon them. Jonah would love nothing more than to see Nineveh destroyed. Because Jonah knows that God is compassionate and would forgive the brutal and cruel nation that oppressed his people if they repented, he boarded a ship heading the other direction away from Nineveh. Before the destruction of Nineveh by Babylon in 612 B.C., Assyria brutalized Israel. Nineveh's evil ways are described in the book of Nahum (2:11-12; 3:1,19). In Nahum, the intent is to suggest the cruelty of Assyria as a whole, not just the capital city. Hence, Nineveh stands as a symbol for the brutally oppressive Assyrian empire itself. Assyria's atrocities were so notorious that the narration hardly needed an explanation or elaboration. This is why Jonah disobeyed God's original commission. But in 3:2-3 we have an initial resolution to the story. God commissions Jonah a second time by repeating his command "Arise, go to Nineveh, and call out" (verse 2). This time, Jonah obeys (verse 3). Just as he thought, Nineveh repents and God relents from destroying them.

Parallels

The experience of the Ninevites in chapter three parallels the experience of the sailors in chapter one. The universality of God's judgment is seen in 1:4 and 3:4, which are accounts of impending disaster. While God is the God of Israel, He is also the God of the universe and He has the ability and right to initiate judgment.

The responses to the impending disaster are described by three verbs. The pagan sailors feared, cried out, and threw. Likewise, the response of the Ninevites is also described by three verbs in verse 5: "they believed God," "they called for a fast," and "they put on sackcloth." The people of Nineveh repent and the king, who hears of Jonah's message second-hand, calls for a city-wide repentance (verses 7-9). The parallelism here emphasize the universal aspect of God's mercy as the Gentiles in imminent danger of wrath respond with inward, vocal, and outward repentance.

Not only do the Gentiles respond, but they express a theology of hope. Similar to the captains, reply, the king says (verse 9): "Who knows? God may turn and relent, and withdraw His fierce anger so that we shall not perish." This theology of hope reveals the inclusiveness and universality of God's mercy also extended to the Gentiles. It also expresses the freedom of God's mercy as He gives hope of salvation to pagans and Gentiles. The hope of salvation is manifested in 1:15 and 3:10. God relented concerning the calamity He proclaimed He would bring them.

God's Concern for the World

The theme of the undeviating mercy of God as expressed in Jonah and other Old Testament passages (Gen. 21:8-21 and 2 Kings 5) is also found in the New Testament. This theme is expanded through the ministry and teaching of Jesus and His apostles. The inward change by God's grace is called a regeneration (Titus 3:5), a spiritual resurrection (Eph. 1:19, 29), a calling out of darkness into a marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9), a new birth (John 3:3), and a making alive (Col. 2:13). Hebrews 12:2 notices that as the "author and perfecter of faith" God instills His grace in His people.

The salvation offered to Gentile (Isa 45:22, 49:6, 52:10) implies an acknowledgement of the lordship of Israel's God (Isa. 45:53 and 51:5). The point is that they are to embrace the God of Israel. This is in

fact what happens to the pagans in the book of Jonah (Jonah 1:16 and 3:5). Isaiah 27:11 resembles the prophecy Jonah was to bring to Nineveh. Nineveh's repentance was the reason for the mercy bestowed on them. The freedom of God and God's will to save had already been clearly affirmed in Ezekiel 18:21-22 and Jeremiah 18:7-8. Jonah 3:10 is a clear expression of this mercy.

Not only is God merciful to Gentile nations, but He also employs His prophets and His nation to be agents of this mercy. God has desired that His people be agents of His mercy and allow those from outside entrance into the community. This role is expressed in the phrase "light to the nations" (Isa 42:6-7). This entails being a light not only to nations near them but also to the entire earth (Isa. 49:6). God does not merely request that Israel be not merely an object but an agent of His mercy, God promises that nations will respond (Isa. 60:3). The activity of God as He instills mercy is evident from Ezekiel 36:26. Exodus 33:19 reveals the sovereign, active, and mighty grace of God as He transforms those who He calls His own.

The New Testament proclaims that Gentiles are recipients of the good news of Jesus. While God's grace extends to Gentiles, His people are to serve as ministers to the world (John 3:16). Jesus was sent to the entire world, His ministry was not confined to Israel (John 1:6-14).

Jesus' ministry was initiated with an inclusive focus. He ministered to the rich, poor, noble, despised, religious, secular, men, and women. Jesus' ministry reached beyond Jerusalem (Luke 19:82), and included Nazareth (Luke 4:16), Galilee (Luke 4:14), and Samaria (John 4:4). The most vivid example of inclusiveness is Jesus' ministry to those outside of the nation of Israel. Christ had a zeal to allow those outside the covenant community access into the kingdom of God. The Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-13) and the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) serve as examples of this passion. Christ instructed His disciples to advance the kingdom of God to all nations (Matt. 28:19). Before His ascension, Christ told His disciples that they will be His witnesses "both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

These themes were also taught by Christ's apostles. Paul insisted, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Similarly, James forbade any of favoritism and discrimination in the church (James 2:1-7). Paul also taught that the expansion of the kingdom to other nations was a necessity (Acts 14:1-8, 17:12, 28:31). The Revelation of John expresses the inclusiveness of the kingdom of God. Those from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation" will constitute the people of God (Rev. 5:9; also see Rev. 7:9, 13:7). The book of Revelation also makes explicit reference to the preaching of the gospel to every nation: "...having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people."

While the theme of God's mercy to the Gentile is found in the New Testament, the Old Testament phrase "light to the Gentiles" is used on numerous occasions (Luke 2:32, Acts 13:47). Jesus blends both the "light" metaphor with the inclusive nature of his message to the world when He says: "I am the light of the world" (John 3:19, 8:12, 9:5, 12:46). But, interestingly, Jesus also calls His disciples light of the world and encourages them to let their light shine before all (Matt 5:14-16). In Paul's explanation of the gospel to Festus he refers to the Old Testament's "light to the nations" terminology: "...the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:23).

God's Free Will

The book of Jonah described God's freedom in salvation and His resourcefulness in salvation. The New Testament makes explicit mention of both of these themes. In Romans 9:15-16, the apostle Paul

quotes Exodus 33:19 and offers brief commentary: "For He says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." God is not only free to bestow His mercy, but He also uses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise (1 Cor. 1:27). God uses His objects of mercy, who are weak, finite vessels, and wrestling with sin, to be agents of His mercy to the world.

Salvation Belongs to the Lord: Jonah and God's Unexpected Mercy

Session 6: Jonah chapter 4—God's Compassion and Jonah's Depression

The book of Jonah revolves around Jonah's famous complaint to God (4:2). Jonah is angry and depressed because God was compassionate. Chapter four is divided into two main sections: Jonah's complaint (verses 1-3) and God's last word (verses 4-11). Jonah felt that Israel deserved better than to have its God forgive its enemies.

Throughout the story, Jonah has hoped that somehow God wouldn't turn out to be consistent with his own well-known character. But God *is* consistent, in contrast to Jonah's hypocritical inconsistency. What happens to Nineveh and to Jonah happens precisely because of what God is like.

The book of Jonah is a story of grace that is amazing. At chapter four, the storyline turns from its narrative exposition to a conversation between Jonah and God about the meaning of what has happened.

Jonah's Complaint

When Jonah has achieved a response that should be the heart's desire of any prophet, he complains to God that He is too merciful and sparing (4.2b). Indeed he infers (in 4:3a) from this merciful and sparing nature of God that God should now kill him. Jonah's inference is clearly mistaken.

In his complaint, Jonah appeals to two of the most fundamental theological axioms of the whole OT. The first is God's self-description in Exodus 34:6-7, where He reveals His gracious, steadfast, and loving nature, in what is the fullest depiction of the nature of God in the whole bible (this passage is regularly used elsewhere in the OT, especially the psalms, where the gracious and merciful nature of God is a regular warrant for Israel's prayer). The second is another fundamental axiom about the nature of God found in Jeremiah 18.7-10, which sums up a basic and recurrent characteristic of God in the Old Testament—divine responsiveness to human attitude and action (especially repentance).

But why does Jonah have a problem with God's mercy and responsiveness?

Jonah's problem is that divine mercy is morally and spiritually debilitating, in that it undercuts the cost of living before God with faithfulness and integrity. Through His mercy God puts Himself on the side of Israel's merciless enemies. So, Jonah chimes in with the voices of the people with whom Malachi quarrels: "It is pointless to serve God" (3.14ff). What difference is there "between the person who serves God and the person who does not serve him" (3.18)? Such a difficulty with the potential moral problem of mercy is a recurrent issue. Compassion undercuts moral effort.

Jonah's complaint is that mercy is a protest against unfairness: the Ninevites do not deserve mercy, presumably either because they are notorious sinners (1:2) or because they are gentiles, or both. Perhaps the older brother of the prodigal son is a good parallel, because his angry resentment at his father's generosity to his undeserving younger brother (Lk. 15.28) parallels Jonah's angry resentment at God's generosity to the Ninevites. The point of Jonah's objection is then not mercy as such, but disproportionate mercy: some people are so undeserving that to be merciful and spare them becomes a moral outrage.

Jonah's complaint may be an attempt to limit divine mercy for no reason other than simple selfishness. We can contrast Jonah's receiving of divine mercy, which he celebrates within the big fish (with the

resounding conclusion “Salvation is from the LORD,” 2.10b), with his unwillingness to see this extended to the Ninevites. A biblical parallel here would be the teaching of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel where the receipt of forgiveness from God must be accompanied by the extension of forgiveness to others. This issue, which features in the Lord's Prayer (6.12) and is underlined in the comments immediately following the Lord's Prayer (6.14-15) is illustrated in the parable of the unforgiving servant (18.23-35): to receive divine mercy oneself, yet selfishly to begrudge it to others, is to contradict and nullify the very nature of that mercy.

God's Last Word

So what approach does God take? God's argument, an appeal to the bush which grows and withers, may at first sight appear strange, as Jonah's concern is not the withering of the plant as such but rather the loss of his shelter and his consequent discomfort. His concern is not for the plant but for himself.

Two aspects of God's final words are striking. First, the Ninevites are characterized as profoundly ignorant. The precise nature of this ignorance is not specified. Although it is easy on the basis of other OT texts to give moral and religious content to that ignorance (Isa. 10:5-15, arrogance; Nah. 3:19, cruelty), our text simply stresses ignorance. God's redescription of Jonah's selfish misery as care for the plant is minor compared to this redescription of the most powerful culture of Jonah's world as marked by the ignorance characteristic of infants.

Secondly, God's keyword is *hûs* (“pity” or “care about”). This is perhaps initially surprising, as one might have expected a repetition of one of the terms characterizing God in 4.2, either “gracious” or “having compassion.” The most common usage of *hûs* is with the eye—a tear coming to the eye, the spontaneous and unpredictable bodily response to other creatures in need. One needs no special intelligence to recognize and understand the tear that shows the care of the heart. How much more then should something so basic to human experience be recognized as characterizing humanity's creator—and, by extension, any who might claim in some way to know this creator.

Appendix I—Themes of Jonah in the OT

It is important to understand the theological themes of the inclusive nature of God's mercy and Israel's mediatorial role to other nations as they are found in the didactic-prophetic narrative of Jonah. Accompanying this task is the need to understand Jonah's theological themes in the light of the rest of Scripture. One of the most striking aspects of the book in its Old Testament setting is its attitude toward those outside the community of faith and the fact that God employs one of His prophets into a mediatorial role. It is certainly not unprecedented that God shows mercy for Gentiles, but neither is it a frequent theme found in the Old Testament (Gen. 21:8-21 and 2 Kings 5). One also finds that this theme is expanded through the ministry and teaching of Jesus and His apostles.

The terminology of "inclusiveness" can be a slippery way of phrasing the theme of God's mercy, but qualifications may help establish what is meant by that term. The salvation offered to Gentile (Isa 45:22, 49:6, 52:10) implies an acknowledgement of the lordship of Israel's God (Isa. 45:53 and 51:5). The point is that they are to embrace the religion of Israel when it is preached to them. This is in fact what happens to the pagans in the book of Jonah (Jonah 1:16 and 3:5).

Isaiah 27:11 resembles the prophecy Jonah was to bring to Nineveh: "This is a people without discernment; therefore he who made them will not have compassion on them, he that formed them will show them no favor." Nineveh, on the contrary, was saved even though its people lacked discernment and did not "know their right hand from their left." What was the reason for God's relenting? Why did God not destroy Nineveh like He did the unnamed city in Isaiah 27? Nineveh's repentance was the reason for the mercy bestowed on them. The freedom of God and God's will to save had already been clearly affirmed in Ezekiel 18:21-22:

If a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed,... none of the transgressions which he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness which he has done he shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked...and not rather that he should turn his way and live?

The Ezekiel passage is similar to the teaching found in Jeremiah 18:7-8: "If at any time I deem concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do it." This declaration refers to judgment oracles addressed to foreign nations by prophets. Jonah 3:10 is a clear expression of this mercy: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he said he would do to them; and he did not do it."

Not only is God merciful to nations outside the covenant community, but He employs His prophets and His nation to be agents of this mercy. The role Israel is to serve is not a new role. God has desired that His people be agents of His mercy and allow those from outside the covenant entrance into the community, assuming necessary qualifications are met. One of the ways this role is expressed is in the phrase "light to the nations." Isaiah 42:6-7 is an example of this: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness...and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeons, and those who dwell in darkness from the prison."

The mediatorial role Israel is to fulfill entails being a light not only to nations near them but to the entire earth (Isa. 49:6): "I will also make you a light of the nations so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." God does not merely request that Israel be not merely an object but an agent of

His mercy, God promises that nations will respond (Isa. 60:3): "And nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."

God is pictured as the active person in what the New Testament calls regeneration (Titus 3:5). The activity of God as He instills mercy is evident from Ezekiel 36:26:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

Along with the references to Ezekiel, other Old Testament passages reveal the sovereign, active, and mighty grace of God as He transforms those who He calls His own (Exodus 33:19).

Appendix II—Themes of Jonah in the NT

The New Testament proclaims that Gentiles can be members of the kingdom and part of the covenant community. While God's grace extends to Gentiles, His people are to imitate Christ and serve as ministers to the world (John 3:16). Jesus was sent to the entire world, His ministry was not confined to Israel (John 1:6-14).

Jesus' ministry was initiated with an inclusive focus. He ministered to the rich, poor, noble, despised, religious, secular, men, and women. Jesus' ministry reached beyond Jerusalem (Luke 19:82), and included Nazareth (Luke 4:16), Galilee (Luke 4:14), and Samaria (John 4:4). The most vivid example of inclusiveness is Jesus' ministry to those outside of the nation of Israel. Christ had a zeal to allow those outside the covenant community access into the kingdom of God. The Roman centurion (Matt. 8:5-13) and the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) serve as examples of this passion. Christ instructed His disciples to advance the kingdom of God to all nations (Matt. 28:19). Before His ascension, Christ told His disciples that they shall be His witnesses "both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

These themes were also taught by Christ's apostles. Paul insisted, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Similarly, James forbade any of favoritism and discrimination in the church (James 2:1-7). Paul also taught that the expansion of the kingdom to other nations was a necessity (Acts 14:1-8, 17:12, 28:31). The Revelation of John artistically expresses the inclusiveness of the kingdom of God. Those from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation" will constitute the people of God (Rev. 5:9; also see Rev. 7:9, 13:7). The book of Revelation also makes explicit reference to the preaching of the gospel to every nation: "...having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people."

While the theme of God's mercy to the Gentile is found in the New Testament, the Old Testament phrase "light to the Gentiles" is used on numerous occasions (Luke 2:32, Acts 13:47). Jesus blends both the "light" metaphor with the inclusive nature of his message to the world when He says: "I am the light of the world" (John 3:19, 8:12, 9:5, 12:46). But, interestingly, Jesus also calls His disciples light of the world and encourages them to let their light shine before all (Matt. 5:14-16). In Paul's explanation of the gospel to Festus he refers to the Old Testament's "light to the nations" terminology: "...the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:23).

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The theme of the undeviating mercy of God as expressed in Jonah and other Old Testament passages is also found in the New Testament. The inward change by God's grace is called a regeneration (Titus 3:5), a spiritual resurrection (Eph. 1:19, 29), a calling out of darkness into a marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9), a new birth (John 3:3), and a making alive (Col. 2:13). Hebrews 12:2 notices that as the "author and perfecter of faith" God instills His grace in His people.

Appendix III—Questions About Jonah

Did Jonah Give a False Prophecy?

In Deuteronomy 18:20-22 it says that anyone who gives a prophecy that does not come true is a false prophet. Doesn't that make Jonah a false prophet? If God says (through a prophet) that he's going to do something, then he either says (through the prophet) that he isn't, or in fact he does not do it, then either God is fickle or the prophet is a false prophet, right?

No. There are some important things we must understand about the nature of Old Testament prophecy, and when we do, then both of these situations will make sense. God isn't double-talking, and his prophets are true. To begin, look at what God himself has to say about his prophetic announcements:

"If at some time I announce that a nation or kingdom will be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it" (Jer. 18:7-10).

God makes an *announcement* that a nation *will be* uprooted, etc. That is what prophets often announced, isn't it? Jonah's prophecy fits this case - he simply announced that Nineveh would be overturned. God calls that announcement a *warning*. If the people *repent*, God will *relent*. Therefore, God's prophetic *judgments* are actually prophetic *warnings*: "This is what you'll receive if you don't repent." God announces that a nation will be built up. But if that kingdom does evil and does not obey God, He will *reconsider* and not do the good he had promised. Therefore, God's prophetic *promises* are actually prophetic *incentives*. "This is what you'll receive if you continue in faithfulness."

The prophets are not so much making singular predictions about the future as they are trying to motivate God's people by giving them a picture of what the future might look like for them. That is God's explicit purpose in making such announcements - he said so explicitly in this passage.

Sometimes the conditional nature of prophecy is explicit. For example, consider Isaiah 1:19-20: "If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land; but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword."

At other times, God confirms with an oath that no matter what happens, the prophecy will come about. For example, consider Ezekiel 5:11: "Therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord ... I myself will withdraw my favor; I will not look on you with pity or spare you."

But many times there is neither an explicit condition nor an explicit confirmation given. What then? If we assume that God's words in Jeremiah 18:7-10 describe a categorical condition, then we must conclude that *all* unqualified predictions carry with them implicit conditions. We should assume the prophetic announcements to be conditional, even if not explicitly stated.

The response of several Old Testament characters shows us that they assumed just such implicit conditions. Look at the king of Nineveh in Jonah. In response to Jonah's direct proclamation of doom, the king declared a fast. Why did he do this? "*Who knows?* God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish" (Jon. 3:9). Even though Jonah's prophecy spoke of certain destruction, it was in fact implicitly conditional. The king of Nineveh understood it to be so, and indeed he was correct, for God saw their repentance and "had compassion and did not bring upon

them the destruction he had threatened" (Jon. 3:10).

Again, in Joel, after a long and dreadful description of the destruction that awaited God's people, the prophet called his people to repentance, saying, "Who knows? He may turn and have pity" (Joel 2:14). There was a possibility that God might relent, though it was not assumed.

Another example is when the prophet Nathan told David that Bathsheba's first child would die. David prayed and fasted for the child until it died as Nathan had foretold. Why did he pray and fast? David said, "I thought, '*Who knows?* The Lord may be gracious to me and let the boy live'" (2 Sam. 12:22). Even though in this case Nathan's words came true, David assumed there was a possibility of events turning out other than had been prophesied - another instance of implicit conditions. We may conclude, then, that even if not explicitly stated, prophecies carried with them implicit conditions. Repentance might bring relief from the threat of punishment, and disobedience might prevent promised blessings.

So, in answer to the question about Jonah: No, Jonah was not a false prophet. God relented because of the people's repentance, in accord with the principle he stated in Jeremiah 18:7-10.

How, then, can one identify a false prophet, if prophecies don't necessarily have to come true? Well, we just have to factor in the possibility of how the people given the prophecy respond to it. If a prophet predicts doom, and the people continue on in their evil with no change, and the prophecy still doesn't take place, then we can assume he was a false prophet. But if they do repent and it doesn't take place, then we know God relented, and that the prophecy had its intended effect: it motivated the people to action.

In Hosea, the prophet is warning Ephraim (the northern kingdom of Israel) of the punishment to come if she does not repent: she will be destroyed and sent into exile. In this case, destruction means exile - Israel will no longer exist as an independent nation. At the same time, the prophet is making promises of restoration. Hosea 3:4-5 mentions both: Israel will live without a king (in exile); afterwards, they will return and seek the Lord and their king. But Israel remained unrepentant, so she received the threatened punishment. This is much of what chapters 4-10 describe. But then, in chapter 11, God again declares his love for Ephraim. Though they have been exiled (in that sense destroyed), he will not utterly destroy them so that they completely cease to exist. Rather, he will gather them from exile in Egypt and Assyria, and they will resettle in their homes (Hos. 11:11). Even the many threats of her destruction might have been averted if she had repented: "Woe to them, because they have strayed from me! Destruction to them, because they have rebelled against me! I long to redeem them but they speak lies against me. They do not cry out to me from their hearts but wail upon their beds" (Hos. 7:13-14).

Is God speaking out of both sides of his mouth? No. He is threatening punishment (including exile) for their evil, but promising afterwards to restore a remnant if they repent and return to him.

Did Jonah Truly Repent While in the Fish?

In the thanksgiving psalm of Jonah 2, does Jonah in any sense repent—if only momentarily or fleetingly? The larger context of the book seems to suggest that Jonah still harbored a deathwish to the very end because he was very unhappy with God's gracious mercy toward the wicked Ninevites and had lost all sense of meaning and purpose in life. But the psalm contains poetic imagery that speaks of death and the recovery of life as God lifted him up from the depths of Sheol. This suggests an inherent spiritual dynamic of death and resurrection that attends a fundamental change of heart. But, then,

where is the fruit of repentance, because Jonah seems reluctant and taciturn as he begrudgingly obeys God in chapter 3 and antagonistic and angry in chapter 4? So, did Jonah undergo even a partial or temporary repentance in humility inside the great fish as he acknowledged Yahweh as the source of his salvation?

There are many theories about Jonah 2. Did he really pray this great poetry at the time, or did he compose this poem later to represent what he had prayed? Are the details poetic metaphor or historic fact? Did Jonah die, and was he later raised from the dead by God? According to ancient concepts of accurate representation, it would not have been inappropriate for Jonah to have composed a later poem to represent what he prayed in the fish's belly. This is likely, particularly in light of Jonah 2:2-4, which seems to indicate that the quote in Jonah 2:4 is the only thing he really prayed, and that perhaps not verbatim (I suspect he was too panicked to be very eloquent). Based on the content of the poem, it would seem that Jonah did not actually express repentance, but rather terror -- terror so great that he took a vow so that God might save him. His prayer seems primarily to have been a desperate plea for mercy. There is no mention of repentance, and no specific action or language that might indicate that repentance took place. In Jonah 3, Jonah actually went to Nineveh and preached. This was a repentance of sorts -- he relented of his attempt to flee (the Hebrew verb for "repent" (*nacham*) also means "relent"). In Jonah 4:1-3, the prophet revealed that his preaching (Jon. 3:4) had been quite insincere, and the whole of Jonah 4 demonstrates that Jonah did not at any time during this story agree with what God was doing. At the end of the story, we find Jonah looking very much like the older brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). So, in a very important sense, Jonah's repentance was not full. I would suggest, however, that the very fact that Jonah recorded his account in this fashion extends hope that he did ultimately learn his lesson and repent of his sin regarding Nineveh. Finally, while Jonah's experience suggests death and resurrection (particularly Jesus' death and resurrection [Matt. 12:39-41]), and perhaps by typological extension spiritual regeneration, the story does not claim to record Jonah's actual salvation or conversion experience.

The Ending of Jonah Seems Abrupt

It appears that Jonah ends rather abruptly with Jonah and God disputing. God asks Jonah a question in 4:9 and Jonah answers him. Then in verses 10 and 11, God asks another question and the book ends. Why are we not given Jonah's response? Why does the curtain seem to fall so suddenly? Actually, it is very fitting for Jonah to end this way. There are three things worth mentioning.

First, this ending is not unnatural. Although it may feel awkward for us, it is an appropriate ending that drives home some of the main points that are repeated throughout the entire book. These last verses succinctly sum up some of the main issues in the book, namely God's compassion and Jonah's hardness. As Jonah 4:1-2 tells us, Jonah was displeased when he saw that Nineveh would be spared. In his frustration he said, "I knew you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." He knows the right words, but his "head knowledge" has not transformed his own outlook on life. That is, Jonah is not manifesting Godly character toward his enemies. Thus, it is appropriate that God have the last word in Jonah in order to highlight his own character again. The verses draw attention to the sharp contrast between God's attitude toward the people of Nineveh and Jonah's attitude toward the vine. Jonah has shown great concern about the vine while God is concerned for the people. What irony! What sarcasm! Jonah cares more for a plant than he does for human life. Has this not been his struggle throughout the entire book? Is it not then a fitting ending to leave Jonah continuing with this struggle?

Second, not only does this ending fit with the overall message of the Book of Jonah, but it highlights or

heightens this message. The ending to Jonah is not a mistake, but in many ways could be considered a literary device. It is supposed to be shocking and abrupt. It is supposed to make us think. Imagine that the book ended in a manner that would sound more appropriate to our ears. For example, imagine that there were a verse 12 which read something like, "And Jonah finally got it! He had failed to have compassion on Nineveh. He had failed to exhibit Godly character. So he went home a changed man." This ending may be more understandable or smoother, but it takes away from the dramatic tension in the story. It almost becomes too smooth. It is almost too clear. The ending, as it currently stands, draws attention to the message instead of making it lighter.

Third, this abrupt ending causes application. As I mentioned above, we are not given Jonah's response to God's question. We are left to wonder, "What did he say? How did he end up? Did he understand what God was saying or did he continue to sulk?" As we wonder about the answers to these questions, we find ourselves asking the same questions about ourselves. This ending forces us to look deep into our own hearts and see where we are like Jonah and where we are more like God. How am I doing as a child of God in terms of showing compassion? Am I undervaluing human life and not caring for the needs of others - especially of my enemies?

By leaving this tension in the story, we are forced to try to write the ending in our own lives. We identify with Jonah, yet we seek by God's grace to make the ending a happy, Spirit-filled one. Frank Page, in his commentary on Jonah (*The New American Commentary Series*, Volume 19b, 1995) writes this:

Some have ventured to remark that the Book of Jonah ends abruptly or somehow in an incomplete manner. On the contrary, the book ends in a way that draws attention and, therefore, increases its teaching potential... The book ends with a clear contrast between the ways of God and the ways of Jonah... The story is deliberately left open-ended for those studying its message to complete it in their own lives" (p.288).