

Proper 20

[Home](#) [Up](#)

Pentecost 18
September 22, 2002

Prayer of the Day

Lord God, you call us to work in your vineyard and leave no one standing idle. Set us to our tasks in the work of your kingdom, and help us to order our lives by your wisdom; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jonah 3:10-4:11

{3:10} When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.... {4:1} But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. {2} He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. {3} And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." {4} And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" {5} Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. {6} The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. {7} But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. {8} When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." {9} But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." {10} Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. {11} And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

The story to this point: Jonah was called by Yahweh to go to Nineveh and "cry against it" (1:1-2), but instead he fled to Tarshish (1:3). After being thrown into the sea and swallowed by a great fish (1:4-2:10), Jonah is given a second call (3:2) which he accepts (3:3). In response to Jonah's warning the Ninevites believe and repent (3:4-9). Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the great enemy of Israel and Judah. The prophecy of Nahum celebrates the approaching fall of Nineveh.

10. When God saw what they did...God changed his mind: "They" are the non-Israelite Ninevites. They repented, the king proclaimed a fast and charged the people to repudiate their sinful ways and pray for forgiveness. And God "changed his mind." The punishment Jonah had announced, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown," was canceled. "God does not abide by his word of judgment. On the contrary, through his mercy he puts himself on the side of Israel's merciless enemies." [1]

4:1. very displeasing: Literally, "displeased with great displeasure." Limburg's translation, "absolutely furious" conveys the intensity of Jonah's reaction.

Is this not what I said.... That is why I fled: The possibility of the hated Ninevites repenting and being forgiven is why Jonah ran away before. Why did he think that would happen?

for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing: Exodus 34:6; Psalm 86:5; Psalm 103:8. See especially

Joel 2:13 where "returning" to Yahweh is grounded in Yahweh's willingness to relent from punishment. [2]

3. *now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live:* "Jonah wants to die because he doesn't like the thought of the people of Nineveh being allowed to live." [3] Jonah expresses his wish to die in verses 8 and 9 also.

4. *the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?":* The Lord asks the same question in verse 9, and Jonah responded, "Yes, angry enough to die."

6-9: Yahweh constructs an object lesson for Jonah.

6. *The Lord appointed:* God is the active element in the story, appointing, providing, preparing, hurling, speaking (1:4, 17; 2:20; 4:7, 8).

bush: A castor oil plant.

Jonah was very happy about the bush: Jonah was furious with God for forgiving the Ninevites, but happy about the bush that saved him from discomfort.

10-11: The pericope ends with Yahweh's justification of his forgiveness of the Ninevites. Jonah cared about the death of the bush (verses 6-8), and was angry enough to die when it withered. How much more should Yahweh be concerned about the lives of the people of Nineveh "and also many animals."

a hindered and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left: The Ninevites are like children, simple and ignorant. When they were told what offended Yahweh they changed their behavior. But they need further instruction. And that is where the matter is left.

Psalm 145:1-8

{1} I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. {2} Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever. {3} Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable. {4} One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. {5} On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. {6} The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed, and I will declare your greatness. {7} They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and shall sing aloud of your righteousness. {8} The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Psalm 148 is an acrostic. Each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. "The acrostic pattern seems not to have obstructed the lyricism of the psalmist, for the hymn effuses originality and warmth." [4]

In contrast to Jonah in the first lesson the grace and mercy of Yahweh are attributes which the singer praises. God's goodness and righteous reveal themselves in wondrous and awesome deeds; his greatness is unsearchable.

1-3: "The introduction (vv. 1-3), in which, in contrast with Pss. 5:2; 84:3, God is addressed in the style in which one would address the reigning monarch, at once throws into relief the fundamental idea which pervades the whole psalm, that is, the everlasting praise of the 'name' (nature) of God, who has revealed himself in all his majesty and unreachable sublimity." [5]

4-7: "In a living tradition the praise should be repeated from one generation to another, and Yahweh's great deeds should be narrated and proclaimed." [6]

8. *The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love:* The Psalm quotes with praise the same self-description of Yahweh's mercy and grace that Jonah quoted with disgust. See also Exodus 34:6; Psalm 103:8; Nehemiah 1:5.

Philippians 1:21-30

{21} For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. {22} If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. {23} I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; {24} but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. {25} Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, {26} so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. {27} Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear

about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, {28} and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. {29} For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well-- {30} since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

21. *living is Christ and dying is gain*: The Christian life is one of absolute dependence and total commitment. Precisely because the life of faith is so rich, the promised resurrection is beyond description.

22. *I do not know which I prefer*: "Prefer" is more in the character of "which I should choose." In verse 23 Paul's desire is to be with the Lord, but he chooses to serve the Philippians.

23-26. *my desire is to depart and be with Christ...but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you*: Paul subordinates his desire to be with Christ to the necessity to remain with the Philippians as they progress in faith.

27-28: Paul instructs the Philippians to live in a manner worthy of the gospel, to stand firm in one spirit, and not to be intimidated by opposition.

29. *the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well*: This is God's gracious gift to the Philippians, a struggle like that which Paul experiences.

Matthew 20:1-16

{1} "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. {2} After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. {3} When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; {4} and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. {5} When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. {6} And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' {7} They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' {8} When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' {9} When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. {10} Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. {11} And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, {12} saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' {13} But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? {14} Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. {15} Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' {16} So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

1. *the kingdom of heaven is like*: Apart from this passage the phrase occurs only in Matthew 13. In Mark 4:31 (parallel Luke 13:19) and Luke 13:21 the phrase "it is like" with the antecedent, "the Kingdom of God," is used. All identify similes for the Kingdom. Matthew also uses the phrase, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to..." (Matthew 13:24; 18:23; 22:2).

a landowner: The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner engaged in a specific task. Heaven, not God, is like this landowner. This is a parable, not an allegory. Any attempt to use it as an allegory is to rob it of its power.

early: In verses 3, 5 and 6 the landowner goes out at noon, 3:00 and 5:00, which may suggest that "early" is 6:00 a.m.

2. *the usual daily wage*: Literally, "a denarius for the day," "a Roman coin worth about 18 cents. A normal day's wage for laborers." [7]

2- 7: These verses describe the hiring of successive groups of laborers.

6. *'Why are you standing here idle all day?'*: The men reply (verse 7) 'Because no one has hired us,' meaning "Because you have not hired us." "Its not our fault that we are idle. We are willing to work . But you have not hired us. If you do not hire us our families will starve."

8-12: These verses describe paying the laborers and the grumbling of those who were hired first. The grumbling here is not a rejection of God, as it is in the Old Testament, but the attitude of

workers who believe that they have been treated unfairly.

13. *Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me:* The landowner rejects the complaint on the basis of the contract that was agreed to.

14-15: The landowner asserts his right to "choose" how he will pay those who are not governed by the contract.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me: What belongs to the landowner is certainly the money with which he pays the laborers. But in the kingdom of heaven all those who enter it belong to God, who may use them as he chooses.

are you envious: Literally, "is your eye evil." The first hired try to intimidate the landowner with the evil-eye, but it doesn't work.

16. *the last will be first and the first will be last:* This proverb also precedes the parable in 19:30. The parable should not be read as an allegory, but as a challenge to the usual way of doing business. The landowner acts without reference to custom or even justice and exercises arbitrary and unfair largesse toward unworthy laborers.

Reflection

"The entire Bible tells the story of God's love for the insiders, the people of Israel and the people of the New Testament church. The book of Jonah, however, has a special concern to show God's love for the outsiders, the people of the world—even for their cattle." [8] And if God loves the outsiders, what should we, who claim God's love for the insiders, feel about God's love for them? Anger? Enough to die?

Like Jonah we are more likely to be happy about something that saves us from discomfort than about the forgiveness of our enemies. What did Jesus teach? "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." And he explicitly commands us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44).

"The question [of Israel's attitude to God's unlimited mercy to the whole world at her expense] takes on new life in the New Testament. How will those closest to Jesus feel about his goodness to those afar off? The parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16) is, in content, a precise recapitulation of Jonah's problem. There the laborers who are hired in the first hour rebel against the equal treatment accorded to those who are hired only at the eleventh. The Lord counters their murmurings, too, with kindly questions: 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?' The final scene in the book of Jonah can show Jesus' disciples even a little more drastically still that, as K.H. Miskotte says, "church people," when they are bad, are worse, more divided, more undependable, ignoble, and inhuman than ordinary people' (*When the Gods are Silent* [1967] 434). But the scene also shows how their Master liberates them." [9]

The sovereignty of God is the point of the parable. Those who follow Jesus can expect to be blessed, but their dealings with God can never be determined by human standards of equity. The kingdom of heaven is like that. God is like that. "Heaven is gracious, but few can draw safe deductions on its methods." [10] In fact, the graciousness of the householder is even stranger than that of Yahweh in Jonah: "Compassion that takes from the poor to give to the poorer is not a helpful image for the compassion of an infinitely bountiful God. If that were the point the parable should end differently." [11] Dominic Crossan comments, "The very easy way to end this story and give a magnificent example of goodness and generosity over justice and exactitude would be, for example, *to give all alike three denarii*.... The present story is an example of a master who violates expectations...and not an example of a master who practices goodness." [12]

Paul is an example of how grace operates. Paul's own wishes are subordinated to the needs of the Philippians, and both Paul and the Philippians enjoy the privilege both of believing in Christ and of suffering for him. Being a Christian is not a way of acquiring "stuff," not even spiritual stuff like forgiveness and eternal life. Instead it is a willingness, however reluctant, to be used by God without explanation or justification.

Hymns [13]

With One Voice (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement 1991* (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).
E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

381 E--Hark, the Voice
297 D--Salvation unto Us
222 I--O Bread of
176 II--For All Your

399 II--We Are the
777v II--In the Morning
436 G--All Who Love
460, 764s, 772s/709v, 362

Prayers of the People [14]

P or A: Looking not to our own interests but to the interests of others, let us bring the needs of all people before God saying, "Hear us, O God," and responding, "Make our joy complete."

A: Let us be willing workers, daughters and sons. Let all of your church know its happiness is in serving our neighbor and worshipping you. Let our faith propel us into the service of others. Hear us, O God, make our joy complete.

A: Let the mind of Jesus Christ be in the leaders of the nations. We pray especially that governments will see as their mandate the equal justice and protection of all and that no citizen will lack basic housing, food or health care. Help us share the resources we have fairly. Hear us, O God. Make our joy complete.

A: Take away selfish ambition and conceit. Help us come to full accord in our national and provincial political processes. Bring unity to your church, divided and broken. Hear us, O God. Make our joy complete.

A: Give encouragement in Christ and consolation from love to those who are ill or in need of your special care in any way. We name those in need we know _____. Take us with you to bear your love and consolation to the sick and the poor. Hear us, O God. Make our joy complete.

P: Enable us both to will and to work for your good pleasure. Oh God, grant our prayers as you see best for us and for all peoples and bless those in particular need through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Or [15]

Presider or deacon

Let us offer prayers to God for all who labor in the vineyard of Christ and for all in every danger and need.

Deacon or other leader

For this holy gathering, and for the people of God in every place.

For all peoples and their leaders, for candidates for office, and for justice, mercy, and peace in the world.

For all who work for daily wages, and for their employers and managers.

For abundant fruits of the earth, and for safety from violent storms.

For the sick and the suffering, travelers and the victims of war, prisoners and refugees, and the dying and dead.

For our city and those who live in it, and for our families, companions, and all those we love.

Lifting our voices with all creation, with the blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ. **To you, O Lord.**

Presider

Gracious and merciful God, who honors the last as well as the first, hear the prayers we offer this day and welcome your people into your kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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Notes

- [1] Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, p. 168.
- [2] “Though the matter of dating and the direction of dependency remains uncertain, it seems more likely that the author of Jonah is picking up quotations from Joel and dividing them (3:9; 4:2).” James Limburg, *Jonah: A Commentary*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 90.
- [3] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- [4] Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III 101-150: Introduction, Translation, and Notes with an appendix The Grammar of the Psalter*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970, p. 335
- [5] Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962, p. 827
- [6] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*. Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1989, p. 548.
- [7] Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980, p. 59; Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 191992, p. 120.
- [8] Limburg, *ibid.*, p. 98.
- [9] Wolff, *Ibid.*, p. 177.
- [10] Charles Williams, *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*, 1936.
- [11] Diedrik A. Nelson, “Matthew 20:1-16,” *Interpretation* 29(1975)290.
- [12] Dominic Crossan, “Structuralist Analysis and the Parables of Jesus,” *Semeia* 1, p. 209.
- [13] <http://www.worship.ca/text/wpch0102.txt>
- [14] http://www.worship.ca/text/int_a2.txt
- [15] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>