

Jonah and the Church

God is good. And in His goodness, He created mankind for a specific purpose: to bless us by having us in the presence of His infinite Person. We were made to enjoy the eternal God by being in a personal relationship with Him. But there was a condition. That was to honor Him by obeying His instructions how we were to live. And very early on, humans decided that they didn't want to do that. So God cast them out from His presence (Genesis 3). That was an exile, because God promised that in the future the relationship could be restored. In time, all the nations on earth rebelled against God (Genesis 11), and God gave those nations over to be ruled by wicked supernatural beings. All the Gentile nations from early in Genesis are in Exile, apart from the presence of God.

But God then went on a mission to reach out to His beloved humans to bring them back to Himself. To do that, God called one man, Abram, who would honor God, with the intent that Abram's descendants would take the knowledge of God to all the Gentile nations. Abraham was also given a plot of land that would be His, where God would dwell physically with his family. By his faith, Abraham exited the exile into God's presence. Abraham's descendents failed to honor God, however, so they too were cast out from God's presence in that land. Exile again. While in Egypt, those descendents became a nation, Israel, and in time God miraculously took them out from that Gentile place so they could dwell in the land God had given to Abraham, with God Himself ruling over them and blessing them. The Exodus was a return from Exile.

As the centuries passed, the people of those Gentile nations, exiled from God, became horribly wicked, just like the gods who ruled them. Those nations were in constant turmoil, violent and turbulent, just like the raging sea. And sadly, tragically, the people of Israel rejected the role that God had for them, that is, of taking the knowledge of God to all those Gentile nations. And they failed to honor God as well (Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, the Books of the Monarchy).

During the period of the Monarchy in Israel, God called a certain Israelite man by the name of Jonah and gave him a task to carry out. Jonah was a prophet, which means he knew God's ways and something of the future. His mission was to take the knowledge of God to the Gentile people of the nation of Assyria. Jonah was horrified at this call. The Assyrians, he knew, were vile and ruthlessly cruel pagans. And in time, they would sweep westward and conquer Israel. It would be bloody and horrible. (He knew this because he was a prophet.) If God would condemn them, Israel could be spared that vicious onslaught. So, he disobeyed God's call. He didn't merely ignore it; he so deliberately and thoroughly refused to carry it out he booked passage on a ship going in the opposite direction! He was *not* going to take the knowledge of God to the Assyrians. "Let God judge them and let them all die! It's what they deserve," he thought.

But God was on mission to save the beloved people He created, even those dwelling in Gentile nations. Even wicked Assyrians. So in His sovereignty, He sent a storm, and He had Jonah thrown overboard into the raging sea to still the storm. Miraculously, Jonah was swallowed by a great fish God sent, and in the belly of that fish, Jonah repented. He called out to God for deliverance and . . . God rescued him! (Whether Jonah died and was resurrected isn't certain from the text, but it's possible.) God had the fish vomit him up on dry land, and this time Jonah obeyed God. He went to Ninevah and warned the people there to repent or experience imminent destruction. Jonah had been 3 days and nights in the belly of that great fish, so his skin was probably eaten away by gastric acid. When the Assyrians saw him and heard his dreadful warning, they too repented. All of them! They turned from their wickednesses. And so God spared that city the dreadful judgment that was due.

The story of Jonah has a strange ending. The prophet was sullen. He wasn't pleased that those Assyrian people repented and came to know the God of Israel. God had to rebuke him for his callous indifference. God, full of compassion, was delighted with the Assyrians' response, though.

Let's discuss the story, because it's loaded with meaning. First, it wasn't Ninevah that was being tested, it was Jonah. Everyone and everything in the story responds to God – except Jonah. He resists God, front to back, beginning to end. The sailors, the sea, the fish, the citizens of Ninevah, the king of Ninevah, the animals of Assyria, the vine, the worm, the sun – all obeyed God. But not Jonah. Second, Jonah was representative of the Nation of Israel, always resisting and rebelling against their loving God. The story anticipates another exile. The nation of Israel is going to be thrown into the "sea," that is, the world of pagan Gentile nations, cast away from the presence of Jehovah, their God. Israel didn't need to fear the Assyrians. They needed instead to fear their God. Third, if the cruel, godless Assyrians could repent at the half-hearted preaching of the poorest excuse for a prophet in the entire Old Testament, why couldn't or wouldn't guilty Israel repent at the preaching of, say, Jeremiah? If God mercifully relented at the response of that Gentile nation to His

word, how much more would He have relented and received back a repentant Israel? The Book of Jonah is satire; God is mocking His own rebellious people. But there's more. And let's not miss this. God's mercy is not just for Israel!! Who would have expected such godless people to believe in God? But they did, and God showed grace to them. God intends to bless all the nations on earth. His special relationship with Israel was never an end in itself but a means to an end, which is God's mission to save His beloved but fallen humanity.

Israel's role was to take the knowledge of God to the Gentile nations so that they too might know and love Jehovah, the Creator God, and so leave exile. Israel determinedly refused to do it. Instead, they went off on their own fulfilling their lusts and passions in flagrant disobedience to their loving God. So in holiness and justice, God had to cast them out from His presence. Another Exile. This last exile involved the Nation of Israel being thrown into the violent world of all the Gentile nations, where they would be hated, harassed, terrorized, and persecuted.

The Jonah story is proleptic of the history of the Nation of Israel. It anticipates their Exile (being thrown into the "sea" of raging, violent, constantly tumultuous Gentile nations because of rebellion), which is like death. Then, eventually, there'd be repentance and restoration, which is like resurrection from the dead. Jonah thus prophesies (his life *is* the message) the Exile and a future restoration, at which time Israel would be obedient and bear witness to God in all the nations. Why? So that all peoples might know God, love Him, be intimately related to Him, and enjoy being in His presence.

When Jesus came, He reprised or recapitulated the history of Israel. His death was like an exile. Being handed over to Rome to crucify Him was just like Israel being thrown into the world of Gentiles to die there at their vicious hands. Being in the grave was just like Israel in the "sea." His resurrection anticipates the future Return from Exile. And His ascension anticipates Israel's future dwelling in the presence of God. Jesus Himself called attention to this in His stilling of the sea (Matthew 8:23-27, which is based on Psalm 107:23-32), a Psalm about Exile. And then, again, Jesus referred us to the story of Jonah in Matthew 12. By His death and resurrection, Jesus reprises or recapitulates the story of that prophet, except that Jesus is the faithful prophet who obeys God.

The offer of the Kingdom (Matthew) was to exit Exile. The Monarchy was interrupted by that Exile, so the return from Exile would be to the Monarchy – except that now the king would be the promised Anointed One, the ultimate son of David, of whom Isaiah wrote. Those who trust Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, exit their exile and enter the presence of the living God. Leaving exile is like a new Exodus. To be in exile is like death. The promise of eternal life is to experience our Creator God and the blessing of being with Him. That is life. Those who reject Jesus remain forever in exile, separated eternally from God's presence. Hell is the place for such people.

What all this means for the Church should be obvious, but let's make it explicit. Jesus commanded His believers to do one task. It's not to hold church services every Sunday morning. It's not to preach the Gospel from a pulpit to whomever shows up. It's to do what Israel was supposed to do but didn't. It's to do what Jonah was commissioned to do, but only did when the alternative was worse. It's to take the knowledge of Israel's God to all the people on earth, so that they too might repent and call on the name of the Lord and be blessed by His presence. Whereas Israel was thrown into the "sea" in judgment, the Church is to go willingly into the "sea" to effect salvation. Just as Jonah had to go into the sea (Assyria), and just as Jesus had to go into the sea (the grave), so must believers carry on, or continue, the mission of the Son of God in the sea ("all the world") to bring to God people everywhere on earth (not just Ninevah). Whereas Israel was thrown into Exile, away from the presence of God, Jesus said to His believers as He commissioned them to go into the sea, "And I am with you always." The presence of God is with us as we go.

The "sea" is an exceedingly dangerous place. The powers of darkness oppress and control all who dwell in it; all people not in Christ are enslaved by wicked supernatural beings, swallowed up just like Jonah was. Freedom is being in God's presence. In love, we reach out to those helpless captives with our testimony and with the Word of God, so they too can exit the Exile and experience the joy of being with God. We reprise the Exodus and the Conquest under the new Joshua (Jesus' name in Hebrew is Joshua). All who respond are like Rahab. It's really all about love, isn't it.

So, beware: God *really* intends for believers to serve Him by participating in some way in Gospel outreach. Of course, not everyone in the body is a "hand" or a "foot" or whatever. Indeed, there are different gifts. Yet, missions is the one and only clearly revealed task of the church. It's not an option. It's not just for professionals to do. God threw His own beloved people of Israel into the sea for refusing to serve Him as He intended them to do. God was gracious to those people, yet He punished them severely. He can do the same to the Church. Hey, do we understand the love of God?