

The Context Bible

Life Group Lesson 16

April 14-20, 2014

John 12:37-14:15

Introduction to the Context Bible

Have you ever wished the Bible was easier to read through like an ordinary book – cover to cover? Because the Bible is a collection of 66 books, it makes reading like an ordinary book quite difficult. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that the later writers of the New Testament, were often quoting or referencing passages in the Old Testament. In fact, much of the New Testament makes better sense only if one also considers the Old Testament passages that place the text into its scriptural context.

You are reading a running commentary to The Context Bible. This arrangement of Scripture seeks to overcome some of these difficulties. Using a core reading of John's gospel, the book of Acts, and the Revelation of John, the Context Bible arranges all the rest of Scripture into a contextual framework that supports the core reading. It is broken out into daily readings so that this program allows one to read the entire Bible in a year, but in a contextual format.

Here is the running commentary for week sixteen, along with the readings for week seventeen appended. Join in. It's never too late to read the Bible in context!

Week Sixteen Readings

<p>4/14 The Unbelief of some Jews (Cont'd) Jn 12:37-12:50</p> <p>Matt 16:1-16:4 Jonah 1-4</p> <p>4/15 Jesus Washes Feet Jn 13:1-13:17</p> <p>Luk 22:24-22:30 Lev 10</p> <p>Jesus Predicts his Betrayer Jn 13:18-13:38</p> <p>Matt 26:17-26:25 Matt 26:30-26:35 Prov 12:20 Prov 19:3 Pslm 55 Pslm 38</p>	<p>4/16 Jesus - the Way, Truth, and Life Jn 14:1-14:14</p> <p>Pslm 128 Job 34 Mrk 9:30-9:50 Zech 13 Prov 4:1-4:3; 4:5-4:13 Prov 7:1</p> <p>4/17 Loving God and Keeping his Commandments Jn 14:15</p> <p>2 Chron 29-31 Jer 26</p>	<p>4/18 Loving God and Keeping his Commandments (Cont'd) Jn 14:15</p> <p>Isa 36-37 2 Chron 32:1-32:23 Pslm 48</p> <p>4/19 Loving God and Keeping his Commandments (Cont'd) Jn 14:15</p> <p>2 Chron 32:24-32:26 Pslm 39 Isa 38 Pslm 60 Prov 12:28 Pslm 119:1-119:8; 119:41-119:48</p> <p>4/20 Easter - Off</p>
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THE UNBELIEF OF SOME JEWS – Cont'd (John 12:37-12:50)

Jesus was not some shot in the dark or some totally unexpected move of God that no one could have anticipated. Any student of Isaiah or many other parts of the Old Testament would have seen the clear prophesies that spoke of Jesus. Jesus made this point, to those of his day, and the point is no less true today.

Last week we began this discussion and we finish it with Jesus' comments from Matthew 16, and the Old Testament background.

Matthew 16:1-16:4

The Scribes and Pharisees were constantly asking Jesus for a “sign” or indication he was who he claimed to be. Matthew recorded Jesus telling one group their sign would be that of Jonah, and then walking off. One wonders if any of those Jews remembered this when word of the resurrection surfaced.

Jonah 1-4

One of the first questions often posed in a discussion on Jonah is, “Was it real?” People debate whether the story is a factual account of a large fish gobbling and then regurgitating Jonah or whether it is more akin to a C.S. Lewis story that has true lessons to teach, using a story medium to convey them (think *Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Great Divorce*). That is a subject that is almost moot to discuss. God certainly has the ability to make a fish grand enough to accomplish the task. He similarly has the ability to sustain life for three days and nights under water with no breathing apparatus. He is God. But we also know that he has chosen to communicate his truth in a wide variety of ways, both symbolic, in stories and parables, and through illustrations. Regardless of the actual events that occurred, most everyone can agree that the story of Jonah is not a lesson in ichthyology (“the study of fish”). Our goal needs to be to understand the narrative for *its purposes* rather than to debate the feasibility of the events.

This is especially important as we consider the book of Jonah. This book has some incredible Hebrew word play, some very important messages both for Israel in its day and for the church in perpetuity, and it asks questions on an individual level that challenge people who wish to live right before God. Of course it also has prophetic implications expressed in the New Testament, like in the Matthew 16 passage above.

In four short chapters, just 48 verses, we have so much more than simply a fascinating narrative.

History – As we consider the history of the story, we are not looking to verify the events as unfolded. We are trying to understand the historical time and place of the story to

help clarify the messages of the book. Jonah begins identifying his place in Israel's history with the first phrase,

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai (Jonah 1:1).

Jonah the son of Amittai was a prophet from Gath-hepher who spoke the word of the LORD during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel, according to 2 Kings 14:25.

This places events surrounding Jonah in the reign of Jeroboam II which different scholars place as early as 793-753 BC or as late as 786-746 BC. For centuries, the major world power to the north of Israel was Assyria. During the reign of Jeroboam II, however, Assyria was experiencing significant internal weakness. Without the active force of a strong Assyria, there was a "power vacuum" in the region. Jeroboam II was able to expand his kingdom northward and establish significant material prosperity.¹

As a result, during the active time of Jonah as a prophet, even though Israel and their king "did evil in the sight of the LORD," God in his mercy stabilized Israel's borders and enlarged their territory. Jonah, no doubt to the appreciation of the king, prophesied this very expansion. Jonah was one of the few prophets who did not bring to the Israelite king doom and gloom over the idolatry and evils of his day. Somehow Jonah was able to prophesy success to the king, in spite of the evil.

Interestingly, this is the same Jonah who was called to preach repentance in the face of coming judgment to Nineveh, a great city in the empire of Israel's historic (and future) enemy to the north, the super-power Assyria. (Not to be confused with "Syria," the minor kingdom in the Damascus region that was a continual thorn in the side of the Israelites). By the end of Jeroboam II's reign, Israel was just a generation away from the Assyrian conquest, which fulfilled an earlier prophecy to the first king Jeroboam,

The LORD will strike Israel as a reed is shaken in the water, and root up Israel out of this good land that he gave to their fathers and scatter them beyond the Euphrates [the land of Assyria] (1 Kings 14:15).

In trying to figure out Jonah's historical frame of reference, we should add two more insights from Scripture. First, when Jehu took over as king of Israel, having assassinated Joram, the LORD told Jehu his sons would sit on the throne of Israel, but only to the fourth generation (2 Kings 10:30). Jonah's king Jeroboam II was the third generation son of Jehu. There was only one more son to sit on the throne from that lineage. Second, God had used earlier prophets to aid and assist foreigners, showing his concern beyond the borders of Israel. Elijah had assisted the widow of Zarephath (belonging to the Sidonian kingdom) in 1 Kings 17. Elisha healed the Syrian commander Na'aman of leprosy (2 Kings 5) and ventured to the Syrian capital of Damascus where he prophesied

¹ These terms and ideas are credited to noted Assyriologist and Old Testament scholar Lawson Younger, in private correspondence dated June 10, 2011.

the reign of the usurper Hazael as king to the Syrian throne (2 Kings 8:7ff). So Jonah was not the first prophet to venture forth from Israel and aid non-Israelites.

To more thoroughly study the historical information relevant to Jonah, we should also consider Nineveh. Beyond the history given in the Bible, we have volumes of historical information from written sources recovered by archaeologists and explorers. Nineveh was one of several great cities in the Assyrian Empire. The empire had reached great strength under earlier kings discussed in earlier lessons. In particular, during the reign of Jehu, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III noted significant tribute from Israel. Shalmaneser's grandson Adad-nirari III (805-782 BC) also claimed to have taken tribute from Israel.² But after Adad-nirari III, the Assyrian empire suffered even more decline, as mentioned earlier. During the reign of Israel's Jeroboam II, Assyria was "rather weak" and the "king's authority fluctuated according to the amount of power the provisional governors usurped."³

Near-eastern archaeologist Seton Lloyd considered the reigns of Assyrian kings during the time of Jeroboam II to be a "period of comparative inertia."⁴ Michael Roaf, a former director of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, calls this time, "a phase of relative weakness" when provisional governors were acting as kings.⁵

This would change in 745 BC with the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III, but during the time of Jeroboam II, Assyria was beset with a number of unusual difficulties. In just a seven-year period, between 765 and 759 BC, Assyria suffered multiple internal revolts and saw two severe outbreaks of the plague, with undoubtedly devastating results on the

² Like several other Assyrian inscriptions, Israel was known as "the land of Omri" the well known founder of an earlier dynasty of Israelite kings. See generally, Parrot, Andre, *Nineveh and the Old Testament*, (Philosophical Library 1955) at 38. Younger translates a Stela with an inscription of Adad-nirari III which he dates at 797 BC or later as, "I received the tribute of Joash the Samarian." Samaria was the capital city of king Joash of Israel. Hallo, William and Younger, Lawson, *The Context of Scripture: Monumental Inscriptions From the Biblical World* (Brill 2003), at 276.

³ Nemet-Nejat, Karen, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Hendrickson 2008), at 37.

⁴ Lloyd, Seton, *The Archaeology of Mesopotamia, From the Old Stone Age to the Persian Conquest* (Thames and Hudson 1978), at 188.

⁵ Roaf, Michael, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*, (Andromeda Oxford 1990), at 175. A number of scholars consider Jonah's text anachronistic when it indicates the king was in Nineveh at a time when Nineveh was not the ruling capital of Assyria. The Hebrew idea of "king" could just as easily be the ruling governor of Nineveh. This need not be an anachronism. Near Eastern scholar A. R. Millard suggested that the ruling governors might have been members of the local princely houses. Millard, A. R., "Assyrians and Arameans," *Iraq* 45 (1983) 106. Younger uses Millard's idea and points to the Tell Fakhariya Stela as illustrating that the Assyrian "governor" (*saknu* in Akkadian) could be labeled a king (*mlk*) in Aramiac/Hebrew.

population.⁶ Another very rare occurrence in Nineveh happened during the reign of Jeroboam II. On June 15, 763 BC, a near total eclipse of the sun occurred from 9:33 a.m. to 12:19 p.m.⁷ This eclipse was a significant event recorded in lists of the day. No doubt, it was highly disturbing to the people!

A final note on this time in Assyrian history concerns an external threat by the nation of Urartu. Urartu was the nation to the north of Assyria and it had been threatening to invade Assyria. This would undoubtedly give a level of great concern when someone like Jonah came preaching that “in 40 days Nineveh will be overturned!”

So in the time of Jonah, we have the following historical notes:

1. God had used prophets to reach outside the nation of Israel. (Since the exodus, Israel was responsible for modeling truth to the outside nations.)
2. Israel was stuck in moral decay.
3. Israel’s line of kings was soon coming to an end.
4. At some point a power likely from the land of Assyria/Nineveh (north of the Euphrates) was going to conquer Israel.
5. During the reign of Jeroboam II, Assyria was in a state of turmoil and internal strife. Undoubtedly this was a part of the reason Jeroboam II was able to reassert full territorial rights over some previously lost lands.
6. Jonah had the luxury of prophesying these pro-Israel conquests of Jeroboam II.
7. During the life of Jonah, God was extending mercy to Israel, in spite of Israel’s idolatry and sin (2 Kings 14:24-27).
8. Revolts, plagues, a full solar eclipse, and undoubtedly other unexplainable events no doubt left the Ninevites concerned about what was going on with the gods and the heavens!

⁶ Boardman, John, *et al.*, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, (Cambridge 1991), 2d ed., Vol. III, Pt 2, at 23; Roaf, at 175. The plagues are noted in the “*limmu* lists,” which were ancient records kept by a designated *limmu* or official record keeper in Assyria. The *limmu* list at the British Museum notes the following problems in the area during this time period: (1) In 765 BC, “a plague.” (2) In 763, a “revolt in the city of Assur” and “an eclipse of the sun.” (3) In 762, a “revolt in the city of Assur.” (4) In 761, a “revolt in the city of Arrapha.” (4) In 760, another “revolt in the city of Arrapha.” (5) In 759, a “revolt in the city of Guzana” as well as “a plague.” As transl’d by Luckenbill, Daniel, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, (Greenwood Press 1968), Vol. 2 at 435.

⁷ See, *limmu* list in footnote 8. Astronomers are able to date this with precision using current knowledge. See, N.A.S.A. at website, <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/SEhistory/SEhistory.html>. This has become the keystone for dating the chronology of Assyrian kings. Roaf, *Ibid.* In private correspondence noted in footnote 5, Younger gives the statistic that the eclipse was 97% in Nineveh.

9. Nineveh was facing a military threat from the Urartu nation in the north.

With this historical perspective in mind, we consider now certain aspects of the Jonah story in more detail. Rather than parsing through the text verse by verse, a job we leave to the many wonderful commentaries and books on Jonah, we will focus these two lessons on certain themes and ideas that are found in the text, as well as the New Testament references to Jonah.

THEMES

God's mercy and concern extends to the nations.

There is something comforting in thinking of God as “ours” rather than “theirs.” The idea that we might have some special connection with the Almighty that ensures us special status in his eyes, lends us confidence and security. Have you ever heard someone before a sporting event pray for victory? It is as if God will hear one side’s prayer over against the other side.

Jonah was an Israelite. God had defined the nation in removing them from Egypt and uprooting the native Canaanites to give their land to Israel. God had “chosen” Israel to be “his people.” God entered into a special covenant with Israel, revealing himself in ways he had not revealed himself to other nations. Israel was God’s “treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth” (Deut 7:6; 14:2, etc.).

Jonah lived at a time when he could see and prophesy God’s blessings on his people, even in the midst of their own sin. That was not a bad gig! Then God ordered Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against the evil there. Jonah suspected this might lead to a turn in Nineveh’s behavior as we read afterwards, in anger Jonah said,

O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in *my country*? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster (Jonah 4:2).

Of course Jonah knew God was that way in Israel. Jonah had prophesied that God would execute mercy on Israel in his days rather than the judgment deserved. Yet the idea of God extending such mercy to others really galled Jonah, and he wanted no part of it. Jonah would sooner disobey God, than see God’s mercy set out on those outside his group!

Are we surprised to read of Jonah sleeping in the midst of a tremendous storm that threatened to break up the ship, a storm of such force that the sailors were throwing cargo overboard and beseeching their own gods for aid? The story says that Jonah,

Had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep (Jonah 1:6).

The Hebrew is written to emphasize that Jonah was in a deep sleep (hence the translation “fast asleep.” The Jewish translators of the Septuagint emphasized this point by saying Jonah was snoring!⁸ Jonah knew the solution to the storm was to throw him overboard (Jonah 1:11-12), but until the crew directly asked him about it, he seemed content to sleep and let them all die with him!

Jonah may have been a prophet of God, but Jonah certainly did not share God’s heart for others! In the midst of Jonah’s self-centered and Israel-centered focus, God worked in compassion and concern for the lost and un-chosen.

Perhaps this is best illustrated by the uses of various terms for God in the text. There are three different terms we should focus on:

1. *Yahweh*. This is the name of God as revealed to Moses and reflected in the worship of the Israelites.
2. *Elohim*. This is the generic Hebrew term for “god” and can be used in reference to Yahweh as the one true God or in reference to the many gods that are falsely thought to exist in the theology of the pantheists.
3. *Ha-elohim*. This is the Hebrew term “*elohim*” or “god” with a Hebrew *hay* (ה) added to the front. The added Hebrew letter makes the word more specific, like adding the English definite article “the” before a noun. It takes “god” and turns it into “*THE God*.”

With these terms in hand, we consider again the story. It was **Yahweh’s** word that told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah sought to flee the presence of **Yahweh**. **Yahweh** hurled the storm at the ship. Each sailor then cried out to their own **elohim**, not knowing **Yahweh**. The captain awoke Jonah and told Jonah to cry out to Jonah’s **elohim**, again not knowing **Yahweh**, but hoping that *the god* (**ha-elohim**) would help.

After casting lots, the crew determined that Jonah was at fault and peppered him with questions. Jonah answered that **Yahweh** was in fact God (“**Elohim**”) of heaven and the God who made the sea. Jonah had already told the men he was running from **Yahweh**. The sailors tried desperately to save the ship and themselves without resorting to heaving Jonah overboard. As a last resort, they decided to throw Jonah from the boat, but before they did so, they prayed to **Yahweh** asking him to save them, and to forgive them for casting Jonah overboard. Once Jonah was discharged from the vessel, the sea stilled and the men feared **Yahweh** and offered sacrifices to him.

We see in the first chapter, even through Jonah’s disobedience, God hears the prayers of the non-Israelite sailors and rescues them, bringing them to faith. There is an irony that

⁸ Ἰωνᾶς δὲ κατέβη εἰς τὴν κοίλην τοῦ πλοίου καὶ ἐκάθευδεν καὶ ἔρρευγεν. “But Jonah climbed down into the hollow of the ship and he was sleeping and snoring.”

on land, the apostate Israel continued to rely on God's gracious mercy in spite of worshipping idols, while the idol-worshipping pagan sailors are moved to faith!

The names used in the story continue into the second chapter as **Yahweh** appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah, holding him three days and nights. Jonah prays to **Yahweh** a beautiful psalm. **Yahweh** then causes the fish to vomit Jonah out upon the dry land.

Here we merge into chapter three as the word of **Yahweh** again comes to Jonah telling him to take **Yahweh's** message to Nineveh. The Ninevites believed **Elohim** ("God") was going to overthrow their city for their sins, yet they did not know him as **Yahweh**. The king called on the people to cry out to **elohim** in hopes *the God (ha-Elohim)* would "turn from his fierce anger". The king's prayer is answered, and God (**Elohim**) relented of the disaster.

Here the king and the people do not know Yahweh as God, but they believe that a God is going to punish them. Unlike the sailors, they are never moved to a Yahweh faith⁹, but

⁹ See the thorough discussion in Magonet, Jonathan, *Form and Meaning: Studies in Literary Techniques in the Book of Jonah* (Almond Press 1983), at 33ff. Younger argues against this view and believes that the structure of the verb as well as the parallelisms in the text indicate that the Ninevites did believe in Yahweh, albeit, not a saving faith. Younger writes in personal correspondence that he disagrees with Magonet's interpretation for three reasons:

- (1) the phrase in verse 5 **וַיֵּאמְרוּ אֲנֹשֵׁי נִינְוָה בְּאֱלֹהִים** contains a very particular usage: the verb **אָמַן** (*āman*) in the *Hiphil* stem + the preposition **בְּ** (*b*) or **לְ** (*l*) has especially significant meaning of "trust in" which is used in salvific passages throughout the OT.¹
- (2) the definite article is used throughout chapters 3 and 4 indicating that, in fact, Yahweh is in view and is the object of the Ninevites' faith (in 3:10, the definite article is on **הָאֱלֹהִים** (*ha-elohim*) is clearly speaking of Yahweh). In other words, the same God (*ha-elohim*) in whom the Ninevites believe/trust is the same God (*ha-elohim*) who relents who is the same God (*ha-elohim*) who prepared/ordained the worm (4:7) who is the same LORD God (*Yahweh Elohim*) who prepared/ordained the plant who is the same LORD (Yahweh) who prepared/ordained the fish (2:1).
- (3) the parallelistic structure of the book indicates that Yahweh is in view and is the object of the Ninevites' faith (see attached pdf).

I realize that there are a number of scholars who hold that the Ninevites did not believe in Yahweh, certainly not a saving faith, but in my opinion, the clear textual allusions in chapters 3-4 to Exodus 32-34 seem to emphasize that this is precisely what is in view.

We add as further support for Younger, that the Assyrians were well known for accepting the gods of foreigners, even sponsoring festivals and offering sacrifices to the foreign gods. It would certainly not be out of character for them to accept Yahweh as a foreign god worthy of appeasement.

A final note here, it is popular to preach Jonah as a likely candidate for people to listen to for he shows up having been regurgitated from a fish after three days interment. The general line is that his cloths must have been half eaten, his eyes bleached from darkness and his odor something unlike what anyone had smelled before. While that makes a nice picture and argument, we should note that Nineveh was over 400 miles from the nearest coastline. Jonah did not waLuk in fresh out of the fish!

God as God hears their prayers, sees their convicted change, and relents from his punishment.

In chapter four, Jonah expresses his anger and displeasure to **Yahweh**, noting that he knew **Yahweh** to be a compassionate God (**Elohim**). Jonah was ready for **Yahweh** to just take his life, and be done with the prophet role. **Yahweh** challenged Jonah for his thinking and then, as Jonah set up a booth to watch and see what happened to Nineveh, **Yahweh Elohim**, Yahweh as God, grew a plant to shade Jonah's head. Jonah was thankful for the plant, but had no attitude change and stayed to watch for Nineveh's destruction or deliverance. The text then shifts to God (**Elohim**) as the judgment is executed upon Jonah! God (**Elohim**) has a worm kill the shade plant. God (**Elohim**) has a scorching east wind bring Jonah to near heat stroke, and then God (**Elohim**) again challenges Jonah asking about Jonah's anger over losing the shade plant. The story then ends as **Yahweh** asks the probing question,

You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle? (Jonah 4:10).¹⁰

We see that Jonah might as well be dealing with an unnamed God for his own perception of what is right and wrong. Yet God is not without a name. He is **Yahweh**, the God of revelation, the God of the exodus, the God who had chosen Israel and had chosen Jonah. And Yahweh's concerns are on a whole different (and holier level) than those of the temperamental and pouty Jonah! God's concerns cover all his creation!

God's omnipresence.

Three times in the first ten verses of Jonah there is a reference to fleeing God's "presence." In Jonah 1:3 we read the first two:

But Jonah rose 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 the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the **presence** of the LORD.

In Jonah 1:10 we read the third time:

Then the men were exceedingly 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.

Yet the whole event teaches plainly that God was "present" while Jonah was at sea as well as on dry land. Jonah even told the sailors that Yahweh his God, "made the sea and

¹⁰ We note that Jonah is one of only two Biblical books to end with a question. The other is Nahum!

dry land” (Jonah 1:9). Was Jonah’s flight from God’s “presence” merely poor thinking on his part? Or perhaps it was a wish and hope, which he learned was not happening! This is worthy of our consideration in a bit more detail as careful study reveals a little more complicated picture on this issue!

There are passages of Scripture that teach that one cannot flee from God’s presence, most notably Psalm 139:7-139:8 which affirms God’s presence everywhere:

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

Yet there are other passages of Scripture that seem to give a more specific location for the “presence” of God. The Psalms speak of coming into the “presence” of God:

Let us come into his **presence** with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! (Pslm 95:2).

Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his **presence** with singing! (Pslm 100:2).

In this sense, the Psalmist also asks God to keep him in God’s presence:

Cast me not away from your **presence**, and take not your Holy Spirit from me (Pslm 51:11).

Similarly we read in Psalm 41:12,

But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your **presence** forever.

If we are to make sense of this, it helps to consider the Hebrew word translated as “presence.” The Hebrew uses the word פָּנִים (pn), which means “face.” It conveys the idea of God facing someone as opposed to turning his back on someone. In this sense the Psalmist seeks a blessing in writing,

May God be gracious to us and bless us, and make his **face** [פָּנִים] “presence” to shine upon us (Pslm 67:1).

Thus while we can say that God’s sight extends to all corners of the earth, and in this sense, no one can escape his presence, there is another sense where God’s face or presence can shine on someone. Jonah could never seek to hide from God. But the lesson of his fleeing God’s presence is more personal than such an absurd idea. Jonah was hoping to remove himself from God’s plan for his life and be a reject for God.

The lesson then focuses on the fact that God was not going to let Jonah go lightly! God had called Jonah as a prophet, and God had given Jonah instructions. Jonah might seek

to live apart from God's face and contact, but God was not going to let Jonah's life apart from God be an easy one!

In 1893, Francis Thompson published a poem entitled, "The Hound of Heaven." As many people see this famous¹¹ poem, God seeks out the author, even as the author flees down nights and days, down years and through the maze of his own mind. Though the author hid, tried to laugh away God, chased hopes, lived through fears, the author was never successful. For God sought the author deliberately, with God's timing, and with majesty. As the poem draws to an end, the author realizes that God is not his gloom, but the very answer to all that the author was seeking in life.

So it is in Jonah. Jonah seeks to be done with God, but God is not done with Jonah. All was well and good for Jonah as he prophesied the good things from God's hand. But when God set Jonah to a chore that Jonah did not want to do, Jonah sought release from his master. But the master said, "No!" Then through the events, God brought Jonah back, even though Jonah was unhappy about it, pouting like a baby!

Fear

The theme on "fear" is found in the first chapter of Jonah. The Hebrew word for fear (*yr'* – יר') is used six times in just eleven verses:

- Jonah 1:5 – "Then the mariners were ***afraid***, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep."
- Jonah 1:9 – "And he [Jonah] said to them, 'I am a Hebrew, and I ***fear*** the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land.'"
- Jonah 1:10 – "Then the men were ***exceedingly 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." [*Yr'* is used twice in the Hebrew of this verse.]
- Jonah 1:16 – "Then the men ***feared*** the LORD ***exceedingly***, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows." [*Yr'* is also used twice in the Hebrew of this verse.]

¹¹ Aside from paintings and use in songs, passages from the poem have wound their way into the famous U.S. Supreme Court decision on desegregation (*Brown vs. Board of Education* uses the phrase "with all deliberate speed") as well as the peanuts book, *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, (Westminster John Knox 2007).

If we focus first on the fear of the mariners, we can discern an increasing fear in the translation of the English Standard Version. In verse 5, the mariners were “afraid.” Then in verse 10, the men were “exceedingly afraid.” Finally in verse 16, the men “feared the LORD exceedingly.

The translators are trying to give significance to the way the Hebrew is written. In the Hebrew, the word for fear is combined and used in ways that give it an escalating emphasis as the story unfolds. In the Hebrew, we have a “growing phrase” being used. In verse 5, the phrase is simply two words. In English, it takes two words for each Hebrew word, so we will put brackets around the Hebrew to see the two Hebrew words:

[The mariners] + [feared]

יִרְאָהּ – מְלָחָה

Then when we get to verse 10, the Hebrew repeats the phrase of verse 5 (using “men” instead of “mariners,” but adds two more words to the phrase (hence the term “growing phrase”). Again we bracket the multiple English words above the basic Hebrew forms to show the growing fear:

[The men] + [feared] + [with a great] + [fear]

יִרְאָהּ + גְּדוֹלָהּ + יִרְאָהּ + אֲנָשִׁים

Now do not get intimidated by this Hebrew; we will explain it more in a moment. But first, we need to get the final verse in (verse 16) and see the phrase get repeated word for word, but with a further addition:

[The men] + [feared] + [with a great] + [fear] + [the LORD]

יִרְאָהּ + יְהוָה + יִרְאָהּ + גְּדוֹלָהּ + יִרְאָהּ + אֲנָשִׁים¹²

This growing phrase shows a growing fear among the sailors. At first they were simply “afraid.” Even this simple fear was not small, however, for it caused each mariner to call out to his god and they were hurling cargo overboard to lighten the ship. The next time the phrase is used, it is with an addition of the men “fearing” their fear. That alone adds heightened fear, but the author does not leave it there. They were “fearing” with a

¹² I have re-ordered the Hebrew words in each of these verses so they make a little more sense to our English only readers. I have also used basic forms of each words and left out prefixes. If you consult a Hebrew Bible, the actual word order is apparent, and makes it even easier to see the growing phrase. A good explanation of this is also included in Magonet, Jonathan, *Form and Meaning, Studies in Literary Technique in the Book of Jonah*, (Sheffield Almond Press 1983) at 31-32. See also, Sasson, Jack, *The Anchor Bible: Jonah*.

“great fear.” This is because Jonah explained he was trying to flee from Yahweh, the God who made the sea (and dry land). The final usage comes after the men have thrown Jonah overboard. The sea has calmed and their ship is no longer in immediate danger of breaking apart and sinking, yet here their fear reaches its peak! The mariners are more afraid after seeing the immediate hand of God. They fear God more than they had feared their own death! Here the men change their god, change their behavior, and “offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows”!

Now, having focused on the fear of the men, consider the fear of Jonah in verse 9. Jonah is fleeing from God, seeking to live apart from God’s face/presence. Jonah has rejected his mission, and seems content to die. He sleeps the sleep of the dead (a deep sleep), while the ship threatened to break up.¹³ Jonah fears Yahweh, but not with a fear that brings him to obedience or worship!

Do you notice that the mariners have fear that drives them to Yahweh God in worship and dedication (vows)? A growing fear that comes from their circumstances evolves into a fear of God, finding out about his power and interest in them and their condition. The mariners respond in faith and commitment. Contrast Jonah. Jonah the prophet, a man entrusted with oracles from God, starts the story with fear of the LORD. Yet, Jonah’s fear does not drive him to God, he is fleeing *from* God.

Fear is a powerful motivator. A tremendous amount of psychological research indicates the power of fear to motivate people individually and corporately. The question for us is, “In what direction do we let fear move us?” Do we allow fear to drive us from God or to God? We should always take our fears before God and let him be the source of our peace before the world, even as we fear or hold God in awe with worship. Let your fears drive you to God, not away from him!

The Ups and Downs of Jonah

Our second theme to consider in this lesson centers on the ups and downs of this story. (To be more precise, we might wish to order that phrase as the “downs and ups” of Jonah!) The idea of “going up” and “going down” is found multiple times in Jonah, both with the actual Hebrew verbs that mean “go up” and “go down” and with pictures and images that convey the ideas. The core Hebrew verb used for “go up” is *alah* (‘לה עלה). The core Hebrew verb for “go down” is *yard* (ירד yrd).

¹³ The Hebrew here is fun. It turns the ship into a person (it “anthropomorphizes” the ship) and says the ship “threatened to be broken up” as if the ship was making a threat! The verb used is one of animate objects. Sasson points out that “Jonah’s ship is granted the faculty to think.” Sasson at 97. This is why Jewish studies scholar Yvonne Sherwood translates this as the ship “becomes literally a nervous wreck.” Sherwood, Yvonne, *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*, (Cambridge 2000), at 251.

These words and ideas are contrasted in Jonah multiple times. In the contrast we can see several important things. The contrast is set up at the very beginning of the story. Consider these early two verses:

- Jonah 1:2 – “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has **come up** before me.”
- Jonah 1:3 – “But Jonah rose to flee from Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He **went down** to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and **went** on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.”

In verse 2, Jonah is called to “get up” or “arise” and “go” to Nineveh. Jonah is to get up and go because the evil of Nineveh has “come up” before the “face” (*pn*) of God. Rather than obey the instruction of God, Jonah got up to flee from God’s “face” (*pn*). He did so by “going down” to Joppa and then “going down” on board the boat (translated in English simply as “went,” even though it is our Hebrew verb for “going down”).

The image is one of Jonah getting the command of God to raise himself up to travel to Nineveh because the evil in Nineveh had risen before God’s face. Jonah was called to stand with God against the evil arising before God’s face/presence. Instead, Jonah rebelled. He got up, but not to stand with God against the evil of Nineveh. Jonah went down away from God. The author underscores this disobedience by using the verb “go down” twice in verse three, emphasizing that while the evil of Nineveh had come up before God’s face, Jonah was trying to flee God’s face.¹⁴ Jonah wanted nothing to do with God and his mission!

In rapid succession, there are multiple references to Jonah going down, either directly using the Hebrew verb *yrd* or by using the picture image:

- Jonah 1:5 – “Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had **gone down** (*yrd*) into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.”
- Jonah 1:15, 1:17 – Not using the verb *yrd*, we still get a picture of Jonah going down as he is hurled overboard and sinks in the water, being then gobbled by a fish who swims down under the water.
- Jonah 2:5 – Again without the direct verb, the image is one of Jonah going down again as the waters “closed in over” him and the “deep surrounded” him.

¹⁴ Earlier we pointed out that the Hebrew noun for God’s presence actually references his “face.” It is the same word used in contrast in these early two verses. The evil has come up before God’s face, while Jonah is seeking to flee God’s face.

- Jonah 2:6 – Here the verb is again used: “I **went down** (*yrd*) to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.”

Jonah in his rebellion sinks as low as anyone can. In his own imaging, he “hit rock bottom.” What he found, once he had sunk as low as he could, was Yahweh God. The reversal occurs here in chapter 2 verse 6; Jonah went down to the very roots of the mountains to the land under the sea, but there, God brought Jonah up!

- Jonah 2:6 – “yet you **brought up** (*alah*) my life from the pit, O LORD my God.”

The image is continued in 2:8 that as Jonah was going down and his life was ebbing away, Jonah’s prayer came up before God, so God brought Jonah up!

From this point on, Jonah does not go down any more, but he is still far from perfect. Jonah goes on to Nineveh and preaches God’s coming judgment. The people of Nineveh repent and God withholds his judgment for that time. Jonah then heads out to sit on the east side and pray. Here we find the last two verbs of “brought up”:

- Jonah 4:6 – “Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it **come up** (*alah*) over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort.”
- Jonah 4:7 – “But when dawn **came up** (*alah*) the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered.”

The plant grows and by the hand of God comes up over Jonah. The next day we have the sun coming up, as it does each day!

Old Testament scholar and friend to our class, John Monson wrote in response to last week’s lesson,

Amazing how everyone and everything in the book is doing what it should do in response to Almighty God of Israel—except the Israelite prophet.

John makes an excellent point well illustrated by the contrast in this theme of going up and coming down. Evil arises to the face of God, as it should. Sailors sail, storms rage, fish swim, pagans are pagans, plants grow up, the sun rises. Everything and everyone seems to be doing what you expect except for Jonah. Jonah is the one in rebellion to his purpose. When he is to arise and stand with God, he goes down instead. He ventures down and down and down, to the lowest of the low. It is there the hand of God rescues him and lifts him up.

Death

Among the many themes of Jonah, we consider one more before turning to the New Testament parallels and uses of the book. This is the image and theme of death.

In English we have a number of expressions that refer to death (the English teachers will call these “idioms”). We talk of being “six feet under” or we might reference the “big sleep.” Phrases like “bite the dust,” “breathe your last,” and “give up the ghost” pepper our language. We know what is meant when we say someone has gone to “meet their maker.”

Similarly in Hebrew, there are idiomatic expressions that reference and give images of death. A number of these are found in Jonah as he is in the belly of the fish. This part of the Jonah story is found in chapter two where Jonah “prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish” (Jonah 2:1). The prayer begins with Jonah crying out “of the belly of Sheol” (Jonah 2:2). “Sheol” was a Hebrew word for the underworld, the grave, or death.¹⁵

It may be said with certainty that in Hebrew thought the term referred to a place of the dead.... Sheol was used as an expression for being in the grave (Psm 18:6; 30:3; 49:14; Isa 28:15).¹⁶

Jonah is crying out from death in his prayer to God. Over and over the images of death are used:

- Jonah 2:3 – “You cast me into the deep...the flood surrounded me”
- Jonah 2:5 – “The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me.”
- Jonah 2:6 – “Weeds were wrapped about my head at the roots of the mountains. I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever.”
- Jonah 2:6 – “Yet you brought up my life from the pit...when my life was fainting away.”

For Jonah, the three days and nights in the belly of the fish were three days and nights where he wrote of himself as dead. In his rebellious flight from God’s face, he finally found himself away as far as might be found. He was as good as dead and considered himself beyond the land of the living. He had sought to flee from God by venturing to a foreign land, and he went further than even he planned! It was as if he went into death.

We do not need to consider this a treatise on death. Although he writes as if he were dead, Jonah is expressing himself as good as dead, or on death’s doorstep. Jonah experienced a deathbed conversion! In the process, God heard Jonah’s voice, and once

¹⁵ In the prophet Hosea, we read of the Lord ransoming his people from the “power of Sheol” as the prophet quizzes death, “O Sheol, where is your sting?” This is the reference point for Paul as he translates “Sheol” into death writing to the Corinthians, “O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55).

¹⁶ Smith, B. K., & Page, F. S., *Vol. 19B: Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, (Broadman & Holman 2001), at 245.

Jonah returned to obedience, God rescued him. God was not through with Jonah because he still had something for Jonah to do! Jonah was still on mission with God to go to Nineveh.

It is to this death image that Jesus appeals in the New Testament. We turn now, therefore, to consider those parallels and references.

NEW TESTAMENT ALLUSIONS TO JONAH

The New Testament gives us a number of references to Jonah and Nineveh, some clear, others more subtle. The clearest are passages like Matthew 12:38-12:41.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

In this passage we see an obvious usage of the Jonah story by Jesus in replying to the request for a sign. While Jonah was figuratively dead (and literally dead to the world!), Jesus would truly be dead for three days and nights in the heart of the earth. This sign, of course, happened after the crucifixion with the resultant resurrection for Christ as he was "brought up" by God from the grave.

The illustration Christ gives goes a bit further though. Not only is Jesus similar to Jonah in the three-days-and-nights aspect, but Jesus is truly greater than Jonah, and so the people should consider Nineveh and repent! Jonah, the fugitive from God, who never really had God's heart for the foreign people, was effective nonetheless because the people of Nineveh repented. Jesus was not a fugitive from God. He was not recalcitrant in his mission. Jesus is *not* a parallel to Jonah (even though he would suffer death for three days as Jonah did figuratively). Jesus was fully on mission with God to preach to those whose sins had risen before the Almighty's face. Jesus was not simply preaching to Nineveh; he was laying down his own life *for* Nineveh. Yet even in this reality, the Ninevites were more responsive to God than many of the scribes and Pharisees hearing Jesus.

This same story is related in Luke 11:29-11:32. In the Luke account, Jesus speaks bluntly calling the generation before him “an evil generation.” “Evil” is a key word in the book of Jonah. The Jonah story begins with the “evil” of the Ninevites coming up before God (Jonah 1:2). Then “evil” comes upon the mariners because of Jonah (Jonah 1:7, 1:8). The ruler of Nineveh calls on each person to repent and “turn from his evil way” (Jonah 3:8). God sees them turn “from their evil way” and relents from the disaster he was bringing upon them (Jonah 3:10).

Jesus again brought up the sign of Jonah when probed for a sign by a group of Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 16:1-16:4 read earlier.

And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." So he left them and departed.

Beyond these direct references to Jonah, there are a number of interesting and thought provoking matters to consider. Jesus the Galilean fit well as one to speak on Jonah. Jonah was from “Gath-hepher” (2 Kings 14:25), which was also a town in Galilee, of the tribe of Zebulun (Josh. 19:13). Gath-Hepher was only about five miles from Nazareth where Jesus grew up.

Before leaving this, it is worth noting another New Testament reference to Joppa that stand in contrast to the Jonah story. For Jonah, Joppa was the dropping off place. Jonah fled Galilee to go to non-Israelite Joppa, and catch a ship to avoid preaching to the pagans in Nineveh. Peter is in Joppa when Cornelius sends for him (Acts 10). Peter is not suspecting this call from Cornelius, who was the first Gentile convert to the church. Peter is prepared to preach to the Gentile only because God sent a vision to Peter while Peter was in Joppa. In the vision, Peter sees a sheet descending from heaven with all sorts of unclean animals. Peter is told to eat, and he recoils, explaining he has never eaten un-kosher food. Peter is reprimanded, being told, “What God has made clean, do not call common!” (Acts 10:15).

As well versed as Peter was in Scripture, and remembering no doubt Jesus’ lessons about Jonah, Peter must have chuckled over God having him in Jonah’s port city where Jonah fled from God, even as God was calling Peter to preach Jesus to the first Gentile converts. It explains why when Peter recounted the story, he was always quick to relate that it happened in Joppa! (Acts 11:5, 11:13).

JESUS WASHES FEET (John 13:1-13:17)

Apr. 15

As one of his final acts with his apostles, Jesus washed their feet. This was both a real act of service and a symbolic act of cleansing. We interrupt the narrative to discuss the role of service among God's people.

Luke 22:24-22:30 and Leviticus 10

In Luke 22:24-22:30 we have Jesus orally instructing his apostles on the importance of serving rather than being served. We have combined that instruction with the lessons from Leviticus chapter 10, which contrast two sets of mistakes in priestly service to the Lord.

The first part of Leviticus 10 has a story that many find disturbing – the story of Nadab and Abihu. Their story is best understood within the context of the entire chapter, which includes the important story of Eleazar and Ithamar.

Nadab and Abihu were two sons of Aaron who were bent on doing their own thing before the Lord, with no regard to his instructions. They were immediately consumed by fire, dying on sight. It is followed by the instruction to Aaron that he and his sons (the serving priests) are not to drink “wine or strong drink” when they are serving before the Lord. This seems to indicate that both Nadab and Abihu were drunk when they acted so recklessly.

God then gave further instructions to Aarons two remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar about eating a grain and goat offering. The sons in their grief did not eat the goat as commanded. As the story ends, it is apparent that their failure to eat was not a bold disregard of God's commands. It was an error made in the grief of the day, as the family was stunned over what happened to Nadab and Abihu. The result for these two brothers was quite different. Their mistaken service to the Lord was forgiven.

JESUS PREDICTS HIS BETRAYER (John 13:18-13:38)

As the John narrative continues, we read of Jesus predicting two betrayals that also stand in contrast. Judas will betray Jesus to the authorities, succumbing to Satan's influence. In fear, Peter will betray Jesus by denying him three times before the night is out. The motives and the results of these betrayals on those involved stand as stark as those of Aaron's sons mentioned in the Leviticus 10 stories above.

Matthew 26:17-26:25; 26:30-26:35; Proverbs 12:20 and 19:3

In Matthew's account of the events, Matthew provides Jesus' comment on the effect of the betrayal on Judas.

The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born (Matt 26:24).

This goes hand in hand with the Proverbs 12:20 teaching that those who devise evil have deceit rather than joy in their hearts. Succumbing to foolishness and folly will also create an anger and harshness against God (Prov 19:3).

Psalm 55

It is clear from Scripture that Jesus took solace in the Psalms. They were a refuge and place of communion for Jesus with God. In this sense, as we read Psalm 55 one wonders whether it was in Jesus' mind as he walked through the betrayals at the end of his earthly life. Psalm 55 certainly fits the situation of betrayal.

This Psalm points to the emotional issues involved when one's betrayer is a friend. One expects enemies to create conflict, but when it comes from friends, it creates a special pain. The solution found in the Psalm is refuge in God's reliable solace and comfort. God is no fair weather presence. He is a constant and steady refuge who,

will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved (Pslm 55:22).

The key is trusting in God (Pslm 55:23).

Psalm 38

While Psalm 55 echoes the heart of one betrayed by his friends (in the sense of Judas), Psalm 38 speaks more to the actions of Peter. In Psalm 38, the psalmist is undergoing great personal difficulty and his friends do not jump in to help or console. Instead, they remain distant and unhelpful.

My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off (Pslm 38:11).

Regardless of the distinction, the solution for the persecuted Psalmist is the same. He relies upon the reliable God. The prayer is one of faith for God to help and bring salvation (Pslm 38:22).

JESUS – THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND LIFE (John 14:1-14:14)

John 14 begins Jesus' long dialogue with his apostles immediately before his betrayal and trial. He starts encouraging his followers to keep faith, especially in view of what is about to happen. Two matters readily become apparent. Jesus knew what was to come, and his disciples had no idea. Even as Jesus told them, they were befuddled about his message. As he told them he was going to prepare a way for them, Jesus was referencing the cross, not celestial mansion building!

Many songs have been written and sermons preached about the idea that Jesus has gone to heaven to work on building mansions/houses/rooms for his faithful. That is a misread of the John 14 passage. Jesus says that there are ALREADY many rooms in the Father's house. The God who made the world in six days, is not having slow construction issues in heaven! When Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you," he was referencing his journey to the cross. Jesus was going before blazing the trail we would follow. The word "prepare" (ἐτοιμάζω - hetomazo) is the same as used of John the Baptist who "prepared a way" for Jesus (Matt 3:3).

Thomas asked what the way was, and Jesus responded appropriately that he himself, that Jesus was the way.

Job 34

This is one of the speeches by the younger man Elihu in response to Job and his older friends. Even though he is the younger of the participants in this drama, Elihu actually offers some of the most sane and biblical insights into Job, Job's condition, and Job's responsive attitudes and words.

Elihu points to God as a just and impartial ruler who makes decisions based upon all the facts that only he knows. No human is in a place where God can be challenged or instructed on right, wrong, or what should or should not be done. God alone measures out reality within his framework of bringing about justice in his own time and way.

Mark 9:30-9:50

In this Mark account of Jesus with his disciples we see a similar theme to both the teachings Jesus gave in his last hours with his apostles in John 14. Jesus was teaching his disciples away from their concepts of self-importance and group-importance. They were wrapped up into which of them were the greatest as well as the special anointing enjoyed by their group. Jesus pushed them to see that God's work was greater than any of them individually or even as a group. It was not "all about them," but was rather all about God! Their goal was to work on what was before them for God's sake, trusting him with the larger picture.

Zechariah 13

The last three chapters of Zechariah (12-14) repeatedly speak of the future day of the Lord using the phrase “on that day” 16 times. Here in chapter 13 we read of that day as one when a fountain will open that will wash away sins and uncleanness. That is the way of the Lord that is opened by Jesus on the cross. Jesus is “the way” for all of Israel and all people everywhere to find cleanness and forgiveness.

Zechariah’s promise does note that it will not be a painless cleansing! God promise is to refine his people like refining silver and gold. Silver and gold are purified by melting the metals and then taking away the impurities that float to the top. In like manner, God’s people are purified, calling upon the name of the Lord.

Proverbs 4:1-4:3, 4:5-4:13 and 7:1

The urging of these (and many other) proverbs is to pursue wisdom. Wisdom is found in instruction, in obedience, and uprightness. Wisdom goes hand in hand with a life lived right. Living right teaches insights into “rightness” just as living with reckless disregard to holiness produces a numbness and ignorance into wisdom (producing instead a condition known biblically as “folly.”)

Apr. 17-19

LOVING GOD AND KEEPING HIS COMMANDMENTS (John 14:15)

Jesus spent a great deal of time urging his followers to be obedient to God in their lives. This is not because God is some maniacal rule enforcer who has some arbitrary and capricious rules that he insists people follow. We of the 21st century should know better than that! We live in a scientific age where we understand more than any preceding generations or civilizations that God has set in motion a universe of rules and principles. If you stick your finger in fire, you will get burned. If you drop a brick on someone’s head it will hurt. On a grander scale, the principles of action/reaction and cause and effect make airplanes fly and cars motor on.

It is not surprising that God would set forward for people, those rules of life that make one’s life count and find blessing. What might be surprising is the motive Jesus gives for our choosing to follow his instruction. In John 14:15 Jesus explained that *if* his followers love him, *then* they will keep his commandments. The motive for obedience comes not simply from a self-interest for a blessed life. It comes from something deeper. It comes from accepting who Jesus is, walking in relationship with him, and from that, doing what Jesus has said.

The blessings of obedience are explored in the accompanying contextual readings.

2 Chronicles 29-31

These three chapters set forth the obedience of King Hezekiah. Unlike many before him, he followed God with a loving heart. In this sense he was likened to King David (2

Chron 29:2). Early in his kingship, Hezekiah restored the practices handed down from Moses, including celebrating the Passover, honoring the giving to the priesthood, and more.

From this obedience came blessing. Not a trouble-free reign, but blessing in the midst of trouble. The reading concludes with the noteworthy affirmation:

Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and faithful before the LORD his God. And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart, and prospered (2 Chron 31:20-31:21).

Jeremiah 26

The Jeremiah 26 passage contains some interesting comparisons and contrasts to the Hezekiah obedience passage read before. Jeremiah was living in Jerusalem as it teetered on the brink of destruction. Jeremiah called out loud for the people to repent and live right, lest they see their city utterly destroyed. The people's immediate reaction was to put Jeremiah to death. Yet some voices prevailed, and with memories of Hezekiah, among others, the people were assuaged into not killing Jeremiah. Notably another prophet proclaimed the same message and when death threats were uttered against him, rather than stay and take God's protection, the other prophet fled to Egypt. This move managed to buy some time, but it was useless for protecting the prophet. The king sent a posse after him, bringing him back to the king for execution.

Isaiah 36-37 and 2 Chronicles 32:1-32:23

As we referenced before, Hezekiah's reign was not trouble-free. Following God's instructions and obeying his commandments did not ensure Hezekiah an easy time in the world. He still faced adversity and challenges. His faith was put to a most severe test. In Isaiah 36-37 and 2 Chronicles 32 we read about a time in his life so difficult and stressful that it understandably would push most everyone either toward faith and reliance upon God, or toward resolution that no God would be so unfair as to let such things happen, moving one away from faith and obedience. For Hezekiah, there was only one option – trust in the Lord.

Psalms 48; 2 Chronicles 32:4-32:26; and Isaiah 38

The victory of Hezekiah and God's people is found in songs of praise. While we are not certain about the origination of Psalm 48, some believe it was written in response to God's salvation of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army. Certainly such feelings of praise were appropriate whether the psalm was written out of those events or not.

The Psalm reflects the praise rightly due God for times of immediate and visible salvation.

The historical events surrounding this Assyrian invasion and assault were provided earlier when studying the passages from Kings. It need not be repeated here, except for perhaps noting one fact. God saved Jerusalem from Sennacherib, but not the surrounding towns and countryside! Sennacherib's invasion razed much of the Judean countryside and many significant towns. Was that because those people were disobedient? Were all unfaithful save those in the Jerusalem?

We know from Isaiah's other prophecies that other than under Hezekiah, the people and the rulers of Judah were, in fact, walking in many diverse sins. Still we need not assume that all were unfaithful. Certainly as Hezekiah turned to the Lord, the people were turning with him. We need to see that being faithful to God, and praising God for his faithfulness, is never a matter of having a cushy or protected life on earth. It is about knowing whose side we have chosen in this cosmic opportunity we call life, learning through love what he wishes for us and from us, and doing it as faithfully as we can. We trust him with the consequences, be they what we would have chosen or not.

A part of this includes seeking his intervention and instruction in the midst of that we find unholy or unjust. Hezekiah sought God's intervention over and over again. We see there are times where God waits for his people to cry out before bringing deliverance. The choices of people can change history. As people make those choices seeking God's face, history changes for the better! We see this in the continued narrative of Hezekiah as he became sick, cried out to the Lord, and was saved. This narrative is given fuller details in Isaiah 38.

Psalm 39

After being saved from a deadly illness, Hezekiah became proud, a sin most abhorred by God. Pride is a sin that eliminates godly reliance and replaces it with self. As this sin became pronounced in Hezekiah's life, we read of Hezekiah reaping the consequences until he turned and repented. Psalm 39 is a psalm of one who begins walking before God in holiness, only to grow into sin. Upon suffering sin's consequences, the psalmist moves again into repentance and fellowship with God.

While we are rarely sure of the precise origin of the psalms, it is easy to fit some into the profiles of life events of certain men of Scripture.

Psalm 60

This Psalm also echoes the cries of one who has faced defeat in sin and found victory in faith. The key for the psalmist was returning to God in righteousness. The psalmist

learned that God is at work, that God has purposes beyond what we know or see, and that God's faithfulness is readily seen in his people of faith.

Proverb 12:28; Psalm 119:1-119:8, 119:41-119:48

These passages also speak to the importance of finding God in righteousness. Righteousness leads to life (Prov 12:28). His blessings follow those who are obedient to his commands (Pslm 119:1-119:3). This is a charge we are to take personally and to proclaim to others (Pslm 119:41-119:48).

QUESTIONS FOR WEEK 16

1. *"Yet you brought up my life from the pit, O LORD my God"* (Jonah 2:6).

How often have we heard it, "I didn't turn around until I hit rock bottom."? What is it about us that numbly refuses to be simply humble and obedient servants to the king?

2. God does not have a plan that is forced upon humanity. Jonah is a good example of "Plan B." God had a mission for Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh. Instead, Jonah fled to the point of death. Once there, Jonah relented and God put Jonah on a new plan to go to Nineveh—a Plan B! The story unfolds that Plan B worked quite well! Nineveh repented and God's wrath was averted for that day.

Where are we on God's calling in our life? Have we refused his Plan A? Maybe even his Plan B? Do not despair. As long as there is a breath of life left, God is able to take a willing heart to His plan to accomplish His purposes. What we need to do is supply the willing heart!

3. Who are you in the Jonah saga? Are you God's co-worker? If so, when he says "Go," are you a Peter who goes or a Jonah who flees? Do you have fear of the mariners that drives you to God or Jonah's fear that drives him from God? Are you the Ninevites called to repentance who turn to God or Jonah who begrudgingly finally manages to do God's will, but not without pouting and bringing on personal suffering in the process?

4. Do we really see God's commands as guideposts to place us into the right paths for life? Where does faith enter into this picture as a part of obedience?

Week Seventeen Readings

<p style="text-align: center;">4/21 The Coming Spirit Jn 14:16-14:26</p> <p>Matt 18:7-18:35 Mrk 4:1-4:12 Isa 6:9-6:13 Deut 29 Mrk 4:13-4:20 Jer 21 Jer 34</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4/22 Keeping Commandments Jn 14:21</p> <p>2 Kgs 2:15-2:25 2 Kgs 3 2 Kgs 6:1-8:6</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4/23 Jesus - the Vine Jn 15</p> <p>Pslm 80 Isa 18 Prov 16:6-16:11; 16:14-16:15 Ezek 15 Prov 20:28</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4/24 Jesus Overcomes Jn 16</p> <p>Pslm 77 Pslm 82 1 Jn 2:12-2:27 1 Jn 4:1-5:12</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">4/25 Peace of Heart Jn 16:33</p> <p>Eph 2:11-2:22 Prov 12:25 Prov 14:13-14:14 Jer 46-49</p> <p style="text-align: center;">4/26 The High Priestly Prayer Jn 17:1-17:26</p> <p>1 Pet 1 Isa 40:6-40:8 Matt 26:40-26:46 Luk 22:39-22:46 Heb 5:7-5:10 Heb 4:14-4:16 Eph 4:1-4:15 Pslm 68 Ezek 37</p> <p>4/27 <i>Off</i></p>
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