

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

Summer 2015

The Surprising God of Jonah: His Compassion and Our Genuine Obedience

Jiri Moskala

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>

THE SURPRISING GOD OF JONAH: His Compassion and Our Genuine Obedience

By Jiří Moskala

The book of Jonah is a jewel in the midst of the Hebrew Bible. It belongs among the 12 Minor Prophets, but Jonah is not a second league prophet. His message presents one of the most significant lessons with immense practical applications for pastors. It is momentous that Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet to whom Jesus directly compared Himself (Matthew 12:39–41); it means that to Jesus Christ the book of Jonah was of utmost importance.

Jonah's message shocks. It not only shook the lives of the people of his time, but it also has the power to shake ours. Prophets disturb people in their comfort zone and go against their status quo. These servants of God's covenant call people to get rid of all idols and destructive behavior, and beseech them to come back to a genuine relationship with God. Their appeals are unambiguous and call for action. One may say, if the message of a prophet does not lead to repentance, it is not the voice of a true prophet. Jonah, who lived a successful life in the eighth century B.C. (2 Kings 14:25), is not an exception. His sermon was short, direct, and focused on divine judgment: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned" (Jonah 3:4).

It is interesting to observe that the book of Jonah is full of surprises. To name a few: (1) Jonah was the first Hebrew prophet sent outside of the territory of Israel and Judea to deliver God's message. As a first missionary, he had to go to the momentous city of Nineveh in the domain of the cruel Assyrian enemies of Israel [it was like sending a Jew to Berlin to meet Hitler during the Second World War]. (2) The meaning of the name "Jonah" is dove. In Nineveh the goddess Ishtar was also symbolized by a dove. It means that the Ninevites had to choose which dove they would follow, their own or

the one God sent to them. (3) Jonah was saved in the belly of the big fish. (4) Jonah preached a mini-sermon to the sailors, and they turned to God. (5) The whole city of Nineveh repented. Surprise after surprise.

For me, the biggest surprise in the book of Jonah lies in the fact that everything and everybody obeys God: the storm obeys God; the big fish obeys God; also the wind, plant, worm, even the sailors and the Ninevites obey God, but the prophet of God, Jonah, is the only exception. The Lord's messenger disobeys. Instead of going to the east, he went to the west. The prophet ran away from God! However, it is impossible to escape from God's Presence, from His loving and caring omnipresence. We are always accountable to Him.

In spite of these facts, the book of Jonah is not primarily about Jonah, but about the God of Jonah. He is a compassionate God, full of grace and mercy. He surprises by His unconditional love. One of the best ways to know the God of Jonah is to study how He treats His disobedient prophet, how He deals with Jonah when he runs away, when he unexpectedly goes wrong. We can know each other quite well until suddenly something goes wrong; how we react in such a situation reveals who we really are.

In the beginning of chapter 4, we meet a very angry Jonah. The Hebrew text literally says: "It was evil to Jonah, great evil, and he became angry" (4:1). One needs to ask what made him so furious. The answer is shocking, because the cause of his rage is God's compassion for the Ninevites! God's prophet is angry, because God saves people. Salvation seems evil to Jonah. He would rather die than to see them saved (4:3). Incredible. In his pride he is so blind that he wants to see the fulfillment of his prediction rather than their redemption. He despised

these cruel foreigners because of the Ninevites' wickedness. Jonah is the first evangelist I know who has 100 percent success and is angry because of it. Instead of being joyful and grateful, his frustration and disappointment with God and His actions sprang up. As humans we have the tendency to push some into heaven and shove others out. How comforting to know that God is in charge of each person's salvation.

God's reaction to Jonah's rage is full of understanding and patience (another surprise and unexpected feature). The good news in the book is that the God of Jonah does not want to save only the sailors and Ninevites but also Jonah. He wants to help him experience the true dimensions of conversion and salvation.

It is striking that Jonah prays to God while being angry (4:2). In the past, I thought that was inappropriate behavior, an unsuitable action. Only later did I understand that this is exactly what God wants from us: to come to Him as we are without a mask, without play acting or hiding something, open and vulnerable (just as revealed in many of the Psalms). Only when we tell Him honestly and sincerely everything and disclose all to Him—even our negative emotions, deep disappointments and hidden thinking—can He change them and heal us! Salvation means healing according to the Bible (Psalm 41:4). If we hide our anger, insults, frustrations and dissatisfactions inside of us, these negative feelings will grow, choke us, take the joy out of life, and eventually kill our spiritual life. When Jonah prays to God, there is hope for Jonah. When we pray, there is hope for us.

Jonah had good information about God, but this "head religion" did not make him a kind, warm, loving and sensitive person. He knew that His God was "a gracious and compassionate

God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity” (4:2; he quotes God Himself; see Exodus 34:6–7), but no ethical consequences of this fact appeared in his life. No sign of God’s gracious compassion is displayed. His behavior reveals bad morality, because his heart was not changed through this knowledge. It is not enough to have an intellectual religion. If one’s life reveals a cold heart and damaging attitudes, it means that the transforming grace of God has not yet been fully accepted, because God’s amazing grace is always a transforming grace. God’s love warms.

God intervenes in favor of Jonah, because He wants to help him to understand and grow. He wants to save him from his anger, prejudice, hatred, enmity, racism, exclusivism, self-centeredness and feelings of superiority. The Lord made a plant for Jonah that shaded him; and for the first time in the book, we read that Jonah is happy, “extremely happy” (4:6). The cause of his happiness was a thing, a plant, which consequently became his comfort. He is not rejoicing over the people and their repentance but over the pleasant shade.

However, God intervenes once more, and the next day the enjoyable plant is dead. The cause of his external happiness is gone, and Jonah pities his loss and himself. God then comes to him with the question, the last question of the book. But what a question! God said (in a short paraphrase of verse 10): “You pitied the plant, Jonah, but I pitied the people. You cried over a thing, but I showed mercy for persons. Instead of lamenting over a plant that appeared without any of your effort, work or achievement, should you not do the same as I and have compassion for people?”

There is no recorded answer from Jonah to this divine question. Why does the book end with a question mark? Because only you and I can answer this pertinent question: What attitude do we have toward people who are different than we are (with different color, gender, education, position, nationality, religion or behavior) and, according to our opinion, do not deserve God’s mercy? Do we have the same unselfish and warming love in our hearts toward other people as God has? Do we have the same compassion toward them as God does?

God’s compassion is incomprehensible, incomparable, astonishing, challenging and transforming! The

book of Jonah confronts us with the real issues of life. God wants us to have courage to face the challenges of life with a proper attitude. He desires us to put down all barriers of religion, race, color, education, geography, language, gender and politics. He wants to save everyone without reservation. The warm compassion of God for people is contrasted with the cold attitude of the prophet. Jonah confesses that he had an attitude of ice toward others and challenges us not to commit the same mistake he did. Jonah was commissioned but not committed.

Let us consider the life of Jonah from a different perspective. God as a Sovereign Lord calls Jonah to go to Nineveh to deliver an important message of judgment—get up, go and preach (Jonah 1:1–2). He refuses and disobeys God’s commands, and the result is that the prophet goes down. The biblical text stresses his downward movement while running away from God. First he went down to Joppa,

THERE IS NO RECORDED ANSWER FROM JONAH TO THIS DIVINE QUESTION. WHY DOES THE BOOK END WITH A QUESTION MARK?

then to the harbor, after that down to the boat, then to the lowest place in the boat, and finally we encounter him at the bottom of the ocean. The downward movement is very graphic. Every time we run from God, we go down!

Then he cried to the Lord, and the compassionate, gracious and loving God saved him. Jonah praised the Lord for his deliverance when he was still in the belly of the big fish (see Jonah 2). Even though he accepted salvation personally, he took it selfishly. It is true that we need to take salvation personally (Jesus Christ died for me!), but the tragedy happens when we take it narrow-mindedly: salvation for me, yes, for my family, friends, group, tribe, nation, but not so much for others. We always have the tendency to dictate to God whom He should save and whom He should assign to perdition. It is so refreshing to know that we have no power to preclude the salvation of others, and that God ultimately decides

this matter, because He understands human hearts and minds.

Afterwards, God called Jonah for the second time. “Get up, go to Nineveh and preach!” (3:1–2). Jonah got up, went to Nineveh, and preached. His behavior leads to a crucial question: Was he now an obedient prophet? Well, he preached to the Ninevites, but in his heart were hatred, enmity, anger, bitterness and prejudice! He experienced God’s grace but was not yet willing to extend this same grace to others; his true conversion was missing.

These exegetical observations lead us to a very significant statement: God does not want our obedience. Let me finish this scandalous statement: God does not want our obedience to be of Jonah’s type. This kind of obedience is only for appearance—on the surface, outward and shallow. God does not want us to obey Him like drilled horses or dogs, or like parrots where we only repeat after Him what He said without allowing Him to transform us by His Word, grace and Spirit. Nor does He want our obedience to be like the obedience of soldiers who follow commands without thinking or understanding as Nazi officers, during the Nuremberg, Germany, International War Tribunal after the Second World War, claimed: “I did nothing wrong; I only obeyed the orders.”

God, of course, wants us to obey Him but desires that our obedience comes as a result of knowing Him for who He is (through His words and actions). He desires that our obedience spring from our heart and is motivated by gratitude, thankfulness, and love for Him and His incomprehensible goodness. When we are attracted to the kindness of God (Romans 2:4), then we do not follow Him because we have to, but because we want to. Our Lord really longs to see us behaving as responsible sons and daughters of God!

Obedience is not a mere outward compliance, but a service of love. Superficial obedience is not enough! True, genuine obedience is never forced or blind. It comes out of the practical knowledge and relationship with the true, loving, and holy God. This obedience does not mean that we will always understand God’s purposes, providence and events in our lives but that we will follow Him no matter what, because we personally know Him and His love for us! Only in this way can we indeed be loving, warm, contagious and compassionate people who show Adventism in a godly and attractive way.