

Sermons In
Obadiah & Jonah

By R.J. Rushdoony



Vallecito, California

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The Vision of the Worshipper of God

Obadiah 1–4

1. The vision of Obadiah. Thus saith the Lord God concerning Edom; We have heard a rumour from the LORD, and an ambassador is sent among the heathen, Arise ye, and let us rise up against her in battle.
2. Behold, I have made thee small among the heathen: thou art greatly despised.
3. The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground?
4. Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the LORD.

The prophecy of Obadiah is the briefest book of the Old Testament; nothing is known about its author nor his time in history. Pusey observed that “The silence of Holy Scripture as to the Prophet Obadiah stands in remarkable contrast with the anxiety of men to know something of him.”¹

The only possible key to the date of this prophecy is v. 11, which clearly records a conquest of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was captured seven times. Some of these clearly do not fit, as Aglen noted, because the conquerors are referred to as foreigners; hence the civil war between Joash and Amaziah is ruled out; when the Egyptian King Shishak took Jerusalem in Rehoboam’s reign, Edom was not independent but subject to Judah. As Aglen noted,

There remain—(1) The capture by the Philistines and Arabians in the reign of Jehoram (related in 2 Chron. xxi.16, 17; (2) by the Chaldeans in the reign of Jehoiakim (2 Kings xxiv.1, seqq.; 2 Chron. xxxvi.6, 7); (3) the second capture by Nebuchadnezzar when Jehoiachin was taken prisoner (2 Kings xxiv.10 seqq.; 2 Chron. xxxvi.10); and (4) the final and decisive siege, which ended in the destruction of the city and general captivity.

There is much to favour the view that our prophet refers to the first of these.²

Many have given Obadiah a later date. Calvin believed him to be probably a contemporary of Jeremiah, writing therefore of the final fall of the city to the Babylonians.³ Luther dated Obadiah from the time of the captivity in Babylon.⁴ Thompson places Obadiah after the Exile in the mid-fifth century, B.C.⁵

However, as Aglen observed,

The only external guidance of any kind towards fixing even approximately the date of this prophecy is its place in the canon. An attempt at chronological order evidently directed the arrangement of the minor prophets.⁶

Moreover, Laetsch has given excellent reasons why Obadiah cannot be dated from the time of Jerusalem’s destruction in 586 B.C. and why the time of Jehoram (c. 850–843 B.C.) is a better date.⁷

Such speculation is of considerable interest, and, to a degree, important, but even more important is the absence of a clear-cut date in this prophecy. Where dating is important to the context of a book, the Bible gives us precise dating by reign and by a variety of important references. The fact that we still have chronological problems does not negate the precision of the Scriptures where precision of dating is relevant and important.

Those who hold to the infallibility of Scripture *cannot* view it as accidental that there is an absence of date in Obadiah. Clearly, this is prophecy; certain events are predicted, very plainly and sharply. Equally clearly, these events have a broader frame of reference than Judah and Edom, and the prophecy cuts us loose from too close an engagement with dates and periods.

Let us examine, in view of this, its principal characters. Isaac's two sons, Jacob and Esau, or Israel-Judah and Edom, were in a struggle from the beginning. The birthright was gained by Jacob and claimed by profane Esau. The bitterness of Esau was perpetuated in his people, the Edomites, who outwardly were the seed of Abraham but inwardly were reprobate. Hence the Edomites viewed any trouble that befell Israel-Judah with delight and malicious pleasure. Morgan stated the situation very clearly:

The background of the picture presented to us by Obadiah is Jacob; the foreground is Esau. Jacob and those descended from him are seen passing through suffering, which is of the nature of chastisement, to ultimate restoration. Esau is seen proud, rebellious, defiant, moving towards ultimate destruction.⁸

The reference is thus to the elect of God and to the reprobate of every age, but, more exactly, to those reprobates who are outwardly of the household of faith, but in reality are not of God. Edom refers to the false churches and pseudo-Christian nations who claim to be representatives of "Christendom" but in reality hate the people of God and delight in every evil which befalls God's true church and which weakens Christian civilization.

This then is the prophecy of Obadiah, whose name means "servant of God," or, as Pusey gave it, worshipper of God.⁹ It has reference to a specific historical incident, the malicious delight of Edom at the capture and humiliation of Jerusalem, and it makes specific prophecies with respect to Edom, all of which have been fulfilled.

The *time* of the book is thus the humiliation of Jerusalem, its helplessness as the enemy prevails against it, and as his brother nation Edom rejoices in his humiliation. The time is the humiliation of the people of God, as they see and feel their helplessness in the face of the enemy and hear the taunts of the hypocrites who claim to be God's people and are in fact His enemies.

The prophecy begins with a sharp brevity which marks the whole book: "The vision (or prophecy) of Obadiah." Then, very briefly also, "Thus saith the Lord God concerning Edom" (v. 1). The historical Edom was a mountainous country of about 110 miles length and 30 miles width, south of Moab, north of the Dead Sea, west of Midian and east of Israel and Judah.

"We have heard a rumour (or, report) from the LORD, and an ambassador is sent among the heathen (or, nations), Arise ye, and let us rise up against her in battle" (v. 1). The "ambassador" referred to is not a literal envoy dispatched by God to the nations. The nations referred to are, like Edom, reprobate: they are "the heathen." Their natural position should be one of enmity to Jerusalem, but God now works to turn their conspiring minds against each other! As Laetsch noted,

The conspiring nations, of course, had their own ambitious interests in mind, but unknown to themselves they were only pawns in the hand of the Lord. It is the Lord who places Himself at the head of this undertaking, who urges the nations, "Arise! Let us arise against Edom in battle!"¹⁰

Laetsch's use of the word "pawns" is excellent. A very wretched book of the post World War II era was titled *Pawns in the Game*. Its thesis was that, a hidden group of conspirators was using men and nations as pawns in their diabolical game, and all history was viewed as predestined by these conspirators. Not surprisingly, the author was not a Christian and viewed the Doukhobors, a dualistic, Manichaeian cult, as the finest religious people of our day.

To hold that history is in the hands of anyone but the sovereign God is to be a Satanist ultimately, because

control is then transferred to creation and either to unseen malignant forces or to malignant men. Obadiah speaks clearly against this kind of error. Outwardly, evil seemed triumphant; Jerusalem had been captured and penalized severely, The enemy moved freely, and the malignant pleasure of Edom at the humiliation of God's people no doubt burned deeply. Precisely at this point God speaks of His sovereign government over all things: God's people shall be delivered in due time, and Edom forever destroyed.

Moreover, the enemy will be destroyed by their own devices. The heathen will destroy the heathen. The conspirators will destroy one another in a cannibalistic judgment, and behind their self-destruction will be the sovereign power of God.

God addresses Edom through Obadiah. It is not Edom, however, who will listen but Jerusalem, God's elect. Whatever their temporary eminence, God declares that Edom is "small among the heathen" nations and "greatly despised" (v. 2).

The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high: that saith in thine heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground? (v. 3)

"*The rock* (s) is the capital Sela (later Petra)." ¹¹ The conclusion of scholars is that *the rock* is Sela, and Sela is the city known to us as Petra, an amazing rock-carved, mountain-bound city. ¹²

Edom was confident that, having established itself securely in its mountain retreats, none could destroy her. Lange's comment is to the point: "*Who will bring me down to the earth?*" i.e., no man can do it. And yet there is one who can." ¹³ Calvin also called attention to this same fact:

And yet there was not wanting a reason why the Idumeans were thus insolent, as the Prophet also states: but he at the same time shows that they had deceived themselves; for God cared not for their fortresses; nay, he counted them as nothing. ¹⁴

This warning of the certainty of God's judgment was addressed to the Edomites, but, if they heard it, it is not likely that they paid any attention to it or took it seriously. However, any Judeans who heard and disbelieved were by that reaction themselves spiritual Edomites.

Spiritual Edomites are governed by purely naturalistic considerations. They may profess to believe in God and in the triumph of His Kingdom, but practically, they believe in the power of evil. They move in fear of evil, trusting essentially in the omnipotence and triumph of ungodly conspiracies and powers. The conspirators and heathen nations who boast that they are too powerful to be overthrown, too entrenched to be uprooted, and too basic to the stream of history to be eliminated are separated by only a thin and inconsequential line from those fearful men, who, while hating these powers, believe in their thesis that the control of history is in their hands. Either God absolutely governs all things, or He is not God but an interesting and curious spectator. And either we believe firmly in God's absolute sovereignty over all men and nations and His total control over all things, or we do not believe in God but in Satan. We are then Satanists, who believe with Satan that the creature can capture and govern creation (Gen. 3:5).

The prophecy of Obadiah is thus a test also: the true sons of the covenant will listen and rejoice: the sovereign God will judge and destroy Edom and deliver His elect into His Kingdom. All others will pass by, positing various considerations as to why the powers of today will not be broken, or, at best, broken only by men. They thereby affirm the death of God and the triumph of Satan.

But God affirms that His judgment is inescapable (v. 4). Laetsch, a very superior commentator, has observed, of vv. 3-4:

Edom's pride shall be humbled. The prophet names four items on which the pride of Edom was based: its power, its wealth, its alliances, its wisdom. But not one of these advantages, nor all of them combined, could prevent its

ignominious ruin.

Edom prided itself on its military strength and superiority (vv. 3, 4). The very character of its land, the high hills, the lofty mountains, the steep crags, the tropical heat, the scarcity of water, all combined to make a campaign against Edom exceedingly difficult and its success problematical, if not impossible. The innumerable caves, natural and artificial, offered refuge for the people of the land and vantage points for the soldiers from which surprise attacks, sudden raids, could be made upon the enemy. While the invaders plodded their weary way in the fierce heat, without adequate food and water supply, the Edomites enjoyed the coolness of the caves, where they had not only hidden their treasures, but had also stored ample food supplies, while huge cisterns filled in the rainy seasons furnished the needed water during the dry summer. In addition to these natural military advantages, “practically every site throughout the length and breadth of the land consisted either of a great fortress or a strong blockhouse.”¹⁵

Edom thus had a security, humanly speaking, such as few nations have enjoyed. The comment in v. 3, “that saith in his heart” must be taken very literally; God, knowing every thought and imagination of man’s heart, gives us here the very thoughts of Edom’s rulers and people. Obadiah, who has inspired great eloquence in commentators from the reformers to Laetsch, has stirred up like abilities in Pusey, who commented on “that saith in his heart,”

The heart has its own language, as distinct as that formed by the lips, mostly deeper, often truer. It needeth not the language of the lips, to offend God. As He answers the heart which seeks Him, so also He replies in displeasure to the heart which despises Him. *Who shall bring me down to the earth?* Such is the language of all self-sufficient security. “Can Alexander fly?” answered the Bactrian chief from another Petra. On the second night he was prisoner or slain. Edom probably under his *Who?* included God Himself, Who to him was the God of the Jews only. Yet men now too include God in their defiance, and scarcely veil it from themselves by speaking of “fortune” rather than God; or, if of a coarser sort, they do not even veil it, as in that common terrible saying, “He fears neither God nor devil.” God answers his thought.¹⁶

God answers Edom’s thought in terms of His sovereign power and purpose, and His absolute justice. As Robinson noted, “Obadiah taught with special emphasis the indestructible character of eternal justice. A ‘day of Jehovah,’ he declared, is coming upon Edom and also upon the nations.”¹⁷

The vision of the servant and worshipper of God is thus a prophetic insight into, *first*, the false security of the reprobate. This false security is grounded in the belief that the determination of history is in the hands of man and not of God. The sin of man is his acceptance of the Satanic faith that every man is his own god, determining for himself what constitutes good and evil (Gen. 3:5), lord of his own destiny and creator of the future. With each failure, Edom was more than ever convinced that, with certain remedies to its structure of defense, the future was thereby secure. Edom’s defense, however, was entirely a military strategy; it was without defense religiously and morally, in that it had despised the only true God.

The vision of the true worshipper is also, *second*, a prophetic insight into the mind of God through His word. The Kingdom is the Lord’s not man’s, and God will not share His glory with another. As a result, the one certainty about history is that its Edomites shall perish, for God’s judgment is inescapable.

Lange, another commentator moved to eloquence by Obadiah, commented:

The judgment of the world presupposes the separation between God’s congregation and the world, and is, as an objective crisis, the final consequence and manifestation of this inner discrimination already experienced (cf. John iii.18f.). The world-power is the necessary complement to the community of the saved. It is not given by an original antithesis to the kingdom of God, but has developed itself with the latter from the same natural ground, and at the first stood in a fraternal relation with it. Now, however, it stands in an independent isolation over

against it; and, as lies in the very nature of the case, the original connection, like a sting cleaving to the conscience, has served only to increase the alienation. The opposition has in all points amounted to polarization: the kingdom of God in prostration, the world-power in secure defiance; the kingdom of God in humility, this in pride; this in possession on the earth, that without possessions on earth, but having a refuge in the heavenly Jerusalem; this only an object of the divine decrees, but that possessing the knowledge of these decrees through the information of the prophets. God's decree is the completion of his kingdom, and so the removal of its enemies. Hence the necessity for the judgment on the world which takes place in the legal form of the *talio*, the penalty exactly adequate to the crime: the punishment of the world-power corresponds to its sins, and its conduct toward the congregation of God. If the harmony in the order of the world is to be restored, a revolution of the existing most unreasonable relation must take place; the world-power is stripped of its possessions, the congregation acquires them,—that despised, this highly esteemed. This judgment is already indicated in the nature of sin; it executes itself so soon as God once allows it development to its final result, and his saviors on Zion establish what has been actually given. What is true they establish in continuance; what is naught, because it is against God, they cast into annihilation. In prophecy, this plurality of saviors, compared with the one Saviour, represents the same preliminary stage as is signified in the history by the previous period of the judges, compared with the monarchy.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, when St. Augustine described the development of the City of God as against the City of Man, he saw the two cities clearly set forth in Obadiah.¹⁹ The present is a prelude to the future, and both present and future manifest the sovereignty of God. The present sees God at work; the future witnesses God triumphant in history's every past event. Time only unfolds what God ordains. The vision of Obadiah is also that of Psalm 46: when the earth and nations are shaken by cataclysms of nature and of war, when empires collapse, and desolations prevail, "will not we fear," for "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (Ps. 46:2, 11).

Some of the contemporary interest in Edom is because Edom means "red." Does the prophecy then speak of the modern "Reds" or Communists? In a real sense, it does: Edom is to be located, however, not only in the Communist states but in all others who deny their covenant heritage and God.

The Promises of Judgment

Obadiah 5–9

5. If thieves came to thee, if robbers by night, (how art thou cut off!) would they not have stolen till they had enough? if the grapegatherers came to thee, would they not leave some grapes?
6. How are the things of Esau searched out! how are his hidden things sought up!
7. All the men of thy confederacy have brought thee even to the border: the men that were at peace with thee have deceived thee, and prevailed against thee; they that eat thy bread have laid a wound under thee: there is none understanding in him.
8. Shall I not in that day, saith the Lord, even destroy the wise men out of Edom, and understanding out of the mount of Esau?
9. And thy mighty men, O Teman, shall be dismayed, to the end that every one of the mount of Esau may be cut off by slaughter.

When the Communist dictator, Nikita Khrushchev, declared to the United States, “We will bury you,” millions of conservatives were deeply perturbed and demanded more anti-communist action and defense preparations. More plainly, and with a perfect record of performance lacking in Khrushchev, the triune God has declared in Scripture, to all who forsake Him, that, in effect, He too will bury them, and His judgments are absolute. It is a telling commentary on these same Americans that, while they fear the Communist threat, they do not fear God’s threat in the slightest. The Communist menace is a real one, but it is nothing compared to the judgment of an angry God. The reason for this differing relationship of these Americans to Communism and to God is very apparent: Communism is real to them, and God is not.

They may profess God, but He is to them very remote at best, and His word strange, unfamiliar, and unknown. Men who walk in remoteness from God and His word are not likely to feel the strength of either except in judgment. Men whose lives are too greatly absorbed by the power of evil will in the end be governed by that evil. William Wordsworth’s poem, “The Daffodils,” makes a telling point too seldom appreciated in our time, on the power of memory, and its influence upon us. Having spent time in the country beside a lake, and having witnessed the loveliness of a field of daffodils swaying in the breeze, Wordsworth concluded,

For oft, when on my couch I lie
 In vacant or in pensive mood,
 They flash upon that inward eye
 Which is the bliss of solitude;
 And then my heart with pleasure fills,
 And dances with the daffodils.

Wordsworth’s romanticism led him to a faith in the cultivation of the *aesthetic experience* as the key to life. For the Christian, it is the knowledge of God’s law-word and obedience unto it which is basic. A man who obeys God’s law knows its force in his life, and he knows also the omnipotence of the Lawgiver. He will move then, not in fear of the law-breakers but the Lawgiver. He will be governed, not by a faith in the power of law-breakers but a faith in the omnipotence of the Lawgiver.

It is precisely this faith in the Lawgiver, the Creator-God, which Obadiah teaches. The promise of judgment is a total one (vv. 5–6).

Edom was a wealthy country, highly productive in its farming. Good use was made of its rainfall; irrigation was practiced in the dry season. Forest conservation, terracing, care for the soil, and other sound agricultural and conservationist practices were the rule. The Edomites, as well as other peoples of the area until the time of the Moslems, and especially the Turks, had a healthy respect for natural resources. They were far ahead of the modern champions of ecology.

But this was not all. Copper and iron mines near Ezion-Geber, as Laetsch points out, provided great wealth as did trade, and brokerage in world commerce. Edom was a wealthy nation, and had accumulated great riches over the centuries. To this day, the echo of wealth survives in the name of the temple: “The most imposing Nabataean temple in Petra is called by the Arabs *el-khazneh*, ‘the Treasury.’”²⁰

The totality of the judgment of God is underscored. If robbed by thieves, something would be left; a thief takes the choicest items, not everything. Grapepickers leave some gleanings, whether by intent or by inability to see all the fruit. Not so the judgment of God: Edom shall be stripped of everything.

The ruin of Edom is too complete to be ascribed to human causality, to the depredation of robbers, to an overthrow as if reapers had come over the harvest; it is God’s pitiless work.²¹

Edom is “cleaned out” completely. “Obadiah mentions the plundering first, because Petra, the capital of Edom, was a great emporium of the Syrio-Arabian trade where many valuables were stored (vid., Diod. Sic. xix. 95), and because with the loss of these riches the prosperity and power of Edom were destroyed.”²²

This destruction, moreover, came to Edom from the hands of her ostensible friends (v. 7). Edom, by its control of the trade routes, combined with a strategic location which rendered it safe from easy attacks, was a nation courted by greater powers, as well as by its neighbors. To conquer Edom was so difficult a project that it was normally wiser to make her an ally and partner. The destruction brought about by God reverses all these factors. Escaping Edomites, seeking to cross their borders into safety in another country, are turned back: no man wants a hunted Edomite in his land. The allies who do not participate in Edom’s destruction and are at peace with her deceive her: they refuse to come to her defense as they had promised. In fact, they then join the enemy to “prevail” against Edom, to set a trap for her and to destroy her totally.

According to Laetsch, “they that eat thy bread” should be rendered, “Thy bread have they laid as a festering wound under thee.” The “bread” of Edom was its copper and iron industry. Its exports of copper and iron returned to her as instruments of war used in attacking and destroying Edom.²³ In this crisis, the Edomites, normally very shrewd and intelligent, become stupid and contribute to their own ruin: “there is none understanding in him” (v. 7). Calvin observed,

[T]hat it nothing avails the ungodly, when they set up their fortresses against the judgment of God, as though they could escape safe from his hand; for as God has heaven and earth under his control, he can, whenever it pleases him, draw down all who now despise his power, and, therefore, deride his Prophets, or regard as nothing their threatenings.²⁴

In the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., the Edomites were completely driven out of their country. They took refuge in southern Judah. After the fall of Jerusalem in the Jewish-Roman war, the Edomites disappeared from history permanently. Ironically, their only safe refuge had been among the people whom they despised, the Jews. Their experience did not teach them any respect for the people of God, and the Herods were a family of Edomites or Idumeans who arose to plague Judea.

Teman was a city of Edom, five miles from Petra, located where the modern Tawilan, Jordan is found. It

had an ancient reputation as a center of wisdom, possibly as an educational center (vv. 8–9). Job’s friend Eliphaz was from Teman (Job 2:11), and in the Apocrypha Baruch 3:23 associated Teman with seekers of understanding. The “mighty men” of Teman are thus men of learning, understanding, and skill in the arts and crafts, in education, diplomacy, and military strategy. The reference is to schooled men in all the disciplines necessary for Edom’s survival and prosperity. Their wisdom, however, is turned into the stupidity of terror to the end that the Edomites are cut off and slaughtered. The possession of Southern Judea, granted them by the Chaldeans as a reward, gave the Edomites a lease on life, but their final destruction could not be averted. When the Nabataeans drove the Edomites out of their homeland, the survivors in Judea remained, together with some refugees, but these too finally disappeared.

Pusey observed, of the failure of Edomite wisdom, that

The men of the world think that they hold their wisdom and all God’s natural gifts, independently of the Giver. God, by the events of His natural Providence, as here by His word, shews, through some sudden withdrawal of their wisdom, that it is His, not their’s. Men wonder at the sudden failure, the flaw in the well-arranged plan, the one over-confident act which ruins the whole scheme, the over-shrewdness which betrays itself, or the unaccountable oversight. They are amazed that one so shrewd should overlook this or that, and think not that He, in Whose Hands are our powers of thought, supplied not just that insight, whereon the whole depended.²⁵

As Solomon observed earlier, “Man’s goings are of the LORD; how can a man then understand his own way?” (Prov. 20:24). Men may chart the downfall of nations and their loss of common sense, but, beyond a point, they cannot naturally account for it. Why should Assyria have survived so long, and then declined so rapidly after attaining its greatest power? Certain factors were operative, we are told, but why not earlier, or why at all? Description and analysis provide us with information but not answers.

Mindful of these things, Calvin wrote of v. 9:

The prophet, after having spoken of one kind of God’s vengeance, adds another,—that he would break whatever there was of strength in Idumea: and thus he shows that the courage and strength of men, no less than their understanding, are in the hand of God. As then God dissipates and destroys, whenever it pleases him, whatever wisdom there may be in men, so also he enervates and breaks down their hearts: in a word, he deprives them of all strength, so that they fail and come to nothing of themselves. Were they who are proud of their strength and counsel rightly to consider this, they would at length learn to submit themselves in true humility to God. But this truth is what the world cannot be made to believe: yet God shows to us here, as in a picture, that however men may flourish for a time, they would immediately vanish, were not he to sustain them, and to support his gifts in them, and keep them entire; and, especially, that empty smoke in everything that seems to be understanding and strength in men; for the Lord can easily take away both, whensoever it may please him.²⁶

The Edoms of any and every age have no existence apart from God.

THREE

The Golden Rule

Obadiah 10–16

10. For thy violence against thy brother Jacob shame shall cover thee, and thou shalt be cut off for ever.
11. In the day that thou stoodest on the other side, in the day that the strangers carried away captive his forces, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, even thou wast as one of them.
12. But thou shouldest not have looked on the day of thy brother in the day that he became a stranger; neither shouldest thou have rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction; neither shouldest thou have spoken proudly in the day of distress.
13. Thou shouldest not have entered into the gate of my people in the day of their calamity; yea, thou shouldest not have looked on their affliction in the day of their calamity, nor have laid hands on their substance in the day of their calamity;
14. Neither shouldest thou have stood in the crossway, to cut off those of his that did escape; neither shouldest thou have delivered up those of his that did remain in the day of distress.
15. For the day of the Lord is near upon all the heathen: as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head.
16. For as ye have drunk upon my holy mountain, so shall all the heathen drink continually, yea, they shall drink, and they shall swallow down, and they shall be as though they had not been.

In vv. 10–14 we have a vivid account of Edom’s participation in the humiliating and bitter defeat of Judah and Jerusalem. It is clearly cited as past but very recent history. The fresh delight of Edom in crushing Judah, whom they had earlier served under David (2 Sam. 8:14) is very clear, as is the panic and defeat of Judah. Laetsch renders a part of v. 13 thus: “Do not also you gloat over his affliction on the day of his disaster!” and the RSV, “you should not have gloated over his disaster in the day of this calamity.” This delight in doing violence to their brother people clearly marked Edom. Obadiah wrote as an eyewitness (vv. 10–14).

Calvin gave the reason why God cited this history of Edom’s cruelty to Judah:

We now understand the Prophet’s meaning:—that the Idumeans could not complain that God was too severe with them, when he reduces them to nothing, because they had given examples of extreme cruelty towards their own brethren, and at a time when their calamities ought to have obliterated all hatred and old enmities, as it is usually the case even with men the most alienated from one another.²⁷

The hostility of Edom stemmed from Israel’s election as God’s covenant man (Gen. 27:41). This same hostility had been manifested in the time of Moses (Num. 20). Israel, however, was required by its law to maintain a brotherly attitude towards Edom (Deut. 2:4–5), and abhorrence of an Edomite was forbidden (Deut. 23:7). At every opportunity, Edom sought to do evil, however, to the people of God. In Ezekiel 35, a chapter of judgments against Edom, we are told in v. 5 of Edom’s “perpetual hatred” for God’s elect nation and people, and its shedding of blood “by the force of the sword in the time of their calamity, in the time that their iniquity had an end.” The law of God requires members of a family to stand with God’s law and witness even against

their son, if he be evil, but, although required to be witnesses, they could not be executioners (as witnesses normally were), their relationship being a bar to it (Deut. 21:18–21). Edom’s sin was “envy” (Ezek. 35:11), and this envy led it to “blasphemies” against God’s Kingdom (Ezek. 35:12). Because they rejoiced at the calamity and desolation of God’s people, God would bring total desolation and calamity upon them (Ezek. 35:15).

Judgment upon Edom, in Obadiah’s language, is also pronounced by Jeremiah (49:7–22).

The sins of Edom denounced in these verses by Obadiah are 1) the denial of kinship ties (v. 10); 2) violence (v. 10); 3) plundering (vv. 11, 13); 4) pleasure and delight in destruction (v. 12); 5) and the slaughter and enslavement of refugees (v. 14).²⁸ The Psalmist gives us a vivid account of this savage hatred of Edom for Judah in Ps. 137:7.

Eleven times in vv. 11–15 reference is made to “the day,” “the day of thy brother,” “the day of their calamity,” etc. As Robinson noted,

“The expression *day* is often thus used to denote the occurrence of either good or bad fortune in connection with some place or person” (Wade). Jerusalem was to have Another “day” (Lk. xix.42), the time of her visitation, but she knew it not. *The Day of the Lord*, on the other hand, which the next section of Obadiah introduces, is the day of Jehovah’s final and uninhibited vindication of His own righteousness.²⁹

The point is well taken, although the use of the term “good or bad fortune” is singularly inappropriate. The *day* has reference to God’s sovereign and absolute justice. The *day* of Jerusalem or of Judah is their day in God’s court, when both judgment is pronounced and the sentence executed. The *day* has reference to *law*, not *fortune*. The sovereign and absolute Lawgiver appoints a *day* for every man, and for nations and institutions, as well as a final and total day of law and judgment in terms of law. Failure to discuss the *day* in terms of law leads to a serious misunderstanding of the basis of God’s judgment on the *day*. Edom had taken vengeance wrongfully on its chosen *day* (Joel 3:19; Amos 1:11), but God appoints His own day. His judgment on the *day* of Jerusalem gives no man or nation the right to make it an occasion of personal vengeance. It was absolutely necessary for God to avenge Himself on Edom, for Edom had taken the law into its own hands for perverse reasons, and the *day* of God’s justice had been turned into a day of injustice.

A doctrine of strict retribution is declared (v. 10). The inscription Dante placed over Hell’s gates is a sound one:

Justice impelled my mighty architect:
The power divine, and primal love and wisdom
Surpassing all, have here constructed me.

The heart of this doctrine of retribution is in the golden rule, which appears clearly in Obadiah’s prophecy (vv. 15–16). The golden rule is generally understood only in its positive formulation, in the Sermon on the Mount: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). It is read to mean a standard of behavior in which men act kindly to others in the hopes that men will so act towards them. The context of the golden rule in Matthew 7 gives every indication that more than kindly action is advised:

6. Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.
7. Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:
8. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.
9. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?

10. Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent?
11. If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?
12. Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

We are told that “this is the law and the prophets,” i.e., this is what the law teaches and the prophets confirm and expound. We thus have *law*, not mere advice. It is more than merely promiscuous love, because we are forbidden to give holy things to dogs or to cast pearls before swine; in other words, we do not behave the same towards all men with no regard for the reality of their religious and moral condition.

But, more than this, the law refers, “The Golden Rule” refers, not primarily to human relations, but our relationship to God, of which human relationships are a facet; v. 11 makes clear that God is in view; v. 12 draws a conclusion from this fact.

We are to ask, seek, and knock in the confidence of a response, because the world is, *first*, a world of law, and it does not frustrate us, and, *second*, it is moreover the personal world of law of the sovereign God and Father, who does not frustrate His children. “Therefore” part of that asking and seeking is to obey God’s law with respect to our world, to do unto others as we, being God’s covenant people, want them to do unto us. This means living in terms of God’s law and in His grace. The key to the golden rule is not that it provides man a way to live peaceably in a humanistic sense, but that it declares that God’s way is the only way of peace for man.

“The Golden Rule” is thus a *rule*, a *law*; “this is the law...” The inverse application and meaning of this law is precisely that which Obadiah formulates: “as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head” (v. 15). This is God’s law: both positive and negative formulations have legal implications, and both are continually enforced by the Lawgiver whose laws are not left to rest in books but are the sinews and bones of all life and being.

The Mosaic law rests on this premise of the golden rule. Jeremiah 50:29 cites the application: “recompense her according to her work; according to all that she hath done, do unto her; for she hath been proud against the LORD, against the Holy One of Israel.” In Lamentations 1:22, the appeal is in terms of this law: “Let all their wickedness come before thee; and do unto them, as thou hast done unto me for all my transgressions.” The golden rule is simply a statement of the positive side of the basic principle of justice, the law of retribution:

23. [T]hen thou shalt give life for life,
 24. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,
 25. Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.
- (Exodus 21:23–25)

The golden rule tells us that this principle of God’s law, which must apply to courts of law, is written into the nature of being and also applies to human relationships which are not matters of court action.

As Obadiah uses it in its negative formulation, it refers to God’s legal action, His death penalty against the heathen nations, in particular against Edom: “For the day of the LORD is near upon all the heathen: as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee” (v. 15).

The day of the Lord is always the day of law, i.e., a judgment day, and history has many a day of the Lord, culminating in the final judgment. It must be added, moreover, that every day is the day of the Lord, because every day sees His law in operation, His judgment in motion, and His sentence in execution. Some of God’s

days are more conspicuous and dramatic in their judgments, more final in their executions, but every day sees His justice in sovereign power. We can therefore say always with the psalmist, “This is the day which the LORD hath made: we will rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24).

Our Lord said, “with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matt. 7:2), a statement which precedes the golden rule and is connected to it by basic meaning. It is a mark of heresy to oppose faith and works. Justification is indeed by faith only, but “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). After declaring the golden rule, Christ went on to state that “Ye shall know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16), and made it emphatic that judgment is the lot of all who bear bad fruit (Matt. 7:16–20).

The day of the Lord is a day of retribution, a day of execution for failure to bear good fruit, and also a day of reward (Matt. 25:34–36). Laetsch touches on this in this comment

Every visitation, every judgment of the Lord, be that a just penalty for the enemies of His kingdom or a gracious visitation for the members of His Church on earth, is a forerunner of, and a guarantee for, the final Day of the Lord. These individual harbingers of the Last Day form as it were the rays diverging from the focal point, the Last Day, towards which they at the same time converge. Therefore every judgment of God upon the wicked world is in a certain sense and to a certain extent a Day of the Lord, presaging the great Day of the Lord, whether it be the destruction of Jerusalem in 586, or the annihilation of Edom, or the fall of Babylon, or the Civil War, or World War I or II.³⁰

Moreover, since every judgment is a deliverance, in that it executes the law-breakers, the greater the judgments, the greater the deliverance, and the closer we come to the final judgment, the greater will be the nature of our deliverance. There cannot be a progress of judgment in history without a progress of deliverance, because God’s government is not a mere negation, nor the mere execution of His enemies, but the enactments of a conquering and triumphant Kingdom.

“Edom is a type of all nations which are in hostility to the Lord and His people, and therefore what Obadiah says of Edom applies to all nations which assume the same or a similar attitude towards the people of God.”³¹ Therefore Obadiah pronounces God’s sentence “upon all the heathen,” or all ungodly nations (v. 15), in the person of Edom.

They shall “drink” *continuously*³² of God’s judgment; i.e., in every age, those who “have drunk, upon my holy mountain” shall find that they drink, not in the flesh of victory and their celebration thereof, but to their death. Pusey rightfully cited the ancient custom, often referred to in Scripture, of using captured vessels to drink in celebration of victory. Possession of the defeated men’s wives, and drinking out of their vessels, especially religious vessels, were symbols of victory in the ancient world.³³ “[Y]ea, they shall drink, and they shall swallow down, and they shall be as though they had not been” (v. 16). “*Swallow down* adds the idea of completeness to the previous *drink*. By this judgment the pagan nations will be destroyed without a remaining trace.”³⁴ If this be true, and the generalization by Obadiah of Edom’s judgment is to “all the nations” (v. 15, RSV, etc.), then all the ungodly nations will be destroyed utterly and God’s Kingdom shall prevail. No other conclusion is tenable.

The golden rule is then a gold rule indeed. It means that God refines the dross out of the world and burns it up in order to establish His true realm of gold, the Kingdom of God; the age of gold is thus the age of law.

FOUR

The Saviors and the Kingdom

Obadiah 17–21

17. But upon mount Zion shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; and the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions.
18. And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau; for the Lord hath spoken it.
19. And they of the south shall possess the mount of Esau; and they of the plain the Philistines: and they shall possess the fields of Ephraim, and the fields of Samaria: and Benjamin shall possess Gilead.
20. And the captivity of this host of the children of Israel shall possess that of the Canaanites, even unto Zarephath; and the captivity of Jerusalem, which is in Sepharad, shall possess the cities of the south.
21. And saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lord's.

The refining of the earth is clearly cited in vv. 17 and 18. Escape and deliverance shall be on or in Mount Zion; the world shall be the inheritance of God's people, in fulfillment of the creation mandate (Gen. 1:26–28). The earth can only truly and properly be subdued in terms of God's law, and God's law is the only true ground of dominion. The way of holiness is the law of God. By means of the law, the way of holiness, "the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions" (v. 17). "The house of Jacob" is contrasted to "the house of Esau," i.e., the elect people of God to the reprobate generation. Physical Israel never regained its full possessions, and, had it done so, or were it still to do so, the meaning of Obadiah is different; the reference is to the true Israel of God, the seed of Abraham, Christ and His Kingdom.

The house of Jacob and the house of Joseph, i.e., the totality of Israel, shall be as a fire and flame, consuming Esau like stubble, devouring them utterly. In this respect, they are like God, who "is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). The reference to God as a consuming fire is to Mount Sinai and the law (Ex. 19:16–19), and this is echoed in Hebrews 12:18–29. They are no longer outsiders trembling before the law, God's people are told by St. Paul, but members of Mount Zion, the city of the living God, and the heavenly Jerusalem. This does not mean, however, that either the law or the judgment of Sinai is absent from Zion, for it is the same God who was described as "a consuming fire" by Moses (Deut. 4:24). Retribution is in every age God's way with evildoers, or law-breakers, "In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1:8). Can any man know God and not know and obey His law? Can any man obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ who despises His law?

God's law is operative in two ways. *First*, God at all times governs and decrees all things, so that all things move in terms of His sovereign counsel and law. Thus, His law is at all times in force and in action. *Second*, God's law is operative through the courts of men, insofar as they serve and obey God's law; it is also operative in the activities of law-abiding men, families and institutions. *Thus, every day is the day of the Lord, and every man and court which enforces God's law and obeys it declares thereby a day of the Lord.* Thus, too, as men enforce God's law in their lives, families, institutions, and communities, they declare thereby a day of

the Lord in their midst. The image and symbol of fire is drawn from the giving of the law on Mount Sinai; now Obadiah declares that the “fire” of “the day of the Lord” goes forth out of God’s elect people, i.e., out of their obedience to and enforcement of God’s law.

“[T]here shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau; for the LORD hath spoken it” (v. 18). Literal Edom was destroyed; none remain of it. *First*, it was ousted from its homeland; then, *second*, it was absorbed and destroyed within the Roman Empire. The Edom of every age, the enemies of God, shall be fully destroyed; history shall see the triumph of God’s elect. No organized Edom shall remain to oppose them (vv. 19, 20).

The literal Edom of Obadiah’s day is always in view, as is the symbolic Edom. “After the destruction of its foes the nation of God will take possession of their land, and extend its territory to every region under heaven.”³⁵

Between 550 and 400 B.C., the Nabataeans conquered Edom and Transjordan; they held this area until conquered by the Romans c. 105 A.D. The Edomites settled in the South, the Negeb; Judas Maccabaeus had trouble with them and killed 20,000 in conflicts with them. The Edomites were later forced to accept circumcision and obey the Mosaic law by John Hyrcanus. The Edomites were almost all wiped out during the Jewish-Roman Wars, except for a few survivors who escaped to the desert tribes and were absorbed by them.

The various enemies of Judah and Jerusalem, including the Northern Kingdom, are all subjected to God’s people. The judgment on God’s people is partial, because they are not all dross, whereas the enemies of God, being all dross, cannot be refined by fire but only destroyed. Calvin’s comment on v. 17 is appropriate here:

We are taught in this place, that the punishment, by which the Lord chastises his people for their sins, is ever for a time. Whenever then God inflicts wounds on his Church, prepared at the same time is the remedy; for God designs not, nor does he suffer, that his own people should be wholly lost. This we may learn from the Prophet’s words, when he says that there would be escape in Zion. And it was no ordinary comfort for the Jews to know that even in their extreme decay there remained for them some hope of deliverance, and that the people, who might appear at the same time to be extinct, would yet be saved, and preserved alive, as though they rose from the dead.³⁶

In the concluding verse, Obadiah comes to the heart and essence of his prophecy (v. 21). Thompson’s comment is very much to the point, both with respect to the meaning of “saviours” and of “the kingdom”:

These reconquests will be led by *saviors* who, like the judges of old (Judg. 2:16; 3:9, 15), will deliver the Israelites from their oppressors. From *Mount Zion* as a center they will extend their rule over *Mount Esau*. The use of *mount* with both names sharpens the contrast between these two nations, the one holy, the other profane; the one destined to triumph, the other to destruction. Obadiah’s hope transcends mere nationalism, for he sees in Israel’s victory the establishment of the kingdom of God (cf. Ps. 22:28; Zech. 14:9; Rev. 11:15).³⁷

Laetsch calls attention to the same facts, adding that the work of the “saviours” or “judges” was not only to save them from their oppressors, but “then to govern them and lead them in the ways of the Lord,”³⁸ i.e., in the way of obedience by law to God’s calling. This understanding of the meaning of “saviours” goes back to the Jewish interpreters of old.³⁹ Moreover, the rabbinic paraphrase of old stated, “And the Kingdom of Jehovah will be manifested over all the lands of the earth.”⁴⁰

The meaning of Obadiah’s prophecy is thus clear. The “Saviours” of God’s elect here referred to are not divine beings but men of God who arise to overthrow God’s enemies generation after generation, and who apply and enforce God’s law.

In vv. 16 and 18, the complete obliteration of Edom as a kingdom and a separate people is foretold, but in v. 21, Edom is still in existence. This means that, while the organized and definitive existence of organized anti-

God activity is wiped out, while the earth endures, Esau, the profane man, will be with us. The Esaus of history will then be thoroughly subjugated to and ruled by the elect of God.

Calvin observed of the declaration, “the kingdom shall be the LORD’S,”

But as it was certain, that it was God’s purpose to rule among his people after having restored them, in no other way than by the power of Christ, the Prophet, by saying that the kingdom of Christ would be Jehovah’s, means, that it would be really divine, and more illustrious than if he had employed the labour of men. But two things must be here observed by us,—that God himself really rules in the person of Christ,—and that it is the legitimate mode of ruling the Church, that God alone should preside, and hold alone the chief power. Hence it follows, that when God does not appear as the only King, all things are in confusion, without any order. Now God is not called a King by way of an empty distinction; but then only is he regarded a King in reality, when all submit themselves to him, when they are ruled by his word; in short, when all creatures become silent in his presence. To God then belongs the kingdom. We hence see that the Church has no existence, where the word of God does not so prevail in its authority, as to keep down whatever height there is in men, and to bring them under the yoke, so that all may depend on God alone, that all may look up to him, and that he may have all in subjection to himself.⁴¹

Thus, the condition of conquest and power in the Lord is the law of God, men of faith who rule in terms of it and bring themselves and all things in their world under the dominion of God. The “saviours” are the great men of God who extend the sway of His law and dominion and rule over God’s realm in terms of God’s creation mandate.

Keil held that the Kingdom “commenced with the founding of the kingdom of Christ on the earth, advances with its extension among all nations, and will terminate in a complete fulfillment at the second coming of our Lord.”⁴² We need not limit the beginning of Christ’s Kingdom to His coming to earth: it began with Adam, and Christ began its restoration.

But it shall prosper. And the heart of that Kingdom is *the law*. The law is basic to the Old Testament, and only by a false separation can its essential nature to the New Testament be denied. Man was called to exercise dominion under God; man denied God and His law-word and fell into sin. The means of man’s restoration is regeneration by God’s atoning act and grace, and the means whereby regenerated man restores the earth and exercises dominion over it is the law. *If there be no law, there can be no kingdom*. God’s law is the structure of God’s Kingdom.

The Word of the Lord

Jonah 1:1–17

1. Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,
2. Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.
3. But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.
4. But the LORD sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken.
5. Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them. But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep.
6. So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not.
7. And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.
8. Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou?
9. And he said unto them, I am an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land.
10. Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.
11. Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous.
12. And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you: for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.
13. Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land; but they could not: for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them.
14. Wherefore they cried unto the LORD, and said, We beseech thee, O LORD, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not upon us innocent blood: for thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee.
15. So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging.
16. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the LORD, and made vows.
17. Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

The Book of Jonah is regarded as myth by modernists and treated as an embarrassment by many neo-evangelicals, who sometimes call it a “parable” instead of history. They find it difficult to swallow as true a

story about a man swallowed by a great fish. The fact is, however, that, in the days of smaller ships, and in the era of nineteenth-century whaling vessels, from time to time men were swallowed by great fish and by whales, and later rescued alive when the whale or fish was caught. The problem lies elsewhere. Men will accept a story of a man emerging alive from the stomach of a whale or fish as an accident of history but will reject it with intensity as an act of God. To accept it as an act of God is to recognize that God's government of man and the universe is total, and that man's life is entirely and absolutely circumscribed by God. The ship and the storm at sea, the fish ready to swallow Jonah, and the calm of the sea thereafter, all indicate an absolute predestination and government which autonomous man rejects. To accept a non-Biblical Jonah story as an accident preserves the theory of man's autonomy and freedom in a world of chance, and hence the real Jonah is rejected even as the latter-day Jonahs are admitted into history.

Man prefers, in his rebellion against God, a universe ruled by anarchy to one ruled by God and His law. If man retains a pseudo-Biblical facade to his rebellion, he denies that God can predestine, because the government is transferred to man's shoulders. The practical result of Arminianism is an impotent god in heaven who chews his fingernails in frustration, waiting to see what man will do.

The prophet Jonah's book is dated by Laetsch "at about 850–825 B.C."⁴³ George L. Robinson dated Jonah "during the reign of Jeroboam II, King of North Israel, who reigned from about 790 to 750 B.C."⁴⁴ According to Robinson,

Jonah exercised his ministry in the reign of Jeroboam II (793–753 B.C.), and it seems most natural to suppose that the story was first committed to writing some time before the fall of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C., though there may easily have been circumstances occurring between 721 B.C. and 612 B.C., when Israel was governed from Nineveh, which prompted the wider publication of the book in that period.⁴⁵

As against those who deny the historicity of Jonah, Robinson cites certain facts. *First*, Jonah was an historical figure, as 2 Kings 14:25 makes clear. *Second*, the book is obviously an historical narrative. *Third*, "if the book is parable or allegory it is unique and without analogy among the books of the Old Testament." *Fourth*, the book has always been regarded as history "until recently," when modern critics rejected its religious presuppositions. *Fifth*, Jesus Christ cited the repentance of Nineveh's men as real history, known as such by His listeners.⁴⁶ Moreover,

[H]ere we may notice that Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet with whom Jesus directly compared Himself. Jesus obviously regarded Jonah's experience and mission as of great significance. It is the more interesting, therefore, to recall that both Jesus and Jonah were "prophets of Galilee." Jonah's town, Gath-hepher, was only a few miles to the north of Nazareth, Jesus' town. It was less than an hour's walk away. Jesus must have gone there often. Perhaps even in His day the tomb of Jonah was pointed out there, as it was later in Jerome's day.⁴⁷

Laetsch's answer to the critics of Jonah's historicity is to the point: "Christians do not believe in a God cut to proper shape to satisfy man's reason."⁴⁸

Turning to the book itself, Jonah begins directly with the command to the prophet (vv. 1–2). In 2 Kings 14:25, we read of Jonah's prediction concerning the restoration of Israel's power under Jeroboam II. An apostate nation was still blessed by God for a season prior to its downfall. Grace was extended to Israel when it was undeserving, because of God's faithfulness to His covenant.

Thus, Jonah by experience knew, as Martin indicated, the extent of the "Divine forbearance."⁴⁹ Forbearance with Israel was one thing: they were, for all their sins, God's covenant people. Forbearance with Nineveh or Assyria was another matter. That forbearance was in God's mind was clear to Jonah: the very fact of commissioning Jonah to go to Nineveh was an act of forbearance. It indicated God's willingness to extend His

grace to Assyria and to permit their redemption. To Jonah, viewing Assyria as long overdue for judgment, such forbearance was morally offensive. It is easy to understand Jonah's preference for judgment against Assyria rather than forbearance when we note the horror with which the nations regarded Assyria. Assyria was utterly ruthless towards all her enemies. Thus, Ashur-nasirpal II (884–860 B.C.), who built up Assyria as a highly centralized state boasted of the terror he instituted and inspired:

I stormed the mountain peaks and took them. In the midst of the mighty mountains I slaughtered them; with their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool. With the rest of them I darkened the gullies and precipices of the mountains. I carried off their spoil and the possessions. The heads of their warriors I cut off, and I formed them into a pillar over against their city; their young men and their maidens I burned in the fire.

I built a pillar over against the city gates, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar.⁵⁰

God, in declaring that Assyria's "wickedness is come up before me" spoke as the "Judge of all the earth" (Gen. 18:25; cf. Gen. 6:13). There were echoes, in this phrase, of God's judgment on the world in the Flood, and on Sodom and Gomorrah. "God represents Himself, the Great Judge, as sitting on His Throne in heaven, Unseen but All-seeing, to Whom the wickedness and oppressiveness of man against man goes up, appealing for His sentence against the oppressor."⁵¹ In spite of this judicial language, Jonah recognized God's forbearance at work: instead of judgment, a prophet was being sent to Nineveh; instead of the day of the Lord, the word of the Lord.

Herman Melville, in the sermon on Jonah in *Moby Dick*, had the preacher declare, "If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves, and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists." At stake was Jonah's morality versus God's righteousness. Jonah's answer was to "flee... from the presence of the LORD" (v. 3), an expression which meant, according to Robinson, "Jonah's resignation of his prophetic commission."⁵² Pusey explained it further:

The words are used, as we say, "he went out of the king's presence," or the like. It is literally, he rose to flee from being in the Presence of the Lord, i.e., from standing in His Presence as His Servant and Minister. Then he must have so stood before; he must have had the office, which he sought to abandon.⁵³

As an established and well-known prophet in Israel, it was impossible for Jonah to retire from his office there: in the eyes of men, he was inescapably linked with God and the prophetic office. To leave that office effectively, he must also leave the country and everything which linked him to his calling. He thus sailed from Joppa or Jaffa for Tarshish or Tartessus at the extreme west of the Mediterranean Sea. Tartessus was a Phoenician colony in Spain.

Modern man would prefer to say: "A great wind or storm struck the ship," making the storm the actor and subject of the sentence, whereas the Bible sees the wind and all "nature" as the absolute servant and tool of God: therefore, the Bible declares that the Lord "sent out" or hurled "a greater wind into the sea" (v. 4). If God is removed from the world around us, and action is referred to mindless natural forces like the wind and the sea, the stage is cleared for man to play god and to become the maker and determiner of his world.

A common mistake assumes the frailty and proneness of ancient ships to shipwreck. Knowledge of the sea and of the weather was extremely important to seamen of the ancient world; valuable cargo was at stake, and seamanship was of a high order. Shipwrecks were not as common as men would now assume, because men were weather-wise and did not readily risk valuable cargo. Sometimes, to gamble on reaching a market ahead of others, some ship owners risked their ships in dangerous weather; at other times, state official business might

compel a ship to sail when it was otherwise unwilling to do so. All in all, the abilities of the sailors of that era must not be underestimated. The very limitations of their ships often heightened the sea wisdom of seamen.

The storm was clearly an unexpected one. This fact, plus its unusual ferocity, led the seamen to regard it as supernaturally inspired.

The “wares” of the ship were thrown overboard (v. 5). Aglen noted the “wares” in Hebrew meant “furniture of any kind, and so including all the movables in the ship. The cargo would probably, as in the case of St. Paul’s shipwreck, be reserved till the last extremity.”⁵⁴ The Hebrew word for “ship” here used indicates a decked vessel.

In desperation, all resorted to prayer to their gods (v. 5). In this situation, every man was pressed into prayer, because the storm indicated to them the wrath of a god towards someone. Jonah’s exhausted sleep drew suspicions to him at once (v. 6).

When prayers proved futile, the men resorted to casting lots to determine the guilty party (v. 7). The casting of lots is now a trust in chance, because men now regard chance as ultimate. It was then a trust in God or in the gods, because men believed that supernatural powers were in some sense ultimate. Being unable themselves to name the guilty party, the men looked to a supernatural act to name the man. Humanistic paganism was thus at that time commonly schizophrenic, in that it operated on the premise of man’s autonomy while still often admitting an ultimate decree. As epistemological self-consciousness has developed, humanism has more readily held to the ultimacy of chance and has found the omnipresence of the sovereign God in Jonah to be both impossible and offensive. For the Bible, no chance exists; therefore everything is an instrument in the hand of God to accomplish His determined end.

Smart regards the question of the sailors (v. 8) as needless: “The sailors have no reason to ask this question since the casting of lots has already given them the answer.”⁵⁵ On the contrary, no question was more natural or necessary. The especial intensity of the storm indicated the extent of God’s wrath. What had caused it, and how could they be forewarned against a like offense? Perhaps Jonah’s offense somehow involved them also.

Jonah confessed his rebellion against God (v. 9). He makes no attempt to disguise it; God has stripped him of any opportunity of escape, and Jonah has no desire to make his guilt the occasion of others’ loss.

Calvin’s telling comment on Jonah’s flight (v. 3) is particularly good, and something of the same recognition is apparent in the fear of the seamen. Jonah’s flight was not merely a “resignation of office”; it was an attack on God’s sovereignty and government:

Now, as to his flight, we must bear in mind what I have before said—that all flee away from the presence of God, who do not willingly obey his commandments; not that they can depart farther from him, but they seek, as far as they can, to confine God within narrow limits, and to exempt themselves from being subject to his power. No one indeed openly confesses this; yet the fact itself shows, that no one withdraws himself from obedience to God’s commands without seeking to diminish and, as it were, to take from him his power, so that he may no longer rule. Whosoever, then, do not willingly subject themselves to God, it is the same as though they would turn their backs on him and reject his authority, that they may no more be under his power and dominion.

[W]e cannot rebel against God, without seeking, under some pretense or another, to thrust him from his throne, and, at the same time, to confine him within certain limits, that he may not include heaven and earth within his empire.⁵⁶

Concerning the great fear of the pagan seamen at Jonah’s confession (v. 10), Keil’s surmise is probably correct: it is perhaps “fully explained from the dangerous situation in which they found themselves, since the storm preached the omnipotence of God more powerfully than words could possibly do.”⁵⁷

Vv. 11–16 is a very revealing passage, in that it indicates that, while men of that era had become

polytheists, they were still aware of Jehovah as the one true God. As a result, the seamen are easily and quickly converted to the Lord. Their unwillingness to throw Jonah overboard reflected their fear of breaking God's law. Their declaration, "for thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee" (v. 14) indicates a practical and theological awareness of the meaning of God's name, "I Am that I Am" (Ex. 3:14; 33:19; Rom. 9:15ff.). As Pusey stated:

Wonderful, concise, confession of faith in these new converts! Psalmists said it (Ps. 135:6, 115:3), Whatsoever God willeth, that doeth He in heaven and in earth, in the sea and in all deep places. But these had but just known God, and they resolve the whole mystery of man's agency and God's Providence into the three simple words, as (Thou) willedst (Thou) didst.⁵⁸

Smart holds that there is no evidence of conversion: "They merely own that such a God is to be reckoned with seriously and placated with sacrifices."⁵⁹ With Smart's evolutionary perspective, it is not surprising that he reads primitivism into the seamen's words. The men gave evidences of faith which are not to be found in Smart's commentary.

Calvin's observation on the vows is a sound one:

Let us then know, that whenever the Scripture speaks of vows, we are to take for granted these two principles,— that vows, as they appertain to the worship of God, ought not to be taken without any discretion, according to men's fancy, but ought to be regulated and guided by God's rule, so that men may bring nothing to God, except what they know to be approved by his word.⁶⁰

Thus, in spite of himself, Jonah was instrumental in the regeneration of Gentiles. As Paul declared, "[T]he gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Rom. 11:29), or, as Moffatt renders it, "For God never goes back upon his gifts and call."

Smart denies that this event, or the Book of Jonah, is historical; he also denies that authentic cases of men being swallowed alive by a whale or shark exist; he cites one case only, and no more, and thus rests his argument on one disproven account.⁶¹ Pusey, among others, does cite data, and Pusey's account is rather detailed. At one time, very large fish did exist in the Mediterranean, including the white shark, which could and did swallow men and horses whole.⁶² G. L. Robinson also cited examples of men swallowed alive by giant white sharks and by whales.⁶³

The real problem lies elsewhere, in the fact that "God prepared a great fish" (v. 17), even as He sent the storm, prepared a worm, an East wind, and so on. The offense is the absolute determination of all things by God. If no Book of Jonah existed, such stories as Pusey reported might gain more acceptance. Men will accept a god who is merely a senior partner, semi-retired, but they reject the absolute God of Scripture. Their attitude is, "we will not have such a God to rule over us." But the Lord is the God who is, and He shall rule over them, to the innermost fiber of their being.

The expression "three days and three nights," used also by our Lord, is explained by Ellicott:

The purely chronological difficulty is explained by the common mode of speech among the Jews, according to which any part of a day, though it were but a single hour, was for legal purposes considered as a whole. An instance of this mode of speech is found in I Sam. 30:12, 13, and it is possible that in the history of Jonah itself the measurement of time is to be taken with the same laxity.⁶⁴

TWO

Jonah's Prayer

Jonah 2:1–10

1. Then Jonah prayed unto the LORD his God out of the fish's belly,
2. And said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice.
3. For thou hadst cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me.
4. Then I said, I am cast out of thy sight; yet I will look again toward thy holy temple.
5. The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.
6. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God.
7. When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD: and my prayer came in unto thee, into thine holy temple.
8. They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.
9. But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed.
Salvation is of the LORD.
10. And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land.

Perhaps few prayers have been made in stranger circumstances than Jonah's prayer "out of the fish's belly" (v. 1). The prayer echoes the language of the psalms, because the psalms were the familiar language of prayer and song to Israelites. In v. 2, Psalm 120:1 and Psalm 18:6 are echoed, and in v. 3, Psalm 42:7. Jonah spoke of being in "the belly of hell" (v. 2); hell, or, more accurately, Sheol, the realm of death, is cited in Psalms 18:5, 30:3, and 116:3 as "a likeness of spiritual death," according to Smart.⁶⁵ Smart's comment on v. 2, that "the exact nature of the psalmist's distress is not at once clear"⁶⁶ is, however, rather amusing, given the circumstances.

The miraculous aspect of Jonah's plight, as well as the seriousness of his predicament, alive and yet buried, was not lost on Jonah. As Calvin observed, "Hence Jonah, that he might mark it out as a miracle, says the fish was prepared by the Lord; for he was received into the inside of the fish as though it were into an hospital; and though he had no rest there, yet he was as safe as to his body, as though he were walking on land."⁶⁷ Both the mission of Jonah and his burial were cited by Jesus Christ as typifying His own work. As a native of Gath-hepher in Galilee, four miles north of Nazareth, Jonah had a further tie to Jesus Christ as a prophet out of Galilee. George L. Robinson's analysis of our Lord's references to Jonah are especially to the point:

Twice in the Synoptists Jesus is reported to have been asked by the Scribes and Pharisees to give them a sign, and twice he responded by citing to them the case of the prophet Jonah and his preaching to Nineveh, Matt. 12:38–42; 16:4; Luke 11:29–32. Possibly our Lord's use of the book will assist us in interpreting it. Strange that so many modern expositors quite ignore this possibility! We naturally ask two questions: (a) Of what did the Scribes and Pharisees seek a sign? Of his character, mission, messianic claims, his right as a Jew to preach a world-wide redemption on the basis of repentance? or what? and (b) in what sense did he mean that no sign would be given

them save that of the prophet Jonah?

The summary of our Lord's answer seems to be, "As Jonah preached repentance to all men, including Gentiles, so do I; as Jonah had to die, as it were, before he was used of God in the accomplishing of his mission, so did I; as he died in a true sense, vicariously, for his own people, so must I; the men of Nineveh, however, responded to Jonah's message of repentance, but you pay no heed to mine; therefore, they will rise up in the judgment and condemn you, for you have far more going on around you than they had, to shut you up to repentance." Thus, Jesus rebukes the Scribes and Pharisees for insisting on external proof; external signs, he knew, seldom convince men who have no light within themselves. Jonah himself did no miracle.⁶⁸

Our Lord thus cited Jerusalem as being worse than Nineveh, as in effect another Sodom to be destroyed (cf. Rev. 11:8; Jer. 23:14; Ezek. 16:48; Isa. 1:10).

Jonah's prayer "is not a petition for deliverance, but thanksgiving and praise for deliverance already received."⁶⁹ Pusey is no doubt right that the prayer came at the end of the three-day period.

The word prayed includes thanksgiving, not petition only. It is said of Hannah that she prayed (1 Sam. ii.1); but her canticle is all one thanksgiving without a single petition. In this thanksgiving Jonah says how his prayers had been heard, but prays no more. God had delivered him from the sea, and he thanks God, in the fish's belly, as undisturbed as in a Church or an oratory, secure that God, Who had done so much would fulfill the rest. He called God, his God, Who had in so many ways shewn Himself his, by His revelations, by His inspirations, by His chastisements, and now by His mercy. "From these words Jonah prayed unto the Lord out of the fish's belly, we perceive that, after he felt himself safe in the fish's belly, he despaired not of God's mercy" (St. Jerome).⁷⁰

The judgment on Jonah had been great, because his calling was great. He was, moreover, a type of Christ.

The burial and resurrection of Jonah constituted the gate by which the word of Jehovah passed forth from the Jewish to the Gentile world. And in like manner in the antitype. The death and resurrection of Christ was the breaking down of the middle wall of partition.⁷¹

The fact of God's judgment on Jonah became public knowledge, apparently, as Martin observed, because Jesus declared, "For as Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites, so shall also the Son of man be to this generation" (Luke 11:30). This sign was his stay in the fish's belly, a symbolic death. "Clearly, therefore, it follows that the Ninevites were informed of the prophet's marvelous experience."⁷²

Martin called attention to still another very important aspect of Jonah's experience: it set forth the death and the resurrection of Christ, and necessarily therefore His atoning work.

But while, in regard to the universal government of God, against which all sin in its essential nature is committed, there can be but one atonement, that of Christ upon the tree, is it not quite conceivable that there may be minor governments conducted within the universal one, quite consistent with it; highly fitted to illustrate it; having laws of their own; these laws penalties of their own, penalties which may give scope for atonements also; atonements as real as these penalties, these laws, these governments are; atonements which, just by being thus real and true and proper inflictions of penalty, satisfactions of law, and in maintenance of government, become, not scenic representation but typical realities, real types of the true, real, and all-perfect atonement by the death of God's Eternal Son? On this principle, the whole system of atonements under the Levitical economy is to be explained; and their illustrative, and especially their demonstrative and typical value brought out. And it is this principle that will show the full force of the type of Jonah.⁷³

All governments on earth are concerned with atonement, with restitution and restoration. An order of law must be maintained; transgressors must make civil atonement. The broken law order must be re-established and restored by means of restitution. To war totally against God's requirement of atonement is to be an anarchist, to

deny all law and all restitution.

Jonah made restitution by going to Nineveh and preaching. What the Ninevites did by way of atonement, we are not told, but it was basic to God's law order and some form of restitution was no doubt imposed; God's law does not function apart from restitution. Nineveh thus made restitution, although we are ignorant of its character. Historians are ignorant of such a step, but there is more in history than historians will ever uncover or know.

God's law-order always works towards the restoration of God's original purpose, paradise on earth, the Kingdom of God fulfilled. Within that purpose, individual men and nations can be either restored also or sentenced to death for capital offenses.

Jonah's first reaction on being tossed overboard was that he had been sentenced to death as an incorrigible offender. As Keil commented:

“When Thou castedst me into the deep, then I said (sc., in my heart, i.e., then I thought) that I was banished from the sphere of Thine eyes, i.e., of Thy protection and care.” These words are formed from a reminiscence of Ps. xxxi.23 ... The thought that it is all over with him is met by the confidence of faith that he will still look to the holy temple of the Lord, that is to say, will once more approach the presence of the Lord, to worship before Him in His temple,—an assurance which recalls. Ps. v. 8.⁷⁴

Even in the experience of drowning and despair, Jonah, as the elect of God, feeling reprobate (“cast out of thy sight,” or, as Keil rendered it, “thrust away,” as Adam and Eve out of Eden), still looked hopefully towards God, expecting again to worship Him in peace.

“The waters compassed me about, even to the Soul” (v. 5); Jonah was at the point of drowning, and life was well nigh quenched in him. The weight of the waves, the depths of the earth, were closing in on him.

Jonah prefigured Christendom and was a type of Israel, and of Christ. But he was also a man, and, as Starke noted, “God can preserve a man miraculously against the course of nature (1 Kings xvii.4ff.) God is not only the God of all believers in general, but also of each one particularly (Ps. lxiii.2).”⁷⁵ God's dealings are universal and also particular; the very hairs of our head are all numbered (Matt. 10:30; Luke 12:7). We live, not merely in an impersonal and general law sphere but under the particular and total government of God. If the very hairs of our head are all numbered and circumscribed by God's total providence and government, then how much more so our words, thoughts, and actions? There is nothing hidden from God, nor too small for His total notice.

The governments of men and nations are general usually and only occasionally particular. The general laws of a state or father govern a people or a family. Only occasionally does the state's government become mildly particular, such as when a law is broken, or a tax desired; then the individual is governed specifically. At all other times, its government is general. A parent's government, much closer to the child, is still general. The particular government enters in with punishment, specific items of provision, and an occasional check to make sure all is well. God's government is absolutely and totally particular as well as general. We live in a law world where our every step is circumscribed, ordained, and utilized by God's sovereign government.

God heard Jonah's drowning prayer, and rescued him (v. 7). Jonah declared,

8. They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy.

9. But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed.

Salvation is of the LORD.

Of this, Aglen commented,

Forsaken their own mercy—i.e., forfeit their own share of the covenant grace. In Ps. xxxvii.28 it is said that Jehovah does not forsake His chasidim; they, however, by forsaking Jehovah (Himself called Israel's mercy, Ps. cxliv.2, margin) and His law (Ps. lxxxix.30) can forfeit their chesed or covenant privilege.

(9) But I will.—The prophet, however, is not among such. He has sinned, but is still a member of the covenant people, and by sacrifice can be formally restored to that favour which repentance has regained.⁷⁶

The “lying vanities” which Jonah condemned were, as Calvin noted, “all those opinions of men, when they attempt to set up religion according to their own will.” This Jonah had done, in opposing his idea of justice to God's; he himself, having followed his own lying vanity, now resolved to obey God rather than to forsake his own mercy, the grace of the covenant.

There is then but one true religion, the religion which God has taught us in his word. We must also notice, that men in vain weary themselves when they follow their own inventions; for the more strenuously they run, the farther they recede from the right way, as Augustine has well observed. But Jonah here adopts a higher principle,—that God alone possesses in himself all fullness of blessings: whosoever then truly and sincerely seeks God, will find in him whatever can be wished for salvation.⁷⁷

The sermon in Melville's *Moby Dick* declares of Jonah's prayer, “He does not weep and wail for direct deliverance. He feels that his dreadful punishment is just. He leaves all his deliverance to God, contenting himself with this, that spite of all his pains and pangs, he will still look towards His holy temple. And here, shipmates, is true and faithful repentance, not clamoring for pardon, but grateful for punishment.”

To be grateful for punishment means to be grateful for the knowledge, restraint, and direction brought by chastening; it means acknowledging that God's sovereign purpose does indeed direct all our ways. To be able to pray, “We thank thee for all our yesterdays,” means to recognize God's providential purpose in all our ways.

“And the LORD spoke unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land” (v. 10). According to Josephus (*Antiquities IX, X, 2*), this was upon the Euxine or Black Sea shore, although Scripture is silent as to the place. It is not silent as to God's command to the fish, and its obedience. The sovereignty of God extends to all creation; thus the beasts of the field, and the creatures of the depths, alike respond to His sovereign rule and authority. Jonah thus was reinstated in God's calling to preach to Nineveh (1:2). The word of God is always a whole word; i.e., Jonah's call required that God's judgment on sin be proclaimed, but also His offer of mercy where restitution is made. God's wrath is the other aspect of His call for the restoration of His Kingdom and order. A partial word is not God's word. Jonah wanted to preach only that partial word, judgment, and such a word was “lying vanity.”

THREE

Saying “Amen” to God

Jonah 3:1–10

1. And the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the second time, saying,
2. Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.
3. So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey.
4. And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.
5. So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.
6. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.
7. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water:
8. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.
9. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?
10. And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

The miraculous experience of Jonah almost certainly attracted widespread attention in the world of his day. Word of his experience probably went from nation to nation and certainly preceded him into Assyria. This no doubt accounts for the remarkable reception Jonah received; his progress through Nineveh, preaching repentance, was apparently impeded by the great throngs which crowded to hear him.

In the providence of God, the rebellion of Jonah was used to bring about the swallowing of Jonah by the great fish, and his deliverance, an incident certain to attract great notice. In itself, the incident was a type of judgment and deliverance and thus an enacted parable. Neither the sailors and passengers aboard the ship, nor those who may have witnessed Jonah's deliverance on the shore, would fail to discuss this amazing episode. As a result, there was in Nineveh an amazing receptivity to Jonah's preaching.

In chapter 2, we have Jonah's repentance; in chapter 3, we have Nineveh's repentance. The parallel between the two is very clear. Jonah's sin was at bottom unbelief, a preference for his way as against God's way. Nineveh's sin was also a form of radical unbelief, plus a habit of "violence" against the nations (v. 8). The severity of the judgment against Jonah, a prophet of God, indicated clearly that God's judgment against Nineveh and Assyria would be at least equally severe. The miraculous mercy of God unto Jonah similarly indicated that the grace and mercy of God to Nineveh would be equally remarkable.

Jesus Christ, in presenting Himself as the Greater Jonah (in His prophetic warning), stressed a like note of judgment. "The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: because they

repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here” (Matt. 12:41; cf. Luke 11:32). Jonah was thus a type of Christ. Jesus drew a parallel: the events then, in Jonah’s day, and now in His day, spoke of the need for God’s judgment; both Jesus and Jonah came proclaiming an impending judgment. Both Assyria and Judah received a witness, but Judah, both evil and adulterous, did not accept that witness and was judged. To both a sign was given, Jesus said: the “resurrection” of Jonah from the fish’s belly was a sign to Assyria (Matt. 12:39–40; Luke 11:29–32). The fact that our Lord spoke of Jonah’s deliverance as a miraculous sign to Nineveh makes clear the fact that it was known to all the men of Nineveh; there is no understanding of our Lord’s declaration apart from that fact. This sign Nineveh received and repented. The sign given to Christ’s generation was His resurrection; this sign they rejected, as they had rejected His entire ministry. Hence, they were judged and destroyed.

We are told that “the people of Nineveh believed God” (v. 5). Laetsch tells us, of the word *believed*,

The prophet uses the same word that Moses used to describe Abraham’s saving faith (Gen. 15:6; cp. Ex. 14:31; 2 Chron. 20:20), a term that denotes saying yea and amen to God’s Word as it was revealed to them by the prophet.⁷⁸

The word, indeed, is the same word as our English amen; the word, *aman*, to remain steadfast, means, as Laetsch indicated, saying yea and amen to God, come what may. To say amen to God is to place our confidence in an omnipotent and unshakable God whose absolute government is our only confidence. Thus, in Deuteronomy 27:14–26, when Moses pronounced the curses of the law, the required response of the people was amen: “And all the people shall say, Amen.” Their amen was the recognition of the whole purpose of God, to bless faith and obedience, and to curse unbelief and disobedience. Faith, belief, is thus saying amen to God; it is the constant renewal of our dedication to God and our confidence in His sovereign governing power and victory.

Jonah’s refusal to say amen to God had involved a disbelief in God’s government; for Jonah, any offer of mercy to Assyria meant somehow a weakening of justice and a loss of hope. Accordingly, in resentment against God’s way, he refused to say amen to God. Now Jonah had to hear Nineveh say amen to God and to know that God accepted them in mercy (v. 10).

Jonah’s message to Nineveh is summarized in a sentence: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (v. 4). There is no hint of anything here except judgment. We are not told that any enemy threatened Assyria at the time. Only one source of destruction is indicated, God the Lord. For proud and mighty Nineveh to accept that message meant that, *first*, they recognized the justice of the judgment. Nineveh, from the king on down, accepted the justice of God’s indictment and the validity of the death sentence against themselves. They thus said amen to God’s judgment and God’s evaluation of their sin. *Second*, they also said amen to God’s sovereign power to judge them. They recognized that the God of Heaven has powers greater than all nations and can bring judgment on whom He will, with or without human agencies. Clearly, they evidenced great faith in God. *Third*, they clearly hoped that God would be as merciful to them as He had been to Jonah: “Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?” (v. 9). This too was an evidence of faith, although their submission to God made them ready to accept God’s judgment and say amen to it.

In Revelation 15:3–4, we read,

And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints.

Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? For thou only are holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest.

To all God's blessings and judgments, all God's people shall say Amen.

Quandt, commenting on Nineveh's hope of God's mercy, observed, "Faith disappoints nobody."⁷⁹ The faith that says amen to God indeed disappoints no one. Jonah's subsequent disappointment was due to his unwillingness to say amen to God.

The extent of Nineveh's faith was made manifest when the Assyrian monarch laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes (v. 6), an ancient symbol of grief and repentance. Smart's comment is observing: "The climax of Nineveh's humiliation before God is reached when the great king himself comes down from the throne, removes the symbols of his royal authority, dons sackcloth like his subjects, and sits in ashes. The king has thus acknowledged his subjection to the King of kings."⁸⁰

One further point: Assyria took warning from Jonah's experience and Jonah's preaching. This in itself is evidence of God's grace. In the last days of World War II, as the Russians were moving into Berlin, people in Berlin went about their daily routine as though nothing were happening. The sound of gunfire was always in the background, and rape and robbery only hours away, but most people reported to work or did their shopping in terms of long established habits. So too as men of the 1970s faced economic disaster and anarchy, they read no warning in the fiery skies, the street mobs, or the collapsing dollar.

Nineveh's ability to hear was of the grace of God.

FOUR

Jonah's Self-Pity

Jonah 4:1–11

1. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.
2. And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.
3. Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.
4. Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry?
5. So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.
6. And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd.
7. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.
8. And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.
9. And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.
10. Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:
11. And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

In the concluding chapter of Jonah, several important strands of Scripture are clearly apparent.

First, there is what can be called the missionary message or the reconstruction motive. All of Scripture witnesses to God's redemptive plan. God from all eternity, and from the fall of man, purposed the redemption and fulfillment of man and the re-creation of paradise on a greater scale. In terms of this, Israel had been called to be a minister of God to all nations. Jonah was aware of this; all of Scripture testifies to it, as witness Psalm 87. God's electing grace has as its purpose the restoration of all things under His Covenant people. The requirement of all God's people is that they labor to bring all things into captivity to Christ. In this sense, we are all either missionaries, or we need one.

Jonah was aware of this. God had sent him to Assyria, and, on the way, used him to convert foreign sailors, and then to convert the people of Nineveh. It had been in recognition of God's purpose that Jonah had rebelled.

Second, we see here very clearly a major aspect of the nature of fallen man, and also of the sin in redeemed man: self-pity. Self-pity has been called "the occupational disease" of all prostitutes.⁸¹ It is not, however, limited to prostitutes but is a sin and weakness all men must contend with. Self-pity disarms a man and renders him incapable of coping realistically with his problems and himself.

Jonah's self-pity is very much in evidence. When the gourd vine, which God had provided, dried up, Jonah's self-pity was such that he could say, "It is better for me to die than to live" (v. 8). Keil drew attention to this similarity and contrast between Elijah's mood and Jonah's:

The prayer, which follows, "Take my life from me," calls to mind the similar prayer of Elijah in I Kings xix.4; but the motive assigned is a different one. Whilst Elijah adds, "for I am not better than my fathers," Jonah adds, "for death is better to me than life." This difference must be distinctly noticed, as it brings out the difference in the state of mind of the two prophets. In the inward conflict that had come upon Elijah he wished for death, because he did not see the expected result of his zeal for the Lord of Sabaoth; in other words, it was from spiritual despair, caused by the apparent failure of his labours. Jonah, on the other hand, did not wish to live any longer, because God had not carried out His threat against Nineveh. His weariness of life arose, not like Elijah's from stormy zeal for the honour of God and His kingdom, but from vexation at the non-fulfilment of his prophecy.⁸²

Self-pity is usually associated, in the minds of those who exhibit it, as a mark of a sensitive and tender soul. More realistically, it reveals a lack of sensitivity and an excess of self-centeredness. There was no pity in Jonah for the people of Nineveh. Here was a city with 120,000 children. "If these 120,000 were the children under three years old, they were 1/5 (as is calculated) of the whole population of Nineveh. If of the 600,000 of Nineveh all were guilty, who by reason of age could be, above 1/5 were innocent of actual sin."⁸³ This estimate of the population of Nineveh was confirmed by M. V. Niebuhr. Nineveh covered an area of about 400 English square miles:

"Hence there were about 40,000 persons to the square mile. Jones (in a paper on Nineveh) estimates the population of the chief city, according to the area, at 174,000 souls. So that we may reckon the population of the four larger walled cities at 350,000. There remain, therefore, for the smaller places and the level ground, 300,000 men on about sixteen square miles; that is to say, nearly 20,000 men upon the square mile." He then shows, from the agricultural conditions in the district of Elberfeld and the province of Naples, how thoroughly this population suits such a district. In the district of Elberfeld there are, in round numbers, 22,000 persons to the square mile, or apart from the two large towns, 10,000. And if we take into account the difference in fertility, this is about the same density of population as that of Nineveh. The province of Naples bears a very great resemblance to Nineveh, not only in the kind of cultivation, but also in their fertility of the soil. And there, in round numbers, 46,000 are found to the square mile, or, exclusive of the capital, 22,000 souls.⁸⁴

In terms of all this, consider Jonah's supposed sensitivity: his gourd vine and comfort outweigh the worth of all Nineveh, including its 120,000 children. Self-pity leads even saints like Jonah into a radical insensitivity.

Self-pity on the part of radicals and revolutionists leads to the horrors perpetrated by men like Robespierre, Lenin, Stalin, Castro, Mao, and others. In self-pity for their real or imagined sufferings, the revolutionists are ready to butcher millions ruthlessly.

The same is true of racists. Their self-pity leads them, because their security is threatened, to sentence entire peoples to perdition. Their thinking is personal only where their own feelings are concerned; with other races, they think impersonally and lump guilty and innocent together. Self-pity means a radical insensitivity to all things outside ourselves; it means, ultimately, placing our will above God's will.

Third, the root of this self-pity and of Jonah's reluctance to fulfil his mission is grounded in man's original sin, his desire to be as God (Gen. 3:5). We are told that "it displeased Jonah," or, literally "it was evil to Jonah," and that "he was very angry" or "burned" (v. 1). The question Jonah raises is an important one: Should God spare Nineveh? He addressed his hope for Nineveh's destruction directly to God in prayer (vv. 2-3), and then he waited for an answer (v. 5).

Jonah's sense of justice was offended. God had dealt very severely with Jonah's sin; of this, there was no

doubt. A faithful prophet had been put through a terrifying experience at sea and in the belly of a great fish. Few men can have experienced a like terror, knowing that God's pursuing judgment was at hand. On the other hand, Assyria's sin was far greater than Jonah's. It followed logically that, even with repentance, some severe judgment was due to Nineveh. Jonah sat down to await that judgment, only to see the Lord forgive Nineveh apparently without any such punishment as Jonah had incurred. It is a principle of all of Scripture (Lev. 4), that "unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more" (Luke 12:48). Jonah as a prophet was thus judged as one to whom much had been given; on the other hand, much had been given, very obviously, to Nineveh, although in a different sphere. The cry of the mariners was thus echoed in Jonah's heart: "Thou, O Lord, doest as it pleases Thee!" (cf. 1:14).

Jonah had been afraid of this all along; in his prayer, he quoted God's declaration of Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6 (v. 2), and uses the name Jehovah (v. 3), "I AM THAT I AM," or, "He who Is." The entire book of Jonah is in a sense a commentary on the name of God. The cry of the sailors is a recognition of the meaning of God's name: "Thou, O LORD, hast done as it pleased thee" (1:14). Jonah's prayer is a recognition of the meaning of that name; because he knew the nature of God from His name, Jonah had fled from the beginning from his assignment.

What Jonah said in effect, in his prayer and in his bitterness over the gourd vine was this: I knew from the beginning that this was the trouble with you, God, that you are the self-sufficient God, independent of me and my feelings. "I do well to be angry, even unto death" (v. 9). You have violated my sense of justice, and have been oblivious of the need of your own people for a clear-cut judgment against their enemies and your enemies. In essence, Jonah said that there is unrighteousness in God and with God.

St. Paul, in dealing with the same fact of God's absolute sovereignty, answered the questioners of his day thus: "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (Rom. 9:14-15).

Jonah says no more. He disappears from the scene. Jonah gives us his book, an indictment of himself, and of us in our self-pity. Jonah wanted to serve a God only a little bigger than himself. The real God is wholly and totally beyond man; He is sovereign and lord. To Him we must say, Amen, so be it. His name and nature require it. We cannot impose our requirements and our sense of justice on Him; we can only receive His law-word and His government. Jesus Christ, as the perfect man, identified Himself to the Church of Laodicea as "the Amen" (Rev. 3:14). As the Amen of God, He by His perfect obedience gave our assent to God as He does whatsoever pleases Him. Jonah makes clear to us that God is He Who Is, the Sovereign God. None other God exists.

The Author

Rousas John Rushdoony (1916-2001) was a well-known American scholar, writer, and author of over thirty books. He held B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of California and received his theological training at the Pacific School of Religion. An ordained minister, he worked as a missionary among Paiute and Shoshone Indians as well as a pastor to two California churches. He founded the Chalcedon Foundation, an educational organization devoted to research, publishing, and cogent communication of a distinctively Christian scholarship to the world at large. His writing in the *Chalcedon Report* and his numerous books spawned a generation of believers active in reconstructing the world to the glory of Jesus Christ. Until his death, he resided in Vallecito, California, where he engaged in research, lecturing, and assisting others in developing programs to put the Christian Faith into action.

[The Ministry of Chalcedon](#)

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Footnotes

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- ⁶⁹ Keil, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, 398–99.
- ⁷⁰ Pusey, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, 407–08.
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- ⁷² *Ibid.*, 221.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, 216.
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- ⁸⁰ Smart, in *Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 6, 890.
- ⁸¹ Jack McPhaul, *Johnny Torrio, First of the Gang Lords* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1970), 70. A like judgment on the self-pity manifested by whores is given by Robert Fabian, author of *London After Dark*, and *Fabian of the Yard*.
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- ⁸⁴ Keil, *op. cit.*, I, 416n.