

Sermon on Jonah, the Angry Prophet

Lessons: Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-10; 4:1-4, 9, 11
Luke 14:1-5, 12-14; 10:30-37
Arcana Coelestia 10441

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And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "O LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in kindness, One who repents from doing harm." (Jonah 4:1-2)

For most people the story of Jonah is about a man who was swallowed up and saved from drowning by a big fish. This is a story that children love and which is easily remembered. But the story of Jonah is not really a big fish tale. It is a story of the Lord's love and mercy towards all people.

Jonah, a prophet living in Israel, was called by the Lord to preach to the people of Nineveh. He tried to avoid this missionary trip by fleeing on a ship going in the opposite direction. But as we know, this did not work out as he had hoped, and he ended up going to Nineveh and preaching to the people the message that the Lord told him. Now why was Jonah, the prophet, so intent on avoiding preaching the message of the Lord in Nineveh?

Well, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and the Assyrians at that time were a people hated by the Israelites as well as hated by the people of other nations. This was because the Assyrians were intent on expanding their empire and control over other nations – – and also they were known to be particularly cruel towards the nations they conquered. So Jonah, the prophet, had no desire or interest in going and preaching any message that might save them from destruction.

Jonah had good reason to fear that if the people of the city should repent due to his preaching, the Lord would relent from their destruction, because he knew that the Lord is *"a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in kindness, One who repents from doing harm."* Which is precisely what happened. Jonah went to the city, preached to them about their impending destruction, the

people from the king on down repented, and the Lord as a consequence repented from the destruction that He had intended for them. This is certainly not what Jonah wanted, and he was so angry he wished to die.

So this is a story about the Lord's mercy to all people. First, He displayed mercy to the wayward disobedient Jonah by saving him from drowning, and then He displayed mercy by saving the people of a foreign gentile nation because they were repented and turned from their evil ways. Jonah in this story is an example of those of us in the church when we resist and turn from obeying the teachings of the Lord. And the Lord's mercy toward the people of Nineveh represents his love and mercy towards all people who turn from their evil ways.

Now this anger and resentment that Jonah displayed, because the Lord showed love and mercy to others who were not of his tribe and religion, bears a resemblance to the story of the good Samaritan in which the priest and Levite refused to help an injured man lying naked by the side of road. It was the Samaritan who was the one who showed mercy on him. Jonah, the priest, and the Levite were all members of the church – – and none of them wanted to show mercy.

These stories also may have a lesson to those of us in the church. Perhaps we need to be on guard against a tendency to feel and display a lack of love and charity to those who are different from ourselves. It is so easy for us to be critical of those whose doctrine or style of worship is different from ours. Perhaps, like Jonah, we even get angry or envious when we see the Lord showing his love and mercy to them also.

To see this in perspective consider these passages from the Word:

“If all, no matter how many ... are governed by charity or mutual love, they have but one end in view, namely the common good, the Lord's kingdom, and the Lord Himself. Variations in matters of doctrine and in forms of worship ... all contribute to the perfection of the whole.” (AC 1285)

“If charity occupied the first place and faith the second the whole appearance of the Church would be different, for in that case no others would be called Christians but those who led a life in keeping with the truth of faith, which is a charitable life.” (AC 6269)

"... the Doctrine of Charity was the doctrine in the Ancient Churches, and this doctrine conjoined all the churches, and so made one out of many; for they acknowledged as men of the church all who lived in the good of charity, and called them brethren, however greatly they might differ in truths In these they instructed one another, and this was among their works of charity; nor were they indignant if one did not go along with the opinion of another, knowing that everyone receives truth in proportion as he is in good." (AC 6628)

Jonah was a prophet used by the Lord. He knew the truth – – that the Lord was a gracious and merciful God. But he did not love this truth. And he did not like the fact that the Lord would apply this truth. Jonah knew the truth, but lacked charity. He lacked love to others who were different. Another lesson is illustrated here for those of us in the church. We can know the truth, we can believe in the doctrine, we can even talk about charity. But when we complain and backbite, are we truly showing ourselves to be members of the church?

Consider these words of Psalm 15:

Lord, who may abide in your tabernacle? Who may dwell in your holy hill? He who walks up uprightly and does what is just and speaks the truth in his heart. He who does not backbite with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor nor does he take up a reproach against his friend ... He who does these things shall never be moved. (Psalm 15:1-3, 5)

Being a true member of the church comes not from faithfully attending weekly worship services, nor does it come from believing certain matters of doctrine. Both of these may be useful for our spiritual lives. But being a true member of the church comes from living according to what the truths of doctrine teach. And chief among these are loving the Lord and loving the neighbor – – the Two Great Commandments. Without living according to these two commandments, without loving them, no matter how much doctrinal truth we may know and be able to talk about, we will only end up being like Jonah, an angry prophet.

Amen.

Prayer:

O LORD, You have searched me and known *me*.

You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off.

You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways.

For *there is* not a word on my tongue, *But* behold, O LORD, You know it altogether.

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend into heaven, You *are* there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You *are there*.
If I take the wings of the morning, *And* dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me.
Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my thoughts;
And see if *there is any* wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.
(Psalm 139:1-4, 7-10, 23-24)

LESSONS

Jonah 1:1-3

¹Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.” ³But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah 3:1-10

¹Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, ⁴a three-day journey *in extent*. ⁴And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

⁵So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. ⁶Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat in ashes. ⁷And he caused *it* to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying,

Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. ⁸But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?

¹⁰Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

Jonah 4:1-4, 9, 11

¹But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. ²So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "O LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my

country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You *are* a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in kindness, One who repents from doing harm.

³ Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for *it is* better for me to die than to live!"

⁴ Then the LORD said, "*Is it* right for you to be angry?" ⁹ ... And he said, "*It is* right for me to be angry, even to death!" ¹¹ And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left, and *also* much cattle?"

Luke 14:1-5, 12-14 (NKJV)

¹ Now it happened, as He went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath, that they watched Him closely.

² And behold, there was a certain man before Him who had dropsy.

³ And Jesus, answering, spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

⁴ But they kept silent. And He took *him* and healed him, and let him go.

⁵ Then He answered them, saying, "Which of you, having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?"

¹² Then He also said to him who invited Him, "When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid.

¹³ But when you give a feast, invite *the* poor, *the* maimed, *the* lame, *the* blind.

¹⁴ And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

Luke 10: 30-37

³⁰ Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. ³³ But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.' ³⁶ So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" ³⁷ And he said, "He who showed mercy on him."

Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

AC 10441. 'And repent [of the evil] against Your people' means having mercy on them. This is clear from the meaning of 'repenting', when it has reference to Jehovah, as having mercy. The reason why 'repenting' means having mercy is that Jehovah does not ever repent, since He foresees and makes provision for all things from eternity. Repentance is a reaction that can take place only in someone who has no knowledge of the future and who sees, as events unfold, that he has made a mistake. Nevertheless the Word speaks of Jehovah's reacting in that kind of way because the sense of the letter consists of ideas of things as people see them. For it is intended for very simple people and for little children, who at first go no further than that sense. Both the simple and little children are in the most external things, with which they begin, and in which afterward their interiors terminate. Wherefore the Word in the letter is to be understood differently by those who have become wiser. by those who have become wiser.

[2] The situation with the Word is similar to that with the human being. Everything within him terminates in flesh and bones; these are the container of everything there. Unless they existed in place of a foundation or support a person could not exist..... It is similar with the Word. This must have a final level in which everything within it terminates; that final level is the sense of the letter, and the inner things are the heavenly things belonging to the internal sense. From all this it is now evident that the way things appear to a person is the reason why Jehovah is said to repent, when in fact He does not repent.

[3] The fact that Jehovah is said to repent is clear from a large number of places in the Word, such as the following:

In Jonah,

The king of Nineveh said, Who knows, God may turn and be moved to repentance, and turn from the heat of His anger, and we may not perish! And they turned from their evil way; therefore God repented of the evil which He had said He would do to them, so that He did not do it. (Jonah 3:9,10)

[4] From these places which speak of Jehovah's having repented, when in fact He cannot repent since He knows all things before He does them, it is evident that 'repenting' means having mercy.

AMEN