

JONAH, THE RUNAWAY PROPHET

PREFACE

A pastor once said that the Christian church should be like a stone that is thrown into the middle of a pond. The ripples gradually extend from the place where the stone entered the water until they reach every part of the pond. He went on to explain that the responsibility of believers is to ensure the good news about Jesus spreads out from us like those ripples. In fact, this is exactly what Jesus said to his disciples in Acts 1:8 “...*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*”

This teaches us two important lessons. First, Jesus expects Christian believers to tell others about their need to trust him to be their Saviour from sin. That is quite a challenge because it is a task for every believer! Second, the Lord wants people from all over the world to experience his transforming love in their hearts and become his children. That is quite an encouragement, for when we do tell others about the Saviour we are doing what God wants us to do, and it is through the preaching of his gospel that he will save men and women and boys and girls

In fact, it has always been God’s plan and purpose that the whole world should know about him. Indeed, when we come to the end of the Bible we are told that in heaven there will be a vast number of people who will have been

brought to enjoy his saving grace in their lives. Revelation 7:9 “...*there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.*”

The book of Jonah gives us a remarkable Old Testament example of God’s wonderful purpose to save people from all nations, in this instance the people of Nineveh. It also challenges every disciple of Christ to have a deep concern and love for those who at this present time do not know Jesus as their Saviour, and a willingness to tell them about him.

I am very grateful to Bob Pritchard, and elder in my own church, for the valuable help he gave in the series of *Sound Words* radio programmes which this book is based upon. Our prayer is that you will be helped as much as we were by the challenge of Jonah’s life.

Derek French.

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INTRODUCTION

As we begin this *Sound Words* study book on Jonah there are a number of important items of background information we need to be aware of before we come the text of the book itself. There are four questions we need to answer and a final fact that we need to take note of by way of introduction to our study..

1) Who was Jonah?

Jonah was the prophet who is the main character in the book that bears his name towards the end of the Old Testament. We are told in Jonah 1:1 that he was the son of Amittai. There is also a reference to him in 2 Kings during the reign of Jeroboam II king of Israel (2 Kings 14:25): *“He (i.e. Jeroboam II) was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah (i.e. the Dead Sea), in accordance with the Word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.”* Gath Hepher was situated in the area of the tribe of Zebulun, north east of Nazareth (see Joshua 19:13). This link with Jeroboam’s period helps us to date his ministry about the same time as Amos and Hosea who prophesied at a similar period in the 8th Century before Christ, around 800-750 BC. Jeroboam II can be dated around 793-753 BC. He shared the throne with his father until 781 BC and then he reigned alone for the rest of his life.

From this we can say that Jonah was an established prophet who was well known as a servant of the Lord by the time we meet him in the book which bears his name. The significance of this is that we are dealing with a mature believer, one who had known the Lord and served the Lord for some time, which makes the lessons we learn from his life all the more telling.

Some have seen a significance in his name which means ‘dove’. We normally think of a dove as a symbol of peace and also of the Holy Spirit. However, this term was used to describe Ephraim in Hosea 7:11 to indicate that the northern kingdom of Israel was ‘easily deceived and

senseless’. That is not to say that Jonah was that kind of man, but one thing is obvious from this book, his life was not what it should have been. He did not really share God’s concern for the lost in the world, in this case the people of Nineveh. So the Lord had to teach him things he should have known already, as we shall see later in this book.

2) Who wrote the book?

The book itself does not tell us who its author was, although traditionally Jonah himself has been considered the writer. There is undoubtedly a similarity with the ministries and narrative about Elijah and Elisha, so it could have been written by those in the prophetic circles who gathered the material from the prophets and then wrote it down.

What we do have to say, however, is the Lord Jesus Christ himself considered the book to be Holy Scripture and true, because he referred to it during his own ministry (Matthew 12:38-41): *“Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, ‘Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.’ He answered, ‘A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Then the men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.’”* So we can say with certainty

that it is part of the Word of God, it is inspired by God, it is true in all its historical and spiritual details, and it is authoritative. Therefore it is a most valuable book. It is full of lessons God wants us to learn and profit from and apply to our lives.

3) What was its purpose?

The book is a little unusual in that it describes a single mission of a single prophet, Jonah. It is a biographical account of how he and the people of the city of Nineveh, the Assyrian capital city, responded to the Word of God. In Jonah's case, his response was to God's command to proclaim God's message of judgement to the people of Nineveh. In the case of the people of Nineveh, their response was to the message itself.

The overriding theme is that of the grace of God, who delights to forgive those who repent of their sins, and that his grace is not just for the nation of Israel, but for all the world. In addition we learn that those who are the true people of God are to shine as lights in this dark world in order to direct others to the mercy of God. This is of course worked out in much fuller detail in the New Testament and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ who is described by John as the Saviour of the world, but it is clearly portrayed in the book of Jonah. As we shall see, this was not something Jonah himself accepted or liked to learn about, and the Lord, with great patience and firmness, had to teach him the value of each individual and of God's loving kindness.

4) What was the historical setting?

After the death of King Solomon there was a major split amongst the people of God, resulting in the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Tragically, both sections of the nation began a very sad and serious decline into sin and rebellion against God. Over 150 years had passed since the death of Solomon in 931 BC and God had sent prophet after prophet to call his people back to him, but with little success. Throughout this period the Lord continued to show his mercy to his people, and although Jeroboam II was an evil king, the Lord graciously prospered Israel under his reign and he restored the boundaries of the nation as we mentioned earlier. Jonah's ministry in Israel at this time was used of God (2 Kings 14:25).

Israel's neighbour, Assyria, was the super-power of the day, and Jonah may well have been known to them as they watched this revival in Israel's prosperity. In Assyria itself there were internal struggles and some turmoil as various leading families grappled for prominence, and so it was in a somewhat depressed state. Significantly it was at this precise time that the Lord sent Jonah to the Assyrian capital city Nineveh. A time when his message would have a profound influence on all who heard him!

How gracious God was and remains, to send his servant to this wicked and needy people. Through Jonah's preaching God rescued the people of Nineveh from their sins, pardoning and transforming them into a people for himself. We shall see this unfolding as we work through this book in coming pages.

5) An important fact

What is significant and helpful is that we see in the book of Jonah a remarkable instance of the truthfulness, honesty and integrity of the Bible. Why? Because it does not hide away the flaws in its chief characters. Jonah's unwillingness to obey God, his rebellion against him, his anger at God's mercy to the people of Nineveh, and his self-righteousness and lack of concern for other lost men and women are not hidden away from us at all. And that is quite amazing. In many biographies the writers give a rather glowing report of their subject's character and often leave out or brush over their failings. However, lying is one of the things it is impossible for God to do, hence this open revelation of Jonah with all his faults is a further reminder that the Bible is the Word of God and is absolutely true.

Some have wondered why the sins of its heroes are not hidden away in the Bible, and another reason we can give is that God intends us to learn not to make the same mistakes ourselves. The Bible is a most remarkable book, the most remarkable book ever written. It is God's book to us – and therefore time spent reading, studying, pondering and applying its teaching to our lives will always be of great benefit to us.

Chapter 1 Jonah 1:1-3: The Lord's Call

Let us remind ourselves of the situation in the world at the time the book of Jonah begins. For a very long time there had been a steady decline in the spiritual and moral state of

the nation of Israel, where Jonah lived and served. Jonah had been a prophet of the Lord for some time, serving during the reign of Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom of Israel. Although Jeroboam was an evil king, under Jonah's ministry and by the mercy of God, Israel prospered materially during this period, although spiritually things were not very good. Israel's neighbour was the powerful kingdom of Assyria. Assyria had expanded its influence far and wide in the known world of that time. It was an evil nation, and as such an enemy of the people of Israel. But, all was not well within Assyria. There had been numerous internal squabbles and wars, and although still much more powerful than Israel, it was somewhat dejected and discouraged at this time. And so it was an opportune time, an ideal time for God to speak to them and challenge them about their sinful lives. It is at this point that the book of Jonah opens.

1) The Lord's call (1:1-2)

Jonah 1:1 *"The Word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.'"*

a. God spoke

The first thing we notice here is that this whole episode in the lives of Jonah and people of Nineveh begins with God. It was God's Word to Jonah. It was God's initiative. This whole book has its origin in God. This teaches us two things in this context:

i. that God is a God of grace

In the great matter of the salvation of men and women it is God who always makes the first move. It is God who starts everything off, not man. When we come to look at chapter 2 we will discover Jonah says this very thing in verse 9, “*Salvation is from the Lord.*” And we shall see this in more detail as we go through this book.

Now this is very important and very humbling. Men and women and boys and girls can contribute absolutely nothing to their salvation. It is something God must do for us. And mercifully he is the great God of grace, who comes to unworthy and sinful people in order to save them.

ii. that God’s message is to be obeyed

This was a Word from the Lord, the God of the whole universe. Jonah knew he was the only true God. All other gods are false. Further, God is described by his covenant name LORD – the name by which he made himself known to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. The God who had rescued Israel from Egypt at the Exodus. The God who had brought them into the Promised Land. The God who had blessed them more than any other nation. This was Jonah’s God and Saviour who was speaking to him. This name would have instinctively aroused in Jonah’s heart and mind something of the majesty and the mercy of God to Jonah himself and to Israel as a people. God had pledged himself to be their God. Therefore, Jonah, as a child of God, was under obligation not only to listen to what was being said to him, but to submit to it whole heartedly, with a willing and glad heart. That obligation still applies to the people of God today. Every Christian

believer is to be submissive to the Word of the Lord. And we have all of God’s Word, much more than Jonah had. We have the entire Bible, and its pages contain many precious things for us to discover about God and his Son, Jesus Christ, and many important commands for us to submit to and obey.

Are you seeking to live in total submission to all that God has said in the Bible? Do you spend time reading the Bible each day so that you can discover what God has to say to you? Are you concerned to please God in your life? Is God’s will much more important to you than your own desires or that of others? These are searching questions, but ones we must ask ourselves regularly because such submission is a mark of the Lord’s true children. That is not to say we are perfect, for that will not be true of any of us until we reach heaven, but it will be the desire of our hearts that we are found more and more obedient to the Word of God.

b. God directed

God’s Word to Jonah was simple, plain and clear: “*Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it...*” Jonah could not have misunderstood what God wanted him to do. The Lord didn’t speak to him in some kind of secret code that he had to decipher first before he could understand it. No! It was obvious what the Lord wanted him to do.

That teaches us another general lesson about the way God deals with us. Namely, his Word is generally clear, plain and simple. Now when you read the Bible you will inevitably find some passages that are difficult to

understand, but most of the Bible is a book that can easily be understood, because this is how God speaks to us. Indeed, we see this in the ministry of Jesus because we read in Mark 12:37 in the Authorised or King James version of the Bible, “*The common people heard him gladly*” or, as the NIV translates it, “*The large crowd listened to him with delight.*” In other words, Jesus spoke and taught in a way that the ordinary people could understand. And that’s another token of his thoughtfulness, for he instructs us in words that even a child can understand. The scholars have a word for this; they call it the perspicuity of Scripture. We do not need to have a high education or academic level before we can understand its message. And that puts on us, as on Jonah, a greater obligation to obey it.

In this case Jonah was to preach against the city of Nineveh. The Lord’s call was clear.

c. God gave his reason

God said in verse 1, “...*because its (i.e. Nineveh’s) wickedness has come before me.*” The Assyrians were a cruel people and their capital city, Nineveh, in particular, was an evil place in which to live. It was famous in the ancient world for the atrocities it had committed. Sin and immorality, torture and exploitation characterised its people. For years they had thought they had got away with it, but they did not reckon on the Lord, who sees and knows all things. He took note of their wickedness and it offended him greatly. Hence Jonah was commissioned to preach against it.

Again there is an important lesson for us to appreciate. We cannot hide our sin from God. We might very successfully hide it from other people, but it is impossible to deceive the Lord. He sees and knows our every word, deed and even our thoughts – nothing is hidden from him – so it is utter folly to think we can live as we like and nothing will happen to us. It does matter, because God sees our disobedience and takes solemn note of it. On the Day of Judgment no one will be able to excuse themselves when the books of heaven are open and the record of our lives is revealed. We can be sure our sin will find us out in the end.

But there is more here, we are told Jonah had to preach against this city, to expose its wickedness and to declare its condemnation. This was by no means an easy task for Jonah to have to do, and it is still difficult to speak of sin and judgment today – but it must be done. BUT, and this is very important, God’s purposes in sending a message of judgment to people is actually one of mercy. Although it is not stated in this opening verse, later when the people of Nineveh did repent and received God’s forgiveness, Jonah complained to God that he knew this would happen (Jonah 4:2). Jonah knew that God often uses the threat and warning of judgment to bring repentance and mercy to sinners. So it is not an entirely negative message. It is designed to stir sinners out of their complacency before it is too late.

d. An additional lesson

We must add that this whole work of God's grace in sending his Word to the Assyrians should have really stirred up the people of Israel. If the Ninevites heard God's Word and repented, so should the people of Israel hear God's Word and repent. Sadly, however, they did no such thing, and within about 40 years were dragged off into exile by the next generation of the people of Assyria. Therefore, believers today should be sensitive to the voice of the Lord and respond quickly, and not be like ancient Israel and suffer as a result.

2) Jonah's response (1:3)

What we read next is as astonishing as it is tragic (v3): *"But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish."* We need to remember this was the action of a servant of the Lord. Jonah was already exercising a ministry as the Lord's prophet in Israel. Remember these words from 2 Kings 14:25: *"He (i.e. Jeroboam II) was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah (i.e. the Dead Sea), in accordance with the Word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher."* Here was a mature believer, one whom God had used to speak to the nation and had seen that Word fulfilled – yet we find him running away from the Lord! It is as preposterous as it was pointless. Jonah knew no one could really run away from God. Psalm 139 makes it very plain that God is present everywhere.

So how do we account for this behaviour? Well, first we have to say it was an act of open rebellion on the part of Jonah, rebellion against God himself. Jonah knew what he was doing. This was not a sin that he committed by accident or without realising what he was doing. This was flagrant disobedience and for which there was no excuse. Jonah should have known better. He displeased the Lord; he marred his own testimony, was a bad example to others and really should not have done this at all. But before we get too severe against Jonah, we need to look at our own hearts, for which none of us has always perfectly done everything the Lord asked of us. How often we know we should speak to others about the Lord and their sinfulness, but it is all too easy to talk about every other subject under the sun except this one. How we need the Lord to be merciful to us, and to help us to obey him better.

And we see again that even the servants of God are but men, and weak men at that. This teaches us to ensure our trust is in the Lord, and not in flesh and blood. He is the only 100% reliable one – *'the arm of flesh will fail us,'* one hymn writer has so perceptively put it. What is so sad about Jonah's response was that he went to the sea port of Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish, which was as far as he could go in those days in almost the opposite direction to Nineveh. Tarshish was in what we know today as southwestern Spain, and was a Phoenician outpost on the very edge of civilisation. Underlying his behaviour is what characterised the religious leaders of the time when Jesus himself walked this earth. They considered every one else to be *'Gentile dogs'* and had no room whatsoever

for the possibility that God might have mercy for anyone other than themselves. It was a very narrow minded view of the grace of God and very unbiblical, because he had already promised to Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the world would be blessed. (See Genesis 12:3, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4 – Gentiles as well as Jews.)

Sadly Jonah had fallen into the trap which it is still easy to fall into, and that is to think God has no interest in anyone else but ourselves, or our church, or our tribe, or our country. It is a very wrong position to take, but Jonah had fallen into the trap, because he did not want the Lord to be merciful to the people of Nineveh. This was the real reason for his disobedience, as becomes clear in chapter 4 verse 2 that we mentioned earlier. It was not his fear of the Assyrians, or the severity of his message that influenced him, but that God might be gracious to these Gentiles was what he could not accept! He had a hard heart that lacked any of the compassion that characterises the heart of God. One Bible commentator, Homer Hailey, has put it like this, “...*he was resigning his job as prophet.*” So we must say that his action was really an act of spiritual and not just geographical significance. He was refusing to serve the Lord, and by going to Tarshish he was trying to make it impossible to serve the Lord as prophet in Nineveh. To take such a deliberate action is to take oneself out of the service of God and to deprive oneself of his blessing. Such behaviour can only have a bleak outcome. How terrible a thing sin is, especially when it is found in the life of a believer, as Jonah was!

Conclusion

The challenges of these opening statements about Jonah are as follows:

- i. Are we concerned to know what the will of God is? The amount of time we spend studying the Bible or hearing it explained will indicate the true answer.
- ii. Do we share the heart of God and have a real love for lost men and women in every part of our world? Our willingness to pray for them and speak to them will prove the condition of our hearts.
- iii. Are our lives submitted to what God tells us to do, or are we living in open rebellion to his Word? Only those who delight in the law of the Lord are truly blessed according to Psalm 1. Remember Jesus said that loving God means keeping his commandments. True obedience actually brings us the joy of the Lord, whereas disobedience deprives us of it. Take great care not to misinterpret favourable circumstances in your disobedience as a sign you are doing the right things. Jonah found an available ship, at the right time and going to the right place, but he was still not doing the right thing. Let us learn from Jonah’s mistake, and let us follow the Lord with all our hearts.

Chapter 2 Jonah 1:4-17: The Lord’s Chastening Hand

You will recall from the previous chapter that God had called Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, and to preach against it. The reason was that the Lord had taken notice of their sinful behaviour. Astonishingly, Jonah refused to go. In wilful

disobedience, he went and boarded a ship that was destined to go to Tarshish, as far away as it was possible to go in the opposite direction to Nineveh. Now all seemed to be going in Jonah's favour. He had sufficient money to pay the fare. He found a ship going where he wanted to go. And the vessel was able to sail immediately. But unless we misinterpret what was taking place, we are also told at the end of Jonah 1:2 that Jonah was fleeing from the Lord. Although it seemed that Jonah was getting away with his disobedience, God was fully aware of what was happening. The Lord knew what Jonah was attempting to do, and he also knows when we are attempting to disobey him also. Jonah was to learn in a very solemn and humbling way that not only could he not run away from God because he is everywhere, but also that he could not compromise with sin and expect God to ignore what he was doing. This is what Jonah was about to learn in dramatic fashion!

1) The Lord sends a storm (1:4)

In the seeming chaos of life on earth it can be very easy to forget who is in control of absolutely everything. But we must never lose sight of the fact that the Lord our God is not only over all things, but in a way that is beyond our full comprehension he is in control of all things. This means large events and small ones. God is King, and reigns and rules over all. There are countless Bible passages that teach this. For example, there are some great statements such as when Ephesians 1:11 speaks of God as the one "...who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will..." A similar statement is found in the words of Isaiah the prophet who wrote this from God in

Isaiah 46:9-10: "...I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do what I please." But there are also other statements, which might not seem so striking, but which nonetheless tell us God is in control of the whole universe, and Jonah 1:4 is such a verse: "Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up." The weather forecasters would like us to believe at times that they have a perfect knowledge of the weather – although that is often proved inaccurate. But not even the best weather forecaster could claim to be in control of the weather, but God is! The Lord who reigns over all things is able to call the wind to do his bidding (Psalm 104:4): "He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants." And here we are specifically told that it was the Lord who sent this wind (v4). We are also told that the wind was 'great' and the resulting storm was 'violent'. Therefore it is not too difficult for us to see that God must be much greater and stronger than the wind which he controls. To use the words of Genesis 17:1 the Lord is, "God Almighty" – whose power knows no limits or restrictions. God is an awesome God. And as such we should reverence and honour him with our lives always, and be careful to please him in all that we do. Those who think they can argue against or abuse God are living very dangerously (Hebrews 10:31): "It is a dreadful (fearful) thing to fall into the hands of the living God." And a day will come when all will have to give account of their lives

to him; even for every idle word we have spoken (Matthew 12:36). This ought to make unbelievers quake with fear!

Here in Jonah 1 we learn another vital lesson. God will chasten his children when we disobey him. (See Hebrews 12:1-13.) The reason why the Lord sent this storm was that he was displeased with Jonah's disobedience. And whenever God wants anyone to do something for him, he will always have his way in the end, however resistant and rebellious we may be to begin with. God was beginning to shout his disapproval at Jonah through the tempest he sent, and this was going to continue for several days until Jonah repented and submitted to the Lord. But we are running ahead of ourselves, and need to take note of other things recorded in Jonah 1.

2) The reaction of the sailors (1:5a)

a. Their fear

The first thing we are told about them is that they were afraid (v5). The previous verse told us that the ship threatened to break up; such was the intensity of the storm they were facing. Now when you consider these would have been quite experienced men of the sea, it is clear this storm was probably the worst storm they had ever had to face.

b. They were religious

The second thing we are told is that *'each cried out to his own god.'* They were religious men, and they had a multiplicity of gods whom they worshipped. It was clear that these men knew nothing of the God of the Bible, the only true and living God. Although religious, and no doubt

sincere in their religion, they knew nothing of the God who is in control of all things, including the very storm they were facing. It is also important to note that crying out to their various gods did them no use at all. Why? Because there is only one true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9). All other gods are false. They are often idols of man's making, and as such are really quite useless to help their devotees in any way whatsoever. Note that although these men cried out to their gods the storm intensified. Their gods were useless and could not intervene or answer their cries. What needy men they were!

c. They were desperate

Then we are told they began to throw their cargo overboard to lighten the ship. Quite clearly these men were terrified and in fear for their lives. The cargo was their livelihood, and its loss would have had to be accounted for, so they would never have taken this course of action unless it was absolutely necessary. We have to conclude that these men were desperate, and were losing all hope.

3) The response of and to Jonah (1:5b-6)

Amazingly, Jonah slept through it all! When he went on board, he went below deck and fell into a sound sleep, indeed a deep sleep. And he stayed asleep while all this was going on. The noise of the storm, the tossing about of the ship, the shouts of the sailors as they began to throw the cargo overboard – it all had no effect on Jonah at all, he simply slept. It was as if he was completely unaware of the danger everyone on board that ship was in. Not every sound sleep is an indication all is well with the person

sleeping! But the captain of the vessel was concerned for everyone on board and so he went to wake Jonah and to plead with him to pray to his God for help. The captain spoke directly to him, and in fact was amazed that he could sleep at all with the raging tempest surrounding them and said so! *“How can you sleep?”* And then he urged Jonah to call on his own God, as all the others had failed to help. And he added these penetrating words *“Maybe he will take notice of us, and we shall not perish.”*

It has rightly been said that the captain’s concern for his crew and passengers stands in sharp contrast to Jonah’s cold indifference to the needy people of Nineveh. He did not want anyone on board to perish, but Jonah did not want anyone in Nineveh to be saved! How this must have spoken to Jonah’s heart.

4) Jonah is found out (1:7ff)

If Jonah had been tempted to think he had escaped from the Lord, he was about to learn very quickly how wrong such a view was. The sailors had come to the conclusion that someone on board must be the cause of this dreadful storm. We are not told how they came to that assessment, and it simply may well have been their superstition, but they decided to cast lots to discover who the guilty person was (v7). Now again, the details are not given to us as to precisely what was involved in casting lots. We know it was a widespread custom at the time, and sometimes marked pebbles or sticks were used and the person who picked the marked item was considered the right person. Undoubtedly for many this was a matter of blind chance,

but we must remember what we said earlier, namely that God is in absolute control of all things. Indeed, in the book of Proverbs we are told that though men may think casting lots was a matter of blind chance, God was in control even over that (Proverbs 16:33): *“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”* So even if the sailors were thinking this was a chance event, in actual fact it was not chance that was in control but God. Apart from the choosing of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot, there is no reference anywhere in the New Testament of believers casting lots or seeking guidance in this way. And even with Matthias we are told the choice was actually the Lord’s (Acts 2:23). Further we must say that at the time of Jonah God’s Word was incomplete, but now that we have the full Bible we should go to its pages for our guidance. However, when the lot was cast, Jonah was discovered to be the cause of the storm. What he had hidden from view was now exposed. God was revealing his guilt and showing Jonah in a most dramatic way that he could not run away from God, nor sin and escape its consequences. This again was a lesson Jonah should have already learned because of something Moses taught the people of Israel many years earlier (Numbers 32:23): *“...you may be sure your sin will find you out...”* If you sin against God you will be caught out sooner or later – the Lord himself will see to that. An awesome example of this principle is the case of Achan and the revealing of his sin in Joshua 7. He could not hide it from God! And what a challenge that is to us today whenever we are tempted to do wrong. It is so easy to convince ourselves that because

no one else can see us it does not matter how we behave. But it does because God always sees what we do and he even knows our thoughts!

Immediately the sailors began to interrogate Jonah with one question after another, such was the urgency of the situation. Who was responsible for their trouble? What was his job? Where had he come from? What was his country? Who were his people? It was no use trying to hide his guilt or to pretend he had nothing to do with what was happening, and so Jonah owned up (v9): *“I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.”* On its own it was a wonderful confession of faith and was absolutely true. Jonah was the Lord’s, and he was not like the gods these men had worshipped. He was the Creator of the universe, the God of heaven who made the very sea they were floating on and were being tossed about by. What a great God the Lord is!

The response of the sailors was immediate. In a second they realised what was at stake, and they were terrified (v10). They had come to understand what Jonah knew already, that God is all-powerful and awesome, and one who should be submitted to and worshipped and loved and served willingly. He is not one to be played about with, and certainly not one to disobey. They questioned Jonah further because he had told them he had been running away from the Lord, and asked him what he had done. You can almost sense their astonishment that Jonah should have ever considered such a course of action, seeing that the God of heaven was his God. But there it was; Jonah was exposed, his guilt was clear for all to see. His attempt to

run away from God was shown to be utterly useless. God knew what he had done, and God knew where he was, and God was not pleased with the way Jonah had acted.

5) Jonah is cast into the sea (1:11-17)

We are told in verse 11 that while all this was going on the storm grew worse and worse – *‘rougher and rougher’*. Because the sailors knew Jonah was the cause of the problem they asked him what they needed to do to make the sea calm. Jonah’s answer must have stunned them. He told them in verse 12 to throw him overboard into the sea. And he added a personal confession of his sin – *“I know it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”* Jonah knew it was useless to pretend all was well any more. He did not excuse himself nor go into denial, but honestly confessed his sin. Now to have been thrown overboard in such a storm would normally have meant certain death by drowning. So this was a shocking thing to say, but he knew it was what he deserved – he had disobeyed God.

Before we go on any further there is an important lesson we could easily overlook from Jonah’s words. There are times when our disobedience and sin against God actually brings trouble and hurt to other people. Here it was to the sailors and their captain. Their cargo had already been lost, thrown overboard. They had been terrified and fearful they would all lose their lives. And the cause of this pain and anguish was Jonah. A modern day example of others being hurt by another’s sins is seen in the tragic and alarming rate of marriage breakdown all over the world. So often one of

the sad results of these divorces is the long term hurt and damage done to children in those homes. The sins of the parents bring trouble to their own sons and daughters. Another example of this same principle is when someone spreads malicious gossip which can be quite untrue, and the result is that other people begin to despise the one gossiped about, even when there is no substance to the allegations. Another person has suffered because of someone else's sins. Therefore, how we need to walk humbly with the Lord and seek his grace every day so that we really do submit to his will and not live careless lives that compromise with sin and bring disaster on ourselves and also others. But let's return to Jonah.

He knew God was angry with him because he had sinned against God. He knew he deserved nothing less than God's just punishment. God had been offended and Jonah was the cause, and therefore he deserved to die. Remember what the New Testament teaches us in Romans 6:23, "*For the wages of sin is death...*" Take special note also that Jonah did not remonstrate and complain or bargain with God about this – this was what he deserved. He accepted he needed to suffer the consequences of his sin.

The response of the sailors to Jonah's suggestion that they throw him overboard was that this was the last thing they would ever think of doing. Instead (v13), they began to row as hard as they could, to try to get back to land. We said this before, but it deserves repeating, that these men had more concern for Jonah than he had for the people of Nineveh! They wanted to spare his life! But the situation grew worse and the sea grew even wilder than before

(v13). The men realised there was no other option but to do what Jonah told them to, yet it went against everything in their very being. It was tantamount to murder, and they could not bring themselves to be so malicious or negligent, but there appeared no other way out. So these men did something quite remarkable. They prayed, not to their own gods any more who had proved useless, but to the Lord, to Jonah's God, the God of heaven and earth and sea. And their prayer is most moving (Jonah 1:14): "*Then they cried to the Lord, 'O Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O Lord, have done as you pleased.'*" We really know very little else about these men, but in the short period of this storm and their conversation with Jonah they had come to realise that the Lord is very great, and that he holds each person responsible for their behaviour. They knew that he was in control of these events and had sent the storm. They said '*...as you pleased.*' In some small measure they had grasped the concept of God's absolute sovereignty over everything. Therefore they did not want to offend God, and yet were fearful if they did throw Jonah overboard they would be guilty in God's eyes of murdering an innocent man. We have seen Jonah was not innocent, but in their eyes they did not think this was sufficient reason to kill him, and so they pleaded with God to have mercy on them. Again it is interesting to see that they used the name '*Lord*' which was the covenant name of God, whereby he came to his people in grace and mercy to bless them. So in this short period they had grasped things about God that others have never appreciated even after

years of hearing his Word taught! That is quite challenging. They then took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the sea became calm (v15). It was again a quite remarkable event. God had done it, and no one else, but God and God alone.

The effect on the crew was immediate (Jonah 1:16): *“At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.”* This was a most solemn experience in the lives of these men that left a deep impression on their hearts and minds. They had recognised that the Lord is not someone to be trifled with. He is indeed the awesome God, who is altogether different from anyone else, and certainly towered over the puny false gods they had worshipped previously. This God was the living God. This God acted and worked in the world in which they lived. This God was infinitely powerful and his strength knew no limits. This is the God who had been gracious to them for he had spared their lives from this storm also. So they greatly feared him and offered him a sacrifice and made vows. What their offering consisted of we are not told, neither do we know what vows they made, simply that they made them. We also do not know if they gave up following their previous gods, and turned to worship and serve the Lord alone. Many like to think that this event had a life-long effect on these men, but we have to say that Scripture is completely silent about them, and so this is as far as we can go with them. Did they now forsake all others and cleave only to the Lord? Or were they like those in the parable of the sower who received the Word

with joy, but when testing and trial came they fell away and produced no fruit? It certainly seems that they trusted in the Lord, but we have to say we do not know. What we do know from our New Testament is that if they did follow the Lord then he knew the true state of their hearts (2 Timothy 2:19): *“Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.’”* The question for us is this, ‘Are we following the Lord ourselves?’

And what about Jonah? In his incredible mercy, the Lord spared Jonah’s life and in a most exceptional way. The Lord prepared a great fish, brought it to the exact spot and at the exact time where Jonah was thrown overboard – and this huge creature swallowed Jonah alive, and he remained inside the fish three days and three nights (v17). Again the sovereign control of God is seen in a most striking way in this event, and we also see his sovereign mercy and grace. Who else could have arranged such a creature to be in the exact spot at the exact time, and that in swallowing Jonah, his life would not have been destroyed but spared? In many ways what was happening to this disobedient prophet was a graphic demonstration of the compassion, concern and mercy of God, which Jonah had been so reluctant to tell the Ninevites about! The hymn writer William Cowper has written a lovely song about the sovereignty of God, and here are two verses from it:

“God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform;

He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace;

Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.”

And we learn more lessons from this incident in Jonah’s life; in particular that God will always have his way with us, however hard we rebel against him at times. His purpose was that Jonah should go to Nineveh, and to Nineveh he would go! At this precise point in time this was still to be revealed to Jonah, but we can see God working out his plan in great detail. Therefore how foolish we are when we resist the Lord’s instructions. Sometimes we do so because we are aware of our inadequacies and weaknesses – but that is no excuse because God is far greater than any lack in us and he is well able to equip us for the work he calls us to do. Other times, it is just like Jonah, we stubbornly rebel against him, perhaps because we do not like what we know the Lord wants us to do. But who are we to argue against God? It is the height or pride and arrogance on our part. How we need the Lord to help us to submit to him always. You might be going through a difficult period just now for the same reasons Jonah went through his trials – because of your disobedience to God. If so, then you need to repent and seek God’s mercy with great urgency, and begin to do what you have so far refused to do.

We are told that Jonah spent three long days and nights inside this giant creature, and we can only imagine what

must have gone through his mind during those long hours. What we do know is that eventually Jonah prayed, and we must come to that in our next chapter.

Chapter 3 Jonah 2: Jonah Prays

In the previous chapter we left Jonah inside the belly of a huge fish. The reason for this was that God was chastening Jonah for his disobedience and he was thrown into the sea by the crew of the ship he was travelling on. No doubt Jonah expected to drown, but we need to remember that in wrath God remembers mercy (Habakkuk 3:2). In his providence and grace God provided a huge fish to be at the exact place where Jonah was thrown into the sea, at just the right time, and this creature swallowed him live! So instead of drowning, Jonah was alive inside this huge fish for three days and three nights.

How mercifully kind the Lord was to Jonah. And this is where we find him at the beginning of Jonah chapter 2. And it is here that Jonah prays. It would have been much better if he had done this at the very beginning when the Lord commissioned him to go to Nineveh, but he did not. And there is a lesson for us in that. When a true child of God begins to disobey the Lord or backslide, then prayer is very often the first thing that is neglected in their life. In all that happened in Jonah chapter 1, even when he confessed to the other sailors he was guilty, there is absolutely no record of Jonah praying – and that’s an ominous silence. As we have seen, something was seriously wrong in Jonah’s heart. So we must ask

ourselves if something similar is happening to us? Have we begun to drift away from God? Have we begun to compromise with sin in our lives? Are we disobeying him in some way? A good test that things between us and God are not what they should be is if we have been neglecting real times of prayer and communion with God. And if so, then we need to begin to put things right with him, and this is where Jonah's chapter 2 begins on such a helpful note – *“from inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God...”* Jonah had at last realised his need humbly to seek the Lord again, and so we find him turning to God in prayer. Before we look at his prayer there is another important lesson for us to appreciate, and it's this. A true child of God, a genuine Christian believer, may in their folly wander away from God for a while – and that can be displayed in all sorts of ways, for example by outright disobedience as here with Jonah, or simply by growing cold and losing their first love for the Lord – but a true child of God will not be able to remain in that condition permanently. They will eventually realise how silly they have been, and come back to God again, and seek his forgiveness. This is because once God has begun a good work in anyone's heart he will bring it to completion. That is something Paul tells us in Philippians chapter 1 verse 6. The true believer will always come back to the Lord eventually. And this is what we see is happening to Jonah as we come to this second chapter. Then let us turn to his prayer, the details of which are found in verses 2 to 9.

1) Some general lessons

a. It is a very honest prayer

This is a general point, but an essential point of all true prayer. True prayer is speaking the truth to God, and Jonah did exactly that. He did not try to pretend all was well between him and the Lord. Neither did he hide away his terrified feelings as he went into the belly of this huge fish. Nor did he ignore the fact that he was in this distressing condition because the Lord was chastening him. He poured his heart out to the Lord in a most moving way. Consider these phrases in his prayer:

v2 *“In my distress...”*

“From the depths of the grave...”

v3 *“You hurled me into the deep...”*

v4 *“I have been banished from your sight...”*

v5 *“The engulfing waters threatened me...”*

v6 *“To the roots of the mountains I sank down...”* etc.

Jonah was really going through a tough time, and wisely he told the Lord about it all. Often, when the children of God have realised they have failed the Lord the distress they feel can be immense. Jonah shows us what we need to do at such times, and that is to turn to the Lord and honestly bring our confession to him.

b. It is a prayer full of faith

All true prayer is characterised by this same attribute. Jonah trusted in the Lord. And he trusted in the Lord when humanly speaking all was against him. Although he had escaped drowning, and was alive in the fish's stomach, he was still in dreadful danger. He could have been digested

by the creature, or died from suffocation, or drowned at some later date. In spite of all these things, Jonah put his trust in the Lord as he prayed to him. Amazingly he spoke of deliverance with such an assurance that he was able to see with the eye of faith what his other senses could not detect, namely, the Lord was able to deliver him. This was hope against hope, humanly speaking, and faith in what could not be seen. He beheld spiritual realities which his natural eye could not see, and although he had no idea how this was going to be worked out, he praised God for his salvation. This is exactly what true faith is according to Hebrews 11:1: *“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”* All true prayer is characterised by true faith, genuine trust and sure confidence in God. Indeed, faith in God is essential. Hebrews 11 again and verse 6: *“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”*

2) The prayer he prayed (2:2-9)

a. He called to the Lord (v2)

This is a very simple, clear and accurate description of what true prayer is. It is not reciting in some meaningless parrot fashion way words committed to memory, ready to be regurgitated without much thought. It is also much more than ‘saying my prayers’ which many people do as a habit they have formed, but without much of their heart in it. True prayer is a purposeful communication with Almighty God. It is calling to the Lord.

What is so helpful about the description of prayer in this verse is that Jonah was able to pray to the Lord in his distress. There are some friends who are fine while everything is going well, but as soon as you are in difficulties they are nowhere to be seen. God is not like that at all. Indeed he delights to hear us cry to him, even when the distress we might be in is our own fault, as was the case here with Jonah. Again and again we find instructions and exhortations to pray to the Lord when we are in need. Peter urges us to do this in 1 Peter 5:7: *“Cast all your care on him (i.e. the Lord) because he cares for you.”* And James, the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ does a similar thing in James 5:13: *“Is any of you in trouble? He should pray.”* Also in one of the Psalms attributed to Asaph we find further directions. In Psalm 50:15 God says, *“...call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honour me.”* Then to all this we can add the wonderful and gracious instruction of Hebrews 4:16: *“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of prayer.”* What a gracious God the Lord is!

Noting that it was the ‘Lord’ who Jonah called on is also very significant. Remember Jonah was an Israelite. He said to the sailors in chapter 1:9 *“I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven.”* The name Lord was the covenant name of God, the name whereby he had revealed himself to his people as the God who would remain unchangeably faithful to them forever. Although Jonah had been unfaithful to God, he knew the Lord had

not been unfaithful to him, and it is this which caused him to pray with such fervency. What is again so encouraging is that Jonah, even in what he called “*the depths of the grave – or sheol,*” knew he could call to the Lord, because even there God was with him. The Lord never deserts his people, however we may feel and deserve at times, and this was a reassuring reality as Jonah comes to his senses, and it constrained him to pray. (See Psalm 139:8 for a similar expression from David.) Even when life is humanly close to its end, we can turn to the Lord with confidence.

Note also that Jonah attributes his being cast into the sea as the Lord’s doing (v3a): “*You hurled me into the deep...*” He knew God was disciplining him. It was not the sailors who threw him overboard, but God himself. When we are backslidden, it is often the case that God uses afflictions to compel us and constrain us to pray. When we do not hear his gentle calls to return to him, he uses the louder instrument of affliction to bring us to our senses. Distress and difficulty have the powerful effect of concentrating our minds on things that really matter. So the Lord, in his grace, often sends such difficulties to us when we have wandered from him to make us sit up and listen to him, and to humble us and bring us to our knees before him in prayer. The result is that prayer becomes real again. This was David’s experience as he records in Psalm 119:67: “*Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your Word.*” and also in Psalm 119:71: “*It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.*” This Jonah wisely did – he called to the Lord (see also Psalm 143:1-2).

There is one further thing to note. Jonah was out of sight of everyone else at this time. He was hidden in the depths of the sea inside this great fish, and no one, not even the sailors who threw him overboard were aware of where he was, but God knew, and God listened to his cry. Even when we may be isolated from everyone else and quite literally have no one near to help us, the Lord is there with his children and we can always turn to him.

b. He rested in God’s grace

There is an interesting phrase that is repeated in this short prayer, and it is “*your holy temple*”. We find it in verse 4 and again in verse 7 after describing the terrible circumstances which his sin and disobedience had brought him. Consider the graphic description in verse 3f: “*You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, I have been banished from your sight...*” This was a most dreadful and frightening situation to be in. Yet when this could well have overwhelmed him, he was able to add in verse 4 “*...yet I will look again towards your holy temple.*” – and similarly in verse 7 where it is: “*...and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.*” What is the significance of this phrase? Remember again that Jonah was an Israelite. It was to Israel that God had revealed himself as the God who dwelt in the temple at Jerusalem, although he was not restricted to the temple, for God is everywhere. But, there, in the holy of holies, was the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat where the blood of atonement was sprinkled for the forgiveness of sins. There God’s presence was seen in a

special way, as the God who receives sinners, the God who loves to forgive, the God who will be propitiated, the God who himself provided the way for sinners to come back to him. It was not that Jonah was slavishly attached to the bricks and mortar of the physical temple in Jerusalem, for he was far from there, but that temple stood as a powerful symbol that God is merciful to sinners who seek his mercy. So Jonah prayed to God in his holy temple. He turned to him in repentance for his disobedience, and clung to this great truth that God is a gracious and pardoning God. The temple and the Ark of the Covenant are no longer with us, but that should not fill us with alarm, for they were only temporary because they pointed to the coming of Christ. He would accomplish in full all that the temple and its many sacrifices for sin pointed towards. Jesus, to use John the Baptist's description, was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He would offer that once for all sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 7:27).

Today, our looking to Christ is the equivalent of Jonah's looking to the temple. There is found full forgiveness, forgiveness that none of us deserves, yet which God delights to bestow because of all that Jesus has accomplished by the shedding of his precious blood. It was this which Jonah took hold of by faith, and even though he knew the Lord was disciplining him, and even though his circumstances in the depths of the ocean seemed to mitigate against him ever receiving mercy and forgiveness, by faith he looked towards God's holy temple, for there pardon was provided and forgiveness freely given to all who seek it. Always remember, God's throne is a

throne of judgement and condemnation for those who refuse to repent, but it is a throne of grace for those who look to God in faith for mercy.

c. He was assured of God's lovingkindness (2:5-7)

Having called on the Lord, and come to his throne of grace, Jonah received the assurance of God's deliverance. Even though he was still at the bottom of the sea – in verse 5 he tells us the waters and seaweed encircled him, and in verse 6 he speaks of having sunk to the very roots of the mountains – he was still able to declare in Jonah 2:6: *"...But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God."* Even inside this great fish he was receiving the assurance that God would deliver him. As he spoke to the Lord, so his faith was strengthened, to the extent that he could speak of his deliverance as if it had already taken place! There is a parallel here with the words of Paul to the Christian believers in Rome. After that most reassuring verse, Romans 8:28, where he is able to declare that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, he is able to add in Romans 8:29-30: *"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified he also glorified."* Now note Paul writes of believers having been glorified as if it had already taken place, such was the certainty and assurance in Paul's heart. And why was this? Because, as Paul had already outlined earlier in Romans, the Lord Jesus Christ has dealt with sin for us. Because of that those who are in Christ, who trust him and therefore belong to him,

are no longer under condemnation – God has forgiven them, and therefore our glorification is guaranteed. This is why Paul could write with such certainty as if it had already taken place. And in similar vein, Jonah was able to anticipate by faith his deliverance, just as believers today are able to anticipate the glory yet to be revealed on the glorious resurrection day. The Lord was restoring his servant and reviving his heart.

d. He praised God (2:8-9)

As a natural progression, having called on God, been confident in his grace and assured of his deliverance, he offers praise and worship to God. Even though he was still in the fish, he declared in verse 9: *“But I, with the song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord.”* And this really is a tremendous statement. It shows something of the true nature of saving faith in God, for it not only gives God thanks for mercies already received, but also praises him for those he has promised and which we still wait for. Faith is the evidence of things not seen. True believers walk by faith and not by sight. For the Lord’s people it is the things which are unseen which are eternal and for which we praise God.

Jonah draws an important distinction between himself and those who worship idols. In verse 8 he declared, *“Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.”* The Bible makes it clear there is only one true and living God (John 17:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:9), and therefore to forsake him for useless idols that cannot do anything for

us, is to turn away from the grace that God promises to all who seek him in truth. How sad that this is so for many even today. But Jonah stands as a testimony to us that God is amazingly merciful. It is obvious that a great change had taken place in Jonah’s heart. He was able to declare with certainty that *“Salvation comes from God.”* Here at last is a glimmer in his heart that God is a God who can and does forgive, and as we shall see, this will be seen to apply equally to the people of Nineveh as it did to Jonah. Here Jonah has a renewed understanding of the sovereign grace and mercy of the Lord. Salvation comes from one source and one source only, the Lord himself. Not from men, not even good men, for even the best has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Salvation comes from God and God alone, from beginning to end. Other Bible passages teach us that, amazingly, God planned to be merciful to sinners and save a people for himself even before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4; Matthew 25:34; 1 Peter 1:14-21). God’s love is a love for the unlovely, for sinners just like Jonah, and Jonah rejoiced in God’s mercy to him.

Application 1

Are you able to say from your own experience that your salvation has come from God? Until you can then you will remain lost in your sins and have no hope of deliverance. Then seek the Lord today while you still have time, and call upon him while he is near. Because to all who do, God has promised he will freely, abundantly pardon.

Application 2

Perhaps you are already a believer, perhaps for many years, like Jonah, but you find yourself today in a similar condition to him at the beginning of his book; disobedient to God, backslidden, having lost your first love for Christ, living under the cloud of his displeasure and discipline. What should you do? Take a lesson from Jonah chapter 2 and call out to the Lord again in true godly sorrow, the sorrow that leads to repentance, and in faith ask him again to forgive you and restore you to himself, and to the joy of his salvation. And do not delay. Do so immediately.

Chapter 4 Jonah 2:10-3:10: Grace triumphs in Jonah and in Nineveh

Jonah had been humbled before God, and became fervent in prayer to the Lord. The Lord's discipline, which was very severe but necessary to get this disobedient prophet to submit to him as he should, had now borne fruit. Jonah ended his prayer with that glorious declaration in Jonah 2:9, "*Salvation comes from the Lord.*" The result of all this was that Jonah received from God '*grace upon grace.*' In other words, God brought him one blessing after another.

1) God's grace to Jonah (2:10-3:4)

a. Dry land at last (2:10)

The first blessing Jonah received from the Lord was when he finished his prayer (Jonah 2:10): "*And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.*" What a relief this must have been to him! From one second being inside this huge creature under the sea in total

darkness, to the next being on dry ground and in fresh air and the light and warmth of the sunshine. It really was an act of incredible grace and kindness to Jonah. His faith in God and the assurance of salvation he expressed in his prayer were not misplaced, and the Lord delivered him from his watery grave. And there's an important fact concerning this which we must not overlook. We are going to look at this in some detail in Appendix I at the end of this book, but this deliverance which Jonah experienced was used by Jesus himself as a picture of his own resurrection from the dead (see Matthew 12:38f). That is how remarkable this act of God's grace was. Jonah was a disobedient servant, who did not deserve any kindness from God at all, but the Lord lavished his grace upon him. How generous the Lord our God is, and how patient to bear with his people who, just like Jonah, disobey him. The Lord is infinitely more patient than anyone else. Honesty demands us to say that when someone lets us down we are very reluctant at times to show them kindness and trust them again. This is where the Lord is so different from us, and how glad we are that he is like this. For if God completely cast off his children who rebel against him and refused to do what he asks them, then how many of us would have been cast off by God a very long time ago. Even at our best we are imperfect beings, even as Christian believers. We say and think and do all manner of things which we ought not to do, and there are so many things we should be doing but we carelessly and often deliberately neglect doing. Like Jonah, the Lord often has to chasten us, but he does this in his grace. And what is so incredible

is that when we do admit our guilt to God he blesses us with forgiveness and restored fellowship with himself. To use the words of John Newton's hymn, God's grace is 'Amazing grace'. The Lord's love for each of his people is wonderful, and for Jonah things did not stop at that.

b. Called a second time (3:1-2)

The Lord came to Jonah a second time and entrusted him with the task he had miserably failed to fulfil when he had been asked to do it the first time (Jonah 3:1-2): *"Then the Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.'"* To be entrusted by God with any task in the work of his kingdom is the highest of privileges anyone can receive next to his or her salvation. And those tasks are many and varied. For example, you may be a new believer and you are called by God to testify to his grace by being baptised. It may be that the Lord is calling you to pray in your church prayer meeting for the very first time, or the Lord is calling you to share the good news about Jesus with a friend, or neighbour, or colleague at work, school, or college. These, and many other tasks the Lord entrusts to us are the highest of privileges. To be called to serve your country as an ambassador is considered amongst men as a great honour, and such service is entrusted to only a select few. Therefore how much greater is the honour when the God of heaven calls us to be his ambassadors on earth to take his Word to others. You may recall that this is exactly how Paul understood the ministry God had given to him and his fellow labourers in the work of the gospel. He wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:20, *"We are therefore Christ's*

ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." This makes it all the more astonishing that Jonah should have refused this commission when the Lord first spoke with him back in Jonah chapter 1. But then having rejected God's commission, having run away and as a result come under the frown of God's chastisement, to be called a second time and be entrusted with this task again by God is truly astonishing. It can be nothing but the grace of God to Jonah. There is no other explanation why God should call him again to do this particular task. What Jonah experienced here has been something many of his servants have experienced over the years. Although perhaps for different reasons, many who have been called by God to preach the gospel or serve him in his church have at first been very reluctant. They perhaps have used their weakness and inadequacy as an excuse and told God they could not do what he had entrusted to them, as if God was unable to help them with their weaknesses – but God has graciously and patiently persisted. Some have been just like Jonah and deliberately and obstinately rebelled against God and have had to be disciplined by him very severely. Yet they have found the Lord has graciously come to them a second time with his Word, and called them into his service. Again how different the Lord is from us. As we mentioned earlier, if someone lets us down badly, then we think more than twice about asking them to help us again. But the Lord delights to give his people second opportunities, where we have failed him before. A New Testament example of this

very thing is Peter who denied he ever knew Jesus and then wept bitterly because of his failure. The Lord did not cast Peter off but used him greatly, and he was the first to preach on the Day of Pentecost where 3000 people were brought to repentance and faith in Christ. The great lesson here is that while there is no excuse whatsoever for our disobedience to God or any backsliding on our part, when we do seek the Lord again he forgives us completely. Not only does he not cast us on the scrap heap, but he is pleased to use us again in his service. We see this in the great call of God to his disobedient people through the prophet Hosea. Hosea pleads with them in Hosea 14:1-2: *“Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to him, ‘Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips.’”* Then they received this precious promise from the Lord in Hosea 14:4: *“I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them.”* The Lord is undoubtedly merciful, and his forgiveness is abundant.

c. Obedience rendered (3:3-4)

This time Jonah did exactly what God wanted him to do (Jonah 3:3-4): *“Jonah obeyed the Word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city – a visit required three days. On the first day Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.’”* God’s grace to Jonah produced his total submission to him. He went and did what God required. Note, this time there is no running away, there is no excusing himself, there is no arguing with

God. There is simple, plain obedience. Jonah had learned the hard way that it is utterly foolish and pointless to think that we can resist God and get away with it. All may seem to go right at first, as it did for Jonah, but in the end God will call us to account. It is so much better when we obey him immediately, but Jonah did not do that the first time. Then how good it is to see him obeying God when he came to him the second time. And it is the same for us. You may have been a Christian believer who has let God down badly by your stubborn refusal to obey him. As a result he has had to bring you through the painful experience of his discipline, and through this you have come to see your fault and to confess it to him for pardon. And the Lord may be speaking to you again, a second time, to do what you had failed to do previously. Then take a lesson from Jonah’s example and obey the Lord fully.

We need to add here, that in spite of all we have said about it being the greatest of privileges to serve the Lord in any capacity, the task Jonah had to fulfil was not an easy one. He had to bring to the people of Nineveh a message of judgement! Jonah 3:4: *“Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”* Remember we learned in chapter 1 verse 2 that Nineveh was a wicked place, and its people had committed dreadful sins against God. Further it was a very large city, taking three days to cross. We know from archaeological excavations that greater Nineveh, including outlying villages, covered an area of around 60 miles in circumference. So it was huge by any standard and its population considerable. Then, added to that, it was the capital city of the Assyrian empire, and Assyria was the

world's super-power of its day and the enemy of Israel at the time. All this combined made the task entrusted to Jonah a most difficult one indeed. He had to stand alone for God and his righteousness, and had to tell these people that the judgement of God would fall on them in 40 days time! Jonah still obeyed. It is better to obey God than to sacrifice. Sometimes we also have to tell people about God's judgement – that unless they repent of their sin and trust in Jesus to forgive them, then they will perish under God's mighty hand and be cast into hell for ever. This is no easy task, and one that we must never take lightly, but we must be faithful to God and to his Word. Yes, we know there is forgiveness with God, and he is a God of love, but he is also a holy God who cannot tolerate sin which must be punished. This message is often neglected, but it is vital, as we shall see next.

2) God's grace to Nineveh (3:4-10)

a. Time to repent (v4)

The warnings of God's judgements are always terrible to receive, and we may ask the question, how should we handle them? We need to note here that the Ninevites were told the judgement of God would come, but not for another 40 days. Now why was that? For surely if they were so wicked and their sin had distressed God so much that he sent Jonah to tell them about his just anger against them, why did he not destroy the city immediately, and everyone in it? The answer we have to conclude is that God was giving even this wicked city time to repent, and that is amazing! But this is exactly how kind and patient God is.

Indeed, this is a theme we find repeated throughout the Bible. The apostle Peter in his second letter deals with those who were saying that because the promise of Jesus that he would return to earth again had not taken place, it would never happen. Peter shows them how wrong they were to think in that way, for God had set a day when Christ would return and this world will be judged. He told them to remember that time is different to God from the way it affects us (2 Peter 3:8): *“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”* So although it may seem to us that God is slow in the way he fulfils his promises, he is not slow at all, but works exactly according to his own timetable. Then Peter adds in verse 9, *“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* God warns us of his judgement before it takes place so that we have ample time to prepare for it. In other words, so that we repent of our sins before it is too late. And God has always, with unchanging faithfulness, pardoned all who are truly repentant for their sinfulness. Compare the words of Ezekiel 33:11: *“As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.”* And this is what he was doing here at Nineveh. In his grace he sent Jonah to them. In his grace he pronounced his judgement on them. In his grace he told them they had only 40 days left, 40 days in which to repent.

b. Repentance in action (3:5-6)

What was the result of Jonah's preaching? Nothing short of a mighty miracle of God's grace (Jonah 3:5-6): *"The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust."* This is an astonishing description when you remember what these people were like prior to Jonah's ministry among them. Humanly speaking, if we had been alive at the time, we may well have been tempted to think these people would never come to serve the Lord. They were an idolatrous people, wicked, evil, ungodly, and opposed to the people of God. Everything about them indicated they were far from God, but, to use an expression from Romans 5:20, *"...where sin increased, grace increased all the more..."* As Jonah proclaimed God's solemn judgement the people were riveted by what they heard, they were convicted of their sin against God and the seriousness of their position. They *'believed God'*.

We see here a truth that we must never forget. God has chosen by the preaching of his Word to save those who believe. Jonah did not tell the people his own message. He knew he dare not do that. He preached God's message. And as God's message was proclaimed the people were brought to repentance. We find the same thing in the New Testament (1 Peter 1:23): *"For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God."* Romans 10:17: *"...faith comes from hearing the message, and the message*

is heard through the Word of Christ." 1 Corinthians 1:21: *"...God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe."* God's appointed method of bringing lost men and women into his kingdom is through the faithful preaching of his Word, the message of the Scriptures, the truth of the Bible. This is so important for us to note in these days as many are suggesting we move away from the preaching of the Word of God, and we must not do that. If we do, we are moving away from God's appointed method, claiming that our ways are better than his, and the result will be disastrous for us and those who hear us. Here God blessed the message of his Word as Jonah faithfully preached, and this whole city turned to the Lord, which is an encouragement to us today to preach God's Word.

Take note of another important lesson. Whether we are ordinary citizens or kings – the same is required by God of all. To know and enjoy his forgiveness we have to truly repent of our sins and humble ourselves under God's mighty hand and plead with him for mercy. This is exactly what happened in Nineveh – both king and people put on sackcloth – the customary means at that time of humbling oneself before God in repentance (cf. 1 Kings 21:27; Nehemiah 9:1). They did not refuse the message, or ignore the message, or persecute Jonah for bringing such a message – they all repented humbly before God.

c. The decree of the king (3:7-9)

The king went further. He urged the whole of Nineveh to fast and pray and forsake their evil ways, that God may yet

relent from his threat and be merciful to them (Jonah 3:7-9): *“Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: ‘By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let each man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.’”* This remarkable edict is unparalleled in Scripture. This Gentile king not only wanted to be right with God himself, but wanted all his people to be right with God also! There was a real urgency in the king’s instructions, because he even included the animals in the order to fast. This was a serious situation and it required a serious response.

It was a genuine call because he urged them to call on God, not to call on their individual gods who were useless anyhow, but on the Lord, the God of Jonah, the God of the Bible, the only true and living God. It was a call for genuine repentance – for he called them to give up their evil and violent behaviour. Repentance is much more than being sorry. It includes sorrow, but there is more because there are different kinds of sorrow. A thief may be sorry that he has been arrested, but he is not sorry for stealing itself. True repentance includes a godly sorrow, a sorrow that God has been grieved and disobeyed. This godly sorrow results in a forsaking of former sinful conduct, and a determination to live in a way that is pleasing to God, in accordance with the teaching of the Bible. Repentance means to make a complete turn around, a complete change

of mind towards sin. Before a person repents he does not bother what sins he is committing and often enjoys them, but the repentant person realises he can no longer live like that and must forsake his old sinful ways. The king realised God’s anger with them was not something they could afford to play around with or consider a trifle. God’s anger is real, can be very fierce, and as such is irresistible. This is a subject people do not like to hear about today, but God has not changed, he still hates sin and will in the end punish every sinner who has failed to repent. The king of Nineveh realised the need to be cast wholly on the mercy of God, as there was no other way out. Therefore he urged the people to plead with God for mercy, that he might have compassion on them and spare them. It was quite remarkable that the king even thought this way about the Lord. Evidently the Holy Spirit was powerfully at work in his heart. His priority above everything else, including all the business of his kingdom, was to be right with God. Nothing was more important than this. And it is the same today. Only by turning from your own sins and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ can anyone know God’s forgiveness and salvation. Consider Peter’s words about the Lord Jesus in Acts 4:12: *“Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”* Therefore to know and love and trust and serve the Lord Jesus Christ is more important than anything else we could ever conceive. The issue is, have you done that? Have you turned to God in repentance and placed your faith in the Lord Jesus? (See Acts 20:21.) Whether you are a Gentile like the people of Nineveh, or a

Jew like Jonah, there is only one way of salvation for all, and that is through trusting in God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

d. The Lord pardons (3:10)

One of the things we learn about God in the Bible is that he knows the truth about everything. Nothing is hidden from his view, and no one is able to deceive him in any way whatsoever (Proverbs 15:3): *"The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good."* Therefore when God examines a situation, or looks into a human heart, he sees things as they really are, he sees the truth. This is very searching, of course, because it means your life and mine are like an open book to God. Things we would not want another human being to know about us are know fully to him! Therefore when we read what we find in Jonah 3:10 about what God saw and did as a result is most significant (Jonah 3:10): *"When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."* God saw the genuineness of the people's sorrow for their wrong doing. God saw the true repentance they were exercising. God saw that this was not counterfeit repentance but the authentic article. And God was pleased. The result was that he did, in fact, have compassion upon the people. He pardoned them for all their iniquity. He spared their lives and did not destroy them as he had threatened. God showed them mercy. The hymn writer has put it so aptly:

"Who is a pardoning God like Thee?"

Or who has grace so rich and free?"

There is no one so gracious as the Lord God. Consider these words from Isaiah 55:6-7: *"Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon."* When we ask the question, but how can God forgive such guilty people? How can God deliver those who deserve destruction? The answer is because God knew that a day would come when his own dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, would die on a cross, and shed his precious blood, paying the penalty, not for his own sins but for all of his people – including the people of Nineveh to whom Jonah preached (cf. 1 John 2:2). It was because of him and him alone that this salvation came to the people of Nineveh, and it is through him alone that God's salvation can come to us. Therefore we must trust in what Jesus has accomplished through his perfect life, his sacrificial death and his glorious resurrection, to bring God's mercy to work in our own lives.

Chapter 5 Jonah 3:10 - 4:11: Jonah Learns a Vital Lesson

Jonah chapter 3 ended on a wonderful note. Jonah had preached the Word of God in Nineveh, a city famous for its wickedness, and the whole city turned to the Lord, including the king himself. They were grief stricken over their sinfulness, gave up their evil ways, and fasted before

the Lord, dressed in sackcloth, a form of clothing that was worn to indicate humbling oneself in repentance. The message Jonah had preached was a solemn warning that within 40 days God would destroy the city because of the people's wickedness, and it was this which moved the Ninevites to seek the Lord for mercy. Chapter 3:10 declares, "*When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.*" The Lord was wonderfully merciful and the whole city was pardoned and spared.

Before we continue into chapter 4 there is problem and an important principle which is at work of which we need to take note. The problem is that it seems to us as if God changed his mind, because he threatened judgement but actually gave pardon. Yet other passages of the Bible teach us that God never changes. We have the Lord's words in Malachi 3:6: "*I the Lord do not change.*" Therefore how do we solve this problem and reconcile this apparent contradiction? The way to answer this is to say two things. First, God's unchangeableness does not mean that he is inactive or that he cannot move. He is after all the living God and not like some lifeless idol made of wood or stone or precious metal. Second, God's unchangeableness means that God never acts in a way that is contrary to his character. God is holy, and will always be holy. God is just and will always be just. God is merciful and will always be merciful. Now a very important principle about God's unchanging character is this, the Lord always pardons those who seek him in true repentance. This is

clearly spelled out for us by the prophet Jeremiah who records the Lord's Word about it. The context is God's warning of judgement on Judah and Jerusalem because of their wickedness (Jeremiah 18:7ff): "*If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I intended to do for it.*" In the next verse in Jeremiah the Lord warned the people of Judah and Jerusalem that he was preparing disaster for them because they had persistently sinned and forsaken him, and it ends with this amazing plea from the Lord, "*So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.*" The Lord offered them mercy, but tragically they refused to accept it, and in the end the nation was overthrown by Nebuchadnezzar, many were killed, and a large number were carried off to Babylon as exiles. How different it was with the people of Nineveh in Jonah's day. They repented and sought God's mercy and he gave it to them. And he did this because of his unchanging character – he always forgives those who repent. From a human standpoint it appears to us that God has changed his mind over the people of Nineveh, but in actual fact he has not changed at all. He is governed by the unchanging principle which his holiness and grace always work by, namely that he will always punish the unrepentant and always pardon the repentant. God does not change at all,

and in this instance the change came in the hearts of the people of Nineveh, and God acted in perfect harmony with his character and grace, and he forgave them. That is a tremendous encouragement for us. The Lord is far more willing to forgive us than we realise, therefore if you have never repented of your sins and called upon God to forgive you, do so today. He will not reject you. Remember the remarkable words of Jesus in John 6:37: “*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.*” What a wonderfully kind and gracious God the Lord is! And what a wonderful message for Christian believers to tell others about! Remember God’s mercy endures forever. (Psalm 136 tells us this 26 times!)

We come now to Jonah chapter 4. Remember, chapter 3 ended with that wonderful description of thousands turning to the Lord and receiving his forgiveness, something that would gladden the heart of any preacher – or so you would think. But in this instance that is not what we find. Jonah was not glad, and so the Lord had to deal with him yet again and teach him a vital lesson.

1) Jonah’s angry outburst (4:1-3)

a. Jonah’s anger

It almost seems incredible that Jonah was not absolutely thrilled at the way God had worked in the lives of the people of Nineveh. Yet Jonah 4:1 teaches us it was altogether different: “*But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.*” Even a casual reading of those words indicates that Jonah was absolutely against all that God had

done. He was seething with displeasure and disapproval and he erupted with rage like a volcano! And, as if that wasn’t bad enough, he then had the audacity to challenge God and speak angrily to him about it (Jonah 4:2-3): “*He prayed to the Lord, ‘O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.’*” You cannot help but come to the conclusion, that even though the Lord had been merciful to Jonah, he did not want the Lord to be merciful to the people of Nineveh! And at the very least we have to say this was a totally selfish attitude to have. But really there is something more to all of this. There is an attitude bordering on hatred in Jonah, and coupled with that an unhealthy, proud heart. Now why do I say that? Well, surely the desire of every true child of God should be to be like God himself. If God forgave these dear needy people, so should Jonah. But he did not want them to be forgiven! He wanted them to be destroyed. He did not want God to be merciful, even though he knew God was merciful. Although Jonah had learned the lesson that to obey God is better than sacrifice, and although God delivered him from destruction inside the great fish that had swallowed him, and although he obeyed God and preached at Nineveh, he really did not want to see these people saved from their sinfulness. There was a hardness in Jonah’s heart that is all too easy to imitate. Jonah, like so many from the children of Israel

over the centuries, had become very inward looking. In other words, he only ever thought God should be merciful to them, and that he should destroy every other nation. As far as Jonah was concerned, God was too generous! He had a huge mental block on this issue, and even though the Lord had saved him, and that salvation was by God's free and sovereign grace alone, he could not see it extending to these Gentiles. Spiritual pride had gripped his heart and led him to exclude others from the grace of God. This indicated a clear misunderstanding of God's heart. Jonah was in effect saying, 'God loves me therefore he ought not to love you!' And when he is confronted with the fact that God did love others, in this case the people of Nineveh, his pride refused to accept it, hence his argument with the Lord. If only Jonah had considered what God had already revealed concerning his purposes for the world. He knew God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 that, "...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." God has always had a plan to bring people from all nations into his kingdom. Instead, Jonah put his own will before accepting the Lord's will, and that is self-righteous pride. What is astonishing is that this arrogant tirade against the Lord is described as a prayer (v2)! He was lecturing the Lord as to what he should have done, not praying in accord with the will of God at all! This is an extreme case of irreverence in the presence of God.

Lesson: We do not have to blaspheme God's name openly to be guilty of taking his name in vain. Therefore how careful we should be whenever we speak to the Lord, for he is Almighty God. Ecclesiastes 5:2 declares, "*Do not be*

quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few." We can be sure of this that whenever anyone prays like Jonah prayed, they will always get a negative answer from the Lord.

b. A similar attitude

Significantly, this same narrow-minded approach was very prevalent amongst the scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus met. Indeed, many of the Pharisees thought the only ones who deserved God's mercy were other Pharisees! We see this coming out when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. You may recall how an expert in the law asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asked him to say what the Law taught. He answered that we are to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbour as ourselves, something no human being has ever been able to do 100%, except the Lord Jesus Christ himself. But, the lawyer wanted to justify himself, and so he asked Jesus, "*And who is my neighbour?*" He thought 'neighbour' only referred to other Jews and other experts in the law. He had to learn painfully and embarrassingly that Jesus knew exactly what he was thinking, and the man had to acknowledge that in Jesus' parable it was not those who you would have thought would be a good neighbour to the man who fell among thieves, but a Samaritan, a man from another nation, a nation the Jews hated! It is this same self-centred, prejudiced attitude that now comes to the fore in the life of Jonah. The result was that he was angry with God and had the nerve to argue with him about it. What a sad episode this was in the life of this prophet of God! He

speaks like a spoiled child who sulks when he cannot get his own way. It is as if he was saying to the Lord, 'I told you so! I knew you'd do this!' Deep down he wanted God to destroy Nineveh and its people. He wanted them to go to hell and did not want them to go to heaven! Indeed he went further because he told God that he knew he was merciful, and compassionate and abounding in love. How sad that Jonah understood so much about God, yet disagreed with him being like he is! It really is a case of outstanding arrogance on Jonah's behalf, and of appalling careless indifference to the plight of so many who were in the grip of sin and Satan and in such need for God to deliver them.

As I mentioned earlier, it is all too easy for us to fall into the same trap today, for Christian believers to become so inward looking, and so uncaring about the millions of lost men and women in our world, that we never do a thing to help them! A man was once visiting a church and as the meeting was about to begin the door of the building was closed, when he heard this tragic comment, "We don't want any of those outside to come in here!" When the apostle John described Jesus as the "*Saviour of the world*" (1 John 4:14) he meant that there would be people from every nation and language in his kingdom, and therefore to think otherwise is dreadfully wrong. And we can broaden this out because it can so easily raise its ugly head in other ways. For example, one group of Christians refuses to accept another group of Christians who believe in the same Bible and the same Saviour. It can include prejudice against those of a different language, or country, or colour,

or education, or wealth, or employment, etc. One man told me recently that in his country if someone wears brown shoes in his church they would not be acceptable! Or when the Lord blesses a different church to our own with many conversions, it is easy to criticise them and claim they are not orthodox or something else, when really we should praise God for saving so many! The potential for us to be guilty of the same response as Jonah is still very much alive today, and it is a grievous sin.

c. An important contrast

By contrast we have the record of Peter in Acts 10. Peter was himself a Jew and had been brought up with the same point of view as Jonah. He had been taught that even to eat with a non-Jew was to become unclean. However, God showed him that his love extended to Jew and non-Jew alike, and sent him to Cornelius, a Roman soldier, to share the gospel with him. God taught Peter in a vision that he was not to call anything unclean which God has called clean. At first Peter wondered what this vision meant, but when he was asked to go to Cornelius and meet his household, and found them all eagerly waiting to hear Peter's message about the Lord Jesus, this is how he responded (Acts 10:34): "*Then Peter began to speak: 'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation to fear him and do what is right.'*" Then Peter proceeded to tell Cornelius and his companions about the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ. Peter's response was totally different from the response of Jonah. Jonah did not want God to be merciful to the people of Nineveh. We must say

that if God himself rejoices over any sinner who repents, then we should do the same, and not to is to fall grievously (see Luke 15:10).

d. A sad request

Jonah ends his discussion with the Lord by asking to die (v3): *“Now, O Lord, take my life away, for it is better for me to die than to live.”* What a dreadful response! Only a short while ago he had rejoiced in prayer that God was going to spare his life (chapter 2 especially v9), but now that God had spared the Ninevites he asks to die! And when we remember this was the request of a servant of the Lord, for Jonah was a prophet, then it is even sadder. You may recall that once Elijah asked God to take his life away in 1 Kings 19:4, but the reason then was totally different. Elijah was exhausted, having defeated the prophets of Baal, run the long journey to Jezreel, and also had the added burden of the threat of Queen Jezebel to kill him. Elijah was in a very low condition physically, emotionally and spiritually, but that was not so with Jonah. His life was not under threat at all, and great blessing had attended his ministry. He was acting like a spoiled child who could not get his own way, but with much more serious consequences.

2) God’s response (4:4-11)

The Lord’s response to Jonah is remarkable. He listens patiently to Jonah’s prayer and then takes steps to show Jonah how wrong he was. And what is amazing is that he does so in a most gracious manner. He could have

destroyed Jonah or struck him down with some deadly ailment for his abuse, but he does none of these things.

a. God speaks (v4)

The Lord rebuked Jonah with a searching question in verse 4, *“But the Lord replied, ‘Have you any right to be angry?’”* And what a penetrating question this was, getting right to the heart of the matter. Jonah had no right at all to be angry. Who was he to dictate to God what he should and should not do, and where was his compassion for the lost? The Lord was challenging him to reconsider his appalling thinking, to consider what basis he had for making such an outburst. God was dealing with Jonah just as he had dealt with the Ninevites, and gave him time to repent. The longsuffering of God is just that, longsuffering and gracious.

b. Jonah’s response (4:5)

Astonishingly Jonah refuses to reply to the Lord’s question. It’s as if he just does not want to change, such is the hardness of his heart at this point. In verse 5 we read, *“Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.”* Jonah still inwardly hoped the city would be destroyed, even though the Lord had challenged his thinking directly! Such was the ingrained nature of Jonah’s prejudices against these Gentiles, that he simply refused to accept that their lives would be spared by the Lord! It really is an extreme instance of the stubbornness which can characterise the human heart, even the heart of a genuine believer because,

remember, Jonah was the Lord's prophet. We learn a vital and humbling lesson through all this. Men, even at their very best, are imperfect beings. Even as saved sinners, we are still sinners. Therefore we need to pray daily that the Lord will help us to walk humbly before him, and to seek his strength to obey his Word. This is not to excuse sin in a believer's life, for sin is always wrong, but it is a reminder that there is only one who has ever lived who was without sin, the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 4:15, 7:26). Therefore, our trust should be in him, and not men, not even men like Jonah who have been greatly used by God.

c. God acts (4:6-8)

The Bible commentator, Gordon Keddie, has written, "*Nothing touches a bad conscience more effectively than further undeserved kindness.*" (p118 'Preacher On The Run' published by Evangelical Press) This is precisely what God did for Jonah. The Lord caused a vine to grow over Jonah to give him added shade, thereby increasing Jonah's comfort in the heat of the sun. How kind God was to his complaining servant! We are told later in verse 10 that God made this plant grow overnight, so it was both a gracious and a miraculous provision from the Lord. This was something which should have made Jonah at the very least think this was unusual and he needed to consider it carefully. We are told that "*...Jonah was very happy about the vine.*" He really appreciated and valued this plant. However, early the very next morning, as he continued to wait and see what would happen to Nineveh and before the full heat of the sun was experienced, the Lord provided a

worm which chewed the vine so that it withered and therefore ceased to give any shade.

An interesting aside to what God was teaching Jonah through this is the wonderful sovereignty of God. He sovereignly made the vine grow, and he sovereignly controlled the worm which ate the vine! In a way which we cannot fully understand, God is absolutely sovereign and in control of the whole universe, even down to the worms in the ground! Ephesians 1:11 tells us that God "*...works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will...*" We saw a similar example of this when God provided the great fish to swallow Jonah in chapter 1. And this teaches us that God is infinitely greater than anyone else, and therefore worthy to be worshipped, trusted and relied on completely.

In verse 8 we are told the sun rose, and that meant of course that it got warmer. Then the Lord sent a scorching east wind. The result of all this was Jonah was overcome by the heat and grew faint. Indeed, Jonah's response at the loss of his shady plant and the resultant discomfort he was feeling led him to cry out in a similar way to verse 3. This time he said, "*It would be better for me to die than live.*" Again, a most extraordinary thing to say, and it is a further indication of the selfishness that existed in Jonah's heart. He was thinking only of himself, and his comfort.

d. God speaks with Jonah (4:9-11)

With great wisdom the Lord challenges Jonah with a question in verse 9, "*Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?*" God's purpose in this discussion with

Jonah was to teach Jonah a lesson that up till that point he had refused to accept. It was a searching, penetrating question because no one had forced Jonah to sit out in the sun, it was his own choice. Jonah very quickly replies, *“I do...I am angry enough to die.”* What an angry person Jonah had become, and it was all because he was out of step with the Lord. However, God had not given up on Jonah, and with great patience the situation is now ready to apply the lesson he wanted Jonah to learn, namely, the people of Nineveh were of much greater value than the vine Jonah had been happy about (v10): *“But the Lord said, ‘You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?’”* What a powerful argument the Lord was using to bring Jonah to see the error of his uncompassionate attitude towards the people of Nineveh. It should have filled Jonah’s heart with shame. He had valued this vine which he did not plant or look after, and which he missed greatly when it withered, yet he could not see that a single individual is of much greater worth than a vine! And in Nineveh, there was not just one individual, but 120,000 who could not tell their right hand from their left. This phrase could refer to the number of young children in the city, making its total population very much larger than this, perhaps over half a million, or it could be God’s way of speaking of the people as being just like little children who were ignorant of God’s way of

salvation and therefore in need of his mercy. Whichever way we take these words, the force of God’s argument is devastating. Not only did Jonah have no right to question what God had done in sparing these dear people, but he had also diminished the value of other human beings so that they were considered of less worth than a vine! How hard Jonah’s heart had become! How unlike the Lord he had grown! How unforgiving he was! Indeed, God told Jonah in no uncertain terms that regardless of how Jonah thought, the people of Nineveh, and even its cattle, were the objects of his Fatherly care and compassion. Not only does God preserve both men and animals (see Psalm 36:6) but also God does not delight in the death of unrepentant sinners. We read in Ezekiel 33:11, *“As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.”* And earlier on in Ezekiel 18:23 God says, *“Do I take pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign Lord. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”* And this is precisely what had happened at Nineveh. The people had turned from their evil and wicked ways and in humble repentance prayed to God for mercy, and he had forgiven them.

The book ends abruptly at that point, and we are given no information at all as to how Jonah responded to the Lord’s rebuke. However, what is significant about the way this short book of the Bible ends, is that it was God who had the first word at the beginning of this book, and it was God who had the last word at the end of it. God’s will, not

Jonah's will, was done, and how glad we should be that it was so. God is a forgiving God, and he will forgive whoever he chooses to forgive, and not even an influential person such as one of his prophets will ever be able to stop him doing so. The great challenge of the book of Jonah is that believers in every age should desire, pray for, work towards and be glad whenever God saves any sinner from their sins. To be otherwise is to be unlike God, and to be guilty of grievous sin!

It is so amazing to see the gracious way the Lord patiently worked with Jonah to teach him this lesson. And the important thing for us is to learn and apply this same lesson to our own lives. God is a gracious God who not only delights to forgive sinners, but who has a purpose to do this to a countless multitude that no man can number from all over the world. And that should therefore motivate us to be involved in evangelistic work at every opportunity; to pray for and be practically involved in pointing men and women to the Saviour; to have a real concern for the lost, who are perishing, and will perish eternally if they are not brought to faith in Christ. Gordon Keddie again: *"The point is this: evangelism is the Christian's way of life – in home, family and church. Evangelism happens when Christians live faithfully in the world, energetically exercising their calling and gifts as God has given them. Evangelism only happens when the people of God add love to the faith they profess. This is true for the preacher and the postman, the housewife and the nurse."* p128 'Preacher On The Run' published by Evangelical Press

The searching question only you can answer is, Are you like God or like Jonah? As we close this part of our study of the book of Jonah let's consider some words from another Old Testament prophet, Micah. These are words about God's gracious dealings with the disobedient people of Israel, but they bring out the same principles that we see in the book of Jonah (Micah 7:18ff): *"Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea."* This same characteristic saturated the heart of the Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, whom he sent into the world to be the Saviour of sinners. And what is so wonderful is that he is still the same today (Hebrews 13:8): *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."* Therefore:

- i. if you need to be forgiven, then ask the Lord Jesus Christ, and ask him today.
- ii. if you have been forgiven then love others just as God has loved you, and tell everyone you can to turn to the Lord, and rejoice when they do.
- iii. if to your shame you are a Christian believer, but have been unwilling to accept those whom God accepts, then you need to seek God's forgiveness afresh, and ask him to make your heart a reflection of his own.

At times we can all too easily forget just how sinful and undeserving we were of God's forgiveness before we became believers, but we need to remind ourselves of just

how gracious the Lord has been to us. To do that we need to go to the cross again, and see our Saviour bleeding, dying, suffering for us, because of our sins, and when we do we will not find it so difficult to welcome all who turn to him. Indeed, then we shall be able to do as Jesus commanded us and love the unlovable (Matthew 5:44ff): *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”* The amazing thing about God is that he loves men even when they are his enemies, and this cost him the death of his own dear Son. Because God cannot ignore our sins, any more than he could ignore the sins of the people of Nineveh, he punished his own Son for the sins of others, that they, and this includes Jonah and the people of Nineveh, may receive his wonderful forgiveness (John 3:16). To love like this is costly, but if we have the love of God in our hearts then this is surely the only way we can love.

Appendix I

Jesus, Jonah, The Ninevites & The Queen of Sheba

We stated right at the beginning of this volume that the historical accuracy of the book of Jonah is something that the Lord Jesus Christ himself upheld and referred to during his own ministry. What we did not do was to examine exactly what Jesus had to say about Jonah and what its significance was. There are two Bible passages in the New Testament which deal with this, namely, Matthew 12:38-41 and Luke 11:16 and verses 29-32, and we shall concentrate on the Matthew passage (Matthew 12:38-41): *“Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him,*

‘Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.’ He answered, ‘A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.’”

It is interesting to note that the teaching Jesus gave concerning himself and Jonah came as a result of a request from the Pharisees and teachers of the law, or scribes as they are sometimes called. As we read through the Gospels it becomes very clear to us that this group of men, the Pharisees and teachers of the law, although very religious men, were generally opposed to Jesus. A notable exception is Nicodemus who we read about in John 3 where he met Jesus and spoke with him, and also at the end of John 19 where he helped Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus’ body in the tomb. But generally speaking, these Pharisees and teachers of the law opposed Jesus resolutely, and were often found trying to trick him with difficult questions or requests. One of the things they failed to learn was that Jesus knew fully what they were thinking and what their motives were each time they questioned him. And, as on other occasions, he exposed the unbelief and

spiritual unfaithfulness of the men in question. They had asked Jesus to show them a miraculous sign. This they had done apparently politely, addressing him as ‘Teacher,’ but Jesus saw beneath this false veneer right into their hearts. Jesus therefore replied, *“A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign!”* In other words, he knew that these men were not asking for a miracle so that they could glorify and praise God and give their devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. Their motives sprang from evil designs and from hearts that in actual fact were unfaithful to God. They actually hated him!

Just before this in Matthew 12:22-37, Matthew records how these very men had accused Jesus of performing miracles by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Jesus had healed a man who was demon possessed and blind and unable to speak (Matthew 12:22). In response to this the people cried, *“Could this be the Son of David?”* That is, could this be the promised Saviour whom God was to send into the world? It was obvious to them that Jesus was no ordinary person. There was something unique about him. But in opposition to this were the Pharisees and the scribes, who accused Jesus of performing this miracle, not by the Holy Spirit’s power but by the power of the evil one. In other words, they were saying all that Jesus had already done was satanic in origin, and that he had done nothing to convince them otherwise. Jesus’ rebuke of these men was devastating (Matthew 12:25 ff esp. v 34): *“You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good?”*

It is at this point that these men tested Jesus further by asking for some sensational sign unlike anything he had already done to prove he was the Son of God, but deep down they did not believe he could do anything like that at all. Jesus, however, did not have to prove that he was the Son of God, for he had done that many times before, and so he exposed the deceit in their hearts. They were evil, morally corrupt, and adulterous, unfaithful to God. So he refused to give them the sign they claimed they wanted to see. Instead, he told them that they would be given the sign which God himself had chosen, and it is here that Jesus refers to the sign of Jonah.

1) The sign of Jonah

Jesus told his critics that the only sign they would receive was something of which the prophet Jonah was a powerful illustration (Matthew 12:30-31) *“...none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth...”*

Something we need to keep in mind as we begin thinking about these words is the way days and nights were often referred to at that time, included speaking of a part of a day and night as if it were a full day. For example, we might say tomorrow we are going to go for a walk. Now we could understand that phrase as meaning that as soon as midnight arrives we are going to begin walking and will not stop for 24 hours until the next midnight arrives! But that would not be the usual way we would understand that

phrase, because what we mean is that for part of the day we will be going for a walk, so the word 'tomorrow' even in our usage does not always mean one complete period of 24 hours. And it was the same often in Bible days. Having said that, what Jesus referred to was, along with his crucifixion and ascension into heaven, part of the most glorious event that has ever happened on earth. Just as Jonah spent those three days and nights inside the huge fish as it swam around the Mediterranean Sea, so Jesus himself would die, be buried in the earth for three days, and then rise from the dead on that third day.

Now there are parallels and differences when we compare Jonah with Jesus which are very significant.

Jonah was buried under the sea in that huge fish because of his own sins, as he bore God's wrath against his unrighteousness. Jesus was buried in the tomb because he had died for the sins of others and suffered God's wrath in their place (1 Peter 3:18): "*Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.*" Without his atoning death there would never be any forgiveness for sins. This is what the Pharisees should have looked for as God's sign for them, but when Jesus died they ignored God's sign and rejoiced that Jesus was disposed of, as far as they were concerned.

Jonah was vomited out by the fish onto dry land, brought back from the watery grave, although he had not actually died. Jesus rose from the tomb, having actually died on the cross, victorious over sin, death and Satan.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is the most earth-shattering event that has ever taken place. Jesus therefore told these unbelieving men that he would conquer death by rising from the grave. And Jonah's experience, even in his disobedience and even though God was chastening him at the time, was a graphic picture of what would happen to Jesus himself. And from our perspective in time now, we can see that this is exactly what happened. To use Paul's lovely summary in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, "*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...*" and that truly is the best news we could ever hear. Why? Because it tells us Jesus has dealt with sin completely, has suffered its punishment entirely, and gained the victory over death we so urgently need and long for, and destroyed him who has the power of death, the devil. It has been said that the resurrection of Jesus was God's visual aid to show us he was entirely satisfied with all that Jesus accomplished in his life and through his death on the cross as he offered his life as a once for all sacrifice for sins. This is why Paul wrote in Romans 4:25, "*He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*" The resurrection proves the genuineness of all he claimed to be and all he claimed he would do for the salvation of sinners. That was the sign, and the only sign that these unbelieving Pharisees and teachers of the law were going to be given. It was the sign that would uniquely demonstrate that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. Had Jesus given

in to these religious critics when they asked for a sign, a display of his divine glory and majesty, it would have meant he had abandoned the path of humility which he had been sent to walk in order to become the Saviour of sinners. Thankfully he did not give in to these men. Paul again so helpfully tells us (Philippians 2:5ff): “...Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” And the sign of Jonah pointed towards the death of Jesus in abject humiliation in order to deal with our sins, and his resurrection in glorious victory so essential for our salvation.

The tragedy was that even when Jesus rose, these men still refused to believe in him. Indeed, they went further than that. They spread a false rumour about Jesus after he came to life again (Matthew 28:11-15): “While the women were on their way (i.e. the women who had come to anoint Jesus’ body in the tomb and who discovered that he was risen) some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them,

‘You are to say, “His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.” If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.’ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.” Even when these men saw the truth, the sign they claimed they required before they would believe in Jesus, they still rejected Jesus; such was their hatred of him and their pride. For had they accepted the sign of Jonah which was fulfilled in Jesus’ death and resurrection, they would have had to admit they had been wrong to oppose Jesus, and they were too proud to admit such a thing!

2) The men of Nineveh

In his condemnation of the Pharisees and teachers of the law Jesus also used those who had benefited from Jonah’s preaching, the people of Nineveh. His application of their response to God’s Word compared with the lack of response from these Pharisees and scribes, was devastating (Matthew 12:41): “*The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.*” What a solemn thing to be told! The ungodly and wicked Gentile men of Nineveh received Jonah’s preaching about the judgement of God without hesitation. And this resulted in godly sorrow filling their hearts with grief that they had so offended Almighty God, which in turn led to their repentance. They turned from their wicked ways and turned to God for mercy. If such wicked and ignorant men, men ignorant of God and the

Scriptures which these Pharisees and scribes studied and claimed to know so well, if they repented so earnestly and speedily, how much more should these proud Pharisees have repented when they heard Jesus preach. On the day of judgement – a day yet to come to this world, and a day that is sure to come, when God will judge everyone who has ever lived – these Pharisees and Scribes will be condemned by the people of Nineveh who did repent. And now a greater than Jonah stood before them, and how much greater therefore would their condemnation be! They had seen the evidence of his ministry again and again that he was indeed the Son of God. He was the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He was the One the Father sent to be the Saviour of the world (1 John 4:14). He was the one whose precious blood shed at Calvary cleanses repentant sinners of all sin (1 John 1:7). What greater privileges these Pharisees and teachers of the law had compared with the people of Nineveh, yet they repented while these men remained unmoved. These opponents of Jesus were without excuse. They had the very same Scriptures which foretold Jesus coming to earth, and the details of his death and his resurrection, yet they still did not seek mercy from Jesus at all. Their end would be worse than their beginning. God would condemn them forever!

Therefore, how we should search our hearts and ensure that we too have truly repented and been made right with God. Failure here will have devastating and eternal consequences.

3) The Queen of the South

As Jesus continued his penetrating exposé and rebuke of these religious critics, he did not stop at the men of Nineveh but also referred to the 'Queen of the South', that is the Queen of Sheba who came to visit King Solomon (Matthew 12:42): *"The Queen of the South will rise at the judgement with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here."* The incident referred to here is well known and is recorded for us in 1 Kings 10:1ff and 2 Chronicles 9:1ff. Again, another Gentile, this time one woman, the Queen of Sheba, from the part of the world we now call Yemen, had heard of the greatness of Solomon, especially his great wealth and his great wisdom. So she came to him, travelling a very long distance to discover for herself the greatness that God had bestowed on Solomon. Her testimony afterwards was that 'the half had not been told her.' Solomon's greatness far excelled anything she had heard about him. And she added in 1 Kings 10:9: *"Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness."* But Jesus was someone infinitely greater than Solomon, and his wisdom far outclassed anything that Solomon was able to display. If the Queen of Sheba acknowledged that this was God's doing in Solomon's life, how much more should these Pharisees and scribes have believed in Jesus, whose every action and word betrayed that he was the Son of God! This woman would therefore rise at the judgement day, along with the people of

Nineveh, to condemn these enemies of Jesus because they refused to acknowledge both who he was and their own need of his forgiveness!

Again we are challenged to ensure we have personally trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins and peace with God. Without him we shall perish, and be found wanting on the day of judgement. But with him we have eternal life and are secure forever. So the great question that has to be answered is, have you received Jesus Christ as your Saviour? Have you believed in him, received him and acknowledged him as your Lord? A positive answer will mean you already possess eternal life, but a negative answer means you are in great danger of perishing eternally, therefore seek the Lord today before it is too late.

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