

Jonah 1:1-9

Who's In Your Boat? Jonah, the Church, and the Common Good

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Jonah portrays Gentiles in a positive light. Both times Gentiles are confronted with the word of God, they repent, in contrast with Jonah the Jewish prophet, who rebels at the word of the Lord. This kind of reversal, in which insiders act like outsiders, and outsiders like insiders, is common in Scripture.

Jonah is sleeping while he should be interceding for those around him, seeking their good through calming the storm (cf. Mt. 8). Jonah knew God's purpose in choosing Israel was that she might be a blessing to others (Gen. 12). The other nations should have been able to look at Israel and marvel at her public, visible manifestation of God's righteousness (Deut. 4). Abraham exemplifies this mission in his intercession on behalf of Sodom (Gen. 18). Israel revealed and celebrated her mission to the world in the Feast of Tabernacles (Ex. 23, Lev. 23, Num. 29, Deut. 16, Hag. 2, Zech. 14, Jn. 7).

When the church is in sin, as Jonah is here, God has subtle ways of waking her up. He may use discipline (e.g., the exile) or he may use a rebuke from the world (!) as he does here in 1:6. The captain awakes Jonah and calls on him to pray on behalf of the sailors.

This is an important subplot in this episode of the story. The captain, ironically, calls on Jonah to fulfill the mission for which God chose Israel in the first place. He calls on Jonah to put his faith to work for the sake of the common good. Biblical faith is not merely a private self-serving virtue, but a public virtue that seeks and secures the common good. We must beware of the danger of falling into the privatization of our faith, as Jonah did. We cannot sleep through the world's storms.

Throughout her history, the church has served the public good. We have a wonderful legacy. The early church grew rapidly largely because she cared for the poor and sick (especially in the all too common epidemics) when the empire would not and could not. The church fought for and secured: the end of the violent gladiator games, the humane treatment of slaves, the care of widows and orphans, the establishment of hospitals, the dignity of women, the advancement of education and the arts, and so forth. The church did not hesitate to use political means and influence to transform culture in these ways, but primarily she brought about change for the better simply by doing what God has called her to do – prayer, preaching, discipline, and mercy ministry. The first task of the church is simply to be the church!

In the modern era, the church has not been as faithful in these areas. Like Jonah, we have kept our faith to ourselves, rather than putting it to work for the good of the communities we find ourselves in. We fear to trespass into public space with Christian convictions. We fail to serve in humility. We must wake up!

The church is God's "public service project," so to speak. So we have to ask ourselves: *Who's in our boat?* Who has God put around us to serve, and how we can do so? How can we calm the storms they face? How can we apply Jer. 29:7 today, seeking the good of the (largely apostate) city God has placed us in? Like the early church, we must learn to minister in word *and* deed. For example, our critique of statist welfare must be joined with a concern for the poor among us. Our condemnation of abortion must be wed to a concern for illegitimately pregnant women, single moms, unwanted children, etc. We have answers and we need to give them! We must act in humility and charity, manifesting God's righteousness.

The church is the only institution in the world that exists for the sake of her *non-members*. We must not merely use God to get salvation for ourselves; we must allow God to use us to bring salvation to others.

Some churches today are finding ways to seek the good of their communities. We must study Scripture and the world around us, finding creative ways to bring God's blessing to them. We cannot be sleeping prophets, like Jonah.

A Study of Jonah: The Death and Resurrection of Israel #7-8

Jonah 1:17-2:10: The Psalm of Jonah

Part I: Salvation is of the Lord (AM)

Jonah's psalm is a patchwork of various fragments from the 150 canonical Psalms. He's praying in the Psalter's language. This passage is a literary masterpiece, structured chiasmatically:

- A. The fish swallows Jonah (1:17)
- B. Jonah calls on God for salvation (2:1-2)
- C. Jonah descends to the abyss, yet looks to the Temple (2:3-4)
- D. Jonah's "death and resurrection" (2:5-6)
- C.' Jonah ascends from the abyss, knowing his prayer went up to the Temple (2:7)
- B.' Jonah praises God for his salvation (2:8-9)
- A.' The fish spits Jonah out (2:10)

The passage is about the "death and resurrection" of Jonah, showing forth that "salvation is of the Lord." The fact that this is a psalm of thanksgiving shows that even in the belly of the fish, Jonah figured out (by faith and repentance) what the Lord was up to. He was assured of his salvation.

1:17-2:10 are full of interesting **details**. The psalm uses *flood* and *exodus* imagery to depict Jonah's plight and rescue from the gates of hell. Jonah is never beyond the Lord's grasp, even in *Sheol*. Jonah looks to the *temple* since that is the special dwelling place of the Lord – the place of power and deliverance. Jonah comes forth from the ordeal a *new man*, ready to obey. The word for "salvation" (the root of the names Joshua and Jesus) means not only "deliverance" but "victory." The gates of Sheol have not prevailed against him.

What's the **big picture**? This death and resurrection have been accomplished by the Lord. [1] He is *sovereign* in salvation. It's all his work from beginning to end. Jonah was helpless. [2] Yet his salvation is *conditional*. It can only be received in the way of repentant, persevering faith. The conditions are not of merit, but of grace. Jonah repents of sin in the belly of the fish and re-enters the way of life. [3] This salvation brings with it the *chastening* of the Lord. How many times will the Lord have to plunge you under the waters before you learn the lessons he has for you? (Heb. 5:8; 12:5ff) [4] God uses *means* to bring about his salvation. Look to the temple (that is, the church), from whence your help comes. Word and sacrament are the power of God unto salvation. The Spirit does not by-pass these means; salvation is not an escape. It means reintegration into the covenant community. [5] The means of salvation have a single *end*: worship. Grace creates an obligation to sacrifice, as the sailors and Jonah both discover. Everything – even Jonah's mission to the Gentiles! -- centers on worship. As Piper has said, "Missions exists because worship does not." Worship is our chief end in life. We must build everything around it.

Jonah's experience in chapter 2 parallels that of the sailors in Jonah 1. This foreshadows the New Covenant: ". . . For there is no difference [between Jew and Gentile]; for all [Jews and Gentiles] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is Christ Jesus . . . Is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God . . ." (Rom. 3:21ff).

Part II: Singing Zion's Songs in a Foreign Land (PM)

How well do we know this story? Do we know it in a fragmented way or an integrated way? Jonah is the story of the Bible in a nutshell (death and resurrection, exile and exodus). Jonah is a *symbolic* narrative. To understand its full significance, we must unpack its symbols – fish, land, sea, wind, storm, etc.

There is an overall typology to the story. Typology is not allegory. It is rooted in history, not philosophy. The future of Israel is being played out ahead of time in Jonah's "near death" experience. Jonah's prayer reveals the paradox of Israel's exile (and ours, as Christians living in 21st century America). Exile means both judgment and opportunity.

We must discern the typological pattern of the history we are living in. What does it mean to be in an exile situation? What does it mean to say that Christendom is over? We must figure these things out and make wise applications.

What does all this mean? It means Israel can sing Zion's songs in the belly of the fish – that is, the Assyrian Empire (cf. Ps. 137)! And it means we can and must sing in exile as well.

As the last vestiges of Christendom are taken from us (even in the so-called "Bible belt"), we must learn this lesson. We haven't been forced out of our "homeland" but we have been "exiled." Our culture was secularized on *our watch!* It's our responsibility.

But how should we respond? With a song of thanksgiving, repentance, salvation, and worship! The temptation is for us to become hostile, narrow-minded/hearted, and self-righteous, as Jonah was in a similar time of declension. We must resist the pressure to become a “sub-culture.” We must become “missional” and “counter-cultural.” We must learn that God loves our *enemies!* We must learn to sing! God is the God of exile, but also exodus! We must join holiness to compassion, as God does, and as Jonah does in his song. Only then can we expect resurrection.

A Study of Jonah: The Death and Resurrection of Israel #9

Jonah 1:17-2:10

Life in the Belly of a Pagan Empire

Jonah 2 is full of critical lessons for today's church. The story of Jonah, as we have seen, foreshadows Israel's coming history. Just as Jonah is cast into the belly of the great fish and then returned to dry land, so Israel will be swallowed up by a pagan empire and then spit back into her land. The Jonah narrative shows that Israel will undergo a death and a resurrection, an exile and an exodus. This is a frequent type (repeating pattern or impress) in history. God has woven this rhythm into his design for history.

Jonah shows Israel what she is to be and do in exile. This story is relevant to us because the church in America is living in a sort of exile situation. Though the entire OT is always instructive for us, the exilic portions of the OT are especially applicable right now. Our period of history most closely resembles Israel's exile. Christendom is (basically) over (for now) and we must be aware of our new position.

In the midst of this situation, Jonah 2 (and other exilic Scriptures) reminds us of two things: our **identity** and our **vocation**.

We must remember our **identity** as exiles, as strangers and aliens.

Because this situation is due to sin, we must *repent* (2:2). We must turn back to the Lord and trust him to restore our dominion. The blessing/curse patterns of Dt. 28 and Proverbs still hold true (as generalities). We must confess our sin, admit our affliction, and seek to be obedient.

Jonah shows us that in exile, we must focus on getting *worship* right (2:4, 7). We can never be exiled from the heavenly temple, of course, but during times of cultural exile, worship may be our only means of influence. Worship is always central, but this is more evident in times of exile. It is entirely appropriate to use this period of exile to reform our liturgy. Faithful worship was the key to the success of the early church in conquering Rome. She had no political clout and yet she conquered the greatest empire the world had ever known simply by worshipping Christ as Lord according to the Bible's ritualized pattern.

Also, we must acknowledge that we are a *counter-culture*, in sharp contrast to the idolatrous culture surrounding us (2:8-9). We must live lives of sacrifice and truth, not selfishness or hypocrisy. We share cultural space with the world, yet we fill that space in a radically different way. Of course, the stranger we seem, the more loving we must be to get our message across. Our deeds help others understand our words.

Our identity gives rise to our **vocation**. Israel went into exile precisely because she didn't carry out her mission of being a light to the nations. But the exile represents a new opportunity to do this. Israel refused to go to the nations, so God scattered her among the nations. We are scattered among non-Christians as well, and must live lives of faithfulness before them. God promises this will be effective, however hopeless it looks (Jonah 3-4; Jer. 31:34). Jonah used a one sentence sermon to bring about the greatest revival of the Old Covenant – and it took place among covenant outsiders!

Central to this exilic vocation is worship. But there is also the "liturgy after the liturgy" – the liturgy of life, so to speak. We are to live our lives in such a way that the pagans see our good deeds and glorify our God (1 Pt. 2:11-12). This means living lives of service, seeking the good of our communities (Jer. 29:7).

On the one hand, we have a *serious problem* with the world. Like Jonah, we know things aren't how they're supposed to be. But, unlike Jonah, this shouldn't make us sulk or despair. It must make us work all the harder to model in our own community human life the way God intended it to be lived.

On the other hand, we have a *healing mission* to the world. We are to show forth God's love to the world, embodying his mercy and grace. This is what Jonah failed to do. He was only in it for himself. He only carried out his mission very reluctantly. As Telford Works says, just as Jonah had to learn God so loved the Ninevites that he gave them his only begotten Son, so we must learn that God so loved his enemies (and ours) that he gave them his only begotten Son. We must give ourselves for their salvation as well. We have not been sent into the world to bring condemnation, but salvation.

This paradigm applies to citizenship, politics, opportunities for service, etc. Paradoxically, we are the best and worst citizens, the most and least interested in politics, etc. As we embrace our identity and live out our calling, we find that God not only cares for his church in exile, he also brings about a new exodus! This is our hope and this is our future.

Jonah #11: Faith, Repentance, and the Mercy of God

Jonah 3:1-4:3, 4:10-11

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The book of Jonah was written for one major purpose: to humble proud Israel. Instead of using her blessings and privileges as a way of serving the nations, Israel looked down upon the Gentiles in arrogance. This denied the purpose of her election in Abraham (Gen. 12). Yet, this is a perennial temptation for the people of God. It is easy for us to take for granted all God has given us. But the book of Jonah forces us – just as it forced Israel of old – to sit at the feet of the wicked, barbaric Ninevites and learn the ABC's of God's truth.

Our focus is on *repentance*, which is a major biblical theme, though it often gets neglected. Often we mistake contrition and despair for biblical repentance. While biblical repentance includes brokenness over our sin because we have offended God (e.g., Ps. 51), *it also includes an embrace of God's mercy towards us in Christ.*

Some examples from history bear this out (this is second Sunday, after all!).

1. **Peter** and **Judas** both repented, but only Peter recognized God's mercy. Judas kept running from Jesus until he killed himself in utter despair; Peter swam to the shore as soon as he recognized Jesus was there. Judas has remorse; Peter had remorse, plus an apprehension of mercy.

2. **Mark Twain** ("the quintessential American") said he "repented" frequently in his youth, especially after local tragedies. But he never had a sense of God's mercy. He believed God was using the tragedies to get his attention and beguile him into amending his life. He described his nighttime acts of repentance as "creatures of fear" that were a "raging hell." "Those were awful nights, nights of despair, nights charged with the bitterness of death." The demand to repent was like a heavy Bible – or anvil – on his chest, crushing him. He thought repenting meant groveling like a coward or a dog. But his repentance could never stand the gladness of the day because it wasn't rooted in mercy. By contrast **the Welsh revival** of the early 1900s brought real joy and change to a mining community. Their repentance could stand the light of day, so to speak, because it was founded upon the solid rock of God's mercy. Their enthusiasm and passion was noted by all. They understood that, biblically, repentance is not complete unless sadness has been turned to gladness and mourning to dancing. It brings total transformation.

Analyze the Ninevites' repentance. They heard a word from God – a word of judgment ("Ninevah will be overturned"), but a word laced with hope ("in 40 days"). They did not despair. They did not say, "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for in 40 days we die!" Instead, they perceived God's mercy and repented! They believed God, and faith gave birth to genuine repentance (3:4). They knew enough about the character of the God of the Hebrews to know that he might relent. They sorrowed – but not like ordinary pagans, trying to appease their God. They sorrowed in hope. Their contrition was hemmed in by confidence in God's grace.

This is a model for us. We cannot even begin to comprehend the depth and breadth of God's mercy. Even as we sorrow over sin, that sorrow bottoms out and turns upward again because we are sure of God's mercy (cf. Ps. 32; 51). God's promises speak to our sorrow: "You may go this far and no farther!" As Cranmer prayed before his execution, *it is always God's property to have mercy.* Luther viewed the entire Christian life as one long, continuous act of repentance – turning from sin to embrace the gospel of mercy.

To repent is to transfer loyalty from false gods to the true. But we can only do this if we know that God will receive us in the mercy of Christ. God doesn't just remove the penalty of sin – he desires to crush sin's stranglehold on us. This is why repentance is so essential. This is why repentance is internal to the gospel itself. Repentance means we serve a new Lord – one who loves us and is gracious to us and restores us to the good life.

On this side of the cross, we never have to be like the king and ask, "Who knows?" for we *know* that God will show us mercy (Rom. 8). We never have to say "perhaps." We *know* God will relent because his wrath has already been poured out on Christ (Rom. 3). We *know* it is property to always have mercy. So, let us repent, and go on repenting!

Jonah #12: Does God Change His Mind? A Complex Providence

Jonah 3 (February 13, 2004)

God is absolutely sovereign and transcendent. He has an eternal plan that encompasses everything that comes to pass. Nothing can thwart that plan or change it. Because he has planned all things, God knows the future exhaustively. He never has to change his mind based on new information or an unexpected turn of events. John Calvin and the Westminster Standards clearly teach biblical truth on this point.

But the Bible also includes passages which speak of God changing his mind, such as Jonah 3. It appears God is immanently involved in the creation, acting and reacting within the flow of history. These texts seem to be in tension with those that describe God's total sovereignty. How can this be? How can the God who planned all things from beginning to end "repent"? How does all of this fit together into a coherent picture of God and the world?

Many Christians go to one extreme or the other. There are those who emphasize God's sovereign transcendence at the expense of his immanence and those who are guilty of the opposite error. The former may be better able to handle trial and adversity because they know God is in control. But God often seems distant from them, so their prayer-lives and other aspects of piety suffer. The latter may have vibrant prayer-lives because of their awareness of God's immanent presence in the world. But they often get paralyzed when things don't go their way because they wonder, "Who's in control of the universe, anyway?"

Neither of these is a satisfactory solution. It is clear from Scripture that God's plans cannot ever change. It is also clear from Jonah 3 that God does in fact change his mind at times. Three aspects of biblical teaching help us hold all of this together:

1. We must understand how **prophecy** works. Some prophecies are tied to covenants sworn with a divine oath. These prophecies cannot fail to come to fulfillment. They are guaranteed. Events such as the coming of the Messiah, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises, and the Final Judgment are sure to happen. But other prophecies have either explicit or implicit conditions attached (Jer. 18:1-11). They reveal what *might come to pass*, depending on intervening historical contingencies. They are not revelations of God's eternal decree but declarations of God's intentions within space and time. God looks at how the people respond to the prophecy and reacts accordingly. The ultimate purpose of prophecy, in fact, is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future ("divine fortune telling") but to drive us to deeper faith and repentance. The Ninevites illustrate this. Prophecy should never make us fatalistic; it should make us obedient. It is ethical, not speculative.

2. We need to understand **providence**. God's relationship with the world is complex. His eternal plan does not change, but his relationships with his creatures in time can undergo change. The universe is not a giant machine with human cogs. Reality is not governed by impersonal laws. Rather, God works in the world according to secondary, created causes. (Again, Calvin and Westminster are right!) God is the Ultimate Cause, but secondary causes are real as well. Thus he brings his immutable decree to pass *through* (rather than without or in spite of) the free will choices of humans. He uses intermediaries. For example, if a tree gets blown over, we can ask, "What caused it – God or the wind?" The answer includes both, though in different ways. There is no such thing as "natural law" as it is often imagined. Miracles are not violations of "natural law." God is always already there. He never "intervenes" or "interferes." Everything is upheld and governed by his personal word, from moment to moment. Thus, it should come as no surprise that God would respond to the Ninevites' repentance. This was part of his eternal plan. That plan doesn't make our prayers or repentances ineffectual or unnecessary; in fact, it's his plan that establishes their meaning and efficacy.

3. We must grapple with the **personality** of God. He's not only the Author of history; he's also a Character within the story. And so he has planned all things, but he's also actively and dynamically involved in the creation. He acts and reacts. He moves within the flow of history. He engages in give and take with the creation. He is, after all, THE LIVING GOD. Like C. S. Lewis' Aslan, he is good, but he is not tame. He is utterly trustworthy, but completely unpredictable. He is absolutely rational, yet incomprehensible. He is not the Great Ice Cube in the sky. He is full of feeling and passion. He loves unexpected twists and surprise endings. Peter Leithart has pointed out that, if anything, the God of the Bible is more like Zeus or Dionysius than Apollo or Aristotle's Unmoved Mover. (Of course, he's none of these – but Leithart is reminding us of our need to guard against depersonalizing God.) God cannot be put in a box. He cannot be pinned down. In fact, he continually breaks free from our attempts to analyze him in a static fashion. He is wild, fierce, and free. The whole book of Jonah shows God acting in unexpected ways to bring about his eternal purposes through the free actions of his creatures.

So: **Does God change his mind?** On the one hand, **no**, he does not, if by that you mean God's eternal decree is up for grabs. If God's mind could change in this way it would be *bad news* for us all for it would mean God was finite – like us, only bigger. If God does not know and control the future, all hope is lost. The universe is adrift with no anchor. Chaos reigns and whirl is king. But on the other hand, **yes**, God can and does change his mind, in the sense that he is involved, responsive, and engaged with the creation. He is in personal, dynamic relationship with us – and relationships always involve change. He responds to us and we respond to him. The truth is, God's "repentance" is our only hope. God changing his mind about us is the essence of the gospel. It is *good news*. The king of Ninevah knew that God changing his mind was their only hope (3:9). God changed his mind about Ninevah and he has changed his mind about us as well. By nature we are in Adam, under God's wrath and curse. But at the cross, God changed his mind about us. He turned from wrath to grace at Calvary. He relented of the great harm he had intended against us. So, yes, because of his Son and his Spirit, God has changed his mind about you – and it was his eternal plan to do so!

JONAH AND THE MISSION OF GOD JONAH 3-4 / JONAH #13

One of the most interesting aspects of the book of Jonah is its treatment of Gentiles. In this story, we find God showing compassion towards non-Jews. In one sense, it might seem as if Jonah is out of place, since God's concern in the old covenant era was primarily with Israel. Was God asking Jonah to take on a missionary project ahead of schedule (e.g., before the Great Commission of Mt. 28:18-20)? Doesn't a story like this belong on the other side of the death and resurrection of Christ? How does the Jonah narrative fit into the larger story of Scripture?

Why does God send Jonah to the Ninevites? At the heart of this book is God's grace and love for all of humanity (Jonah 4:1-4). Missions is actually rooted in the very heart of God. God is a missionary God. He *sent* his Word and his Spirit forth in the beginning (Gen. 1). Then he *sent* forth his Word (made flesh) and his Spirit (at Pentecost) again to recreate the world. Thus, from the beginning God has had a mission. He calls his people to share in that mission. Just as the Father sent the Son into the world, so now Jesus sends us (Jn. 20:21).

Jonah didn't want to participate in God's mission because he perceived the Assyrian threat to his own nation of Israel. Rather than allow Assyria to be strengthened through the word of God, he wanted to buy more time for Israel to repent. Obviously, God had other plans. Along with the rest of Scripture, the story of Jonah as a whole teaches us three important lessons about the church and missions:

1. **God's purpose all along has been the blessing of the nations.** God's plan of redemption was *never* confined exclusively to Israel. The Jews never had a monopoly on God's salvation.

Genesis 12 is clear: God elected and blessed Abraham in order that he might be a blessing to the world. Biblically, election gives rise to mission. We are chosen in order to be sent and in order to serve. Election gives us privileges, but also tasks.

Abraham was chosen to undo the sin of Adam. Genesis 12 is God's answer to the downward spiral of Genesis 3-11. Israel, as the family of Abraham, would have a special, priestly role to play on behalf of the world. They would be the holy nation, through whom the Word of God and ultimately the Messiah would come. Salvation is of the Jews, after all.

Israel was not sent in exactly the same way as the church has been sent, of course. Most of the old covenant pictures of Israel show the nations streaming into her (e.g., Isa. 2:1-4), whereas as the new covenant images portray the church largely on the go, moving out to the nations (e.g., Acts). But Israel and the church both exist as missional communities. The church does not so much *have* a mission, as she *is* a mission in her very essence and being. This mission is the world's salvation.

2. **Salvation has always been on offer to all of humanity.** God's election of Abraham in Genesis 12 does not mean the rejection of all the other people groups in the world. God never shows partiality. He has always been the God of both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 3:27ff).

In Romans 4, Paul argues that Abraham was the father of both Jews and non-Jews in the old covenant who shared his faith. To be sure, Jews had greater privileges. They were given many advantages, as the special seed people. But Gentiles could be saved as well by trusting in Israel's God.

In the new covenant, these two peoples – believing Jews and believing Gentiles – have been joined together into one new humanity, reversing the curse of Babel in Genesis 11. This is the “mystery” Paul describes (e.g., Eph. 3), namely, that Gentiles would enter into the kingdom as Gentiles, sharing the same status as believing Jews.

In the old covenant, we find countless Gentile God-fearers, as they came to be called (Ps. 115, 118). These Gentiles were invited to worship at the tabernacle/temple (Num. 15), which was to be a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:7). They were only excluded from the Passover (though now in the new covenant, they participate in the greater Passover feast). God-fearers include Abimelech, Pharaoh, Jethro, Job, Uriah, Hiram, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, Cyrus, the Roman Centurion, the Syro-Phoenician woman, Cornelius, groups in the synagogues (e.g., Acts 13:16, 26), etc. Paul describes these God-fearers in Romans 2: though they do not have the law (Torah) by nature, as the Jews do, they do (by faith) the things of Torah, and therefore will be justified at the last day.

Obviously, then, what happens in the book of Jonah is not that unusual under the old covenant. Assyria and her king took their place among a huge number of uncircumcised servants of Israel's God. The prophets promised a greater inclusion of the Gentiles in the messianic age, but Gentile salvation as such is nothing new.

3. **A missional church is God's answer to the world's problems.** A missional God implies a missional church. The book of Jonah wonderfully illustrates this. We see God in action through his church to extend the blessing of Abraham and reclaim lost sinners.

Ninevah was full of violence and hatred. God remedied the problem by sending her the church (in the form of one man, the preacher/prophet Jonah). The church is always the key to cultural transformation. The Word is the central to this (Jonah's sermon), but usually there's much more involved as well. The church trains and renews culture through manifesting an alternative way of life (practicing forgiveness, tithing, singing, ruling, etc.). In all these ways, the church contrasts God's way of life with the world's way of "life." This has always been God's plan: to use his people to accomplish his redemptive design for the world. Behind the mission of Jonah, behind the mission of the church, stands the mission of God. In fact, the church's mission *is* God's mission. And while we will often fail (as Jonah did), we can have confidence the church's mission will ultimately succeed – the compassion and love of God guarantee it! God modeled missions for us in the way he baptized and disciplined Israel. Now we're to do the same with the rest of the nations. This doesn't necessarily mean becoming a missionary; it means realizing you already are one, right where you are!

JONAH 3: NINEVAH AND THE RITUALS OF REPENTANCE

Modern people tend to have a love/hate relationship with ritual. We don't trust ritual, and yet we find we can't live without it. The book of Jonah is shot through with ritualized activity. [1] In 1:16, after the sailors are delivered from the storm, they engage in liturgical sacrifices and make promises to YHWH. Apparently, these became repeated actions for the men, as they gave up worshipping their pagan deities, and worshipped the God of Jonah, the God of heaven and earth. [2] In chapter 2, Jonah's song is filled with allusions to the prayer book of Israel, the Psalter. Jonah has made the Psalms his own prayer language. His "spontaneous" prayer arises from familiar fixed forms. [3] In chapter 3, the Ninevites do rituals of repentance. They put on sackcloth and ash, and they fast. These actions represent their brokenness over sin. They are becoming living sacrifices, in the hope that God will not turn them into dead sacrifices. They "kill" themselves so that God won't have to.

Why do these sorts of ritual actions seem strange to modern Christians? There are several reasons, but one major problem is that we tend to think that ritual belonged to old covenant worship, while new covenant worship is "spiritual" and "spontaneous." While there is indeed a transition from old to new covenant, the change is in *the forms or types of rituals*, not a movement away from rituals altogether. The new covenant is not a rejection of ritual as such. Worship is still sacrificial and ritualized, as the NT repeatedly indicates. Of course, we do find abundant warnings about the abuse of rituals – doing the wrong rituals, or doing the right rituals in the wrong way. Calvin's discussion of Jonah 3 and his practice in Geneva bears out this tension between ritual and *ritualism*.

How should we understand the rituals of Jonah 3? What is a biblical theology of ritual? Three things should be kept in mind:

1. God uses rituals to restore human life. God himself moves through his divine life ritually. The angels manifest a ritualized form of worship in heaven. Therefore, the importance of ritual in human life should come as no surprise. God uses rituals to engrave habits and character into our lives. The 40 day ritual pattern in Ninevah transformed the city into a new humanity. It reprogrammed life.
2. Biblical rituals are corporate and participatory. They include the entire community – men, women, and children. In fact, in some sense, they even create and nurture community. Ninevah had been dominated by violence, by torn human relationships (3:8). The rituals of repentance restructure Ninevite society into an orderly city, as the greatest down to the least engage in these liturgical actions in unison. The Reformers sought to accomplish the same end through restoring biblical rituals to the church, especially in her worship. This is the "priesthood of believers."
3. Finally, liturgy is bodily. It involves the whole person. This is important because sometimes we think of Christian growth in an overly intellectualized fashion. But, as has been said, Christianity is the most materialistic of religions. It is bodily and earthy. We relate to God through physical "things" like a preacher, a book (paper and ink), water, bread, wine, music, and oil. In fact, it is impossible to have a relationship with God apart from these external things. Biblical religion is not a private ideology; it is a total way of life. Rituals both embody and encourage our faith and repentance. Our deepest attitudes come to expression in bodily rituals.

Of course, ritual is not magical, and the right rituals in worship or elsewhere in life are no guarantee of faithfulness. The histories of Israel and Ninevah bear this out. It is possible to do the ritual in a hypocritical way, to be sure. But the ritual itself is a call to faithfulness, a call to be who we are in Christ. The discipline the liturgy imposes on us from the outside-in helps us to live as God wants us to live. While repentance is not possible without the ritual of confession, ritual all by itself – apart

from a changed life – is also insufficient. We must let God's rituals set the tempo for life. God's rituals are graces – they are aids and helps along the way to the kind of life he wants us to live.

JONAH 3:10-4:11
JONAH'S LAST STAND
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By now, we are familiar with the basic meaning of the book of Jonah. Jonah was a prophet in Israel during a time of rebellion. He knew this meant that Israel would soon be carted off into exile and he knew that Assyria (the world empire of the time) was the most likely candidate for the job. Thus, when God commands him to go to Ninevah (the capital of Assyria), he wants no part in saving and strengthening Israel's mortal enemy. Jonah runs away, hoping to buy Israel more time to repent. But Jonah cannot escape his prophetic calling. Jonah's disobedience meant life for the sailors; how much more then will his obedience bring life to the Assyrian empire (cf. Rom. 11)! Jonah's 3 days in the fish symbolize Israel's future: she will die in the belly of the Assyrian empire, and then be resurrected into her missional calling once again.

But as we come to the book's final chapter, Jonah still hasn't learned his lesson. Throughout this chapter, we find a series of contrasts between Jonah and God. Of course, the question for us is clear: Will we copy God's attitude towards the world around us, seeing the world through the lenses of compassion and mercy, or Jonah's attitude, looking out only for our own interests? Will we share the Father's heart for others, or will we be narrow hearted like Jonah?

There are several important details in this chapter. Verse 1 sets up the contrast between Jonah and God (though it's clearer in the Hebrew). Where God's anger ends, Jonah's begins. God is slow to anger (think of the 40 day period), whereas Jonah is immediately angered by the Ninevites' repentance. God saw Ninevah's repentance and relented from his anger and the evil he intended against them. Jonah saw their repentance, and it was an evil thing to him, making him angry: "How dare you share *our* blessing with *these Gentiles!*"

In verse 2, we see further evidence of Jonah's self-centeredness. He speaks of "my word," set over against God's word. In fact, Jonah's speeches and God's speeches match one another down to the word in this final dialogue. Each speaks 48 words, and every speech and response contains the same number of words. That's not coincidental; it's by literary design. Also, Jonah speaks of Israel as "my country," as though it belongs to him rather than God. He accuses God of sharing *hesed* (covenant love) with an uncovenanted people. Jonah is taking his last stand against God!

In verse 3 and verse 8, Jonah says he longs to die. His idol (Israel's special status) has failed him now that Ninevah has received God's *hesed* as well. Jonah worshipped Israel rather than Israel's God. Whenever we long to die out of frustration it's a sign that we have some other god in our hearts besides the true God.

In verse 5, Jonah moves east of the city (cf. Cain in Gen. 4). He sits – but not in repentance like the king (cf. 3:6). He builds a small tabernacle, like those used in the Feast of Tabernacles/Booths/Ingathering. This feast in Israel's calendar celebrated their dwelling with God and the evangelizing of the nations. But Jonah is celebrating a perverted Feast. He is alone. He is excluding the Gentiles from his shelter, even as Israel was excluding them from the temple (which was to be a house of prayer for all nations). Jonah's self-centeredness has made him the Old Testament version of the older brother (cf. Lk. 15).

In verses 6-8, God plays a trick on Jonah in order to teach him a lesson. God provides a shade plant that grows over night, much to Jonah's delight. But the next day, God provides a worm to destroy it. The whole episode once again demonstrates God's sovereignty over his creation. It is highly symbolic, an enacted parable: the tree (like the fish) = Assyria. God will preserve his people, even as he chastens them. Despite what Jonah thinks, his preaching to Ninevah will ultimately serve Israel's good because these God-fearers will break Israel's fall when he scatters them among the nations. The worm = the serpent. Ninevah will eventually apostatize and perish (cf. Nahum), no longer shielding Israel from God's wrath (= the sun and wind). Israel better shape up while there's still time. The sun "attacks" Jonah even as the worm "attacked" the plant. In other words, Israel is in grave danger. Jonah is in the same "misery" (4:6) as Ninevah (1:2). The fact that the same word is used of Jonah's plight and Ninevah's plight shows that Israel stands in need of God's grace and rescue every bit as much as the pagans. Israel is no better than the nations. How dare she look down upon them in pride!

God is giving Jonah the big picture through these symbols. Judgment (exile) will come, but Israel will still have opportunity to repent. Assyria will provide shelter for a time, but Israel must learn the lesson of the fish and the plant, lest she perish too. We must learn that God's chastening hand may hurt, but it also provides an opportunity to repent.

Jonah is mad that his plant is taken away the next day, which means he still doesn't get it. And that brings us to the final dialogue between Jonah and God in verses 9-11. Jonah had pity on the plant because it served *his* interests and provided for *his* comfort.

But if he pities the plant, how can he ignore the misery of the great city? Aren't people (and even cattle) more important than plants? Jonah has no regard for the 120,000 inhabitants of the city. The number 120,000 is historical in some sense, but also symbolic. The number 12 = the number of tribes in Israel. Ninevah is a shadow of Israel, a spiritual Israel. Through repentance, the people of Ninevah have become True Jews (cf. Rom. 2).

This book ends where it began, as far as Jonah's attitude is concerned. God has the first and last word in this book, but the last word comes in the form of a question posed to all of us: Will we live with tenderness and compassion towards others? Will we have a heart for the world? That's the challenge of the book of Jonah. We are not saved merely for our own benefit. It's "a wide world after all," and we're called to share in God's concern for it. We are saved to serve.