***Jonah Meets God***

**The Reluctant Prophet, Jonah 4:1-5 October 15, 2023**

***“But Nineveh has more than one hundred and twenty thousand people . . . .  
Should I not be concerned about that great city?”*Jonah 4:10-11**

**God reaches down to Jonah**

*10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.*

*But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord, “O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. 3 Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”*

*4 But the Lord replied, “Have you any right to be angry?”*

*5 Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. 6 Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. 7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”*

*9 But God said to Jonah, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”*

*“I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die.”*

*10 But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”*

Jonah 3:10-4:11

1. Jonah’s pronouns reveal that he needs a paradigm shift, and God provides for the change in perspective
2. Jonah is not a false prophet (see Deuteronomy 18:21-22) because God’s judgment always leaves room for repentance
3. As in Genesis 3, God initiates this conversation and provides what Jonah needs

A black and white image of a poster

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

**Answering God’s questions**

God’s first question reveals Jonah’s heart

*4 But the Lord replied, “Have you any right to be angry?”*

Jonah 4

God’s second question reveals Jonah’s folly: he doesn’t acknowledge God as creator or provider

*9 But God said to Jonah, “Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”*

Jonah 4

God’s third question reveals to Jonah what really moves the heart of God

*10 But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”*

Jonah 4

**Doug’s final lessons from the vine, the worm and the east wind**

1. Mercy triumphs over anger

*27 “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. 30 Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

*32 “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. 35 But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

Luke 6

2. I miss God’s blessing (and misunderstand the gospel) when I miss God’s heart for his  
 world (see Luke 19:41-44)

*Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*

*3 Then Jesus told them this parable . . . .*

Luke 15 (remember that “this parable” is actually three parables)

*10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and “sinners” came and ate with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and ‘sinners’?”*

*12 On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 13 But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

Matthew 9

*12 “Even now,” declares the Lord,*

*“return to me with all your heart,*

*with fasting and weeping and mourning.”*

*13 Rend your heart*

*and not your garments.*

*Return to the Lord your God,*

*for he is gracious and compassionate,*

*slow to anger and abounding in love,*

*and he relents from sending calamity.*

Joel 2 (see how Peter appeals to this passage in Acts 2)

3. The invitation to celebrate with the Father is still open!

*31 “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’*

Luke 15

*39 [Jesus] answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. 41 The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.*

Matthew 12

**Resources for further study**

The Bible Project team does a great job of introducing Jonah at [*https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-jonah/*](https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-jonah/)

Spurgeon has five sermons on Jonah at this Monergism site: [*https://www.biblebb.com/brefindex/jon.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/brefindex/jon.htm)

For Jonah 4, I recommend Spurgeon’s sermon at [*https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/2504.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/2504.htm)

Doug’s Logos library includes a helpful Bible study by Paul Mackrell (Day One Publishing, 2007)

Sam Millen recommends Keller’s study of Jonah in *The Prodigal Prophet* (Viking, 2018)  
and his article at [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jonah-prodigal-prophet/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jonah-prodigal-prophet/)

The Gospel Coalition has these articles based on Keller’s *The Prodigal Prophet*:  
“Fishy Story” at [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/tim-keller-fishy-story/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/tim-keller-fishy-story/)“Meet Jonah” at [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jonah-prodigal-prophet/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jonah-prodigal-prophet/)and a podcast on “The Mystery of Mercy” at [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/tgc-podcast/jonah-and-the-mystery-of-mercy/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/tgc-podcast/jonah-and-the-mystery-of-mercy/)

Erik Manning has an interesting discussion of the scientific questions around the Jonah sign/miracle at [*https://crossexamined.org/the-mind-blowing-meaning-behind-the-sign-of-jonah/*](https://crossexamined.org/the-mind-blowing-meaning-behind-the-sign-of-jonah/)

Doug likes the ESV Study Bible’s introduction to Jonah included in his full notes.

**ESV Study Bible introduction:**

*Theme*

The Lord is a God of boundless compassion not just for “us” (Jonah and the Israelites) but also for “them” (the pagan sailors and Ninevites).

*Purpose, Occasion, and Background*

The primary purpose of the book of Jonah is to engage readers in theological reflection on the compassionate character of God, and in self-reflection on the degree to which their own character reflects this compassion, to the end that they become vehicles of this compassion in the world that God has made and so deeply cares about.

Jonah prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:23–28), who ruled in Israel (the northern kingdom) from 782 to 753 b.c. Jeroboam was the grandson of Jehoahaz, who ruled in Israel from 814 to 798 b.c. Because of the sins of Jehoahaz, Israel was oppressed by the Arameans (2 Kings 13:3). But because of the Lord’s great compassion (2 Kings 13:4, 23), Israel was spared destruction and delivered from this oppression (2 Kings 13:5). This deliverance came through a “savior” (2 Kings 13:5), who may have been Adad-nirari III (810–783 b.c.), king of Assyria.

Jeroboam’s father, Jehoash (798–782 b.c.), capitalized on this freedom from Aramean oppression and began to expand Israel’s boundaries, recapturing towns taken during the reign of Jehoahaz (2 Kings 13:25). Though Jeroboam “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (2 Kings 14:24), he nevertheless expanded Israel even farther than his father did, matching the boundaries in the days of David and Solomon (2 Kings 14:25); this was “according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher” (2 Kings 14:25). Thus Jonah witnessed firsthand the restorative compassion of God extended to his wayward people.

In God’s providence, the expansion by Jeroboam was made easier because of Assyrian weakness. The Assyrians were engaged in conflicts with the Arameans and the Urartians. There was also widespread famine, and numerous revolts within the Assyrian Empire (where regional governors ruled with a fair degree of autonomy). Then there was an auspicious eclipse of the sun during the reign of Ashur-dan III (771–754 b.c.). This convergence of events supports the plausibility of the Ninevites being so responsive to Jonah’s call to repent.

It was not until some years later that Tiglath-pileser (745–727 b.c.) would gain control and reestablish Assyrian dominance in the area, and his son Shalmaneser V (727–722) was the king responsible for the conquest of Israel and the destruction of Samaria in 722. Thus Jonah prophesied in an era when Assyria was not an immediate threat to Israel and when Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity because of the compassion of God.

*Genre*

The genre of Jonah is debated. The book has been read as an *allegory*, using fictional figures to symbolize some other reality. According to this interpretation, Jonah is a symbol of Israel in its refusal to carry out God’s mission to the nations. The primary argument against this view is that Jonah is clearly presented as a historical and not a fictional figure (see the specific historical and geographical details in 1:1–3; 3:2–10; 4:11; cf. also 2 Kings 14:25). Another proposal is that the book is a *parable* to teach believers not to be like Jonah. Like allegories, parables are also based on fictional and not historical characters. Parables, however, are typically simple tales that make a single point, whereas the book of Jonah is quite complex and teaches a multiplicity of themes.

The book of Jonah has all the marks of a *prophetic narrative*, like those about Elijah and Elisha found in 1 Kings, which set out to report actual historical events. The phrase that opens the book (“the word of the Lord came to”) is also at the beginning of the first two stories told about Elijah (1 Kings 17:2, 8) and is used in other prophetic narratives as well (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:10; 2 Sam. 7:4). Just as the Elijah and Elisha narratives contain extraordinary events, like ravens providing bread and meat for the prophet (1 Kings 17:6), so does the book of Jonah, as when the fish “provides transportation” for the prophet. In fact, the story of Jonah is so much like the stories about Elijah and Elisha that one would hardly think it odd if the story of Jonah were embedded in 2 Kings right after Jonah’s prophetic words about the expansion of the kingdom. The story of Jonah is thus presented as historical, like the other prophetic narratives.

There are additional arguments for the historical nature of the book of Jonah. It is difficult to say that the story teaches God’s sovereignty over the creation if God did not in fact “appoint” the fish (1:17), the plant (4:6), the worm (4:7), and the east wind (4:8) to do his will. Jesus, moreover, treated the story as historical when he used elements of the story as analogies for other historical events (see Matt. 12:40–41). This is especially clear when Jesus declared that “the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah” (Matt. 12:41).

The story of Jonah is not, however, history for history’s sake. The book is clearly *didactic* (as the allegorical and parabolic interpretations rightly affirm); that is, the story is told *to teach the reader key lessons*. The didactic character of the book shines through in the repeated use of questions, 11 out of 14 being addressed to Jonah, and the question that closes the narrative leaves readers asking themselves how they will respond to the story.

*Key Themes*

The primary theme in Jonah is that God’s compassion is boundless, not limited just to “us” but also available for “them.” This is clear from the flow of the story and its conclusion: (1) Jonah is the object of God’s compassion throughout the book, and the pagan sailors and pagan Ninevites are also the benefactors of this compassion. (2) The story ends with the question, “Should I not pity Nineveh …?” (4:11). Tied to this theological teaching is the anthropological question, Do readers of the story have hearts that are like the heart of God? While Jonah was concerned about a plant that “perished” (4:10), he showed no such concern for the Ninevites. Conversely, the pagan sailors (1:14), their captain (1:6), and the king of Nineveh (3:9) all showed concern that human beings, including Jonah, not “perish.”

Several other major themes in the book include:

1. God’s sovereign control over events on the earth

2. God’s determination to get his message to the nations

3. The need for repentance from sin in general

4. The need for repentance from self-centeredness and hypocrisy in particular

5. The full assurance that God will relent when people repent

*History of Salvation Summary*

Jonah’s rescue from death provides an analogy for the resurrection of Christ (Matt. 12:39–40). The repentance of the Ninevites anticipates the wide-scale repentance of Gentiles in the messianic era (Matt. 28:18–20; Luke 24:47). (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the Overview of the Bible. See also History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ.)

*Literary Features*

The book of Jonah is a literary masterpiece. While the story line is so simple that children follow it readily, the story is marked by as high a degree of literary sophistication as any book in the Hebrew Bible. The author employs structure, humor, hyperbole, irony, double entendre, and literary figures like merism to communicate his message with great rhetorical power. The first example of this sophistication is seen in the outline of the book (see below).

The main category for the book is satire—the exposure of human vice or folly. The four elements of satire take the following form in the book of Jonah: (1) the *object of attack* is Jonah and what he represents—a bigotry and ethnocentrism that regarded God as the exclusive property of the believing community (in the OT, the nation of Israel); (2) the *satiric vehicle* is narrative or story; (3) the *satiric norm* or standard by which Jonah’s bad attitudes are judged is the character of God, who is portrayed as a God of universal mercy, whose mercy is not limited by national boundaries; (4) the *satiric tone* is laughing, with Jonah emerging as a laughable figure—someone who runs away from God and is caught by a fish, and as a childish and pouting prophet who prefers death over life without his shade tree.

Three stylistic techniques are especially important. (1) The *giantesque motif*—the motif of the unexpectedly large (e.g., the magnitude of the task assigned to Jonah, of the fish that swallows him, and of the repentance that Jonah’s eight-word sermon accomplishes). (2) A *pervasive irony* (e.g., the ironic discrepancy between Jonah’s prophetic vocation and his ignominious behavior, and the ironic impossibility of fleeing from the presence of God). (3) *Humor*, as Jonah’s behavior is not only ignominious but also ridiculous.

**The Setting of Jonah**

*c. 760 b.c.*

Jonah prophesied during the politically prosperous time of Jeroboam II of Israel (2 Kings 14:23–28). During this time the Assyrians were occupied with matters elsewhere in the empire, allowing Jeroboam II to capture much of Syria for Israel. The Lord called Jonah to go to the great Assyrian city of Nineveh to pronounce judgment upon it. Jonah attempted to escape the Lord’s calling by sailing from the seaport of Joppa to Tarshish, which was probably in the western Mediterranean. Eventually he obeyed the Lord and traveled overland to Nineveh at the heart of the Assyrian Empire.[[1]](#footnote-1)

# Meet Jonah—the Prodigal Prophet

October 4, 2018  |  [Tim Keller](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/profile/tim-keller/)   
at [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jonah-prodigal-prophet/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jonah-prodigal-prophet/)

Like most people raised in a churchgoing home, I’ve been aware of the story of Jonah since childhood. As a minister who teaches the Bible, however, I’ve gone through several stages of puzzlement and wonder at this short book. The number of themes is a challenge for the interpreter. It seems to be about *so* many things.

Is it about race and nationalism, since Jonah seems more concerned over his nation’s military security than over a city of spiritually lost people? Is it about God’s call to mission, since Jonah at first flees from the call and later goes but regrets it? Is it about the struggles believers have to obey and trust in God? Yes to all those—and more. A mountain of scholarship exists about the book of Jonah that reveals the richness of the story, the many layers of meaning, and the varied applicability of it to so much of human life and thought.

I discovered that “varied applicability” as I preached through the book of Jonah verse by verse three times in my ministry.

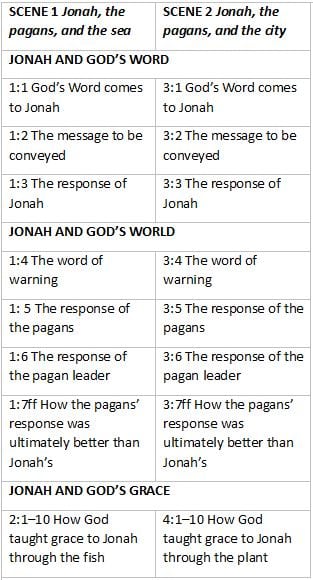
The first time was at my church in a small, blue-collar town in the South. Ten years later I preached through it to several hundred young, single professionals in Manhattan. Then, a decade later, I preached through Jonah on Sundays immediately after the 9/11 tragedy in New York City.

In each case the audience’s cultural location and personal needs were radically different, yet the text of Jonah was more than up to the task of powerfully addressing them. Many friends have told me over the years that the particular Jonah sermons they heard were life-changing.

### Structure of Jonah

The narrative of Jonah seduces the reader into thinking of it as a simple fable, with the account of the great fish as the dramatic, if implausible, high point.

Careful readers, however, find it to be an ingenious and artfully crafted work of literature. Its four chapters recount two incidents. In chapters 1 and 2 Jonah is given a command from God but fails to obey it; and in chapters 3 and 4 he is given the command again and this time carries it out. The two accounts are laid out in almost completely parallel patterns.



Despite the literary sophistication of the text, many modern readers still dismiss the work because the text tells us that Jonah was saved from the storm when swallowed by a “great fish” ([Jonah 1:17](https://www.esv.org/verses/Jonah%201%3A17/)). How you respond to this will depend on how you read the rest of the Bible. If you accept the existence of God and the resurrection of Christ, a far greater miracle, then there is nothing particularly difficult about reading Jonah literally. Certainly many people today believe all miracles are impossible, but that skepticism is just that—belief that itself can’t be proven. Not only that, but the text doesn’t show evidence of the author having made up the miracle account. A fiction writer ordinarily adds supernatural elements in order to create excitement or spectacle and to capture reader attention, but this writer doesn’t capitalize on the event at all in that way. The fish is mentioned only in two brief verses, and there are no descriptive details. It’s reported more as a simple fact of what happened. So let’s not get distracted by the fish.

The careful structure of the book reveals nuances of the author’s message. Both episodes show how Jonah, a staunch religious believer, regards and relates to people who are racially and religiously different from him. The book of Jonah yields many insights about God’s love for societies and people beyond the community of believers; about his opposition to toxic nationalism and disdain for other races; and about how to be “in mission” in the world despite the subtle and unavoidable power of idolatry in our own lives and hearts.

Grasping these insights can make us bridge-builders, peacemakers, and agents of reconciliation in the world. Such people are the need of the hour.

### Theology of Jonah

Yet to understand all of these lessons for our social relationships, we have to see that the book’s main teaching is not sociological but theological. Jonah wants a God of his own making, a God who simply smites the bad people and blesses the good people, for instance, Jonah and his countrymen. When the real God—not Jonah’s counterfeit—keeps showing up, Jonah is continually thrown into fury or despair. Jonah finds the real God to be an enigma, because he can’t reconcile the mercy of God with his justice.

The book’s main teaching is not sociological but theological.

How, Jonah asks, can God be merciful and forgiving to people who have done such violence and evil? How can God be *both* merciful and just?

That question isn’t answered in the book of Jonah. As part of the entire Bible, however, the book of Jonah is like a chapter that drives the Scripture’s overall plotline forward. It teaches us to look ahead to how God saved the world through the one who called himself the ultimate Jonah ([Matt. 12:41](https://www.esv.org/verses/Matt.%2012%3A41/)) so that he could be both just and the justifier of those who believe ([Rom. 3:26](https://www.esv.org/verses/Rom.%203%3A26/)). Only when we readers fully grasp this gospel will we be neither cruel exploiters like the Ninevites nor Pharisaical believers like Jonah, but rather Spirit-changed, Christ-like women and men.

Many students of the book have noticed that in the first half Jonah plays the “prodigal son” of Jesus’s famous parable ([Luke 15:11–24](https://www.esv.org/verses/Luke%2015%3A11%E2%80%9324/)), who ran from his father. In the second half of the book, however, Jonah is like the “older brother” ([Luke 15:25–32](https://www.esv.org/verses/Luke%2015%3A25%E2%80%9332/)), who obeys his father but berates him for his graciousness to repentant sinners. The parable ends with a question from the father to the Pharisaical son, just as the book of Jonah ends with a question to the Pharisaical prophet. The parallel between the two stories, which Jesus himself may have had in mind, is the reason why I titled my new book, [*The Prodigal Prophet*](https://www.amazon.com/Prodigal-Prophet-Jonah-Mystery-Mercy/dp/0735222061/?tag=thegospcoal-20).

***Jonah's Object-Lessons***

June 11, 1885  
C. H. SPURGEON (1834-1892)  
at [*https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/2504.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/2504.htm)

**"And the Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live."—Jonah 4:6-8.**

I want to lay the stress especially upon these three sentences in my text,—  
  
"God prepared a gourd."  
  
"God prepared a worm."  
  
"God prepared a vehement east wind."  
  
The life of Jonah cannot be written without God; take God out of the prophet's history, and there is no history to write. This is equally true of each one of us. Apart from God, there is no life, nor thought, nor act, nor career of any man, however lowly or however high, Leave out God, and you cannot write the story of anyone's career. If you attempt it, it will be so ill-written that it shall be clearly perceived that you have tried to make bricks without straw, and that you have sought to fashion a potter's vessel without clay. I believe that, in a man's life, the great secret of strength, and holiness, and righteousness, is the acknowledgment of God. When a man has no fear of God before his eyes, there is no wonder that he should run to an excess of meanness, and even to an excess of riot. In proportion as the thought of God dominates the mind, we may expect to find a life that shall be true and really worth living; but in proportion as we forget God, we shall play the feel. It is the feel who says in his heart, "No God," and it is the feel who lives and acts as if there were no God.  
  
In Jonah's life, we meet with God continually. The Lord bade the prophet go to Nineveh, but instead of going there, he took ship to go to Tarshish. Quick as thought, at the back of that announcement, we read, "But the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken." God hurled out the wind as if he had been throwing a thunderbolt after his servant who was seeking to escape from him, and there was such a terrible storm that the shipmen were compelled to cast Jonah overboard. Then we read, in the 17th verse of the first chapter, "The Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." God began by preparing a storm, but he went on to prepare a fish. We do not know what fish it was, and it does not matter; it was one that God made on purpose, and it answered so well that Jonah lived in the fish's belly for three days and three nights, and then he was landed safely, a better man than when he went into the sea, though none too good even then.  
  
You may have found, dear friend, that God has prepared a storm in your life. There was a tempest which checked you in your career of sin. You had determined to go to destruction, and you had "paid the fare thereof;" but there came a great trial, something or other that stopped your ship, and threatened utterly to swallow it up. After that, there came delivering mercy; you who were cast into the sea were, nevertheless, not lost, but saved. What you judged to be your destruction turned out to be for your salvation, for God had from of old prepared the means of saving you; and he sent you such a deliverance that you were compelled to say with Jonah, "Salvation is of the Lord." Since that time, I should not wonder if you have seen the hand of God in many very singular ways, possibly in much the same form as Jonah did, not literally, but spiritually. Especially if you have erred as Jonah did, if you have fallen into ill-humours as he did, you have probably had to bear the same kind of discipline and chastisement.  
  
Let it never be forgotten that Jonah was a man of God. I often hear great fault found with him, and he richly deserves the condemnation; he was not at all an amiable person; but, for all that, he was a man of God. When he was in the very depths of the sea, when he appeared to be cut off from all hope, he prayed as none but a man of God could pray: "Out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice." It takes a real saint to cry out of such a place as Jonah was in,—the living tomb of the belly of the fish. He was also a man of faith, else had he not been a man of prayer. But he did still believe in his God; it was even as the result of a mistake that was made by his faith, rather than by his unbelief, that he tried to run away. He had such regard for God's honor that he could not bear to exercise a ministry which he feared would raise a question about the truthfulness of God, and represent him to be changeable. So far as his idea of God went, he was faithful to it; his fault mainly lay in that imperfect idea of God which had taken possession of his mind.  
  
Jonah was a man of faith and a man of prayer, and God honored him exceedingly by making his word to turn the whole city upside down. For my part, I hardly know of any other man who ever had so high an honor put upon him as this man had. It is just possible that, if you or I had made a king on his throne to come down from it, and robe himself in sackcloth, and if we had seen a whole city—men, women, and children,—all crying out for mercy as the result of one sermon from us, we might have been as greatly foolish, through the intoxication of pride, as this man was foolish through a vehement zeal for God, which happened to take a harsh shape, instead of being tempered, and softened, and sweetened by a recognition of the great love and kindness of God, and by a sweet delight in those gracious attributes of his character. Jonah was grandly stern amid a wicked generation; he was one of God's "Ironsides." He was the man for a fierce fight, and he would not hold back his hand from the use of the sword, or do the work of the Lord half-heartedly; he was one who wished to make thorough work of anything he undertook, and to go to the very end of it. We want more of such men nowadays; he was not lacking in backbone, yet he was lacking in heart; in that respect we would not be like him. He was singularly strong where so many in these days are grievously weak; perhaps he is all the more criticized and condemned because that virtue which he possessed is so rare to-day. The faults he had were on that side on which most modern professors do not err; and therefore, Pharisee-like, they are content to condemn the man for that which they do not themselves commit, Because they are not brave enough and strong enough to fall into such a fault.  
  
In my text, we have God very conspicuous in the life of his servant Jonah; and I want to bring out this truth very prominently, that we may also see God in our lives in similar points to those in which he manifested himself to Jonah. So, we will notice, first, that *God is in our comforts:* "God prepared a gourd." Secondly, *God is in our bereavements and losses;* "God prepared a worm." Thirdly, *God is in our heaviest trials:* "God prepared a vehement east wind." Then, fourthly, what is not in the text in words, but is of the very essence of it, *God prepared Jonah:* and these three things—the gourd, the worm, and the east wind, were a part of his preparation, the means of making him a fitter and a better man for his Lord's service. He learned by the gourd, and he learned by the worm, and he learned by the vehement east wind; they were a sort of kindergarten school to which the childlike spirit of Jonah had to go. He needed to be taught as children in their infancy are taught by object-lessons, and things that they can see; so Jonah went to God's kindergarten, to learn from the gourd, and the worm, and the east wind, the lessons that he would not learn in any other way.  
  
**I. So, first, I remind you that GOD IS IN OUR COMFORTS: "God prepared a gourd." Everything of good that we enjoy, however little it may be, comes from God.**

"'Tis God that Hits our comforts high,  
Or sinks them in the grave;  
He gives, and blessed be his name!  
He takes but what he gave."

Let me call your attention to Jonah's comfort, that is, the gourd which God prepared. *It was sent to him when he was in a very wrong spirit,* angry with God, and angry with his fellow-men. He had hidden away from everybody in that bit of a shanty which he had put up for himself outside the city, as if he was a real Timon the man-hater. Sick of everybody, and sick even of himself, he gets away into this little booth, and there, in discontent and discomfort, he sits watching to see the fate of the city lying below the hill. Yet God comforted him by preparing a gourd to be "a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief." You know that we are very apt to say of some people, "Well, really, they are of such a trying disposition, they fret about nothing at all, and they worry themselves when they have no cause for it; we have no patience with them." That is what you say, but that is not how God acts. He does have pity upon such people, and he has had patience with many of you when you have been of the number of such people. Why, I do not believe that any man here would have proposed to make a gourd grow up to cover the head of the angry prophet; we should much more likely have called a committee meeting, and we should have agreed that, if the discontented brother liked to go and live in a booth, he had better work the experiment out; it would probably be for his good, and make him come back and live in the city properly, like other people! Though he was left to feel the cold by night, and the heat by day, it was entirely his own choice; and if a person chooses such a residence, it is not for us to interfere! That is how men talk, and men are so exceedingly wise, you know; but that is not how God talks, and he is infinitely wiser than any of his creatures. His wisdom is sweetly loving, but ours sometimes curdles into hardness. What think ye, brothers and sisters, has not God sent us many comforts when we did not deserve them; when, on the contrary, we had made a rod for our own back, and might well have reckoned upon being made to smart? Yet God has sent us comforts which have relieved us of the sorrow which we foolishly brought upon ourselves, and made us stay the fretfulness which was our own voluntary choice. God has been wonderfully tender with us, even as a mother is with her sick child. Have you not found it so, brothers and sisters? Well, now, look back upon your past life, and think that all the comforts which came to you when you deserved to be left without them, came from God, and for them all let his name be blessed.  
  
Further, notice, that *the comfort which came to Jonah was exactly what he wanted.* It was a gourd, a broad-leaved plant, very probably the castor-oil plant, which botanists call *Palma Christi,* because of its resemblance to the human hand. In its native country, it grows very rapidly, so that it would speedily afford a welcome shade from the heat; whatever kind of gourd it was, God prepared the plant, and it was exactly the kind to shield Jonah from the burning heat of the sun. The Lord always knows how to send us just the very comfort that we most require. There is many a mother who has had only one of her children spared to her, but what a comfort that one child has been! I have heard one good woman say, "My dear daughter is such a joy to me, she is everything I could wish." Or it may be that God has sent to you some other form of earthly comfort, which has been altogether invaluable to you; it has been a screen from the great heat of your trouble, "a shelter in the time of storm." Whenever you get such an invaluable blessing, praise God for it. Do not let your gourd become your god, but let your gourd lead you to your God. When our comforts become our idols, they work our ruin; but when they make us bless God for them, then they become messengers from God, which help toward our growth in grace.  
  
Note, next, that *God sent this comfort to Jonah at the right time.* It came just when he needed it; when he was most distressed, then it was that the gourd came up in a night. The punctuality of God is very notable.

"He never is before his time,  
He never is too late."

Just when we need a mercy, and when the mercy is all the more a mercy because it is so timely, then it comes. If it had come later, it might have been too late; or, at any rate, it would not have been so seasonable, and therefore not so sweet. Who can know when is the right time like that God who sees all things at a single glance? He knows when to give, and when to take. In every godly life there is a set time for each event; and there is no need for us to ask, "Why is the white here and the black there; why this gleam of sunlight and that roar of tempest; why here a marriage and there a funeral; why sometimes a harp and at other times a sackbut?" God knows, and it is a great blessing for us when we can leave it all in his hands. Let the gourd spring up in a night, it will be the right night; and let the gourd die in the morning, it will be the right morning. All is well if it be in God's hands. Let us, therefore, distinctly recognize God in our comforts, in their coming to us when we are unworthy of them, in their coming in the form in which we most require them, and in their coming at the time when we are most in need of them.  
  
This gourd, like all our comforts, was sent to Jonah *with an exeedingly kind design,* and God made it to come up, "that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief." One would not have thought of a gourd delivering a man like that from his grief. It is an unmanly thing for a prophet of Jehovah to have a grief from which a gourd can deliver him; but God knew his servant, and ha condescension he sent this singular form of comfort with this motive, "to deliver him from his grief." I think that Jonah, when he wrote this verse, must have smiled to himself, and thought, "All through the ages, what a feel they will think I was! "yet he went on, and honestly put it down. So, often, when you and I have been comforted by some mere trifle, and we have been very grateful for it; yet, looking back upon it, we have thought to ourselves, "What poor creatures we were to have been comforted by so small a thing! How foolish it seems for us first to have been put out by so little a matter, and then to have been comforted by something equally little!" Let us see here God's wonderful kindness, his microscopical kindness in thus looking, as it were, to our animalculae of grief, and somehow dealing with them after their own shape and form, so as to deliver us from the grief they have caused us.  
  
Yet, further, it seems that *this design of God was fully answered,* for "Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd." God has often sent us mercies that have made us exceeding glad, and we have been delivered from the pressure of heavy grief. But here is the sad note in the history of Jonah, as it has often been with us also, although he was exceeding glad, *he does not appear to have been exceeding grateful.* It is one thing to be glad of a mercy, it is another matter to be grateful for that mercy. Sometimes a man spends all his time in rejoicing over the comfort, which then becomes idolatry, whereas he ought to have expended it in blessing God for the comfort, and then it would have shown that he was in a right state of heart. I do not read that Jonah thanked God for this gourd; possibly, no worm would have devoured it if he had done so. Our comforts are always safest when they are enveloped in gratitude. Let us overlay the wood of our comfort with the gold plate of our gratitude; so shall it be preserved. An ordinary comfort protected with a sheet of gratitude shall become to us a double means of grace.  
  
This, then, is the first point at which I am aiming. I want every child of God—and I would that every man and woman and child here would do the same,—just to think of every comfort as having come from God. Even though it be a poor fading thing, like a gourd, yet it is valuable to you for the present; therefore, think of it as having come to you from God, even as "the Lord God prepared a gourd" to deliver his servant Jonah from his grief. So, the Lord has prepared your comforts, prepared your prosperity, prepared your wife, prepared your children, prepared your friends; wherefore, bow your heads in gratitude to him, and bless the name of the Lord whose mercy endureth for ever.  
  
**II. Now we turn to our second point, where we shall need even more faith than in the first part of our subject. The prophet next says that "God prepared a worm," which teaches us that GOD IS IN OUR BEREAVEMENTS AND LOSSES.**  
Jonah's great comfort was destroyed by *a very little thing.* It was only a worm, but that was enough to destroy the gourd. Oh! how soon may our earthly comforts be taken away from us! There is a little fluctuation in the markets, and the prosperous merchant becomes a bankrupt. A little red spot appears in the cheek of your fair child, and in a few weeks she is taken away by decline or consumption. A very little thing may soon destroy all your comforts, and make them to be like the withered leaves of Jonah's gourd.  
  
It was also, probably, *an unseen thing* that wrought this havoc. Very likely Jonah did not see that worm. God prepared it, but the prophet did not discern it, until he saw the destruction it had caused. And, my clear friends, some little unseen thing may yet come to you, and turn into grief all your present joy.  
  
Besides, *it was a very foul thing,* a worm, a maggot, at the root of this gourd; and through this foul thing it withered and died. It is sometimes the sharpest bitterness of our grief when we have our joy spoiled by somebody else's sin. The venomous whisper of a wicked gossip, a foul drop from the black tongue of slander, has poisoned the very well-spring of domestic bliss. In Jonah's case, the Lord prepared the worm; and although no evil thing can be charged against the good God, yet at the back of man's free will there is the great truth of divine predestination, which, without taking any evil upon itself, yet overrules even the waywardness of man for the Lord's own glory. People often think that there is no worm which can eat into their comfort; but God can prepare one, as he did in the case of the prophet. He as much prepared the worm as he prepared the gourd, he as much destroyed the comfort as he first of all gave it to his sorrowing servant.  
  
This worm, which God had prepared, *did its work very speedily.* The gourd was destroyed in a night; when Jonah fell asleep, there it was over his head, guarding him from the bright beams of the moon; but when he woke in the morning, it hung shrivelled and worn out, affording no protection whatever from the fierce rays of the sun. Oh, how soon can God take away every atom of comfort that we have! I am never at a wedding but the thought of a funeral crosses my mind; I cannot help it. Neither do I hear the sound of joyous music, but I reflect how soon it will all be over, and the trumpet of the great day of judgment will subdue all hearts with fear. It is well, when you are glad, to rejoice as though you rejoiced not, for then you will learn, when you are sorrowful, to mourn as though you sorrowed not. Recollecting the vanity and frailty of all things here below, have yourself well in hand; create your circumstances, rather than be the creature of them; overrule them by faith, instead of bowing before them in terror.  
  
Further, when God prepared the worm to destroy Jonah's gourd, *the result of its work was very sad.* It left the poor man without that which had made him exceeding glad, and he was as angry and distressed as before he had been rejoicing. I want you, dear friends, just to pause here to learn this lesson. It is God who sends your trials; do not get into your head the notion that your sickness or anything else that grieves you is from the devil. He may have a finger in it, but he is himself always under the supremacy of God. When Job is vexed and plagued by Satan, the arch-enemy cannot touch him anywhere till God gives permission. God stands evermore at the back of all that happens; therefore, do not begin kicking at the secondary agent. You know that, if you strike a dog with a stick, he bites at the stick; if he were a sensible dog, he would try to bite you. If you quarrel with anything that happens, your quarrel is virtually with God himself. It is no use to quarrel with the Lord's agent; for it is God, after all, who sends you the affliction, and "he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men." Say, as old Eli did, when he heard the evil tidings concerning his household, "It is the Lord: let him do what seemeth him good." Let it be with you as it was with Aaron when, as he could not speak joyfully, he did not speak at all: "Aaron held his peace." It is sometimes a great thing to be able not to say anything. Silence is golden when it is the silence of a complete submission to the will of the Lord. God prepares the worm; therefore, be not angry with the poor worm, but just let the gourd go. It was God who made it to grow, and he had a perfect right to take it away when he pleased.  
  
**III. Now, thirdly, "God prepared a vehement east wind," which teaches us that GOD IS IN OUR HEAVIEST TRIALS.**

Jonah could not escape the fury of the wind, especially when his gourd was withered. This wind came from the east, which, according to our old proverb, is "neither good for man nor beast." But it came from the east most vehemently, and, at the same time, after the protecting gourd was gone, the fierce rays of the sun beat upon Jonah's head, where he seems to have been weakest, though he probably thought himself to be strongest just there.  
  
So, dear friends, *God may send you troubles on the back of one another.* The gourd is gone; now the east wind comes. Troubles seldom come alone, they usually fly in flocks, like martins; and it will often happen that one will come upon the back of another, and you will say to yourself, "Why does this trial come just now when I am least able to bear it?"  
  
Sometimes, also, *troubles come very fiercely.* It was "a vehement east wind." It came like the rush of scorching heat out of the open door of an oven; it was like the Sirocco, a sultry wind burning up everything in its track. This wind came with all its might upon poor Jonah; and just so may fierce and fiery trials come at any time upon the dearest servants of God.  
  
And, once more, *trouble may come when we think ourselves secure.* When Jonah went away out of the city, he seemed to say, "There, I will get away from men; I will not have anything more to do with them, they have always worried and troubled me. I will get quite alone; there I shall sit and enjoy myself, for I cannot enjoy anybody else." But the troubles came even there; indeed, Jonah had built his booth "on the east side of the city," just where he would be likely to feel the full force of the wind blowing from that quarter. In going there, he had not gone out of the realm of withered gourds, and he had not gone beyond the reach of the vehement east wind. Neither have you, dear friend, though you say, "I thought, when I left my last trying situation, I should get into a comfortable place." Yes, I will tell you when you will get into a comfortable place, if you are a Christian, and that is, when you pass out of this world altogether. But you will not find it anywhere else; go where you may on this globe, there are no islands upon which the sea does not sometimes beat roughly. There is no atmosphere so calm but the east wind will disturb it sooner or later; you may go and sit in your booth if you like, but there shall come to you even in that booth the chequers of comfort and of loss, of gourds which spring up in a night and which also wither in a night.  
  
Yes, fierce troubles will come to us, and *they may bring us no benefit in themselves.* It is a popular notion that trials sanctify those who have to endure them; but by themselves they do not. It is a sanctified trial that sanctifies the tried one; but trial itself, alone and by itself, might make men even worse than they are. Here, for instance, is Jonah; his gourd is gone, and the sun's fierce heat beats upon him, and makes him faint; and even to the Lord himself he says that he does well to be angry, even unto death. The trial was not sanctified to him while he was in it; and it often happens that "nevertheless afterward" is the time in which trials benefit us: "No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." You may have ten thousand trials, and yet be none the better for them unless you cry to God to sanctify every twig of the rod, and to make the fury of the east wind or the burning rays of the sun to be a blessing to you.  
  
It seems that, at the time, *this trial only revealed Jonah's folly,* for it appeared to make him pray very foolishly, and talk very foolishly. His trials were like the tossing of the troubled sea, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. This vehement east wind threw up great masses of black seaweed upon the shore of Jonah's character, and made the great sea of his heart roll up the foul mass of corruption that else might have been hidden and still. Brethren and sisters, unless the Spirit of God comes upon us in power, we shall not grow holy through our trials. Though we were washed in a sea of fire, we should not lose an atom of our sin by suffering. Nay, the very flames of hell shall never purify a soul, or purge away a single sin; he that is filthy shall even there be filthy still. There is nothing in suffering, any more than there is in joy, in and of itself, to make a man holy. That is the work of God, and of God alone; yet God overrules both our joy and our grief to accomplish his own divine purpose by his Spirit. It is God who sends the wind; so, once again, I want you to pause, and bow your heads before him who sends all your trouble. Do not be angry with God for what he does to you; but feel that it must be right even though it should tear everything away from you, though it should leave you a widow and houseless, though it should strip you, and though it should even slay you. God is God still; and the deeper your trouble, the greater are your possibilities of adoration; for, when you are brought to the very lowest, it is that, *in extremis,* you can raise the song *in excelsis,* out of the deepest depths you can praise the Lord to the very highest. When we glorify God out of the fires of fiercest tribulation, there is probably more true adoration of him in that melody than in the loftiest songs of cherubim and seraphim when they enjoy God, and sing out his praises in his presence above.  
  
**IV. Now, lastly, I said that it was not in the text verbally, but it was there in spirit, that IN ALL THIS GOD WAS PREPARING HIS SERVANT.**  
Do you not see that *God was teaching Jonah by the eye and by experience?* Unless the Lord had put Jonah through this process, he could not so well have argued with his servant. So the gourd must go, and the wind must come, and the sun must beat upon the fainting prophet, and Jonah in his angry temper must get to feel great grief over his poor gourd which had met with such an untimely death, and then God comes to him, and says, "Art thou troubled about thy gourd? Hast thou pity upon a gourd, and should not I have pity upon a great city with more than a hundred and twenty thousand helpless children within its walls, and all those thousands of unsinning cattle? Should not I spare these, when thou wouldst have spared this tender plant, which sprang up in a night, and withered in a night?" Sometimes, God puts us through an unusual experience in order that we may the better understand him; and sometimes that we may the better know ourselves. Men who are of a hard nature must have hard usage, diamond must cut diamond, that at last the purpose of the great Owner of the jewels may be accomplished.  
  
Then, dear heart, with thy sore afflictions, *God is preparing thee to be a comforter to others.* Thou distressed and troubled one, God is training thee that thou mayest be a very Barnabas, the son of consolation, to the sons and daughters of affliction in times to come. I would suggest to some of you here who have to bear double trouble that God may be preparing you for double usefulness, or he may be working out of you some unusual form of evil which might not be driven out of you unless his Holy Spirit had used these mysterious methods with you to teach you more fully his mind.  
  
I am probably speaking to some who are not yet converted to God. You have not yet believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, yet you have a world of troubles. You think that God is so angry with you that he means to destroy you, for ever since you have begun to think of divine things you have had nothing but trouble. You have lost one dear friend after another, you have yourself been very ill, and you often feel very low-spirited and sad, and you say to yourself, "Ah, I am doomed to perish!" Now, I do not come to that conclusion at all. On the contrary, I thank God for your trouble, for I think that, as God dealt with Jonah to teach him a lesson, he is dealing with you to bring you to himself. It was a good thing for Jonah when he had finished that quarrel with his God, for no good ever comes that way. What a blessed thing it would be for you also to finish your quarrel with God! Finish it soon, I beg you. How can you be reconciled to him? Only by the death of Jesus, for God has given his Son to die for sinners. That ought to end your quarrel with God. Remember that blessed verse, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Turn to him, then. Let the God of love end your discussions, and end your questionings; may his blessed Spirit come and sanctify your troubles, and bring you to himself!  
  
God bless you all, dear friends, for Jesus' sake! Amen.

1. Crossway Bibles. (2008). [*The ESV Study Bible*](https://ref.ly/logosres/esvsb?ref=BibleESV.Jon&off=9711) (pp. 1683–1685). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)