

12. The Restless Prophet (3Q 2021—Rest in Christ)

Biblical Material: Jonah 1–4; Jer. 25:5; Ezek. 14:6; Rev. 2:5; Luke 9:51–56; Jude 1–25.

Quotes

- God has always chosen the slow and difficult way, respecting human freedom at all cost. *Philip Yancey*
- Not only the ship, but the whole world becomes too small for Jonah. *Martin Luther*
- The so-called godly man may be more likely to do serious wrong than a man who deeply questions himself. The ‘godly man’ often zealously follows religious precepts that, in the end, justify an unjust injury to others, while the questioning man, addressing his own conscience, may have the better chance to consider all the circumstances and come to the just decision. *Gerry Spence*
- When you have nothing left but God you will become aware for the first time that God is enough. *Dag Hammarskjold*
- There is but one thing of real value—to cultivate truth and justice, and to live without anger in the midst of lying and unjust men. *Marcus Aurelius*

Questions

How do we begin to see what kind of God is portrayed in Jonah, especially as compared to other parts of the Old Testament? What does God’s concern for Nineveh tell us about him, especially when considered against the nationalistic sentiments of the Israelites? What does this tell us about nationalism today too? How does Jonah’s experience illustrate issues in the great controversy?

Bible summary

Jonah 1–4 is the whole story of Jonah. In Jer. 25:5 people are called to turn from their evil ways. Similarly God speaks through Ezekiel (14:6) calling for people to turn from their idol worship. Rev. 2:5 tells us to repent. A Samaritan rejects Jesus in Luke 9:51–56. Jude 1–25 is about judgment and deliverance.

Comment

The book of Jonah is rightly recognized as providing a great deal of insight into the nature and character of God. The real question is “why is this important?” Some argue that it doesn’t really matter what concept of God you have as long as you obey the rules and do as you are told. What is wrong with that concept? Is salvation a matter of correctly understanding God? Or is just the application of the provided solution that will save us?

Jesus made it clear that he wanted to reveal God as he truly is. Yet even this belief can become something that is seen as just a dogmatic point. We may even have the right picture of God, and yet do nothing about it, or not wish to have a relationship with such a God. It is not just a question of getting the picture right, it is also vital to love such a God as he is revealed!

It seems that Jonah was included in Scripture primarily to reveal God’s true nature—in contrast to the mistaken ideas of just about everyone else. Even God’s spokesman Jonah had some severe deficiencies in his God picture, while we can only speculate on the errors believed by the sailors and the Ninevites. So how do we apply Jonah’s experience to ourselves?

Most of all, how do we help others not only see God more clearly, but want to have a relationship with such a God? Is it only a question of describing God right, or is there much more to it? Think of those (like Homer Simpson above!) whose knowledge and experience of God is so limited and so damaged. How do we best share the truth in such a winsome way so that others will choose God and want to accept his gift of a relationship that saves and heals?

The book of Jonah is so *different* to the other minor prophets that unfortunately some have dismissed it as a mere fable. Sandwiched between the obedient prophets Obadiah and Micah, Jonah is the anti-prophet, the one who reveals a whole new side to the divine-human relationship. In fact Jonah is more of a parody of what is meant to be the arrangement between God and his prophet, and the result is a very serious depiction of the prophetic call, of judgment, and the nature of God—all in a story that is at the same time full of comic irony.

Jonah makes a mockery of the way things are “supposed” to be. This book is God’s subversive handbook and Jonah is the anti-hero. The book of Jonah destroys the wrong-headed, rigid and formalistic ideas about God and reveals his gracious desire to save all, not the ones who arrogantly see themselves as God’s elite.

Just a few examples of the ironic opposites. Prophets of God obey God, but Jonah refuses and runs away. (Talk about a restless prophet!) Then we meet good, God-fearing sailors, contrasted with a bad, God-disobeying prophet. On the ship, when they all are facing imminent destruction, God’s man is asleep in the hold. The heathen city of Nineveh repents, while God’s people Israel generally refuse to listen. Nineveh is spared, and instead of celebrating, God’s prophet Jonah gets mad. God explains he has the right to be gracious, and Jonah disagrees with him. Jonah appreciates gourd that he did not plant, then blames God when it dies...

The restlessness of Jonah can be traced to its source—a refusal to trust in God. His decision to run away as far as possible is a reflection of our human desire to “be in charge,” to choose our own path even to our detriment. God doesn’t compel, though he certainly puts Jonah through the mill! Jonah’s life becomes a success as he aligns his will to God’s, and he slowly discovers the truth about the God he initially refused. For in the end, who knew Jonah’s story, and who made sure it was written down and put in the Bible? Only one man could have known this—Jonah himself. The redeeming factor here is that Jonah’s book is there to read, with all his faults—Jonah’s voyage of discovery that shows an attractive picture of God, while Jonah admits he doesn’t look so good!

Ellen White comments

Among the cities of the ancient world in the days of divided Israel one of the greatest was Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian realm...It had flourished through the centuries until it had become “an exceeding great city of three days’ journey.” Jonah 3:3.

In the time of its temporal prosperity Nineveh was a center of crime and wickedness. Inspiration has characterized it as “the bloody city, . . . full of lies and robbery.” In figurative language the prophet Nahum compared the Ninevites to a cruel, ravenous lion. “Upon whom,” he inquired, “hath not thy wickedness passed continually?” Nahum 3:1, 19.

Yet Nineveh, wicked though it had become, was not wholly given over to evil. He who “beholdeth all the sons of men” (Psalm 33:13) and “seeth every precious thing” (Job 28:10) perceived in that city many who were reaching out after something better and higher, and who, if granted opportunity to learn of the living God, would put away their evil deeds and worship Him. And so in His wisdom God revealed Himself to them in an unmistakable manner, to lead them, if possible, to repentance. {PK 265}