

QUIZ

1. What personal response of the Ninevites toward God preceded their repentance?
2. How did the Ninevites manifest their penitent attitude?
3. How was Jonah a sign to the Ninevites?
4. How was Jonah a sign to the Jews of Jesus' day?
5. Why did the king of Nineveh decree that the animals should wear sackcloth?
6. Does God repent? Explain!
7. Why pray?

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING AHEAD OF GOD—THE DISPLEASURE OF JONAH

TEXT: 4:1-3

- 1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.
- 2 And he prayed unto Jehovah, and said, I pray thee, O Jehovah, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I hastened to flee unto Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness, and repentest thee of the evil.
- 3 Therefore now, O Jehovah, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.

QUERIES

- a. Why would Jonah be displeased that thousands of people were saved?
- b. Why would the graciousness of God lead him to flee to Tarshish?
- c. Why did he think it better to die than to live?

PARAPHRASE

But God's withholding of His wrath against Nineveh was very displeasing to Jonah. Jonah was grieved and vexed and prayed, saying, Lord! isn't this what I said back in Palestine before I ever came to Nineveh? This is exactly why I ran off toward Tarshish—I knew that You are gracious, merciful, longsuffering, overflowing in Your loving-kindness and that you would forgive and withhold Your punishment. On account of this, O Lord, I beg You, take my life. Because my mission is a failure, I would rather be dead than alive.

SUMMARY

Jonah feels his mission is a failure when Nineveh is not destroyed. He cannot go back and preach to his wicked countrymen with any forcefulness because God is merciful. Jonah would rather be dead.

COMMENT

v. 1-3 . . . IT DISPLEASED JONAH EXCEEDINGLY . . . THEREFORE . . . TAKE . . . MY LIFE FROM ME . . . There are about as many different opinions as to the cause of Jonah's anger as there are commentators. We prefer Professor Fairbairn's evaluation. We just cannot bring ourselves to characterize Jonah as a man so full of hate that his primary vexation is due to a cold-blooded desire to see hundreds of thousands of heathen slain. Fairbairn says, "Jonah was disconcerted and downcast because the example of severity had been withheld, which he thought would operate so beneficially upon the minds of his countrymen and without which he seemed to have no means of attaining the great end and object of his life." Hugh Martin, in *The Prophet Jonah*, says, "In Jonah's judgement the sparing of Nineveh would eclipse the honor of God, destroy the credit of his ministry, and harden the hearts of his countrymen."

The people of Israel in Jonah's day were in a state of terrible degeneracy and profligacy. All the efforts of God, sending them prophets, had thus far failed to bring them to their senses and repentance. So the Lord, before abandoning them finally to their fate, sought once more to move them from their downward plunge, by working upon them through feelings of jealousy and shame while at the same time giving them an example of His mercy and lovingkindness when repentance is shown. For this purpose God did with Nineveh what He did not usually do with other heathen nations. Living in the age of ease, comfort, luxury, during national ascendancy of Jeroboam II when the people were almost totally libertine, Jonah preached in vain month after month, year after year. All the while his own countrymen and neighbors despised everything he was attempting to do on their behalf. It is no wonder Jonah, like Elijah of old, after waiting month after month for some fearful, sudden, decisive turning-point to come in the form of wrath from the Lord, would feel discouraged by the thought of the Lord's mercy. When he thought of this at his first call it would cause him to despair of any thing effectual being accomplished toward bringing his own countrymen to their senses. Then after his own experience in the sea monster's belly, he might stand in the midst of Nineveh and imagine that in forty days he would at last obtain the very example of the wrath of God upon sin

that he hoped would come and that he could take back to Israel and persuade them to turn from their sin.

It requires no stretch of the imagination, then, to see what a disappointment it was for him to see Nineveh spared, and the very weapon snatched from his hand by which he hoped to prevail against the sin of his countrymen. Jonah was not so much concerned with his own reputation nor so full of hate and vengeance that he would have taken some fiendish delight in the slaying of thousands of people; but he loved his own people so intensely, and was so firmly persuaded that an act of severity was required to shake them from their false security he was grieved and frustrated. Instead of having the vantage point of a tremendous illustration of God's wrath upon sin he felt his whole purpose in life had been defeated and there was nothing left for him but to die.

Neither Jonah nor Elijah were right. Both of them were out of harmony with God's will. Both of them misunderstood God's plan and had only a partial view of His purposes and therefore made hasty, carnal judgements as to how God should govern. The lesson for us is that God's way is still the best; for He sees the end from the beginning, and directs all with infinite skill and unerring wisdom. If we *could* alter the plan of God it would not be for the better but for the worse. We must take the attitude of Habakkuk who, when he could not understand why God would use a heathen nation to punish the covenant people, said, "I will take my stand to watch, and station myself on the tower, and look forth to see what he will say to me . . . behold . . . the righteous shall live by faith."

QUIZ

1. Why do you think Jonah was displeased with God's mercy on Nineveh?
2. What other prophet had the same concept of how God should govern?
3. What lesson should we learn from this?

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING AHEAD OF GOD—THE DEMONSTRATION BY JEHOVAH

TEXT: 4:4-10

- 4 And Jehovah said, Doest thou well to be angry?
- 5 Then 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 shade, till he might see what would become of the city.

- 6 And Jehovah God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to deliver him from his evil case. So Jonah was exceeding glad because of the gourd.
- 7 But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd, that it withered.
- 8 And it came to pass, when the sun arose, that God prepared a sultry east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and requested for himself that he might die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.
- 9 And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.
- 10 And Jehovah said, Thou hast had regard for the gourd, for which thou hast not labored, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:

QUERIES

- a. Why does God ask Jonah twice if he does well to be angry?
- b. What kind of "booth" did Jonah prepare for himself and why?
- c. What is the lesson to be learned from the gourd?

PARAPHRASE

And God said to Jonah, Are you right in being grieved because I have spared Nineveh? But Jonah went out and built a little lean-to on the east side of the city and camped under its shade. He wanted to wait to see if God would not bring judgement upon Nineveh after all. And when the leaves of the little shelter withered in the heat, the Lord prepared a gourd vine to grow up quickly and spread its broad leaves over Jonah's head to shade him. Jonah was very happy that the vine was there to shade him from the hot sun. God also prepared a worm! And the next morning the worm killed the gourd vine and it withered and dried up and gave shade to Jonah no longer. So when the sun began to bear down in the heat of the day God also caused a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah and he grew so hot he became very weak to the point of fainting and actually wished to die. He said, Death is better than this! But God said again to Jonah, Are you right in being so grieved over the withering of the gourd? Jonah replied, Yes, I am right in being grieved enough to die. And God said, You are grieved in your soul over the gourd vine because you had need of it in the direst way. You cannot claim the gourd as your right because you did not create it, or plant it, or cultivate it. And the gourd vine is, at best, only a plant which has withered and died.

SUMMARY

Jonah succumbs to discouragement. God gives him an object lesson. God is about to show Jonah how inconsistent his thinking is.

COMMENT

v. 4-5 . . . DOEST THOU WELL TO BE ANGRY? . . . JONAH WENT OUT OF THE CITY . . . TILL HE MIGHT SEE WHAT WOULD BECOME OF THE CITY. God asks, Are you certain that your concept of how I should deal with the Ninevites is correct? are you certain that My dealing with them as I have is grievous? It would seem that God is giving Jonah opportunity to *think*, perhaps to pray, and learn a new lesson about God's purposes and ways. The Lord plants the idea in Jonah's heart that he may not be doing well in being grieved.

But Jonah could not yet believe that the Ninevites would be allowed to resume their former course of peace and prosperity without a strong demonstration of God's wrath. And, as we have said before, this lingering concept in the mind of Jonah was not due to any maliciousness or bloodthirstiness. Even when he knew the people had repented he might have considered some form of punishment still perfectly compatible with God's righteousness and justice. Many have still felt the consequences of their sins long after they have repented (cf. David, Moses, etc.). After all, Jonah took his revelation of God's nature from the Old Testament and not from the New. And there is a difference! Fairbairn says, "These considerations appear to me perfectly sufficient to account for a state of mind in Jonah such as might induce him, without any disobedience to the will of God, so far as that had yet been made known to him, to go and erect a booth at some distance from the city, where he might wait in anxious expectation to see what would become of it." All of Jonah's knowledge of how God dealt with sin, especially heathen wickedness, was learned from the O. T. What Jonah needed still to learn, and what God had not yet shown him, was the largeness of the mercy to be extended to Nineveh—that it amounted to an *entire remission* of the threatened penalty. To teach him this, to show him it was reasonable and just on the part of God, yea, even of urgent necessity in the best interests of those whom Jonah loved so dearly, his own countrymen, Jonah's temporary shelter from the burning sun was turned into a school of discipline.

This "booth" which Jonah built was a temporary, small, lean-to affair, built usually of palm leaves, or at other times with any type of leafy tree branch, which would afford shade from the searing desert sun.

v. 6-8 . . . JEHOVAH PREPARED A GOURD . . . JONAH WAS EXCEEDING GLAD . . . BUT GOD PREPARED A WORM . . . AND IT SMOTE THE GOURD, THAT IT WITHERED . . . GOD PREPARED A SULTRY EAST WIND . . . JONAH . . . FAINTED, AND REQUESTED . . . THAT HE MIGHT DIE . . . God knows exactly how to correct Jonah's mistaken concept of the Divine purpose for Nineveh's salvation. Jonah needed something that would graphically turn his thoughts from the channel they were in to ideas of God's purpose which had never entered his imagination. For this purpose God permitted him to go construct his frail booth near the city and to experience there for a time inconvenience and discomfort. Then suddenly God brought over Jonah, without any exertion on the part of Jonah at all, the shadow of a broad foliage by the growth of the gourd vine. Then, just as suddenly, God made him feel again, in an even more intense way, the scorching sun and parching wind, by causing a worm to destroy the gourd vine. Jonah suffered a mild sunstroke and fainted from the exposure and said he would have found death itself a happy release.

v. 9-10 . . . DOEST THOU WELL TO BE ANGRY FOR THE GOURD? . . . THOU HAST REGARD FOR THE GOURD, FOR WHICH THOU HAST NOT LABORED . . . God is leading him slowly but surely to an ever higher plan concerning the Divine behavior. In other circumstances it would have been a matter of little significance to Jonah what happened to the gourd vine. Situated as he was, however, depending for his comfort, and in a sense, also for his life on its ample foliage, its sudden destruction necessarily came upon him as a terrible tragedy—a calamity. This is exactly the relationship God would have him consider concerning Nineveh. Nineveh, a city that feared the name and obeyed the voice of God, God had need of it in this time of extreme necessity in the case of Israel. God's cause would suffer by its annihilation.

If there had been any hope of the people in Israel being still brought permanently to repentance by some great example of the wrath of God, God would have known it and brought it to pass. But this hope could no longer be entertained. Everything of this sort had already been tried with Israel and still their hearts waxed hard and cold.

QUIZ

1. Why did God allow Jonah to leave the city and sit and wait?
2. Why might Jonah still cling to the hope that the city would be destroyed?
3. What was God's purpose in shading Jonah with a gourd vine and then taking it away?

GOD'S MESSENGER RUNNING AHEAD OF GOD—THE DECLARATION OF JEHOVAH

TEXT: 4:11

11 and should I not have regard for Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

QUERIES

- a. Why would God want to have regard for wicked Nineveh?
- b. What is the meaning, "cannot discern between right and left hand?"
- c. Why mention cattle?

PARAPHRASE

And God said, Should I not then be just as concerned for the preservation of Nineveh as you were for the gourd vine. You needed the vine and I have urgent need for Nineveh to be preserved. In addition to this there are more than 120,000 innocent children and dumb animals abiding in that city.

SUMMARY

God reveals to Jonah His purpose in sparing Nineveh.

COMMENT

v. 11 . . . SHOULD I NOT HAVE REGARD FOR NINEVEH . . . God must use other means than a demonstration of His wrath upon Nineveh if He is to bring any heartfelt repentance to the calloused Israelites of Jeroboam's day. *He must call their jealousy into action*, (cf. comments on 1:1-2). God seeks to arouse Israel, by the example of this heathen nation spared due to repentance, to the startling consideration that the favor of God was bestowed on those of every race who work righteousness—and *of the possibility* that the kingdom of heaven might be transplanted to a people more spiritually prepared to receive it! Yes, the Lord at this time peculiarly had *need* of Nineveh in its penitent state; "the cause of righteousness in the earth could ill afford to spare so singular a witness to the truth; the spiritual good of Israel itself in particular required it."

MESSENGER RUNNING AHEAD OF GOD

This singular demonstration of God's mercy and forgiveness and salvation would also furnish hope for the faithful remnant later in captivity. This concept which the Lord sought to impress even on Jonah personally in his own experience in the sea, and which was taught again in the experience of the gourd, provided for all the faithful among the future exiles a sure ground of consolation and hope. There would be hope for them even in what might seem to be despair and grief.

And so ends this remarkable history of a remarkable prophet of God. There are some significant lessons to be learned from this account.

1. Beware of letting our ideas of the results of God's work interfere with carrying out His present will for our lives.
2. Beware lest we belittle what can be or what is accomplished for God by our ideas of the significance or insignificance of the place of service.
3. Wherever and whenever God is pleased to manifest His grace and goodness it is our obligation and privilege to acknowledge and rejoice in that manifestation.
4. God's ways are not our ways. God does not change; man must change!

QUIZ

1. What was the ultimate purpose in sparing Nineveh?
2. What hope would the sparing of Nineveh give to the Israelites of the captivity?
3. How did God compare Jonah's grief for the gourd to His concern for Nineveh?