

The God of the Second Time

Another look at the Jonah story

by Jo Ann Davidson

Theme

The God who called Jonah again, despite his deliberate disobedience, is still the God of second chances.

Theme Text

“Now the Word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time . . .” (Jonah 3:1).

Introduction

My teenage son Jonathan has been patiently fine-tuning my knowledge of sports. I never was interested before, but recently Jonathan paid me the supreme compliment that now I know more than the moms of most of his friends! For instance, when it comes to baseball, I now realize that, though the game can be played either with a soft ball or a hard ball, both types of ball are HARD on the head! Jonathan has also informed me about the differences in batting with a metal bat or a wooden bat.

In baseball, there are also MAJOR and MINOR leagues. The MAJOR league players earn huge salaries and are considered to have made it to the top of their profession. MINOR league players have achieved in the sport, but on a lesser scale. Their hopes are still set on one day playing on a MAJOR league team.

The words MAJOR and MINOR are similarly used in education. A college student MAJORS in a certain subject or subjects, and MINORS in others. That means a person's MAJOR receives the most attention and the most hours in class. The MINOR takes less work and less hours in class. Thus MAJOR and MINOR generally comes to mean the difference between the more important and the less important.

Biblical Prophets are All Major

However, one must be careful NOT to use that customary understanding when studying the Bible. For instance, in the Old Testament, there are the MAJOR prophets and the MINOR prophets. A person might have the understandable tendency to conclude that the twelve MINOR prophets aren't quite as important as the big MAJOR prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. It is at this point that our understanding of MAJOR and MINOR must take a different nuance.

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An analogy might be found in music. If you have had some music lessons you remember that there are MAJOR scales and MINOR scales. But this designation in music has nothing to do with their value or importance. The two types of scales are just structured differently and can be conveniently classified this way. Just so in the Bible, the minor prophets are no less important than the major prophets. The books are just generally shorter.

Let us look at one of the “minor” prophets. Before long we will be reminded that this book is definitely not in the minor leagues! The book of Jonah contains a major message of major importance. And its themes still remain very contemporary. Let’s start at the beginning.

Certainty of Jonah’s Book

Jonah 1:1 “NOW THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO JONAH . . .” The book begins with the identical formula with which many of the other prophetic books commence. See how Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Micah, Zephaniah and Jonah all open with, “THE WORD OF THE LORD THAT CAME UNTO ____.” Thus we are assured that the book of Jonah is a genuine biblical record. We are not dealing with fairy tales or legends. We are hearing the word of the Lord.

This “formula” also immediately authenticates that the following account does not originate with Jonah, but comes from God himself—“THE WORD OF THE LORD.” This is a holy introduction and should remind us each time we read it in Scripture that we need bow before the God of Heaven with a prayer for the Holy Spirit to open our minds as we study.

God Knows Us Personally

Consider that God calls people by name. He knows our parentage and background. He knew Jonah was the son of Amittai. When God summons people, He doesn’t just say, “Hey, you.” He calls them by name.

A belief in the God of Scripture gives us personhood and authenticity. The modern philosophical movement of “existentialism” says that there is no ultimate purpose to life. Existentialists insist that human life is meaningless and absurd. But biblical Christians think differently. We believe that the Lord of heaven and earth has given each of us life and a destiny, and that He even knows us by name!

God Knows Big Cities

God called Jonah and said, “Arise, go to Niniveh” (Jonah 1:2). “Among the cities of the ancient world in the days of divided Israel one of the greatest was Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian realm” (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 265). To obey God’s commission, Jonah would have to make a tremendous journey across the desert—about 750 miles on foot. Yet it was not really the travel that distressed him, but rather Nineveh itself.

“Nineveh?” Jonah must have gasped. “The capital of Israel’s worst enemy?” For Jonah, Nineveh meant the center of Assyrian power, the menacing threat to Israel’s survival. The city of Nineveh itself was the epitome of everything Jonah hated about the Gentiles. He knew its reputation as an idolatrous, sin-ridden city, and nothing was more repulsive, repugnant, or distressing than going there to preach repentance.

God knows all people and all places by name—and we can never presume to know what God is going to do next. Who would have thought that God had any plans but judgment for the wicked city of

Nineveh? This should remind us that we cannot always predict whom God is going to convert next. The next person on God's calendar may surprise us.

He surely surprised Jonah! For He sent him to a Gentile city—one of the most renowned cities of heathendom on the face of the earth.

God's Ways Can Surprise Us

And on top of that, God was sending him on a precedent-breaking mission. Of all God's messengers, only Jonah had ever received such a commission. The Lord did a new thing by Jonah—a startling and marvelous new thing upon the earth. He violated all current Israelite expectations by manifesting His care for people outside the seed of Abraham. He was sending His first apostle to the Gentiles!

However, Jonah seemed to prefer a funnel of God's providence targeted exclusively on the Israelites. The drama of the situation was profound. And a contest of wills between Jonah and Yahweh began with God's command: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me" (Jonah 1:2). Archaeologists have excavated numerous ancient Assyrian inscriptions. And from these we are reminded that God was accurate in His particular concern over their self-confident pride and their cruelty. (See Is. 10:12,13; Nahum 3:1,19.)

God's Judgment Reveals His Mercy

Examine God's pronouncement: "Their wickedness has come up before Me." This is formal legal language. The Lord is seated in His court. We are ushered before God the judge. A case is to be called and judged. We are reminded that all nations come under His rule. Regardless of some modern voices that seek to soothe our consciences with an exclusive "God is love," we observe here (and all through Scripture) that God notices human wickedness. Thus this was a very serious situation.

But there came another surprise, for this announcement was also an indication of God's mercy. Yes, the people of Nineveh were notoriously wicked, and Jonah was commissioned to bring Nineveh a judgment message.

However, the Assyrians could be grateful for that. The greatest curse that can ever be brought against a nation or a people is for God to turn away, as He had announced through Hosea: "Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone" (Hosea 4:17).

But the mercy granted to Nineveh was just the beginning of God's astonishing attention to details. We have noted God calling a person by name and commissioning him or her. This is a frequent Old Testament pattern. But what happened next was far from routine.

"But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1:3). The shocking surprise was Jonah's stark refusal to shoulder his task. Moses and Jeremiah also initially shrank from their divine assignments, but Jonah's blunt defiance went far beyond their hesitation. As a result, what ensued was an accumulation of hair-raising phenomena, one after the other, as God pursued Jonah. The violent sea storm, Jonah's survival in the belly of a fish, the mass conversion of a great pagan city—these were not routine.

Jonah Doesn't Agree With God

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Notice in verse 3 that in just one verse we are informed twice that Jonah fled “from the presence of the Lord.” One time would be shocking enough. However, this duplication in a single verse compels attention to the irony of anyone, let alone a prophet, thinking they can escape from the presence of the Lord! Notice, too, that Jonah did not just depart—he fled!

Furthermore, three times in this same verse we are notified of Jonah going “to Tarshish,” which punctuates the fact that Jonah was traveling in a diametrically opposite direction from God’s instructions! Nineveh is northeast. Tarshish is west. This verse emphasizes three times the magnitude of Jonah’s rebellion.

As he “thought of the difficulties and seeming impossibilities of this commission, he was tempted to question the wisdom of the call.” I mean, what “could be gained by proclaiming such a message in that proud city” (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 266)? Maybe if he just ignored these divine instructions, doom would come to the despised Gentiles, for they surely would not think of repentance on their own. Jonah may have thought that if God had a little more time to think about the situation, He might change His mind.

There are some people today who are of the opinion that God actually matures. This contemporary theory is termed “process theology.” The understanding is that God’s thinking ripens through experience just as ours does—God’s mind improves as it processes what happens in His creation. In other words, God becomes wiser by watching what transpires, and He discovers better ways of administering His kingdom.

The account of Jonah (and of all Scripture) strongly contradicts this perspective. For it reveals to us just how diligent God was in getting His message to Nineveh. God did not learn from Jonah. Nor did He make mistakes. Jonah remained His chosen messenger even though he refused the assignment and tried to escape. Nor did God change His mind about Nineveh.

God Begins to Nudge Jonah

“But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea” (Jonah 1:4). For Jonah’s sake a tempest was unleashed. It whipped up the ocean and caused the ship to founder. But its purpose was to smash Jonah’s inflexibility. The elements of nature and many innocent sailors were engaged in the adventure with Jonah and because of him.

The extensive confession of both the Old and New Testaments (see, for example, Jer. 23:19, 20; Ps. 107:23-31) is that the functioning of all nature is dependent on God’s action. Scriptural testimony opposes contemporary views in which the universe is considered a closed and secular system allowing no place for the action of God.

Right here in the book of Jonah the wind has begun to blow. The tempest is stirred—God has acted. God went to extreme measures to show Jonah how much He loved him—and Nineveh. This was a sign of His special grace.

God thought His message so important, and the person he elected so consequential, that He brought nature into play to help this chosen person fulfill his task. As God wrestled with Jacob at the brook Jabbok, so now He began to wrestle with Jonah. One of the major underlying themes of this book is the dogged persistence of God. Jonah disobeyed and was trying to escape God, but God pursued him

relentlessly. “Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god” (Jonah 1:4,5). To their credit, these pagan sailors could see that this was no ordinary storm, but one divinely instigated.

“But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship” (verse 5). As we noted initially, twice the text mentions that Jonah tried to “flee from the presence of the Lord,” emphasizing the futility of what Jonah was trying to do. Now we are informed for the third time that Jonah “went down.” The first two times are in verse 3, when Jonah, trying to escape God’s command, “went down” to Joppa and “went down” into the ship. In verse 5 we see that he “went down into the lowest parts of the ship.” Jonah just kept going down and down and down in his miscalculated attempts to escape his divine commission.

The storm raged dangerously, and the captain of the ship, “distressed beyond measure,” (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 267) checked the ship from stem to stern and found Jonah asleep.

“Arise,” he said. Note the close similarity of the captain’s exclamation and Jonah’s original summons from God in verse 2, “Arise.” The word must have mocked Jonah. This was the very word with which God had disturbed his pleasant life a few days before. “Arise, call on your God” (verse 6). Note the irony of a heathen skipper pleading with a Hebrew prophet to pray to his God.

“So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah” (verse 7). Notice Jonah’s response. He evaded all the questions about his town, country, and occupation and admitted only to the fourth inquiry: “I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven” (verse 9). Again, what delicious irony: Jonah did not want to carry salvation to Nineveh. But now he was forced to speak of God to pagan sailors on the ship.

Jonah acknowledged that the God he worshiped was not merely a nationalistic deity, but that He was Yahweh, the God of heaven and earth, the Creator Himself.

“What is this that you have done?” the mariners implored. “Why have you not obeyed so great a God, and how did you think to escape the hand of the Creator Himself?” These are words of amazement and wonder, an exclamation of horror at Jonah’s flight from the God of heaven and earth. The frightening storm preached the omnipotence of God to the mariners more powerfully than words could possibly have done.

The sailors were impressed in spite of Jonah, for they certainly saw nothing particularly good or virtuous in him. In fact, what moved them was that they saw he was a disobedient man. But behind all this, they saw that there is a real God out there, a God who is in control! God had broken through in spite of His recalcitrant messenger.

“What shall we do to you?” they asked (verse 11). They had acknowledged the God Jonah worshiped. Now they asked him what attitude they should take. The sailors confessed their fear and sought the remedy. “What can we do that God should not be angered? You tell us and we will obey.”

Jonah Still Refuses God’s Call

Jonah replied, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me” (verse 12). Jonah was no pious martyr. He knew he deserved death for his profound disobedience. He knew the Hebrew Scriptures and their teaching that the wicked will die. He knew that his ignoble disobedience had put everyone in jeopardy, but he stubbornly chose to drown rather than repent. What might have happened if Jonah had repented of his defection right

there and called for God to save him, the crew, and the ship? What an opportunity Jonah missed to witness.

After struggling for a while in vain to save Jonah's life, the sailors faced the awful choice. "So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging" (verse 15). And with the immediate change in storm, the arm of the holy God was so suddenly manifested that the sailors "feared Jehovah with great fear." They had feared the storm greatly, but now they "feared the Lord exceedingly" (verse 16).

Such a stark contrast between Jonah and the sailors. The pagan mariners had been willing to do everything in their power to save Jonah's skin. Jonah was unwilling to make any such effort for the pagan Ninevites. Jonah, although orthodox in his beliefs, responded to God in disobedience. He claimed to fear God, but his actions contradicted his confession.

But God Still Wants Jonah

But what happened to Jonah? "Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah" (verse 17). And "Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish's belly" (Jonah 2:1).

Nowhere in his prayer, however, did he mention his rebelliousness and sin. He recognized that his troubles were great, but Jonah never acknowledged why all this had happened to him.

This prayer of Jonah should remind us that we can pray in the midst of failure, when our distress has been caused by our own disobedience. Often that is when it is most difficult to pray. Our self-condemnation makes us think that either we have no right to call on God or, if we do, we surely do not deserve His help. But Jonah discovered God's grace at the precise moment that his situation seemed hopeless—when to all appearance nothing should be expected from God. At last Jonah learned that "salvation is of the Lord" (verse 9).

But what happened to Jonah? "So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land" (verse 10). Jonah was deposited on the beach. There Yahweh still awaited him.

Jonah's Second Chance

"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time" (Jonah 3:1). Hug those words! Surely these are some of the most encouraging words in Scripture! Jonah deliberately and stubbornly rebelled against God. But marvel that even his disobedience was not enough to make God turn His back on him. The wonder is that despite his disobedience God called him. He is the God of the "second time"—Abraham's, Jacob's, David's, Peter's. And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:32).

Nineveh Is Over-Turned

"Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). Jonah was again commanded to proclaim the startling message. It was a proclamation of judgment. And the response of the Ninevites was unbelievable. From high society to the hotel, every segment of Ninevite society humbled itself before God. From the king to the beggar, everyone put on "sackcloth and sat in ashes" (verse 6).

“God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them” (verse 10). The Ninevites did more than perform proper deeds of penance. They changed inwardly. “They turned from their evil way.” Thus, paradoxically, Jonah’s prediction was true. Nineveh was “overturned”!

Yet another surprise awaits us. “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry” (Jonah 4:1). The overturning of the Ninevites resulted in turning away God’s wrath (Jonah 3:10). But this caused an adverse effect on Jonah (Jonah 4:1). The Hebrew reads: “It burned to him.” His reaction stops us in our tracks.

Jonah’s Confusion about God’s Ways

The issue for Jonah was not so much that God repented, but for whom He repented—this indiscriminate extension of divine compassion to notoriously wicked people. Sharing His mercy with the corrupt Ninevites? God should be more strict with His benevolence, Jonah thought. Jonah was furious at God’s slowness to anger!

“He prayed to the Lord and said, ‘Ah, Lord, was not this 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 abundant in loving-kindness, One who relents from doing harm’” (verse 2). For the first time Jonah openly revealed the reason he tried to evade his call to Nineveh. He was concerned about his own reputation if God did not come through with the predicted judgment.

However, the wicked Ninevites were really no different from Jonah. All of them were rebellious sinners deserving only punishment. Yet God had graciously decided to show mercy to both. Jonah was willing to accept this mercy in his own case, but not for Nineveh. And so he begged God in Jonah 4:3: “Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!” Jonah just couldn’t comprehend why God had extended Nineveh’s probation. He did not want to live if God could forgive the wicked Assyrians.

“Then the Lord said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’” (verse 4). It was a mild response. He would have liked Jonah to come to his senses and see the childishness of his behavior. The Lord could not have been gentler with Jonah. Helping this person become a more mature believer seemed to be a goal second only to the salvation of Nineveh. He was challenging Jonah to think again about his reaction, to analyze the way he had set his mind.

What was God’s response to Jonah’s anger? He acted out a parable (see Jonah 4:4-8). Like the great fish, the worm was now God’s instrument, and like the great fish, it obeyed.

Jonah’s attitude demanded of God that He destroy. So God did just that, to see how Jonah liked his theology coming true in his own life. God sent a weevil and a hot wind, and the shade plant withered, and Jonah was miserable and ready to die. He was more passionate about punishing Nineveh’s disobedience than obeying the Lord Himself.

“Then he wished death for himself, and said, ‘It is better for me to die than to live’” (verse 8). These are Jonah’s last words in the narrative. He ended, as did his actions in the beginning, opposing God.

God's Amazing Portrait

But Jonah did not have the last word. Yahweh posed another question: "It is right for you to be angry?" God inquired (verse 9). "Let us analyze this anger of yours, Jonah," God proposed. "It suggests your concern over this plant, but what did it really mean to you? Your attachment to it could not have been very deep, for it was here one day and gone the next. Your concern was dictated by self-interest, not by a genuine love. You never had for it the devotion of the gardener. If you feel as bad as you do, what would you expect a gardener to feel like who carefully tends a garden and watches it grow, only to see it wither and die? This is how I feel about Nineveh, Jonah, only much more so. All those people, even all those animals—I made them. I have cherished them all these years. Nineveh has cost Me no end of effort, and its people mean the world to Me. Your pain is nothing compared to Mine when I contemplate their destruction."

Nowhere in the Bible do the personhood of God and His entanglement in our human situation stand more clearly revealed than here. A person's troubles are dwarfed by God's own hurt.

So, said the Lord, "should I not spare Nineveh?"

How much greater the mercy of God than ever that of His chosen people!

Jonah had become a recipient of God's grace in a way no different from that which would be the case for Nineveh—quite apart from the question of justice. This is one of the major themes of this narrative. And this is at the very center of the argument between God and Jonah.

A Look in the Mirror...

All this brings us to the very heart of God's love. In reality God abhors sin, but He cannot bear the loss of any person. He detests evil because it destroys life and plunges a child of His into suffering and death. But God endures the sinner. He just cannot simply blot him or her out. It began with Adam and continues even to this day with me and you.

As a church we stand where Jonah stood. God has told us "Go," and we must discern through Jonah's experience that His commands are not to be taken lightly. "Men 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" (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 275). God has commissioned the Seventh-day Adventist Church to proclaim the final judgment message, that "the great things of God's law—the principles of justice, mercy, and love therein" may be set forth in their true light (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 275). He is serious about it. God is determined, indeed, as He was with Jonah, that the Great Commission shall be carried out.

Perhaps we, like Jonah, are hesitant to proclaim such a startling judgment message. Maybe we too are embarrassed that God's mercy has postponed the judgment we have preached for so long. Now it seems as though we do not know what we are talking about. And we are like Jonah, who, "jealous of his reputation, . . . lost sight of the infinitely greater value of the souls in that city" (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 271).

Consequently, this "test case" of Jonah is a look in the mirror. Have we too run away from God or His explicit guidance? A potential Jonah lurks in every heart.

What is the command from God that we find difficult to hear? What instructions from God annoy us? What prompts us to say “Anything but that, Lord”? What divine assignment causes us to dig in our heels? Most of us have our own Ninevehs, our own cities of escape and evasion.

Nineveh might be the Lord’s urging that we change our behavior to do some action that demands more than we are ready to give. How many of us hear the word of the Lord and go the opposite way? Our running off to Tarshish can happen in our soul long before we physically board the ship. Some run away from God without ever leaving their geographical location. We can run away by so filling our lives with noble activities that time for God is squeezed out. We can be running off in all directions, but not under God’s direction.

We readily notice others in the church who blur the message, but may God hasten the hour when we finally begin to accuse ourselves before God. The fact is that even the finest of us are “poor, miserable, blind, and naked.” And in spite of all the good things we do for this church, we finally realize with Jonah the words of the great spiritual: “Not my brother, nor my sister, but it’s me, O Lord, standin’ in the need of prayer.” From the very beginning we all have been problem children.

Ultimately, the book of Jonah is about a magnificent God and His amazing compassion, especially enhanced against Jonah’s self-centeredness. Jonah had never learned to look out at the world and its many people through God’s eyes. He needed to let this divine perspective overcome his natural selfishness. Today we also need this great compassion to wash and cleanse our own hearts.

References

Bible texts in this sermon are from the New King James Version.

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