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# Two Unlikely Missionaries: A Study in Narrative Theology

## Introduction

The following study is an original exercise in narrative theology—a newer discipline in theological studies (Alter 1981; Sternberg 1985; Fokkelman 1999). The working assumption in this field of study is that the biblical narratives (aka “stories”) are not just simple historical accounts but are intentionally “shaped” theologically.

In the case of the book of Jonah, the four chapters are a completely unique narrative of all the prophetic books in Scripture in that these chapters narrate only one event in Jonah’s life—and mention only a few words of his message, whereas all other prophetic books, whether major or minor prophets, contain some narrative details of the prophet’s life but in the main consist of the prophetic message. Moreover, Jonah, though identified as a prophet in 2 Kings 14:25, is not even introduced as a prophet in his book. But this is subtly implied with the opening “formula” of him receiving “the word of the Lord” as other biblical prophets did (discussed below).

This study, in seeking theological intent, traces some of the details of this solitary event in Jonah’s life because this is what the narrator highlights. For a comparison, the apostle Paul is also studied in this article. Narrative details given of his life in the New Testament are not concentrated in one book. Rather they are scattered throughout the book of Acts, with a few more found here and there throughout Paul’s letters and epistles where the content in those books mainly records his teachings (see Bruce 1977; Jervell 1984; Witherington 1994; Longenecker 2002; Baker 2011; Kirk 2011; Keener 2013; Heilig 2020).

We have to come to terms with the fact that we possess only fragments of Paul. Vanished almost completely is, for example, the Pauline missionary preaching. Not only do we have occasional writings from him, but even “occasional speeches.” He dealt orally with questions with questions and problems of his churches. We know for sure that the early Christian missionary preaching as part of the gospel gave reports of persons and churches who had accepted the gospel (1 Thess. 1:8; Rom. 1:8). The life of a church was simply part of the gospel. (Jervell 1984:53)

Building on this research, application is here made to issues in misiology through a comparison of Jonah and the premier New Testament missionary, Paul.

### Two Unlikely Missionaries

Throughout Salvation History, God has impressively and graciously enlisted various persons to share his blessings, messages, and counsel. In both the Old and New Testaments, God commissioned some to minister beyond Israel.<sup>1</sup> There have been varied responses to these divine calls, but none as surprising as the ones given by the Old Testament prophet Jonah and Saul of Tarsus in the New Testament—both of whom might have been thought of as unlikely to be divinely called.

The Old Testament prophet Jonah responded to his divine enlistment by traveling in the opposite direction of where he had been sent—eventually realizing God was not releasing him from his responsibility. And later, after finally getting to Nineveh, when the violent Ninevites saw the possibility for divine mercy in Jonah’s judgment message, rather than rejoicing, Jonah was furious. All of the four chapters in the book of Jonah focuses on this one singular incident in his life.

On the other hand, there is Saul of Tarsus who, thinking he was honoring Yahweh while traveling to Damascus to persecute Christians, was confronted by Jesus and that changed everything. He became the apostle Paul, and an outstanding New Testament “missiologist”—responding in an astonishing way to this change of plans. The book of Acts first records his murderous attitude toward Christians, and then his dynamic missionary activity to the Gentiles. He then traveled energetically, not persecuting Christians anymore but rejoicing to share the message of divine mercy: “whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:11).

Paul’s letter to the church in Rome, along with other letters he wrote to various Christian churches established in predominately pagan territory, still reverberate and inspire—underscoring the importance of Christian mission. Maintaining a vigorous and extensive schedule, Paul was not

traveling as a tourist, though nothing would have been wrong with that. Instead he earnestly desired to share the gospel, which included divine judgment against sin just as Jonah had been called to do.<sup>2</sup>

The apostle's passionate soul took him around the Mediterranean sustaining a vigorous itinerant schedule to Syria, Asia, and the European continent. His noble life and writings still inspire conversion to the Christian faith. In fact, some have suggested that no single event, apart from the death and resurrection of Christ, have proven so important for the course of Christianity than the conversion and divine commissioning of Paul.<sup>3</sup> Books are still being written about his impressive ministry (e.g., Knowles 2008). The vibrant letters he wrote to various Christian churches now make up much of the New Testament all of which reflect his theology, his warm personality, and the depth of his faith. Moreover, unlike Jonah, Paul practiced what he preached.

However, if a person was acquainted with Paul during the early years of his professional life, they might never have guessed that this would happen. Paul himself described his top-notch academic achievements along with his fierce loyalty to his Jewish faith.<sup>4</sup> This is what prompted him to get permission to travel outside Israel to Damascus to force Christian believers back to Jerusalem to face trial, even death.<sup>5</sup> It is unlikely that any Christian back then had the conversion of Paul on their prayer list, thinking that would surely be impossible. Paul's reputation against Christianity was such that believers were skeptical at first that his conversion was real. Even Ananias wondered if God had made a mistake by sending him to go visit Paul and pray for him for he too was aware of Paul's reputation (Acts 9:13). But God *did* know what he was doing when He stopped Paul on his deadly journey to Damascus. And that encounter changed Paul's heart. He accepted Jesus and earnestly took on his mission as an apostle to the Gentiles—establishing churches in many cities. He bravely preached and taught while enduring severe persecution, even listing the extensive painful experiences he endured,<sup>6</sup> including surviving a deadly storm on the same Mediterranean that Jonah earlier had experienced.

It is Paul who must carry the word of God to Rome. Yet at the height of the storm an angel says to Paul: "Do not be afraid, Paul: you must stand before Caesar; and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you" (Acts 27:24). God's purpose of blessing has its focus, at the moment on Paul; but its scope includes all who travel with him. (Newbiggin 1995:33)

However, one of the most "successful missionaries" of all times is found in the Old Testament. The result of his mission to the capital city of the most powerful nation in the world at that time has never been

matched. The entire city of Nineveh of the then world-prominent nation of Assyria, was converted! The apostle Paul never mentions a whole city experiencing conversion as a result of his ministry.

The book of Jonah opens with Jonah's divine call: "The word of the Lord came to Jonah" (Jonah 1:1). This "formula" is the same description of how God called many in the Old Testament, such as Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and others. For example, notice the introduction of some of the prophetic books near the book of Jonah in the canon:

*The word of the Lord that came to Hosea the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel. (Hos 1:1, emphasis added)*

*The word of the Lord that came to Joel the son of Pethuel. (Joel 1:1, emphasis added)*

*The word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem. (Mic 1:1, emphasis added)*

Jonah received his call as did many prophets in Scripture. The formulaic statement, "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah" (Jonah 1:1), opens the book of Jonah, an authentic mark indicating a person had been called by God.<sup>7</sup> At the outset of the book the reader is instructed that Jonah was not promoting himself as a motivational speaker, nor was he seeking political office

This introduction also establishes that Jonah's judgment message did not originate with him. It came from God as the text declares that it was "the word of the Lord [*Yahweh*]." One should be filled with wonder that the God of heaven would entrust such a crucial mission to such an unlikely person as seen in the four chapters of Jonah.

Jonah was to announce a *judgment message* to the "great city of Nineveh," which is how God himself described the city (Jonah 1:2). Assyria was the reigning super-power of the time and also a current enemy of Israel, conducting warring raids against the northern tribes. The Assyrians were known for their violence and iniquity. Much is now understood about how cruel the Assyrians were. Archaeologists have found documentation about what the Assyrians did to their enemies: mutilating their captives, abusing the most vulnerable children, elderly, pregnant and nursing mothers; driving chariots over roads paved with people; erecting numerous gallows around a conquered city for hanging their captives; chopping enemy soldiers in pieces and then making mounds of

the various body parts. Moreover, they boasted of this, carving wall-sized granite “murals” depicting their gruesome acts—reliefs that survive to this day. Mercy was not part of Assyria’s political system (Belibtreu 1991). Some historians of antiquity refer to the Assyrians as the “Ancient Nazis.”

Nineveh itself was known for its wickedness. Even the king acknowledged the vile nature of the city in a proclamation following Jonah’s judgment announcement. He urged: “let us call upon God earnestly, each one turning from his *wicked ways* and from the *violence* which is in their hands” (Jonah 3:8, emphasis added). When Jonah received his divine call to go to Nineveh, he had no doubt that God was speaking. He knew exactly what God meant. However, he had no inclination to cooperate. Moses and Jeremiah also struggled with their divine tasks, but not to the extent that Jonah did.<sup>8</sup> Rather than accepting to God’s directive to travel north to Nineveh, Jonah fled east, buying a ticket to take a “cruise” on the Mediterranean—destination Tarshish.

But God pursued Jonah, enlisting his arsenal of nature to confront this stubborn prophet. A deadly storm erupted, endangering all the lives on board the ship. When casting of lots designated Jonah as the cause of the storm, he admitted that he was a Hebrew who served the God of heaven and earth uttering this while in the very act of disobedience (contra Paul’s attitude on board a ship during a major storm on the same body of water, as noted above). There is no hint that he was ever concerned about anyone else on the ship. In fact, Jonah uncaringly imperiled all those on board, napping while everyone else struggled against the storm. This starkly contrasts him with the pagan mariners who were straining to save life as they implored their gods for help even tossing overboard their cargo, which would have cut into their profit. The text in Jonah chapter 1 is graphic:

But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up. Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep. (Jonah 1:4-5)

When the crew came to realize that everyone on board was doomed in the violent storm, they prayed a second time not now to their pagan deities, but to Yahweh, the God of Israel. These *pagan* seamen beg help from the true God: “greatly fear[ing] the LORD” (Jonah 1:16). Somehow, despite Jonah’s disobedience, these mariners, who likely had battled other severe storms on the Mediterranean, saw the hand of the true God in the storm. The contrasts between the prophet Jonah and the pagan sailors in the first chapter of the book of Jonah are extremely sharp.

At the height of the storm Jonah does tell the mariners: “Throw me into the sea . . . and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you” (1:12). Despite what might be surmised at first glance, there is no hint of altruism in Jonah’s statement nor any confession of wrong-doing. He is no closer to submitting to God’s directive than he was before the storm. What might seem like a bit of regret is still hardened defiance. Jonah is never concerned about the lives of anyone in the entire book. For example: why did he tell the sailors to toss him overboard? Why did he not just jump into the stormy waters himself and not involve them?

The sailors at first refused Jonah’s request and continued to battle the storm, but finally, after praying (again) to Yahweh for forgiveness, they reluctantly hurled Jonah overboard and the sea immediately stopped its raging (1:15):

The men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. Therefore they cried out to the Lord and said, “We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man’s life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O Lord, have done as it pleased You.” And the sea immediately stopped its raging. (Jonah 1:13-15)

As God did throughout the entire book of Jonah, he continued revealing his sovereignty over all nature by miraculously sparing Jonah’s life: He prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah, rather than let him drown. And at last, after three days in the middle of a smelly deep darkness, realizing that his life had been spared, Jonah finally prayed but it took a lot more time than for the pagan sailors. He did admit God’s providence, but made no mention of any wrong-doing nor did he ask for forgiveness unlike King David did when confronted with his sin. However, “God will not let him off. But God will also not let him go. For God does not cancel his calling” (Newbigin 1995:33).

In spite of all Jonah had done, God heard his prayer. He spoke to the great fish, who, for the second time, obeyed his divine orders and deposited Jonah on the seashore. What happened next? “And the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time” (3:1). Surely these are some of the most encouraging words in Scripture. In spite of his unrepentant attitude, God again commissioned Jonah. This time Jonah obeyed God’s instructions: “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you” (3:2).

Upon arriving at the capital city of Assyria, Jonah delivered the solemn judgment message: “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed” (3:4). And the results have never been matched even by the apostle Paul. The whole city, including high government officials and the king himself, were

convicted and repented. They did not just believe Jonah, the text states that the people of Nineveh “believed *God*” (3:5). And God accepted their sincere penitence and forgave them.<sup>9</sup> Jonah then returned to his country and all Israel rejoiced at the power of the gospel to convert even the worst sinners?—no, not really. In fact, Jonah then snarled at God in bitter fury:

O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness, a God who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. (4:2-3)

At last, Jonah admitted out loud what had been going on in his mind that he was resisting God’s project since the very beginning. Why? Because, as he finally acknowledged, he suspected all along that God would be merciful to the notoriously wicked and violent Ninevites. And he would rather die than accept this. In fact, he mentioned this twice, for his last words in the book are still furious: “it is right for me to be angry, even to death!” (4:9). Jonah’s contrary attitude never shifts in the entire book:

Jonah goes to speak God’s word to the pagan world, and his obedience is met by a stupendous miracle. There is universal repentance. The pagan world has been humbled. But Jonah is utterly disappointed. The heathen are not to be punished after all. What justice can there be in a world where God is so absurdly generous? Jonah is frustrated and angry. . . . And we are left with the picture of Jonah sulking while God pleads with him for Nineveh, that great city with its thousands of innocent babies and its dumb animals—God so tenderly pleading for the pagan world and Jonah so sullenly wrapped up in his own self-pity. (Newbiggin 1995:33)

Jonah’s attitude is remarkably like the elder brother in the New Testament parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The older brother angrily criticized his father for throwing a party for his other son who had squandered the family inheritance on sinful living. Grace is so unfair, his kid brother deserved punishment. Notice how the profligate younger brother of the parable, like the wicked citizens of Nineveh, was easier for God to convert than the self-righteous older brother or Jonah.

However, one might be warned not to smirk too quickly at the elder brother’s attitude nor Jonah’s tirade against grace. They are not alone. Jonah’s attitude is not that rare even though some might be reluctant to admit it. Grace can be an offensive aspect of the gospel. After all, isn’t it easier to ask for God’s mercy for personal mistakes than for outright sinners? Nor is it difficult to notice the best of what one does and the worst



of what others do. There are always valid excuses for personal mistakes but they are hard to come-by for the behavior of others. Doesn't life-long obedience count for anything? Is it fair that undeserving sinners get grace so readily?

Though he does not seem to notice, what Jonah detests about Nineveh can be found in his own character. He could not see that his heart was just as contrary to God as the worst of the pagan world. The grace God extended to the Ninevites was the same grace that God had been extending to him. He readily accepted it for himself but resented wicked sinners receiving it.

What is truly amazing is that in spite of Jonah's defective character, God called him on a "foreign mission" to Nineveh with the Assyrians—Israel's paramount enemy at that time. Would not God have been wise to call a "better" person? Yet the 120,000 notoriously violent citizens of that great capital city were converted! This should cause Christians to reconsider their distinctions between the righteous and wicked, the saved and lost, and those considered prone to be converted. While some analyze and discuss to whom Christianity should be "marketed," God continues to surprise us with his grace that is able to convert even the worst sinners.

In the first century of the Christian church, who would have thought that Saul, the determined persecutor of Christians, would be converted?

Paul reminds the Galatians that before his conversion he had been a practicing Jew. He makes clear that there was nothing in his pre-Christian life that would have led anyone to expect that he would become a Christian. He had known no sympathy with the Christians, but on the contrary had given himself over to a vigorous endeavor to stamp this little sect out. (Morris 1996:51-52)

In the book of Jonah, the possibility of God's grace convicted an entire wicked city. Because of the "wideness of His mercy," God delighted to forgive Nineveh's past acts of violence. The life of Jonah is instructive that successful mission does not always guarantee that those fulfilling their mission are in tune with God's heart.

Perhaps Paul, who would have become well acquainted with the Old Testament during his rabbinic training, was thinking about Jonah's recalcitrant attitude when he wrote:

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and strife, and some also from good will: the former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely . . . . What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice. (Phil 1:14, 18)



The details of the story of Jonah are familiar. When the story is told to children, much attention is usually paid to the great fish. But surely this was not the writer's primary focus. That great sea creature is mentioned in only three verses.

Perhaps the writer, through obvious comparisons between Jonah, the pagan sailors, and then the Ninevites, wanted to stress how much more trouble God has with one of his own than he does with the worst of the unbelieving world. Maybe the profound nature of God's forgiveness was the primary focus.

God's propensity to forgive is a difficult thing for many to appreciate. Jonah surely had a hard time. Perhaps that is why Jesus spent so much time talking about it. The four New Testament Gospels frequently recount that God is far more lavish with his forgiveness than was "acceptable" for some. Many of Christ's parables drew attention to this, such as the parable of the Prodigal Son as we have seen.<sup>10</sup> Jesus also spoke of how human parents, sinful as they are, know how to give their children good things; however he then emphasized that God, the heavenly Father, is even more generous and loving (Matt 7:7-11).

The book of Jonah surely is one of the most profound pictures of God's forgiveness in the entire Bible. That may be the reason why Jonah's book is read by our Jewish brothers and sisters at *Minchah*, the afternoon service of the yearly Day of Atonement, near its holiest hour when Yom Kippur is nearing its peak. Why? Because of the book's spotlighting divine forgiveness in the face of judgment.

Jonah's book is also one of the most evangelistic books in the Bible. It reveals how God converts people and saves sinners. Even the petulant prophet Jonah was constrained to admit this, spewing it out in anger to God: "I know You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm" (4:2).

Paul's conversion in the New Testament is another miraculous conversion, which Paul himself recalled several times in amazement.<sup>11</sup> His striking change of heart also instructs how God converts people.

When studying the lives of Jonah and Paul, one should be reminded that the God of the Bible is not a distant deity uninvolved with life here on earth. Nor is he a cosmic dictator who seeks mindless submission. God yearns for personal relationships. All through Scripture there are stories of him pleading and even reasoning with people. A God who asks for mindless external conformity is not the God revealed in Scripture. This faulty perspective was invented by those not truly informed about God's nature in the Bible. God himself offers the invitation: "Come now, let us reason together" (Isa 1:18). In the New Testament he was no different.

Jesus constantly engaged and personally interacted with, and forgave all kinds of people.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, in each generation Christians must consider how to share the true God in a contemporary manner and in different cultures. Sometimes attempts are made to bring God down to a level where people will say, “Oh, I can love *that* kind of God”—hesitating to portray God as he revealed himself in Scripture.

Another tragedy occasionally seen in the Christian church is to capitulate to various modern attitudes by saying, “There are many different religions, but all of them are just trying to get to the same place. It really doesn’t matter which route is taken.”

Other Christians have decided that all a person really needs to know is that Jesus loves them. Speaking only about God’s love, they refuse to mention that he is serious about sinning and sinfulness. However, it is striking that both the pagan mariners during the deadly storm, along with the people of Nineveh, when confronted with divine judgment were drawn to call upon God. When they saw the true God in action they were moved to pray to him.

This is an important issue: one need never apologize for the God of Scripture. Surely, some will scoff and be derisive. But if anyone is ever truly converted, it will be because they have met the true God—as is graphically revealed in the book of Jonah and the conversion of Paul. Those were certainly extraordinary times when, first, heathen sailors and then an entire city of violent people were moved to call upon the name of the Lord—turning to the true God in spite of the reluctant witness and disobedient life of Jonah. And then when Paul, on a journey to imprison Damascus Christians, was confronted by Christ on his way. This suddenly reversed his course and resulted in him becoming the greatest missiologist in all of Christian history!

The lives of Jonah and Paul also instruct that God takes seriously those he calls and the message that he commissions. In the case of both Old Testament Jonah and Paul, it was a long, difficult process for all three of them. But God is relentlessly committed. The experiences of both Old Testament Jonah and New Testament Paul can teach that if nothing else these two lives reveals a major matter in Christian mission: who God is—the Creator, the Redeemer, and covenant-keeping God.

As he did with Jonah and Paul, God invites all to join Him in proclaiming the Gospel. His directives are clear. God wants the “everlasting Gospel” preached “to every nation, kindred, tongue and people” (Rev 14:6-7). This grand message includes the announcement that “the hour of his judgment has come.” Moreover, divine judgment is good news! Even the psalmist realized this:

Let the sea roar, and all its fullness,  
 The world and those who dwell in it;  
 Let the rivers clap their hands;  
 Let the hills be joyful together  
 before the Lord,  
 For He is coming to judge the earth.  
 With righteousness He shall judge the world,  
 And the peoples with equity. (Psalm 98:7-9)

Evil and wickedness will not continue forever. The Creator/Redeemer God has promised to set everything right again.

Accepting God's mission requires that one's personal inclinations become secondary. Jonah learned this the hard way. Yet, his rebellious and stubborn life, along with the unlikely conversion of Paul, can provide encouragement that God can use flawed human beings. For even the most confident Christians are better described by the prophet Isaiah: "But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousness is like filthy rags . . . and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away" (64:6). In the last book of the Bible, God again reminds us: "you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev 3:17). In spite of all the good things a person might do for God, the words of that great spiritual writer are still true: "Not my brother, nor my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer." All of us, just like Jonah and Paul, need God's grace.

God told Jonah "Go"—but Jonah said "No." However, after attempting a determined detour, Jonah finally realized that God was very serious about his directives. Paul also was confronted with a major adjustment in his thinking; he first thought that persecuting Christians was honoring God and God had to stop him in his tracks.

God has given Seventh-day Adventist Christians a breathtaking mandate. He has told them to "Arise and Go" just as He did Jonah and Paul, entrusting believers to share in what is now called "The Great Commission" to all nations. They need to learn that God's commands are not to be taken lightly and that God invests a lot in those he calls. What is more, the lives of Jonah and Paul instruct us that God's commissions are not to be taken lightly. All Christians need to learn to see the world from God's perspective. People "boast of the wonderful progress and enlightenment of the age in which we are now living; but God sees the earth filled with iniquity and violence" (White 1917, 1947:275).

In contrast to Jonah's negative attitude toward the citizens of Nineveh, consider the (converted) Paul's attitude toward Rome, another major capital city, as he makes three strong statements: "*I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.* So for my

part, *I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek*" (Rom 1:14-16, emphasis added).

Paul's attitude was the opposite of Jonah's—also in direct antithesis to his earlier thinking—and the attitude of many modern Christians who seem to regard fulfilling Christ's commission as a favor they give to God.

As noted above, Paul was greatly concerned about the ancient city of Rome, the paramount capital city of his time, and the determined enemy of Christians. What could Paul hope to accomplish there? Just like Jonah's announcement to Nineveh, Paul's message to Rome was not a "warm fuzzy." The first issue he addressed to the Romans was, like Jonah's to the Ninevites, God's judgment against sin: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom 1:18).<sup>13</sup>

God has invited the Seventh-day Adventist Church to proclaim a confrontational, counter-cultural message, just as he did Jonah and Paul so that "the great things of His law, the principles of justice, mercy and love therein may be set forth in their true light" (White 1917, 1947:275). God is serious about this. Just how serious he is can be learned from studying the lives of Jonah and Paul.

We are to intercede even for those we know are facing God's judgment. We are also to proclaim that judgment, but in the hope of the repentance and reprieve, in the spirit of Abraham and not Jonah. (Wright 1983:26)<sup>14</sup>

Could it be possible that there are some today who think it is no longer necessary to take seriously Christ's commission to share the Gospel with a lost world? And because there has been much time rightly spent developing an impressive knowledge of Scripture, lack of zeal does not matter?

Could some Christians today be more like Jonah—hesitant to proclaim the startling message that judgment awaits each person and how Christ was crucified for their sins and offers forgiveness. Or maybe some are embarrassed that God's mercy has still "postponed" the Second Coming of Christ that has been preached about for so long. Perhaps some are like Jonah, jealous of one's reputation, have lost sight of the infinitely greater value of people. Is it possible that there are hearts like Jonah's in our faith communities? Are any believers turning away from God's explicit instruction? Is there some divine command too difficult to listen to? Are there instructions from God that are annoying, leading to the response "anything but that, Lord" that cause resentment and/or a detour? Do some want to limit God's mercy to others or even limit God's mercy to themselves?

Could it be that traveling to “Nineveh” might be the Lord’s way of convicting that there needs to be a change in some aspect of lifestyle, behavior, or diet, or to carry out some action that demands more than one wants to give? Could there be some present instruction from the Lord eliciting a response of going the opposite way until finally discovering, like Jonah and Saul of Tarsus, that it is “hard to kick against the pricks?” (Acts 26:14). Or are some Christians on a path they think is serving God yet actually working against him like Paul did at first?

To fulfill the divine mandate, the church needs more than just the excellence of natural abilities and intellectual brilliance, as important as these are. All believers, just like Jonah and Paul, need God’s special grace to offer love for the lost, and fervor for the Great Commission.

The book of Jonah remains a relevant book in Scripture for missiology. It presents a lesson instructive for the 21st century. It presents several cogent questions: is there any traveling in a different direction than God has set out, traveling to Tarshish instead of Nineveh; are some fast asleep while the world violently tosses in unprecedented tragedy, drowning in a “storm?” God used the sea captain to wake Jonah. What might he use to wake his people up? Or are some, like Paul, on the wrong task for God with Jesus sorrowfully pleading: “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace?” (Luke 19:42). Should the Holy Spirit withdraw from the Church today would it make any difference with the church continuing as though nothing has happened?

When the many details in the biblical records of Jonah and Paul are pondered, ultimately their lives must be instructive about the glorious God of heaven and earth and his seeking to redeem even the worst sinners.

The four chapters of the book of Jonah open and conclude with the word of God to one of his erring children. And in between is found an inspiring picture of God’s universal love and his sovereignty over all life, including fish, worms, and wind. In this tiny book the Old Testament reaches one of its peaks teaching about God’s tender concern for all his creatures. And God’s final question to Jonah, “Should I not pity Nineveh, . . . and what about the animals?” (4:11). He grants an astonishing biblical glimpse into the heart of God and his gracious involvement in humanity and all living creatures.

The Bible, then, is covered with God’s purpose of blessing for all the nations. It is concerned with the completion of God’s purpose in the creation of the world and of man within the world. It is not—to put it crudely—concerned with offering a way of escape for the redeemed soul out of history, but with the action of God to bring history to its true end. The Old Testament is full of visions of a restored creation.

These visions are not of an otherworldly bliss, but of earthly happiness and prosperity (Ps 82 and 144), of wise and just government, or a renewed nature in which kindness has replaced the law of the jungle (Isa 1:1-9). (Newbigin 1995:33-34)

The New Testament records the story of a stubborn proud intellectual rabbi making a 180-degree turn when confronted by Christ. No wonder the rabbi Saul converted to the Apostle Paul insisted, “whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:11). The “everlasting gospel” can still convert the most unlikely people. The “everlasting gospel” can still be shared by the most unlikely missionaries.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For example, both Elijah and Elisha. Also, oracles were given to other nations surrounding Israel. See Isa 13-24; Ezek 25-32; Amos 1-2; Hab 2:4-20; and Zeph 2.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the book of Romans, which highlights the gospel, Paul first describes God’s wrath against sin (Rom 1-3).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Bruce 1977:75: “No single event, apart from the Christ-event itself, has proved so determinant for the course of Christian history as the conversion and commissioning of Paul. For anyone who accepts Paul’s own explanation of his Damascus-road experience, it would be difficult to disagree with the observation of the eighteenth-century writer that ‘the conversion and apostleship of St. Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation.’” (citing Lyttelton 1747:1).

<sup>4</sup> Paul’s defense in Jerusalem: “Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now.’ And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent. Then he said: ‘I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished’” (Acts 22:1-5, emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> “Now Saul was consenting to his [Stephen’s] death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8:1-4; cf. 9:1-2).



<sup>6</sup> Paul wrote to the Corinthian church: “Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I speak as a fool. I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?”

If I must boast, I will boast in the things which concern my infirmity. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands” (2 Cor 11:22-33).

<sup>7</sup> Note, earlier of Samuel: “And the LORD appeared again in Shiloh: for the LORD revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh *by the word of the LORD*” (1 Sam 3:21, emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> **Moses:** “But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?’ ... Then Moses answered and said, ‘But suppose they will not believe me or listen to my voice; suppose they say, “The Lord has not appeared to you.” ... Then Moses said to the Lord, ‘O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. . . .’ But he said, ‘O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever else You may send’” (Exod 3:11; 4:1, 10, 13).

**Jeremiah:** “Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.’ Then said I: ‘Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth’” (Jer 1:4-6).

<sup>9</sup> This becomes even more remarkable when considering that their conversion did not last. Later God sends another prophet (Nahum) to again confront them with their vile sinful acts.

<sup>10</sup> Also Jesus’ parable of the generous employer who gave the workers hired at the eleventh and last hour a full day’s wage to the complaints of workers who had worked all day (Matt 20:1-16; Luke 15:11-32).

<sup>11</sup> See Acts 22:1-22; 26:9-18; Gal 1:11-17. Cf. Eph 3:8: “To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.” For an exhaustive exegesis of Paul’s conversion experience as described in the book of Acts, and comparison with Paul’s account of this conversion in his epistles, see Keener 2013:1597-1701, 3504-3029.



<sup>12</sup> Some of the recorded conversations of Jesus include Nicodemus (John 3); the Samaritan woman (John 4); the Syrophoenician mother (Mark 7:24-37); and Peter (John 21:15-17). Christ graciously would give each person time and space to listen and answer. He would even allow them to dispute His Word, but not listen. He never forced anyone to assent.

<sup>13</sup> Even the first sermon Peter preaches after the climactic out-pouring of the Holy Spirit, also contains strong words: “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene ... just as you yourselves know ... you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross.” (Acts 2:22-23)

<sup>14</sup> This is in the context of where Abraham intercedes before Yahweh on behalf of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. See also Gen 20:7.

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