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| **THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR**  **"A Sinful Response to Sovereign Mercy” Rev. Carl Haak September 11, 2011; No. 3584** |

Dear radio friends,

    As we continue in the study of the book of Jonah, we come to yet another startling and strange episode in the life of the prophet Jonah.  We again see that the Word of God in this book centers not so much in the prophetic utterances of Jonah, his sermons, but in the very life and actions of the prophet himself.

      Let us recall a few of the facts.  Originally Jonah had been commissioned to go to the city of Nineveh and cry against it because their wickedness had come up before God.  Jonah, however, ran away.  He turned one hundred eighty degrees to go to Joppa and found a ship to Tarshish, a distant, remote location.  But God will not let go.  He sends a storm upon the ship and He rebukes the prophet through pagan sailors.  He prepares a fish.  When Jonah is cast overboard, a fish swallows him.  And Jonah is in the belly of the fish for three days, after which the fish spits him back out on dry land.  Then the Lord renews His commission:  Jonah, go to Nineveh; preach the preaching that I bid thee.  And God powerfully uses the Word spoken by Jonah to bring repentance to His own in Nineveh.

      Now we come to chapter 4.  We learn of Jonah’s reaction to this mighty display of the sovereign mercies of God.  We read, “It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.”

      Let us begin by asking the question:  What should have been Jonah’s response to the mercy of God shown to the Ninevites?  Well, we would expect joy.  From every aspect, the book of Jonah is one of mercy.  It is about God’s mercy first of all to Jonah, who had rebelled against his God.  Yet, God had preserved His servant from his own folly.  And God, in mercy, had brought him to repentance in the fish’s belly and brought him to Nineveh to be His mouthpiece.  It was a vision of mercy when God showed mercy to the pagan mariners on the ship.   And, greatest of all, God’s mercy in the book of Jonah is shown to the Ninevites.  We have, as it were, a flash of light in the Old Testament — a flash of the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ going to all nations to gather a church out of all people — elect and precious, one church in Christ.

      After all of that, we must remember that Jonah *was* a prophet.  In a sense he had a very special passion given to him, by grace, for the glory of God.  He was a true prophet who wanted and was consumed with the glory of God above all things.  Certainly we would say that a prophet would rejoice when the mercy of God, His sovereign mercy, is so powerfully displayed.  What should have been Jonah’s response?  Joy!

      But what was the response?  The language leaves no doubt.  “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry” ([Jonah 4:1](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jonah+4:1)).   It was a response of extreme displeasure, irritation, which degenerated into extreme anger.  And it was startling and stark.  It is almost as if we would wonder if we are reading the book right.  But it is no mistake.  Jonah resented what God had done and got angry over it.  The word “angry” here means “to glow, to wax warm, to blaze up, to flare.”  Jonah blew his cork.  He got angry at God.  And it was not something passing, for a moment.  It was deep-seated.  When God comes to him in verse 4 to deal with His narrow-hearted prophet, His hot-tempered servant, God asks him the question:  “Doest thou well to be angry?”  And Jonah does not even answer.  We read in verse 5, “So Jonah went out of the city.”  He got up and walked off.  “I’m not going to talk about it.”  It was a carnal anger, a horrible, sinful, shameful thing, as if Jehovah did not know the end from the beginning, as if Jehovah’s ways are not right.  And now Jonah’s response to the display of God’s sovereign mercy was, not that he was perplexed, not that he had questions about how all of this was going to fit together.  No!  That was not his response.  His response was:  he was angry with God.

      Now we need to ask why he was so angry.  In a moment we are going to look at the prayer that he prays in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 4 and that is going to give us the reason.  But on the surface, we should see at least two things that stood at the root of his anger.

      First of all, God had done something that Jonah did not want.  Or maybe it would be better to put it this way:  God had not done what Jonah wanted to be done.  We gather that if after his sacrifice, and his journeying to Nineveh and preaching to the Ninevites the judgments of God, God had destroyed the city and wiped them out, Jonah would have gone home happy.  Here he had done what God said.  He was not happy about it, but he had obeyed.  He had preached what God had told him to preach.  But instead of getting the result that Jonah wanted, God’s sovereign way was something different.  And Jonah did not like it.

      Does that sound familiar?  We are taught to pray, “Thy will be done,” but very often that prayer can mean for us, “Thy will be done, so long as it’s according to my liking.  But do not do anything that would be contrary to my plan for things in my life.  I’m supposed to be accepted at this college.  I’m supposed to be accepted by my friends.  I’m supposed to make the team.  I’m supposed to, as a husband and wife (a young couple), have two boys and two girls, our own house, and a nice back yard.  I’m supposed to get A’s in this class.  I’m supposed to be pretty.”  And if it doesn’t happen, do you get mad and go off and pout against God?

      Oh, beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ, may Father’s mercies erode our foolish, proud, selfish heart and make us at all times reconciled with Father’s will, to receive all things from the Father’s hand as being right.

      Secondly, at the root of his anger was that Jonah had forgotten God’s mercy to him.  Jonah was not consciously, experientially, living in the wonder of God’s mercy to him.  Compare Jonah to the apostle Paul ([I Tim. 1:16](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=I+Tim+1:16)). Paul says, “Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.”  Paul says, aware of God’s mercy, aware of the fact that *I*was the one who was so hardened against God, now, having received that mercy, let my experience be for the encouragement of others to know God’s loving-kindness.  But the greatness of God’s mercy to Jonah had receded into the background of his mind.  He had forgotten very quickly.  The most amazing thing in the Bible, you know, is that the memory of God’s people is very short.  You would ask, how could one forget if he lived three days in a fish’s belly?  How could one forget that salvation is, indeed, of the Lord’s mercy?  Yet Jonah forgot.  Do not shake your head at Jonah.  Think of your own heart.  How soon we forget that everything that we are and have is of the Lord’s mercy!  Oh, the magnitude of that mercy!  How quickly we forget that mercy of God.

      That applies also with regard to our reactions and thoughts toward others and patience for others in the church and willingness to understand others.  We become quick to judge, quick to put the deeds, words, and actions of others in a bad light.  Are you very quick to get mad and irritated at another person, maybe that child, that husband or wife?  Jonah, you who have received everything of mercy from God, doest thou well to be angry?  You, who have received abundance of grace and mercy through Jesus Christ, do you do well to be angry?

      Jonah’s anger expressed itself in two ways.  First of all, there was a petulant prayer.  Jonah’s anger expressed itself in prayer ([Jonah 4:2](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jonah+4:2)), “And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country?  Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish:  for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.”   Now, we must commend the prophet that, in his anger, he had sense enough to pray.  That was better than what he did before.  Before he just turned foot and ran.  But that is as far as we can go to commend him.  This is not a spiritual prayer.  It may use high-sounding words, but it was a churlish, peevish, petulant prayer.  It is not a prayer to copy.  It is a prayer here in the Scriptures for admonition — do not pray *this* way.

      What was Jonah saying?  He was saying this:  “Lord, when the command came to me first, I refused to obey because I knew that thy very nature is merciful.  I saw that in Israel.  And I had a strong suspicion that if I went to Nineveh I would be used as an instrument of Thy sovereign mercy to Thy children there.   I knew that Thou art merciful.  That was stamped in the history of Israel way back at Mount Sinai, when Moses pleaded Thy mercy for a rebellious people.  And I had this nagging suspicion that now, to the Ninevites who are Israel’s *enemies,* to those pagans, to those barbarians, to *those* people, national enemies of Israel, to *them* Thou wouldst show purposes of sheer mercy and make them one church in Jesus Christ.  And what I feared would happen did happen.  I have a gripe.  I’m angry that Thou hast done this!”  Jonah does not like certain people.  He has these people sized up.  They are not like us in Israel.  We are God’s people.  They are whatever.  Their ancestors were cannibals.  Mercy should not be shown to them.  So he went on to pray, “Therefore, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.”

      Now that is shocking and shameful.  Jonah is digging in his heels against God and saying, “If it’s going to be this way, I’d rather be dead.”  That is terrible!  The pain that we have when we hear those words should not simply be from a distance, saying, “Jonah, what’s the matter with you?  How dare you talk like that?”  The pain should be directed to ourselves.  That is how stubborn, foolish, obstinent, and shamefully self-willed we are when we say, “OK, can’t do anything about it?  That’s the will of the Lord?  I don’t like it.  But don’t ask me to accept and submit to it.  I’d just as soon die then, if that’s the way it’s going to be.”

      Have you ever said that?  Jonah said, “I would rather die than see mercy shown to those Gentiles who are Israel’s enemies.  Just take me out of this, then.”  Jonah should have been down among the repentant Ninevites.  He should have been in their streets saying, “Yes, the Lord is merciful to awful sinners, isn’t He?  I’m an awful sinner.  And you see now your sins.  Isn’t the mercy of God wonderful?”  But instead, his narrow heart causes him to miss it all.  His narrow heart shuts the door to the blessings all around him.  There the people of Nineveh are brought to repentance by sheer mercy.  They are hungry and  teachable for the Word of God.  They probably could not get enough.  “Tell us more, Jonah.  We have to know more of this wonderful truth of the mercies of the sovereign and eternal God.”

      But instead, the prophet, who should have been down teaching, is bitter, closed up in heart, resentful, because he thought he knew who should receive God’s mercy and who should not, and because he thought the mercy of God was owed to him but not to others.

      So we read that “Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.”  Jonah left the city.  He went to the east side, where the sun would rise behind him and lighten the city in front of him.  And he builds a little lean-to, a booth, with the sides open and boards overhead to protect him from the sun, to see what would become of the city.  Forty days came and went.  Jehovah has repented of the evil that He said He would do.  But let’s wait and see!  Maybe in a week or two they will go back to where they were.  Maybe it was just an emotional thing with them.  Maybe their pagan training and former life is going to win out.  The old craving for plunder will conquer them.  It is almost as if Jonah is a spiritual sadist.  He thinks, “Perhaps God will then come down and consume them as I wanted at first.”

      He is not like Jeremiah the prophet.  Jeremiah, too, had prophesied of a judgment of God upon Judah.  And Judah did not repent.  What was Jeremiah’s response?  It was much closer to what it should be, [Jeremiah 17:16](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jeremiah+17:16):   “As for me, I have not hastened from being a pastor to follow thee:  neither have I desired the woeful day; thou knowest:  that which came out of my lips was right before thee.”  But Jonah?  Jonah went out to pout and to wait to see if, perhaps, the repentance was only surface deep and if, at last, the city would receive the judgment that he thought it ought to get.

      What does that say to us?  It says for sure that we must see what miserable creatures we are as children of God when we are left to the dominating influence of any remaining sin.  Jonah was a child of God.  He was a regenerated, sanctified man.  But he is the record of one who has remaining sin in him — a besetting sin, a sin that clung to him in a fish’s belly, and a sin that, when he did not take it seriously and crucify it and fight it unto blood, would bring him exceedingly low.  For Jonah, his besetting sin was religious bigotry.  It was pride, a twisting of the idea of mercy that somehow he deserved it and others did not.  It plagued him.  He struggled with it.  He prayed against it.  But when he let down his guard and stood on his own, it came back full-blown.  Then, what a miserable man he was.  That sin produced one sin after another.  Here is a holy prophet.  But when he is left to himself, one unmortified sin makes him a shameful, miserable sinner.

      Jonah is not the only example of this in the Bible.  Think of David, a man after God’s own heart, the sweet psalmist of Israel.  When he came under the predominating influence of one sin, his own lust, what happened?  Adultery, murder, and horrible lies—destruction to his own family.  Trace it out.  It began as a young man, soon after marriage.  He began to take more wives.  He had been anointed king after Saul.  God had said in [Deuteronomy 17:17](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Deuteronomy+17:17) about the king:  “Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away.”  But David multiplied wives.  He began to be a connoisseur of fine female flesh.  He catered to, he fed, he nurtured his lust in him.  He did not fight it.  He did not try to crush it.  As he fought against the Philistines, he knew what to do with a Philistine in front of him — kill him, crush him!  But his own lust?  He did not fight his own lust that way.  Then one night, though he had six wives, he said, Why not a seventh?  Why even bother about her being my wife?  Why should it concern me that she is another man’s wife?  I can have him killed.  And the man after God’s own heart became a beast.  Why?  Because of unmortified sin.

      Do you hear the Word of God?  Whatever besetting sin you and I choose to leave alone because we think it is too hard to fight and we can declare a truce with it—whatever it is, beware.  You might say, “Well, I’ll decide to leave it alone if it leaves me alone.”  But it is not going to leave you alone.  Maybe that sin is not obvious.  It may be the envy in you as a young girl.  It may be jealousy.  It may be covetousness.  It may be the belief that this thing—this house, this car, this dress—is *all* you need to make you happy.  It may be ambition.  It may be the desire that, oh, I have to get ahead.  It may be that you are subject to make uncharitable judgments or you are selfish.  Whatever it is, if you allow it to be left alone, God alone knows what it may lead you to do.  Leave no unguarded place, no besetting sin, unbattled within you.  That is the lesson of the book of Jonah.  Watch and pray, said Jesus, for ye know not what hour ye shall enter into temptation.  The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

      How compassionate, then, we ought to be with others when we know this about ourselves.  Do not stand throwing stones at Jonah.  If we are left to ourselves, we are exactly like him.

      A child of God is like a person soaked with fuel oil, walking through a burning building.  If he gets out, it is because God has watched over him.  Do you understand that?  There is no sin and no depth to which you could not go, but for the grace of God.  But behold the wonderful mercy of God.

      Jonah was angry at God.  How dare He?  But God is sovereign in His mercy.  And God is going to deal in love with this prophet and bend his knee in repentance.  God’s mercy is an unconditional mercy, that is, it is not dependent on or caused by the one He chooses to save.  It is undeserved.  If you want proof of that, then, child of God, look upon yourself.  Everyone who has received the mercy of God is a proof that God’s mercy is totally undeserved.  Let us humbly thank Him.  Let us rejoice in Jesus Christ, and let us look to the greater than Jonah, our Lord Jesus Christ, and put our trust in Him.

      Let us pray.

      Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word, and we pray for its blessing upon our heart.  Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.