

# Jonah

(condensed)

## “Is It Right for You to Be Angry About God’s Grace?”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**W**hy is it, that the grace and goodness and mercy and love of our Lord is so often infuriating? Yes, the grace of God is maddening. That eternal divine “energy” that we call “grace” – “everywhere present, filling all things”<sup>1</sup> – should be welcomed with glad shouts and open arms. We should be singing and dancing and lifting our hearts exalting this transcendently Three-Person’d, intimately passionate Lover every moment of our lives, no matter where we are or how we feel or what’s happening to us.

But we do not. We do not.

All too often, we flee from this Grace Who knows no bound and for Whom no square foot of creation is off limits. And when this “Hound of Heaven”<sup>2</sup> eventually catches us – as Grace always does – we react in anger and petty self-centeredness. It is my prayer today that we will feel with some depth how wrong it is to be angry about God’s grace.

And so, allow me to introduce you to one of my favorite prophets, Jonah. His Hebrew name means “Dove” and all that we know about him is from a single

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase is from the Prayer to the Holy Spirit in Eastern Orthodoxy: “O Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth, everywhere present, filling all things; Treasury of Good Things and Giver of Life: Come and dwell in us, and cleanse us from every impurity, and save us, O Good One!”

<sup>2</sup> The title of Francis Thompson’s (1859–1907) epic poem, much of whose power consists in restating the paradox of trying to flee from God’s presence. Listen to God’s refrain to Francis: “All things betray thee, who betrayest Me’ ... ‘Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me’ ... ‘Lo! naught contents thee, who content’st not Me!’ (lines 15, 51, 110). And the closing lines (167–182) are jammed with paradox, as God catches Francis and speaks: “Alack, thou knowest not / How little worthy of any love thou art! / Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee, / Save Me, save only Me? / All which I took from thee I did but take, / Not for thy harms, / But just that thou might’st seek it in My arms. / All which thy child’s mistake / Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home: / Rise, clasp My hand, and come!’ / **To which Francis responds:** Halts by me that footfall: / Is my gloom, after all, / Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly? / **And God concludes:** ‘Ah fondest, blindest, weakest, / I am He Whom thou seekest! / Thou dravest [**drove away**] love from thee, who dravest Me.’”

verse in 2 Kings<sup>3</sup>, an 8-word gloomy sermon, and<sup>4</sup> this poignant story about Grace and anger, and Grace and anger, and Grace. Spoiler alert: We're not going to pay much attention to the big fish, because it occupies only 3 of the story's 48 verses.

Jonah is a Hebrew prophet, one of 15 Hebrew prophets who each wrote a book in the Old Testament. Now a Hebrew prophet is an ordinary person like you and I, to whom the Word of the Lord comes with such surprising power that it cannot be resisted. The Word of the Lord so completely takes the prophet prisoner, that the prophet's body and mind and mouth become totally consumed with fulfilling the Word of the Lord. The experience is not pleasurable; it is overwhelming; it is frightening; it is painful. And it is entirely irresistible. Nothing else matters. And there is nowhere to hide.

Now all the other 14 Hebrew prophets in the Old Testament are directed by the Lord to prophesy to their own people, the Hebrew people, condemning the Jews' infidelity to the Lord – their failure to live holy lives of obedience, their failure to fulfill the unique calling to be a holy people as their Lord is holy. All the other prophets are sent to pronounce Israel's failure to walk righteously before God and justly with its neighbor.

But not Jonah. When the Word of the Lord comes upon Jonah, the irresistible Word sends Jonah not to his own people, but north to their most wicked pagan enemy, the Assyrians. Specifically, into downtown Nineveh, the capitol city – near modern-day Mosul in northern Iraq.

Now it just so happens at the time that the mighty Assyrians are ruthlessly assaulting the Northern Kingdom of Israel and ripping town-by-town into exile

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Kings 14:25 He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.

<sup>4</sup> Jonah 3.4b.

back in Assyria.<sup>5</sup> You see, the Assyrians are the terrorists of the ancient world.<sup>6</sup> Their strategy of terror is especially foul. When capturing a city, they would enucleate the eyeballs of their victims, dismember their extremities, dissect their faces, decapitate them, and either pile their heads at the city gates or hang them about town as repulsive decorations.

Jonah knows the Assyrians. His prophetic counterpart, Nahum, cries out against Nineveh, “Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims ... who has not felt your endless cruelty?” (Nahum 3.1, 19)

And so, when the Word of the Lord comes to Jonah, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against their wickedness,” it is not unreasonable to want nothing to do with this unusual call. Instead of obediently going north 550 miles from Gath-hepher to Nineveh, Jonah sets out to flee 2,500 miles to Tarshish, the end of the known world.



Let's see what happens when you get angry at the Grace of God.

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<sup>5</sup> The capitol city of Samaria would fall in 722 BC ending the Northern Kingdom of Israel, whose ten tribes would never return. Babylon would conquer Assyria in 612 BC, then capture and deport into exile the Southern Kingdom of Judah in 586 BC. (the “Babylonian Captivity”). Babylon would fall to Persia in 539 BC, whose King Cyrus the Great would permit exiled Judeans to return home and build the second temple in Jerusalem, as recorded in Ezra.

<sup>6</sup> See the paper by Erika Belibtreu, “Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 17:01 (Jan/Feb 1991), at [http://faculty.uml.edu/ethan\\_Spanier/Teaching/documents/CP6.0AssyrianTorture.pdf](http://faculty.uml.edu/ethan_Spanier/Teaching/documents/CP6.0AssyrianTorture.pdf)

Hear the Word of the Lord:

**N**ow the Word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> *“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.”* <sup>3</sup> But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

<sup>4</sup> But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup> Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god ... <sup>6</sup> The captain came and said to Jonah, *“What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”*

<sup>9</sup> *“I am a Hebrew,”* Jonah replied. *“I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, Who made the sea and the dry land.”* <sup>10</sup> Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, *“What is this that you have done!”* For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them so ...

<sup>13b</sup> The sea grew more and more stormy against them. <sup>14a</sup> Then they cried out to the LORD, *“Please, O LORD, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life”* ... <sup>15</sup> So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup> Then the men feared the LORD even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

<sup>17</sup> But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

<sup>2:1</sup> Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, <sup>2</sup> saying, *“I called to the LORD out of my distress, and the Lord answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice. <sup>3</sup> You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all Your waves and Your*

*billows passed over me ...<sup>5</sup> The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped around my head<sup>6a</sup> at the roots of the mountains ...<sup>6c</sup> yet You brought up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God.<sup>7</sup> As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple ...<sup>9</sup> With the voice of thanksgiving I will sacrifice to You; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!”*

<sup>10</sup> Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

<sup>3:1</sup> The Word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, <sup>2</sup> “*Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.*” <sup>3</sup> So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the Word of the LORD ... <sup>4b</sup> And he cried out, “*Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*” <sup>5</sup> And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth ...

<sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed His mind about the calamity that He had said He would bring upon them; and He did not do it.

<sup>4:1</sup> But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. <sup>2</sup> He prayed to the LORD and said, “*O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing ...*”

<sup>4</sup> And the LORD said,

*“Is it right for you to be angry?” ...*

<sup>6</sup> The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. <sup>7</sup> But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. <sup>8a</sup> When the sun rose, God prepared a

sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die.

<sup>9a</sup> But God said to Jonah,

*“Is it right for you to be angry ... ?”*

<sup>10</sup> Then the LORD said, *“You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. <sup>11</sup> And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”*

One: The Word of the Lord.

All: *Thanks be to God!*

What a story! Full of plot twists, irony, surprising reversals, deep insight into human nature and the poison of hatred, stunning revelation about God’s character and unstoppable will – and to boot, the story ends with a cliff-hanger, without resolution on the human level. Indeed, our last glimpse of Jonah is pitiful. There God’s prophet sits in the torrid Assyrian wind, choking with dust, wilting in the heat of the Mesopotamian sun, still arguing with the Lord that he’s “angry enough to die”! There sits Jonah – the Dove! – slumping in the gracious presence of “the Lord, the God of heaven,” Whom Jonah knows “made the sea and the dry land” (1.9). And Jonah’s Creator is asking and repeating the central question of this story: “Is it right for you to be angry?” But the prophet refuses to surrender his anger. End of story.

Why is Jonah angry?

Is he angry that “the God of heaven, Who made the sea and the dry land” didn’t leave him alone in his disobedience, in his betrayal of self, but graciously followed him out to sea?

Is he angry that the One Who makes wind and water, chooses to use wind and water to compel obedience, hoping to win Jonah's salvation? Is he angry that pagan sailors are trying to show him the very mercy he is failing to show? Is he angry that it is through his disobedience rather than obedience that the sailors begin confessing and worshiping and sacrificing to his Lord?

Is Jonah angry that because God is the Lord of the sea, God can choose to use anything in the sea as an instrument of mercy? Even a monster?

Is he angry, after God answers his lovely prayer of desperate lament and regurgitates him to dry land, that the Word of the Lord refuses to leave him alone on the beach? Refuses to ignore his identity crisis and find somebody else? Refuses to give up on him and take away his special calling?

Is Jonah angry, after his 8-word gloom and doom sermon, that the people of Nineveh repent and trust the Lord and that the Lord actually reckons the Assyrians' faith as righteousness, just like the Lord reckons the faith of Abraham & Sarah?

Is he angry that not just a few folk repent and believe in the Lord, but that every human being and every animal in the vast city of Nineveh bends their knee in sorrowful repentance, crying mightily to God, turning from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands? Is Jonah angry about the glory of a whole city bowing humbly before the true Maker of heaven and earth?

Is he angry that God changes His mind about destroying Nineveh? Is he angry that the God Who makes and holds all things together remains free to interact, to give and take, to relate interpersonally, and to change His mind for the sake of salvation?

Is he angry that the Lord is internally consistent, that no matter how wickedly Jonah twists his circumstances – how UN-prophet-like he behaves – the Lord faithfully remains inside the circumstances, working with and through the stuff in life that happens, graciously and mercifully and patiently resisting anger, abounding in steadfast love, and always ready and eager to turn back from

punishing? Is Jonah angry that this is Who God Is and that God cannot NOT be God?

Is Jonah angry that God knows exactly what God is doing, and that God can be trusted in whatever God is doing, and that God has the majesty to appoint bushes for shade, then to appoint worms to wither the bushes, then to appoint the sun and earth to make winds to try to blow Jonah off his narcissistic pedestal into the glorious liberty of salvation?

**P**eople of God, what an unmatched picture of sin in all of Scripture! God's prophet Jonah is angry that the only Lord of heaven and earth has claimed him and will not let him go.

What a picture of sin! God's prophet, gifted with the Word of the Lord, is angry that he cannot escape from grace and mercy and patience and steadfast love and forgiveness!

What a picture of sin! How can this possibly be? How?

And what about you? Is it right for you to be angry about God's grace?

Is it right for you to be angry about the very particular way God chooses to show you mercy and steadfast love?

Is it right for you to be angry about the freedom with which God orchestrates the everyday events in your life – everyday! – the natural world, the weather, your work or unemployment or retirement, what you can eat or drink, whether you remain healthy or get sick, whether you have cancer or not, whether you have prosperity or poverty? Is it right for you to be angry if God reserves the freedom to arrange everything in your life by His fatherly hand, for your salvation?

Finally, is it right for you to be angry that the God Who sent a sea monster to eat Jonah for 3 days and 3 nights, and Who sent His only-begotten Son to eat death forever, can now freely use even death as an instrument to save you?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates the feast day of the Holy Prophet Jonah on 21 September, and seizes on Jonah as a foreshadowing or "type" of Christ's resurrection, with the following two hymns, the Dismissal Troparion: "To the Ninevites, you were a trumpet, blaring fearful threats of Heaven's judgments, at which they repented with all their hearts; and from the sea-monster's belly you foreshadowed the Lord's divine Resurrection to all the world. Hence, entreat Him to bring all of us out of corruption, who honor you, O Jonah, as a friend of

No.

No, it is not right to be angry that the Lord cannot stop loving you. And it is not right to be angry that the Lord cannot stop loving them. And it is not right to be angry that the Lord cannot stop loving the wind and the water and the cattle and the sheep and the stars and the bushes ... and the worms.

It is not right to be angry about the grace of God.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.



Richard I. Deibert  
Peace Presbyterian Church  
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God"; and the Kontakion: "You passed three days and nights within the sea-monster's entrails, showing forth the Lord's descent into the belly of Hades; for when He had freely suffered His saving Passion, He arose out of the sepulcher on the third day. Hence, we honor thee, O Prophet, who was deemed worthy to be a figure of Christ." *The Great Horologion (or Book of Hours)*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, Massachusetts, 1997), 256–57. In ancient Christian allegorical thinking, to say that Jonah's ingestion and expulsion from the sea monster is a "type" of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection is to make Christ's resurrection the "antitype" of Jonah, just as when a die is stamped on a coin: the die, which is a reversed and unclear image, is the "type," and the stamped image on the coin, which is true and clear, is the "antitype." New Testament events are always "antitypes," in that they are the ultimate reality contained within – and making possible and real – the types, the events happening chronologically beforehand. See John Anthony McGuckin's entry on "Allegory" in *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 6–8.