Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Jonah

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

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Chapter 1

Jonah's history a picture of that of the Jews

The prophet Jonah gives us the opportunity of applying his history to many sentiments that arise in the human heart in all ages. His personal history — the history of a man who was upright in the main, but who had not courage to follow out the will of God boldly — is so intermingled with his prophecy, as to make this individual application easy and natural. Nevertheless the history of Jonah is that of one who bears testimony on the part of God, rather than that of a believer in his ordinary life. It is the history of the human heart, when the testimony of God towards the world has been committed to it, and that of the sovereign and governmental dealings of God in connection with the workings of that heart. It is on this account that we find in the history of Jonah a picture of the history of the Jews in this respect, and even in some respects of that of the Messiah; only that the latter entered into it in grace, and was always perfect in it. I shall point out the leading features which the Spirit of God has been pleased to develop in this narrative, deeply interesting as it is in this aspect.

His prophecy confined to the threart of Nineveh's destruction

It is evident that in this prophecy the prophetic events are but the occasion, and, as it were, the frame of the great principles that flow from them; or rather the prophetic event. For the prophecy is confined to the threat of the destruction of Nineveh in forty days: a threat whose accomplishment was averted by the repentance of that city. Jonah's history forms the chief portion of the book.

Called to announce righteous judgment Jonah invests himself with the importance of his message

Nineveh — which represents the world in its natural greatness, full of pride and iniquity, regardless of God and of His authority — had deserved the righteous judgment of God. This is the occasion of all the development of God's dealings that we find in this book. Jonah is called to announce this judgment. The wretched tendency of the nature of man, to whom the testimony of God is committed, is to invest himself with the importance of the message with which he is charged. That God may so invest him in His grace we see in the history of that grace; that the man who bears the message should do so is but pride and vanity. The result with such is, that they cannot bear with the grace that God exhibits towards others, nor with any communication of His mind or nature through any other means than their own, even although it should be in grace. It is they who must do the thing themselves; it is they who must have the glory of it; and thus all their thoughts of God are limited to their own point of view — to the portion committed to them of God's message. Compare that which we have seen in the case of Moses and of Elijah, those eminent servants of God. The sense of that supremacy in God which can pardon is too much for the heart; it cannot be borne. The self-renunciation that seeks only to do the will of God, be it what it may, leaves God all His glory, and, if He glorifies Himself by shewing grace, can bless Him for it most heartily. Without this we shall like to wield the sword of His vengeance — a thing more in harmony, alas! with our natural hearts, and more adapted to increase our own importance.

Vengeance and grace to the messenger's natural heart

"Wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, as Elias did?" is the natural expression of the heart. For vengeance is the manifestation of power. Grace leaves sinful man to enjoy mercy — will not bring in power, but spares those against whom power might have been exercised. On the other hand, it is God alone who can shew grace.

The threat of vengeance is connected in the mind with the man who has received authority to announce it. The message and the messenger are both feared. A pardoned man is at the time more occupied with his own joy, and with Him that pardoned, than with the messenger of pardon. Moreover, when grace is shewn, it connects itself with the alarm inspired by the threatened judgment. And if the messenger be not himself imbued with the spirit of love, he feels himself in the presence of a God who is above his thoughts; and he is afraid of Him, because he does not know Him. He fears also for his own importance, if this God should be more gracious than the narrowness of his heart would desire and the message committed to him expressed.

Jonah's displeasure at grace to Gentiles

Such was the case with Jonah, although he feared God.

He flees from the presence of Jehovah, feeling that he cannot reckon upon Him to satisfy the little exigencies of his contracted heart (compare chap. 1:3; 4:2).

God is felt to be above the desires of man's heart. On the other hand, the truth of God pleases us when we can invest ourselves with it for our own importance. Thus it was with Israel.

Israel were the depositary of God's testimony in the world, and gloried in it as clothing themselves with honour, and Israel could not bear with the exercise of grace to the Gentiles. It was by their opposition to this that the Jews filled up the measure of their iniquity to bring the wrath of God upon them (compare Isaiah 43:10; 1 Thess. 2:16).

Jonah a type of Israel's unfaithfulness to render witness to God

Two principles, then, on which in fact the testimony of God may be rendered, are unfolded in this prophecy. First of all, man is called to render this testimony as a mark of faithfulness to God, for which he is responsible. This is the position in which we have already seen that Israel was placed. Their whole history is before us in confirmation of this thought. Blessed by God with nearness to Himself, Israel should have been a witness to the whole world of what the only true God was. But, wholly incapable of apprehending His grace towards the Gentiles (although the house of Jehovah was at all times the house of prayer for all nations), Israel failed even in maintaining their own faithfulness, and consequently therefore in that which was the only means of making the world, as such, to understand the true character of God. Instead therefore of being made a blessing to others, they only involved them in the divine judgments that were to fall upon themselves. This is the picture which Jonah sets before us in his own history at his first receiving the message of God. The same thing will take place at the end of the

age. Israel, unfaithful to God amid the billows of this world, insensible through their blind unbelief to the judgment which is ready to swallow them up, will drag into the results of their own sin all the other nations; and then the intervention of God will bring the latter also to acknowledge His power and His glory.

Those who truly acknowledge God must own His glory and grace to others or become unfaithful in their own walk

Let us here remark, that the principle we are speaking of is always true. If those to whom God in His grace has committed a testimony, do not employ this testimony in behalf of others according to the grace that bestowed it, they will soon become unfaithful in their own walk before God. If they truly acknowledged God, they would feel bound to make known His name, to impart this blessing to others. If they do not own His glory and His grace, they will assuredly be unable to maintain their own walk before Him. God, who is full of grace, being our only strength, it cannot be otherwise.

The reason for Jonah's failure

The first picture, then, that is set before us is that of a man called to be God's witness in the midst of a proud and corrupt world, which follows its own will, without regarding the authority or the holiness of God. But this man is not sufficiently near to God to enter into the spirit of His holy and loving ways; and therefore, knowing that He is gracious, shrinks from the task of representing such a God before the world. To invest himself with God's name for his own honour, Jonah, the Jew, would not refuse. But to bear the burden necessary to the maintenance of the testimony of such a God, so gracious, so longsuffering, as well as holy, this was too hard a thing for the proud and impatient heart of a man who desired to have his own will carried out in judgment, if the others would not obey it in holiness.

Jonah's flight was from Jehovah, not from the city's opposition: Jonah contrasted with the Faithful Witness

Observe, that although Jonah ought to have lifted up his voice against Nineveh, it is from the presence of Jehovah he fled, not from the carnal opposition of the city. Christ, our blessed Lord, is the only One who accomplished the task of which we speak. He is the faithful witness. We may compare Psalm 40, in which He speaks of the manner in which He undertook and accomplished it — He who dwelt in a glory that placed Him so entirely above such a position, that sovereign grace alone could bring Him down into it — a glory however which alone made Him capable of undertaking and accomplishing it, in spite of all the difficulties which the enmity of man put in His way. And great as His glory was, He accomplished the undertaken task of service as a duty in the humility of obedience, and that even unto death. See in Psalm 40:1-2 how far He went, and how — sheltering Himself from nothing — He puts His trust in God. He becomes man to accomplish this task (v. 6-8). He performs it faithfully (v. 9, 10), not concealing the truth and righteousness of Jehovah from the congregation of Israel. In verse 11 and following verses, under the deep pressure of the position He was in from man's iniquity and His taking up the cause of His people, He commits Himself to the tender mercies of Jehovah, praying (after having

rendered testimony with a perfect patience) for judgment on His enemies, the enemies of God's testimony. For it is the time, under the Jewish economy, of judgment.

Chapter 2

The entire rejection of the witness for God's first message

We have seen that the judgments which fall upon the unfaithful witness, being at length acknowledged by himself, are the means through which the name of Jehovah becomes known and worshipped among the Gentiles. Here begins the second picture of the testimony — the complete and entire rejection of the witness considered as the depositary of the first message. He undergoes the judgment of God, and is cast out of His presence into the depths of hades.

The just lot of unfaithful Israel: the spirit of the remnant in Jonah's prayer

This is the just lot of Israel, unfaithful to the testimony of God, and incapable of rendering it. Christ, in His infinite grace, came down into this place, being rejected because He was faithful. We most distinctly see the spirit of the remnant of Israel in Jonah's prayer. Verses 7-9 of chapter 2 prove it most clearly.

In fact the remnant of Israel, although upright by grace, are but flesh; the testimony is committed to them, and they fail. The flesh being without strength, sentence of death must pass on all that is of man. He is but vanity; and if he goes down into death, who can raise him up? Who can make a dead man the witness of God?

Death and resurrection: Christ, the Faithful Witness, is also the firstborn from the dead

But, blessed be God! Christ went down into death; and, as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so also the Son of man went down into the heart of the earth for the same period of time. But who could prevent His rising again? It was death here that was without strength, and not man. Death combated with One who had the power of life; and whether we consider the power of God, from whom Christ had merited resurrection, or the Person of the faithful witness Himself, it was not possible that He could be holden in the bands of Sheol. He is not only the faithful witness, but the firstborn from the dead.

Chapter 3

The second testimony as the Risen One: God's grace and mercy to Israel and the Gentiles

And now the second testimony begins. All that Israel could have been, all that belonged to man as responsible in himself, as far as testimony was concerned, has failed for ever. Christ Himself, the faithful One, has been rejected. Israel, consequently as the vessel of God's testimony in the flesh, is set aside. It is the risen One only, who can now bear testimony; and, we may add, bear it even to Israel, who is now become the object of mercy, instead of becoming the vessel of promise and of testimony. But this makes God return, so to speak, into His own character of lovingkindness. If Israel cannot, as a righteous one, be the vessel of the testimony of righteousness (and even, as a sinner, has rejected it), God returns to His own gracious character, as a faithful Creator; from which, moreover, in the depth of His own being, He never departed, although He put man to the proof, by bringing him into relationship with Himself, under every possible advantage, to see whether he could be a witness of righteousness — of God on the earth. Jonah knew at heart that there was grace in God. Assuredly he and his nation had experienced it. But in this case, unless righteousness were apart from mercy, so that he who stood as witness of this righteousness might be honoured — unless it were vindictive, so that he as its witness might be exalted — he would have nothing to do with it. Thenceforward he became incapable of it. For, in truth, God was gracious; and such a witness of Him as Jonah would have had was impossible — would not have been true.

It is on this account that grace (that is, the revelation of grace) is identified with mercy towards the Gentiles. Is He the God of the Jews only? Nay, verily, but of the Gentiles also. And the casting-off of the Jews, as Jews, becomes the reconciling of the world. The same Lord is rich unto all that call upon Him, that the Gentiles may glorify God for His mercy.* {* Hence, also, we may add, it is connected with resurrection in its accomplishment. This indeed, has a deeper cause — the state of man by nature; but this was brought out, in dispensation, by the failure of the Jews in connection with Christ after the flesh.}

God's controversy with Jonah: the reason for His warnings

This is God's controversy with Jonah at the end. He would refuse God the right of shewing mercy to His helpless creatures, and insist upon His rigorous execution of the sentence upon the Gentile world without even leaving space for repentance. God answers him, not at first by unfolding the counsels of His grace, but by appealing to the rights of His sovereign goodness, to His nature, to His own character. Nineveh has hearkened to God. Now, if God threatens, it is in order that man may turn from his iniquity and be spared. Why else should He warn the sinner? Why not leave him to ripen unwarned for judgment? But these are not the ways of God.

The effect of God's Word on the Ninevites: confession of sin and pardon

And we may remark here that, in the case of Nineveh, it is not faith in Jehovah, as in the case of the terrified mariners. The effect of the dreadful troubles that will fall upon Israel in the last days, as judgment upon the unfaithful witness of Jehovah, will be to make this God of judgment known, and to cause the great name of Jehovah to be glorified in all the earth (Jonah 1:14-16). With respect to the last days, we have seen that this is the testimony of all the prophets,* as well as that of the Psalms.

{*See Isaiah 66; Ezekiel 36:36; 37:28; 39:7, 22; Zechariah 2:11; 14; and a multitude of other passages.

See Psalm 9:15-16; 83:18; and all the Psalms at the end of the book.

Here it is simply God. The inhabitants of Nineveh believed God. It is the effect of the word of God on their conscience. They confess, and turn away from their sin. They acknowledge the judgment of God to be just and His word true; and God pardons them and does not execute His judgment. Moreover, this is in accordance with His ways as revealed by Jeremiah.

Chapter 4

Jonah's selfishness and care for his reputation as a prophet

The God of grace has compassion on the works of His hands, when they humble themselves before Him and tremble at the hearing of His righteous judgments. But Jonah, instead of caring for them, thinks only of his own reputation as a prophet. Wretched heart of man, so unable to rise up to the goodness of God! If Jonah had been nearer to God, he would have known that this was truly the God whom he proclaimed, whom he had learnt to love by knowing Him. He would have been able to say, Now, indeed, the Ninevites know the God whose testimony I gloried in bearing, and they will be happy. But Jonah thought only of himself; and the horrid selfishness of his heart hides from him the God of grace, faithful to His love for His helpless creatures. Jonah 4:2 exhibits the spirit of Jonah in all its deformity. The grace of God is insupportable to the pride of man. His justice is all very well: man can invest himself with it for his own glory; for man loves vengeance which is allied with the power that executes it. God must proclaim His justice. He does not save in sin. He makes man know his sin, in order to reconcile him to Himself, in order that his restoration may be real — may be that of his heart and of his conscience with God. But it is to make Himself known in pardoning him.

God's grace and compassion on Jonah as on others: His kindness to those who need it

But God is above all the wretched evil of man, and He treats even Jonah with kindness, yet making him feel, at the same time, that He will not renounce His grace, His nature, to satisfy the frowardness of man's heart. He relieves the suffering of Jonah, disappointed at the non-fulfilment of his words; and the selfishness of Jonah's heart delights in this relief. He almost forgets the vengeance he had desired, in his satisfaction at being sheltered from the burning heat of the sun. Having gone out of Nineveh, and seated himself apart that he might see what would become of this city whose repentance vexed his evil heart, he rejoiced, in the midst of his anger, at the gourd which God prepared for him. But what a testimony to the utter iniquity of the flesh! The repentance of the sinner, his return to God, irritates the heart. It is really this ; for the city is spared on account of its repentance. Will God smite one who returns to Him in humiliation for his sins? He who does not know the heart of man could not understand the application of such a word as "Charity rejoices not in iniquity." We see it here in the case of a prophet. There is the same thing — having also the same application, and the same patient grace on God's part

— in the case of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. But if man is content with that which relieves his own distress, and is even angry in his selfishness when that which relieved him is destroyed, shall not God spare the works of His hand and have compassion on that which, in His goodness, He has created? Assuredly He will not listen to the man who would silence His kindness towards those who need it. Most touching and beautiful is the last verse of this book, in which God displays this force, this supreme necessity, of His love; which (although the threatenings of His justice are heard, and must needs be heard and even executed if man continues in rebellion) abides in the repose of that perfect goodness which nothing can alter, and which seizes the opportunity of displaying itself, whenever man allows Him, so to speak, to bless him — the repose of a perfection that nothing can escape, that observes everything, in order to act according to its own undisturbed nature — the repose of God Himself, essential to His perfection, on which depends all our blessing and all our peace.

The subject of the Book — God's government of men on earth: the tender mercies of the Creator God

It is well to remark here, that the subject of this book is not the judgment of the secrets of all hearts in the great day, but the government of God with respect to men on the earth. This is the case, moreover, with all the prophets. We may observe, also, that God reveals Himself in this book as God the Creator — Elohim. We know that even the creatures still groan under the effects of our sin; and they share also the kindness and the compassion of God. His tender mercies are over them. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without Him. The day will come when the curse shall be removed, and they shall enjoy the liberty of the glory of the children of God, set free from bondage and corruption. If God becomes our Father, He takes also the character of Jehovah, who will judge Israel, and who will accomplish His promises and His purposes with respect to them in spite of the whole world. He never ceases to be the Creator God. He does not lay aside one of His characters in order to assume another, any more than He confounds them together; for they reveal His nature, and what He is.

What the existence of the Book proves

It is sweet, after all, to see Jonah's docility in the end to the voice of God, manifested by the existence of this book, in which the Spirit uses him to exhibit what is in the heart of man, as the vessel of God's testimony, and (in contrast with the prophet, who honestly confesses all his faults) the kindness of God, to which Jonah could not elevate himself, and to which he could not submit.

The two ways in which Jonah's history is used in the New Testament

We may remark, that the case of Jonah is used in the New Testament in two ways, which must not be confounded together: as a testimony in the world, by the word of God — a service with which the Lord compares His own: and afterwards as in the belly of the fish — a circumstance used by the Lord as a figure of the time during which He lay in the grave. Jonah, by his preaching, was a sign to the Ninevites even as the Lord was to the Jews, harder of hearing and of heart than those pagans who were afar from God. Jonah was also (in that which happened to him in consequence of his refusal to bear testimony) a

type of that which befell Jesus when He bore the penalty of the people's sin, and when, being raised from the dead, He became the testimony of grace, and at the same time the occasion of judgment to those who had rejected Him. We have seen in his history that Jonah is a remarkable moral figure of Israel — at least of Israel's conduct.