
James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of JONAH

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THE BOOK of JONAH

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I) I:I

Jonah is a book to which our Lord Himself made reference in relation to His own death and resurrection. In a remarkable way, as we shall see, the message of the book for us is the challenge of personal death and resurrection in the spiritual sense, in obedience to the word and will of God. It was because of a death that Jonah refused to die that he came to grief; and later, in grief-stricken obedience he returned to God, and preached in Nineveh as one back from the dead, filled with the Spirit. No problems about the book, either as to its date, or as to its form, whether historical or allegorical, should be allowed to blind us to its central teaching for the spiritual life of the individual and of the Church.

Jonah was an approximate contemporary of Amos. There is only one other reference to him in the Old Testament, outside the prophecy itself, in 2 Kings 14:25, where it is clear that Jonah was a messenger of mercy to King Jeroboam II. This is interesting, in relation to his ministry in Nineveh, which was essentially one of mercy, although it began with a warning of judgment. Our Lord's reference to Jonah (Matthew 12:40,41) is a pointer to the true method of interpretation so far as Israel was concerned. Just as Jonah, because of his disobedience, was cast into the sea, then delivered in order that he might fulfil the divine will, so also Israel, because of her disobedience, would have to pass through the crucible of exile from her land, then return in order to fulfil her divine mission in the world. Understood thus, the message of the book is sufficiently similar to that of both Amos and Micah, though couched in different language, to enable it to stand in historical sequence with them.

2) 1:1

The book of Jonah has tended to become discredited in the minds of many because of an almost inevitable association of ideas, 'Jonah?' they say, 'Ah, yes, the whale'. But that is precisely to miss the point of the book; the whale (better, the big fish) is incidental. There are weightier matters in the prophecy than the problem of how Jonah could have been swallowed by a whale. Is it the presence of the miraculous that men boggle at in this record? We have often pointed out that miracle in the Scriptures is confined to four main periods, each of them being a time of crisis - the time of the Exodus, the beginning of the prophetic era and the declension of the people of Israel, the time of the captivity, and the coming of our Lord and the birth of the New Testament Church. Jonah is sufficiently near to Elijah and Elisha to warrant being linked with them in the early prophetic ministry. There is therefore no more reason for caviling at the miraculous in Jonah than there is in the record of Elijah and Elisha. This is surely not an adequate ground for questioning the historicity of the book! The decisive consideration, however, for us should be the fact that Jesus Himself believed in the historicity of Jonah's mission to Nineveh. Nor will it do to say that our Lord was simply quoting the story to illustrate his point, and that this does not necessarily mean that He believed it to be historical. We can scarcely think He could mean that legendary figures out of a non-historical allegory would be able to rise up in judgment with real, historical people such as the generation of Jews to whom He was then speaking, and condemn them (Luke 11:32). Are we to believe that the final judgment also is legendary? The difficulties are greater for those who reject the historicity of the book of Jonah than for those who accept it.

3) 1:1-3

If the reference in 2 Kings 14:25 is any indication, we may suppose that Jonah was active in the service of God, and used effectually by Him up to this particular point in his experience, when alas he became disobedient and refused the commission to go to Nineveh. This sad story of a man who got out of the will of God and ran away from it, serves to remind us that there is no experience in the Christian life that can be regarded as final and conclusive and from which it is not possible for a believer to fall, however greatly he may have been used. The spiritual life, and above all fruitfulness therein, is based on precise spiritual laws, which when broken bring an inevitable train of consequence on the disobedient, and this is as true for the hitherto honoured and fruitful servant as for the novice who has not advanced far in Christian things. Jonah found to his cost that he could not take liberties with the will of God, and that past faithfulness could not stand him in stead when his heart was intent upon resisting it. We should learn from this that there is no point in the Christian life at which we can afford to relax vigilance on our souls, and that the perils are especially great when we have got beyond the elementary stages of spiritual advancement. It costs too much to forget or be unmindful of the fact that there are new deaths to die day by day if true spiritual life is to be maintained!

4) 1:1-3

There are two points in particular that we need to note in these verses, the one connected with the other. The message that Jonah was to proclaim to Nineveh was one of judgment; he was to 'cry against it' (2). Yet, it is clear from the third chapter of the book that behind this pronouncement of impending doom and judgment the grace of God was at work, and that He had a purpose of blessing for that wicked and heathen city. We may learn much from this. It would be interesting to study the history of the Church in the past hundred and fifty years and see on the one hand how times of great and widespread national awakening were related to preaching which emphasised and had at its heart the solemn note of judgment, and on the other how in times when judgment has been at a discount, not to say repudiated and despised as a doctrine, spiritual barrenness has tended to prevail. It is certainly not without significance that many of the great spiritual movements recorded in the Scriptures of both Old and New Testaments have begun with a solemn and warning note of judgment. It is surely only in the context of the certainty of divine judgment apart from the grace of God that that grace is magnified and exalted among men.

5) 1:1-3

The other point that arises in these verses concerns the reason for Jonah's disobedience. It was not the length of the road to Nineveh, nor the dangers involved in such a mission as Jonah knew this would be. Cowardice was far from him, we may be sure. The real problem was simply that he knew that behind God's warning of judgment there was a purpose of grace. He knew that Nineveh would repent, that his mission would be successful. And he did not want it to be successful. He did not want God to bless that wicked city, and even after his terrible experience and subsequent obedience it was still hard for him to accept their acceptance by God. For, servant of God as he was, he was also a bigoted Jew, and the Ninevites were Gentile dogs. This is the key to the whole story. It was God's care for a Gentile nation that made Jonah so bitter. This is an extraordinary thing. Were not the Jews called of God in the beginning in order that they might be a light to the Gentiles, that through them the whole world might come to hear and know God? Ah yes, this was the purpose of their election, but the tragic mystery of the Jews is that they were rarely able to see this, even in the bright light of New Testament revelation. A great part of Paul's distress and sufferings in the Christian Missionary expansion of his time was due to his protracted battle with this 'Jonah-like' spirit that was always unwilling and sometimes refused outright to admit the possibility of the Gentiles being included in the blessings of the gospel. It is one of the major lessons of the Book of Jonah that it approximates so nearly to the spirit of apostolic Christianity in its wide and universal understanding of the divine love and mercy.

6) 1:1-3

Another point of spiritual import emerges from this however; Jonah's bigoted spirit did not become evident until God commanded him to go to Nineveh; the sin that put him out of touch with God lay hidden in his heart long before it came out in his life. God's commands reveal the thoughts of many hearts, to their profound dismay and discomfiture. Wrong attitudes secretly harboured and entertained within have a way of coming out into the open given a certain combination of circumstances. God sees to that. We cannot suppose that He was unaware of how Jonah would react to the command to go to Nineveh. Indeed it was as much to bring matters to a head as anything else that He gave it! C. S. Lewis's words about the trial of our faith are very pertinent here: 'God has not been trying an experiment on my faith or love in order to find out their quality. He knew it already. It was I who didn't in this trial; He makes us occupy the dock, the witness box and the bench all at once. He always knew that my temple was a house of cards. His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down'.

7) 1:3

There is something both frightening and comical in this account of Jonah's flight from God. It is frightening because it is so deliberate and wilful and decisive, in the desire it shows in the man's heart to escape from God - frightening also because it echoes so nearly our own wayward impulses when we are balking at God's plans for our lives. But it is comical that a man should think to be able to escape from God in a ship: The Psalmist had a much more realistic appreciation of the situation when he cried, 'Whither shall I flee from Thy presence?' (Psalm 139:7-12). He knew that no man can escape from God. Jonah's experience here betrays a whole series of fatal miscalculations. He paid his fare, we are told. So he thought. But he was wrong. He did not realise as he handed over the money, that very soon he would be asked for more, and more, and more. The fare he paid was only the first instalment, a token deposit; and he discovered that included in the price to be paid to get away from God was the terrible storm at sea, and the wind, and the mighty tempest; included also in the price was the threat of imminent destruction, the turning against him of all the crew, the icy waters clutching him like the hand of death, the great fish and, but for the mercy of God, the blackness of darkness forever. Ah, we keep on paying for running away from God, and there is always the frightful possibility that it will turn out to be a one-way ticket. It is not always easy or even possible to get a ship back!

8) 1:4

From the moment he entered the ship on his ill-fated exploit, nothing went right with Jonah. He was out of joint, and everything that happened in the natural order witnessed to this, and confirmed it. This is not to say, of course, that every disobedience of man is reflected in natural disturbance and calamity, but it does serve to remind us that the sin of man is linked organically with elemental disorder (see Genesis 3:17, Romans 8:19-22). We unleash forces greater than we know when we transgress the will and command of God, and in this connection we should remember how the Scriptures associate the intensification of evil in the last days with convulsions in nature (Matthew 24:3-7). But there is something more here than merely natural interaction between sin and the forces of nature. It was the Lord who was responsible for this tempest that overtook that hapless crew. And if the idea expressed in the first part of this Note is unpalatable to the modern mind, this is even more so. But the truth of God stands, though all men should deny it. It is one thing to recognise that there is much that is mysterious in the afflictions that beset our earthly experience, and to realise that our Lord's words to His disciples - 'What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter' - set bounds to our enquiries after an explanation of them; but it may well be that we shut our eyes deliberately to one possible reason for the misfortunes that dog our steps, namely, that God is in the storm, in displeasure at our sins, chastising us for our wilful disobedience to His will. To deny God the right to be angry is simply to disbelieve in His existence as the true and living God, and to set up in His place an idol of our own imagination's making. It is we who are made in His image, not He in ours!

9) 1:5

But men are especially blind to spiritual realities when they are at odds with God (this is part of the price they pay!) and Jonah was fast asleep in the sides of the ship, his conscience quietened and stilled by the very determination of his refusal of the divine will. We may marvel that a man should be able so completely to shut God out of his consciousness, but we should not underestimate the bitter determination that can grip a man's heart when he is set on disobedience. We shall see more yet, before we go much further in the story, but in the meantime we think of the disobedient prophet sound asleep while the crew of the ship were in terror of their lives. It was obvious to them that this was no ordinary storm, but a visitation of divine anger. It may be that Jonah was oblivious to the fact that God was highly displeased with him - this is always a possibility, as we indicated in yesterday's Note, since sin blunts spiritual vision and insight and blinds men to eternal realities, and men often remain asleep long enough before waking up to the fact that God is in fact chastising them. But there is another possible interpretation, namely, that Jonah knew God was angry, and in his disobedience was unconcerned, as if to say, 'The storm can rage as much as it likes, I am not going to Nineveh, whatever happens'. In other words, in spite of the chastisement of God he is still rebellious and stubbornly resisting His will. Ah, it is a very ugly situation when men persist in their disobedience under God's chastening hand.

10) 1:6-7

The heathen sailors stand in an altogether better light than Jonah, the servant of God, in this story. They, at all events, were more faithful to the light they had than Jonah was to his, and were at least aware that there was a moral cause for the catastrophe that had overtaken them. And it was they who, according to their light, took steps to deal with the matter. They saw that something must be done. It is the world's rebuke to the Church that so often it can sense and discern the underlying moral and spiritual causes of national maladies more truly than the people of God - intent on repudiating the very possibility of a God of judgment - can do. We recall with sad amusement the uproar within the Church when some newspaper editors expressed their frank opinions about the Church's ineffectiveness in the modern world. It was clear then that no suggestion that the divine displeasure might be upon His people was acceptable as an explanation. And so we drool on sentimentally, insisting that 'everything in the garden is lovely'. It is left to the heathen sailors to give expression to the resounding, God-like word, 'What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise call upon thy God'. We find ourselves saying 'That might have come from the lips of an apostle. What a pity it had to be the heathen who said it!' Ah, yes, but this is often the way. We have often heard things said by secular politicians which should have been, but were not, said by the Church. What is more, when the Church does not say them, God sees to it that they are said by others. Indeed, there is a strange irony at work in this part of the story, for this is what Jonah was to have been saying to the heathen in Nineveh. All unconsciously, the heathen sailors are reminding him of the calling on which he has turned his back. Escape from God? How futile to think such a thing! He presses in on all sides, and He will not let us be.

11) 1:8-11

Jonah answers the urgent questions put to him by the distraught sailors as they realise that he is the cause of their peril. The answer given by the prophet, 'I fear the Lord, the God of heaven' is a technical expression denoting his adherence to the Hebrew religion, in much the same way as phrases in the New Testament such as 'ye that fear God' (Acts 13:16) and 'a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house' (Acts 10:2) are used to describe a particular class of people. To take Jonah's words literally would necessitate interpreting them ironically (for was he not resisting God's will, and therefore not fearing Him?), or taking them as a simple statement of his feelings at the time in face of the storm, which is possible, but could scarcely be regarded as an answer to the questions the sailors had put to him. It is best to take his words as describing his religion. Their reaction to this information is significant. It made them the more afraid. This tells us that some knowledge of the Hebrews' God had reached them; enough indeed to make them realise that He was a God to be feared (cf Joshua 2:9-11), and that Jonah had put himself in a highly unenviable position in resisting His will. Once again the reproach of the heathen comes to the disobedient man of God. How this must have humiliated Jonah, and made him squirm! But some humiliations do not humble, and Jonah was apparently bare-faced enough to tell them plainly that he had run away from God (10). If the sailors had not been in such extremity of fear because of the storm, they might have been prompted to remark that by all possible evidences Jonah had been singularly unsuccessful in his flight, for God had caught up with him, with a vengeance!

12) 1:12-16

There are two possible interpretations of Jonah's words in 12. It may be that he was in despair at the thought of how grievously he had sinned against the Lord, and was doing what he thought to be the one right thing by the sailors whom he had involved in such peril by his disobedience. In this connection it has been suggested that we have thus a glimpse of the moral and spiritual grandeur of the prophet which had for the time being been obscured by his waywardness and rebellion, and that this was what impressed the ship's crew to the extent that they sought to help him to the utmost of their ability, although in vain, to bring the ship to land; and when forced ultimately to take the prophet's advice, they put him overboard with the greatest reluctance, and with a moving prayer on their lips to the God of Israel (14) that He might not hold them accountable for 'this man's blood'. On this interpretation, then, Jonah has become reconciled to the divine will, albeit he thinks he has forfeited the right to live. And when he 'dies' in principle, as it were, 'life' is, as ever, the result, and the mariners 'fear the Lord exceedingly'; that is, they become believers. How quick God is to press us into His service, when we come to heel from our disobediences, and how graciously He honours our faltering return to His will. And how wonderful that the very task Jonah had shrunk from - the evangelising of the Gentiles - should be accomplished in the conversion of the sailors in this unexpected way!

13) 1:12-16

The other possible interpretation of 12 is that Jonah, although now awakened and full of fear, is still rebellious and perverse of heart, and that he was prepared to die rather than submit to the will of God and go and preach to the Gentiles at Nineveh. This is far-fetched only to those who do not know their own hearts and their dark capabilities. When sinful stubbornness grips the human spirit, there are no depths to which it will not sink; a frenzied madness seems to possess it in which the will of God becomes something to resist at any cost, and death itself seems more desirable than submission to it. This frenzy is of the devil, of course, and we have only to think of the extreme lengths that even believers sometimes go to in avoiding that 'good and acceptable and perfect will of God' to realise how much the demonic can become a factor in Christian experience. On this interpretation, the conversion of the heathen mariners has a rather different significance. Jonah sees enacted before him the very thing he fled to avoid - the reconciliation of the Gentiles to God, and brought about, moreover, by his own instrumentality. God made him an unwilling vehicle of His power, when he refused to be a willing one. This is an aspect of the divine sovereignty which is not always recognised or reckoned with, but we would do well to take it into consideration in our understanding of God's dealings with us.

14) 1:12-16

Let us think a little further of the note struck at the end of the previous reading. When God is set upon making us an instrument of His purposes, He uses us, whether we will or no; it is not His purposes but our well-being that will suffer when we resist Him. We see this on the grand scale in the tragic rejection of the Jews in the New Testament. They refused to be a light to the Gentiles (see Romans 9-11) and were rejected of God, but even in their rejection they are still pressed into God's service, and He has used the Jews down the ages in spite of themselves, as His signposts in history, and in the very sufferings and afflictions that their disobedience has brought upon them they have borne witness to the redeeming purpose of God for the world. As Paul puts it, 'the casting away of them is the reconciling of the world' (Rom 11:15). What is this but the 'negative' side of the reconciliation wrought by God's chosen one, Jesus, Who came to be by His death the light of the world?

15) 1:17

Not even death, however, is allowed to claim this man whom God has determined shall live and shall proclaim His word to the Gentiles. If Jonah actually desired to die, either in despair as he thought of the enormity of his disobedience and what it had led to, or in the extremity of his terrible resistance of the divine will, it was denied him, by the mercy and compassion of God. On the one hand, His loving purposes for our lives reach deeper than the depths of self-despair (cf Peter's outburst, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord', and remember what he finally became); there is no limit to what He can do in and with a repentant heart. On the other hand, He is strong enough to resist pity until affliction and chastisement have done all their appointed work in our lives. One would have thought that Jonah had suffered enough in his terrifying experiences in the storm to bring him to book, but if our second interpretation is right, then apparently he had not, and God went still further in the extremities he allowed to come upon the hapless prophet, albeit the great fish was prepared to save him from himself and from the dire consequences of his disobedience as well as from the final terror of the storm and the horror of a watery grave. We suspect that, however rebellious Jonah may have been in preferring death to obeying the will of the Lord, he would think differently when he actually entered the stormy waters of the Mediterranean. Our bravado speedily melts when God joins issue with us in earnest, and doubtless Jonah would have been thankful, as he was going down the third time, for any mode of deliverance, by whale or otherwise! But of this extraordinary experience more in the next Note.

16) 1:17

The problems that arise in the matter of Jonah being swallowed by the fish are two. First, it is averred that the throat of the whale is so small that it could not possibly swallow a man. This supposed restricted swallowing capacity however is true only of the Greenland whale, which is scarcely likely to have been found in the waters of the Mediterranean. The sperm whale by contrast is able, and has been known, to swallow and afterwards eject when dying a mass of about thirty six feet square, that is, a mass equal to the bodies of six stout men compressed into one! Second, the even greater problem of how Jonah could possibly have been preserved alive in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights seems to present to many an impossibility. But we may respectfully suggest that too little is known about the inner conditions of the whale for men to be contemptuously dogmatic either way. But as one commentator put it, 'Common sense alone suggests that if a man can invent a mechanical submarine capable of preserving fifty men alive, surely it is not difficult to believe that the Almighty could, if He chose, adapt an animal submarine to be capable of holding one'!

17) 1:17

But when everything in this line of apologetic has been said that can be said, we have to remember that the book of Jonah posits a miracle here, and the point about a miracle is that it cannot be explained away by natural causes. Why can we not be content to accept the event as a miracle and be done with it? Attempts to explain how Christ may have short-circuited the processes of nature in feeding the five thousand and turning the water into wine do not really help us very much as a commentary on the miraculous; it is better to accept that He did so than to try to discover how He did it. Let us accept the story here at its face value in the same way. The strange disinclination to let God be God seems to us a mystery requiring more serious consideration than the other.

18) 2:1

A careful reading of the chapter will surely make it clear that Jonah is thanking God, while still in the fish's belly, for deliverance from death. That is to say, the cry in 2, and the affliction which he mentions, both refer to his experience as a drowning man in the water, not as a captive in the fish. The interpretation we must therefore put on the story is that he 'came to himself' as he realised his extremity (3-6), cried to God for mercy as he saw the enormity of his sin and where it had led him, and God heard his cry and answered by sending the fish, which was for his protection, not his chastisement. What this teaches us is the unaccountable tenderness of God, in His care for His people. Jonah was far away from God in his sin, but God was never far from him, but near at hand, waiting to be gracious, like the waiting father in the story of the Prodigal Son. The truly amazing thing is that God should have wanted to have anything more to do with such a rebel as Jonah proved to be. But he did, and moreover, He was quick to move to his aid when at the last he turned in repentance and contrition. Not very complimentary to God for a man to turn to Him only as a last resort and as the alternative to certain death, but God is not bothered with pride as we humans are; He stoops low to help and heal us (how low none of us will ever understand!). Not only so; His help was ready and at hand, all prepared for Jonah's despairing cry. How wonderful that He is strong enough to allow us to go to the depths before lifting us, knowing that if He moved before that time, His purposes would fail of fulfilment in us. Such tender strength is surely to be trusted!

19) 2:2-4

Two points should be noticed in particular at this point. The first is that Jonah's words echo unmistakably some of the most characteristic utterances in the Psalms. Compare 2 with Psalm 18:6; 3 with Psalm 42:7; 4 with Psalm 31:22; 8 with Psalm 31:6; and 9 with Psalm 50:14. Some have felt that this argues against the genuineness of the passage, but in fact it is a convincing proof that it is. For Jonah was, after all, a man of God, who knew his Psalms, and what more natural in time of extremity than to voice well-known and well-loved words to express his heart? Not only is it not unlikely that a man should do so in the grip of such distress, in all probability the only words that would come readily to mind would in fact be words that had often come unbidden to his lips. The second point is that in this dark experience Jonah was able to recognise that it was the Lord Who had brought it upon him; the Lord had cast him into the sea, and the billows and waves were His (3). Grim and terrible though it may be thus to fall into the hands of the living God, it is still into hands that are known, and known furthermore as hands of love and grace. All is not darkness when we recognise the billows as the Lord's, for it means that they are in His control. It is this recognition that is often the beginning of the change that leads to calm and peace. It was so with Jonah.

20) 2:5-7

One feels the sense of terror that must have gripped the prophet as he struggled in the depths of the sea against what seemed certain drowning and death (5, 6). It is difficult to think that such a graphic description should be merely poetry and not a literal description of Jonah's experience. The pitiless swell of the sea and the desolation of a drowning man are too true to life for the account to be anything but real. It was when he came to an end of himself that Jonah found help of the Lord (6b and 7). It is easy to see how his experience should have been quoted by our Lord as illustrative of His own death and resurrection, for in fact it was a 'death' and 'resurrection' that he in fact went through, in the moral and spiritual, if not the physical, sense (although some commentators suggest that he did actually die, and was brought to life again by God). Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10 are a good description and commentary on these verses here; Jonah indeed had the sentence of death passed on him; he was pressed out of measure until he despaired even of life. And this was in fact God's way of bringing him to the point of utter dependence upon Himself, out of his sin and rebellion, out of his bitter distemper of spirit, into a new experience of His grace - which, in New Testament terms, is the application of the Cross with its self-crucifying discipline to the heart of the believer. From the spiritual standpoint therefore, Jonah's story can be described as that of a believer who got away from the place of blessing and power because there was a death he refused to die. And God had to bring him back to that place of death in this terrifying way.

21) 2:8-10

Some think that Jonah 'came to himself' in terms of making a vow to the Lord (9) that if he were spared he would give himself anew to obedience. This is very likely, and has often been known to happen with men in extremity. It was certainly the response that God was waiting for in Jonah, and the whole extraordinary happening was designed to produce it. Whether in the fish or in the sea, Jonah came to realise that by his disobedience he had forfeited the right to be alive at all and that what life was given him was solely by the grace of God, and therefore to be lived henceforth unto Him, in utter and wholehearted obedience to His will. When a man is thus brought to such a place, it is astonishing how quickly the most intractable and terrifying predicaments become sorted out and set in order. 'The Lord spoke unto the fish', we read, and straightway Jonah was on dry land. Thus easily does God lift the pressures and extricate us from the tangles and the distresses into which our wilful disobediences lead us. But how slow we are to learn this! All honour to Jonah for learning it so quickly. With some it takes a lifetime, and some never learn at all, and bring continued misfortune and entanglement upon their lives. We pay dearly for continuing in disobedience.

22) 3:1

It is with this chapter that the lessons of the book of Jonah become paramount so far as the present life of the Church is concerned. For here is the record of a truly marvellous work of grace and spiritual awakening, in a city as unlikely to be touched by the Word of God as any in our own day. It is impossible to over-estimate the importance of the principles implicit in God's dealings with the prophet. But first of all, we must ponder the statement that 'the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time'. Here is grace indeed, unaccountable and undeserved, for a man who had forfeited every possible consideration from the God he had disobeyed, and whose will he had flouted. It passes all wonder and understanding that God should be prepared to recommitment and reinstate in prophetic service one who has so grieved and disappointed Him, but it stands written as a word of almost unbelievable hope for all who have felt they have grieved the Lord and been dismissed His service forever. We recall the New Testament counterpart to this in the story of Peter's denial and his subsequent restoration and recommitment by the risen Lord. 'Go tell His disciples and Peter....'(Mark 16:7). And the word of the Lord came to him the second time, to some purpose, as we see in the account of the day of Pentecost. What a word for those whose sense of unworthiness because of past sins weighs them down and makes them feel they can never be used again! Is this God's word to you today?

23) 3:1-3a

It is essential however to realise when, and in what circumstances, this word came to Jonah. It was after he had died a death that had brought him back into the will of God. It is instructive to compare these verses with the earlier parallel in 1:1-3a for a study in obedience and disobedience, and see where the respective attitudes led the prophet. Jonah's reinstatement offers no ground for complacent presumption such as that expressed in Hosea 6:1-4, where Israel's light assumption that God would soon set matters right was quickly exploded. There is no warrant in the Scriptures for supposing that God will as a matter of course forgive and restore those who stray from His ways. What do we take Him for? Indeed, all the evidence points in the other direction. We have already considered Peter's heartsore experience; there is another striking example in the story of Samson (Judges 16). All three instances alike have this in common that the Lord took them up again after a painful and humiliating 'death' which brought them to an end of themselves and back to a new obedience to the will of God. In this sense, death 'worked' in them to bring forth life, Peter on the day of Pentecost, Samson in the prison house in Gaza, and Jonah in the city of Nineveh, all alike wrought mightily for God as men that were alive from the dead, and this is still the only basis of effectual service in individuals and in the Church as a whole. This is the lesson we all need to learn, and none of us can ever learn it deeply or often enough.

24) 3:1-3a

Two lessons, closely connected, emerge from consideration of the previous two Notes. Some time ago the question was put in 'Life and Work': 'Why is it that the Church has a diminishing impact upon society today?' The answers given to this question reflect very substantially the theme of the book of Jonah at this point. The Church need not expect to make much headway in the world so long as she is disobedient or careless concerning her distinctive message; nor need she expect the living word of God to come to her again in power and unction unless she is prepared to die the death that leads to life in her corporate experience. There is a price to be paid for spiritual renewal, and until the Church is once again brought to an end of herself and severed from the ecclesiasticism that has so often in her life become substitute for the Holy Spirit, and brought once more in humble, penitential obedience to the priorities of the gospel, there is little hope that any real renewal will come. That is the first lesson. The second is this: if and when the Church, through its very bankruptcy, comes to an end of herself, and calls in contrition upon the name of the Lord and, tasting death, finds life, then the powers of the world to come will once again throb and pulsate in her message, and her ministers will preach as dead men come to life, with signs following, to the blessing and renewing of the land. Look what one man did in Nineveh, when his lips were touched with holy fire to speak the word of the Lord! It is crucified preachers that move cities with resurrection power.

25) 3:1-3a

We append the following Note by the Rev. W. Still on Jonah's obedience (3): 'There is something fine about the ultimate compliance of a rebel. It takes a man to change his mind when he knows he is wrong, and humbly take another road. How often we see men, for no other reason than foolish pride holding to the most ridiculous prejudices when in their secret hearts they know they are wrong. How blind to fail to see that there is something infinitely pathetic about holding on to a lead which has already led astray. Surely better to admit to wrong than to be wrong! Yet men will rather be wrong and adamantly hold to it than humbly change their front. Nothing can be done with the man who wraps himself up in his own conceit and refuses to budge, nor can any true man stand with him. The only course is to leave him in his 'splendid' isolation until its comicality breaks in upon him.

There are Christians who must never be wrong! They ignore a whole world of the obvious, wriggle and twist and turn, are silent, vociferous, or quiet and smooth, in desperate hope that no one will see their fault. Yet it is obvious! What they do not understand is that silly pride which cannot admit a mistake constitutes a barrier to fellowship, and ultimately leads to estrangement. This attitude is always accompanied by a touchiness which demands the most exacting consideration, and is ever on tenterhooks and puts all others within distance on tenterhooks also, because it must not be wrong; others may be - that is not so important - it must never be! Is this a mirror? If so, how many see themselves in it? This may be me - very likely it is! But consider it not impossible, dear reader, that it may be you!

26) 3:3b-4

We have already commented on the nature of Jonah's message to Nineveh and we need only add now that this would scarcely be regarded as a true evangelistic note in a man's preaching today. This prompts the reflection whether in fact we may not have a basic misconception in our thinking on evangelism to overcome before we can properly be said to have a truly Biblical attitude. We have elsewhere insisted that preaching the gospel means something far wider than 'preaching a gospel message', as if evangelism depended on the (doubtful) exposition of a few well-known and appealing texts. The Scriptures themselves make it plain (Psalm 19:7) that it is the law of the Lord that converts the soul, and this may very properly be taken as a general reference to the whole Word of God and not to a few parts of it in particular. The fact is, any part of the Word of God, if preached by a man in the power of the Spirit, has converting power in it, and this is as true of the dark and sombre words of judgment as it is of the winsome and appealing passages that magnify the love of God in Christ. (The fallacy is to suppose that the darker passages do not magnify His love as well - they do, since even divine judgment cannot be conceived aright except in the context of grace). It is a greater trust in the power of the Word of God that we need in the Church and in the Church's evangelism. It is possible in our work to trust, all insensibly and inadvertently, in presentation, technique, personality, personal drive and dynamic rather than in the Word itself energised by the Spirit of God. We are given good cause to wonder today whether the confession in the Creed, 'I believe in the Holy Ghost' is as meaningful now as it was in earlier generations.

27) 3:5-6

The effect of Jonah's preaching was such as to confirm the worst of his earlier fears that God was purposing to bless Nineveh (see Note on 1:1-3). It was a truly astonishing work of the Spirit of God. With startling suddenness, a message of doom which, at almost any other time would probably have sounded ludicrous and been held in derision, became awesomely real and convincing to the men of Nineveh. They believed the warning; they knew that it was the living God Who was speaking to them, and they reacted in the one right way, turning to Him with all their heart in true repentance. One recalls another Old Testament situation in which a similar message was given, but with very different effect. When Lot warned the men of Sodom of the approaching doom of that wicked city, he seemed to them as one who mocked (Genesis 19:14). There is a parable here in the contrast between the two stories, for those who are prepared to see it. A church that has compromised with the world, as Lot did in Sodom, is not likely to be heeded when it sounds a warning voice and speaks of the judgments of God upon the land. We should not discount, in our thinking and debating about the problem of communicating the gospel in our modern age, the possibility that the main issue is a moral one, not one of method. If we are not right (and 'right' here must mean having 'died', like Jonah, and become 'alive from the dead') but are content with a slovenly, unconsecrated attitude, little different in essence from those to whom we preach, how should we suppose that they should pay heed to us, or even that we have anything worth saying to them?

28) 3:5-6

The fact that Nineveh, capital of 'the most brutal empire which was ever suffered to roll its force across the world' was breached to such purpose by the Word of God, should teach us to beware of thinking any people or any community too unlikely, in its hardness and unresponsiveness, to be touched effectively by the gospel. There are no people too hard for God, if He chooses to bless them, and has a purpose of grace for them. This is true for parishes, missionary situations, and individuals alike. We say we believe this, but when it comes to the point, we falter and lose heart. Of course places are hard (where in the world is it easy to do gospel work today?) and people are hard, but we still have to ask ourselves whether we believe that the power of the devil is greater than the power of the gospel. Look once again at the Note on 3:3b-4, and let faith in the converting power of the gospel rise afresh in the heart. The message of the crucified and risen Saviour proclaimed by crucified and risen messengers is still the power of God unto salvation, and this is still the way to breach the dark, hard core of wicked cities. One has only to think of the virgin territories reached by the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles to realise how true this is. Given resurrection power, nothing is impossible. And this is why a ministry at depth is so necessary and important for the Church in our day, to break through the facile shell of evangelism, that has a name that it lives, but is dead, and bring it in earnest to a death that will bring it life, and power, and a renewed commission from God. Nothing less will be of any avail.

29) 3:7-8

It is something when a spiritual awakening touches the throne itself! It was the king of Nineveh who led the nation in its national repentance. Such was the extent of the Spirit's power in the ministry of Jonah. We recall that when John the Baptist thundered out the summons to repentance in Judea in the time of Christ, Herod the king was made to tremble, wicked profligate as he was, and sought counsel of John. The attitude of the throne to spiritual matters may be a truer index of a nation's state than we had realised. It is certain that in the Scriptures the behaviour of royal houses had a direct bearing on the moral and spiritual welfare of the people ('like king, like people') and if this be so, then it serves to underline the importance of Paul's injunction to pray for those set in authority over us, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. It also sets in a rather different light the protests of some much maligned church leaders against the dishonouring of the Lord's Day by our own Royal House and reminds us that they may be better guardians of the nation's well-being than the compromising temporisers who regard them with contempt as narrow-minded bigots. We need to remember that loyalty to the throne does not require us to turn a blind eye to failure and declension. Kings and queens - and consorts - are men and women of like passions as ourselves, whose conduct comes under the judgment of the Word of God like other men's. Their privileges do not exempt them from responsibility, but rather increase it.

30) 3:9-10

The words of the king and his nobles in 9 are significant. Jonah had preached, not a summons to repentance, but a proclamation of impending and imminent doom. This not only produced repentance in them; they also dared to hope that God might pardon them. Now why? What grounds did they, a heathen nation, have for such a hope? It can scarcely be that they were trusting in their repentance to move God. No; but something else gave them grounds for hope. It was this: Jonah was a sign to them. In Matthew 12: 39-41, our Lord speaks of 'the sign of the prophet Jonas', and he was referring to the fact that Jonah had been in the whale's belly three days and nights. This awesome experience not only was the explanation of the extraordinary power with which Jonah preached in Nineveh; it was also the ground of the Ninevites' hope. For they knew his story, knew in all probability from the sailors about his supposed death. And now here he was in their midst, a man back from the dead, taken up afresh by his God. And they therefore knew that the God that this man preached was a God Who gave a second chance. Grace had come to Jonah the second time; might they not hope that such a God with whom they now had to do, would be gracious and merciful to them? And so He proved to be; He 'repented of the evil that He had said that He would do unto them; and He did it not' (10).

31) 4:1-3

In some sense what these verses reveal is the most astonishing and extraordinary part of the entire book of Jonah. Here was the God-appointed leader of a mighty work of spiritual awakening, a man signally used of God for blessing, and he is angry at the effect his ministry has on the people of Nineveh, angry with its success, and angry with God for being gracious and merciful to the heathen city! One can scarcely credit this, but it stands clear and plain for all to see. Indeed, here is the word that explains all Jonah's earlier rebellion and revolt against the will of God. This, then, is why he fled to Tarshish - he knew only too well God's gracious desire to bless, and was churlish enough and bigoted enough to be hurt, disappointed and angry with Him for doing so. This raises several important lessons for us. For one thing, it shows us that even in the terrible experience of discipline he had passed through, the ploughshare of God had not been allowed to go very deeply into his life; not very far down under the surface the old bigotry and prejudice lay undisturbed. We do not mean by this that Jonah's consecration in chapters 2 and 3 was not real - it was, as far as it went, but we see here that it did not go anything like far enough. He did, in fact, get back into the will of God, and found a new power for service, but there are many deaths to die, not one only, deaths moreover on ever deepening levels, carrying the costly therapy of the Cross into the dark recesses of the human spirit where unimagined potential for evil still holds sway. The 'old Jonah' came alive in this querulous and complaining attitude against God. How partial and fitful our experiences of death to self can be!

32) 4:1-3

The partial nature of our 'death to self' is seen in two ways: on the one hand there may be whole areas of life as yet unaffected by the discipline of the Cross, and on the other hand the particular area where the initial crucifixion has taken place may be still, relatively speaking, be unsubdued, and liable to flare up again at the slightest provocation. This is how it was with Jonah. The old bigotry and prejudice to which he had died in the sea and the fish's belly came to life again in this sad and distressing outburst against God after the blessing of Nineveh. But there was also another evidence of the self-life, more subtle, but none the less deadly, in the (unconscious?) desire to force his own ideas and prejudices upon God. Some people become so obsessed with their own set ideas that even God Almighty has to adjust Himself to suit them. But God does not intend to dance attendance upon our petty shibboleths, nor is He prepared to be forced into a mould of our making. Some of the frantic extravagances in the realm of faith healing for example, fall into this category, when foolish people put a pistol to God's head and require Him to do their bidding. The grim determination sometimes shown to muster a certain number of missionaries for the field within a certain time (with the consequent disastrous pressure on unfortunate lives when the time limit is nearly expired and the candidates are not forthcoming) is another example. People involved in this kind of attitude do not see as those outside do very clearly, that it is self-rampant not self-crucified, that motivates them. And it is perhaps understandable that when God refuses to dance to their tune they should become disillusioned and harbour a secret grudge against Him that breeds in the end a Christian (?) cynicism in them and ruins any possibility of real service.

33) 4:1-3

It is striking to note the similarity between Jonah's words and attitude here and those in 1:12. The reversion to the earlier stubborn petulance is almost complete. If it were not so serious one might be prompted to smile at the childishness the prophet displays. It is not unknown for a spoilt child (or, far worse, a spoilt adult) to hold a whole family to ransom until he finally obtains what he petulantly and peevishly craves. The sometimes absurd threats such people make (not excluding their own demise) in order to gain their ends are a kind of blackmail that is often acceded to as the line of least resistance, to keep the peace in the home and save all concerned from intolerable strain and tension. The squalid domestic blackmailer knows this, of course; knows that if only he makes things unpleasant enough he will get his own way, and takes a perverse delight in using his power over the others. But God will have none of it, nor must we. Strain and tension with honour is better than strain and tension with dishonour. Petulant children (whether of school age or old enough to have families of their own) must be dealt with firmly and unhesitatingly for their own sakes as well as for the sake of all around them. When they say, 'If you don't do what I want, I'll....', let them do it; call their bluff, and let them stew in their own juice for a while. To discover thus that they are in no wise indispensable will be a salutary, if humiliating, lesson to them that may reduce their sense of proportion to its proper size and make them a little less intolerable and more fit to live with!

34) 4:4

We should not forget that it is Jonah himself who has put all this on record for us, writing doubtless from a standpoint of another and deeper renewal in which his bigotry and prejudice had been done away, and much needed lessons truly learned. Looked at thus, the opening verses of the chapter are his frank confession that this was his sin, and that God graciously dealt with it. If this be so, then it is highly probable that the Lord's words here to the sulking prophet were the focal point of the change that was ultimately wrought in him. 'Take a look at yourself, Jonah,' says the Lord; 'Stand back from yourself and see if this attitude of yours is either reasonable or worthy'. This is a biggish thing for any man to do, but until it is done, there is not a great deal of hope for him. It is significant that the Lord invites the prophet's co-operation in the demolition of his bitter prejudices, and proceeds (6-8) to help him to see himself as He saw him. Ah, how reluctant we are to look the unpalatable truth about ourselves in the face, and how tardily, when we do so, do we accept it and act upon it! But God's quiet enquiry in 'the still, small voice' must have been more devastating than earthquake, wind or fire, for it brought him back to basic issues. Nineveh was rejoicing in the grace of God, there was joy in the presence of the angels of God over sinners repenting, and yet Jonah, like the elder brother in the story of the prodigal, was acting like a churl. To be reminded of this must have been a very considerable jolt to his spiritual life.

35) 4:5

Jonah's sulky reaction bespeaks, it would seem, a conflict between 'his better self' and his bitter prejudices against the Gentiles. It is very harrowing and humiliating to know that you are in the wrong, and to realise that sooner or later you will have to 'climb down'; it was too much for Jonah at the moment, and he took refuge in a fit of sulks. Not but that his state of emotional exhaustion had something to do with this. We should bear in mind how great a pressure had been upon him, with his terrifying experience followed by a tremendous preachment in Nineveh. We may recall how exhausted Elijah became after his battle with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, and how a circumstance which at another time he would have scorned - Jezebel's threats - proved too much for him, and he fled to the wilderness and cried to the Lord, 'Now let me die'. Jonah was 'not himself', then, at this point, and the Lord's patience and tender care which followed his savage outburst is all the more eloquent of His wise understanding of human frailty and weakness, and His gentle dealing with it. This does not, of course, excuse it, or make it less serious, and we should not underestimate the stubbornness that was mingled with the weakness in Jonah's heart. Was he sitting there under the booth still wishing and hoping that God would bring judgment on Nineveh? Ah, Jonah, Jonah, there are a few more deaths to die yet. God is wondrously patient with difficult people, but not to the extent of allowing them to remain difficult. He means business with His saints!

36) 4:6

There are two lessons to be learned from the gourd. On the one hand it was the evidence of the Lord's tender care for His servant, and as such corresponds to the ministry of the angel which He provided for Elijah in a somewhat similar circumstance (1 Kings 19). Jonah's grief (as Elijah's wasn't) was of his own making, yet God would deliver him from it. How kind He is, not only to the faithful, but also to the froward and rebellious! Far kinder than any of us ever deserve! This may well give us a worthy example of Paul's famous words in Romans 2:4, 'The goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance'. It is certainly true in the experience of believers that when we have sinned, and been a grievous disappointment to ourselves and to God, His unchanging goodness towards us often manifested at such a time in special tenderness and love, breaks our hearts and brings into them a regenerating grace that brings us right back in shame and contrition to His feet. God does not shower His goodness upon us with this 'ulterior' (?) motive, but because He is love, but love, in fact, of such a prodigal nature has this effect. The provision of the gourd was likewise the expression of such love, but it also served as a parable to Jonah, by which he was taught a lesson about the breadth of the divine love, and that it extended to Gentile Nineveh as well as to the covenant people. This is the second lesson of the gourd, and it occupies the remainder of the chapter.

37) 4:7

The point about the gourd is this: having raised up the gourd to comfort Jonah, God prepares a worm to eat at the root of the gourd so that it withers. Jonah misses its shade and protection, and is angry that such a pleasant and useful plant should be so inopportunistically destroyed. God turns this attitude of Jonah's to good account. 'Are you angry, Jonah, that the gourd should have been destroyed? Why should you show such concern about this insignificant plant, on which you have bestowed no labour, the creature of a day?' 'Yes, but it was useful to me' cries Jonah, 'it gave me pleasure and comfort, and now it is no more. Of course, I'm angry'. And God quietly answers him, 'Have not I, then, the right to be sorry at the thought that the people of Nineveh should be destroyed, and angry that you should wish them to be, a people more precious in my sight than many gourds could possibly be to you. For all their sins I love them; they are made in My image, and I have a use for them in the eternal counsel of My will. Should I not spare them as you wanted to spare the gourd?' Thus God condemns Jonah in his niggardly and bitter attitude towards Nineveh, by making him condemn it himself in what he felt and said about the gourd. All this to magnify the grace and tenderness of a God Who is not willing that any should perish. It is something when it is God Who has to temper the bitter bigotry and blind hatred of His people on the subject of judgment. A pleasant change from the contemporary notion that the God of the Old Testament is a bloodthirsty, vengeful deity! Ah, what will it take to convince us that mercilessness is a human trait, not Divine?

38) 4:7-11

There are further lessons to be learned before we lay aside the book of Jonah. One is the danger of too lightly assuming that we can 'contain' God within our own man-made ideas and prejudices; confine, too, the very possibility of His election within our own recognised and acceptable 'closed-shop' systems. How slow we are to learn that God has His people in all manner of unexpected and unlikely, not to say unorthodox, places! We are altogether too narrow in our understanding and interpretation of His electing grace. Let us learn from Jonah's experience that 'the love of God is broader than the measures of man's mind', and that we best represent Him when we cherish hopes for the most unlikely of men and the greatest of sinners. We may well think how grateful the Apostle Paul would be for the message of this book, in relation to the bitter opposition shown against his mission to the Gentiles by the Jews of his day (cf Acts 22:21, 22). This was undoubtedly the biggest single hindrance to his work, and one which repeatedly confronted him right to the end. Let us see to it that we do not fall into the same error of supposing that none but those who lip our own particular shibboleths can possibly belong to God. Remember Jesus's words in Luke 9:50, 'He that is not against us is for us'.

Nor should we miss the throb of tenderness in 11, as God speaks of the vast masses in Nineveh. It is a verse which brings us right into the New Testament and the picture of Christ looking with deep compassion upon the multitudes, as sheep without a shepherd (see also Hebrews 5:2). It is rather shattering to find how very far from the spirit of His Master Jonah stood, even in the context of having been mightily used of Him in the blessing of the city. Well might the Apostle Paul exhort us, 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus Who...' (Philippians 2:5ff). Which do you think is more important, being used of Him, or being like Him, and breathing His Spirit? How you answer will reveal a great deal about your deepest heart - and your deepest need!