

God's Divine Appointments

God's Divine Appointments:

**The Supernatural Working Of God
Through Everyday Events**

**The Stories of Joseph,
Judah And Jonah**

By

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God's Divine Appointments

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Introduction: Why Joseph, Judah, and Jonah?

While it may seem odd to read a book that centers upon the stories of these three Old Testament characters, Joseph, Judah and Jonah, there are, at least, four very important reasons as to why their accounts in Scripture are so valuable to us today.

First, each of these men had a destiny that needed to be fulfilled; a special calling to accomplish the plan of God in our world.

Joseph was to become second in command in Egypt. This would allow for the survival of his own people as well as the survival of the Egyptians. It also allowed the fulfillment of a promise that God made to Abraham; that his descendants would spend four hundreds away from the Promised Land but would eventually return as a powerful nation with great wealth.

Though he was the fourth eldest son of Jacob, Judah was destined to be the special one among his twelve sons. Indeed, it would be the line of Judah through whom the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, would eventually come.

Jonah was called to proclaim judgment upon Nineveh. His attempts to flee were thwarted by the Lord. The message to the people of Nineveh had to be proclaimed and was indeed proclaimed. Like Joseph, Jonah was a “type of Christ;” but only for the time he spent in the belly of the sea monster. In fact, Jonah is the only Old Testament character that Jesus compared Himself to.

Their destinies were all part of the overall plan of God for time and eternity. Consequently, we will explain the importance of each one of them with respect to God's plan for the human race.

Second, there are a number of “divine appointments” in each of these three narratives. “Divine appointments” as we define them, are the supernatural workings of God through simple everyday events.

In other words, there are a number of seemingly unrelated incidents, that, when eventually connected, reveal the plan of an all-knowing, all-powerful God; a God who is supernaturally working His will by means of ordinary occurrences. Put another way, it is the “supernatural” working through the “natural.”

Third, as was true in the lives of these biblical characters, the Lord Himself is working in this same way in the lives of believers today. Seemingly unrelated events, which on their own do not appear important, are all part of a greater plan of the Lord. They will eventually begin to make sense to us when we are able to connect the dots.

Finally, these accounts contain a number of valuable lessons that each believer should understand as well as put into practice in their daily lives.

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There is something else that we should mention. The experiences of these three biblical characters are vastly different. While not a perfect human being, Joseph consistently lived a life that was pleasing to the Lord.

On the other hand, Judah was not always spiritually in tune with God. Indeed, his life is a testimony of one who matures, who experiences spiritual growth.

Finally, there is Jonah. Basically, he shows no spirituality at all throughout his entire ordeal. Indeed, from his initial commissioning to go to Nineveh, to the last words of criticism against him by the Lord, his story is a spiritual train wreck! Simply stated, what we learn from Jonah is how a believer in the God of the Bible should *not* act.

The Divine Appointments

One final thing. At the end of the book we have an appendix in which we summarize the various divine appointments in the lives of these individuals. Along with it, we make some observations about their experiences and the lessons that each of us should learn from them.

May the Lord teach us, through these three important biblical characters, to realize that He is also supernaturally guiding everyday events in our lives to bring about His divine will for us.

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Introduction To The Story Of Joseph

Is God providentially controlling events in our lives? Are there such things as “divine appointments?” We will discover that there certainly are! We find this to be true in God's plan for the descendants of Abraham.

The Promises Of God

To begin with, we must go all the way back to the time of Abram, whose name was later changed to Abraham. He was given a number of promises by the Lord. Among them were the promise of many descendants, as well as a Promised Land in which his descendants would eventually live:

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3 NIV).

Abraham believed God, left his family, and set out and settled in the Promised Land. But later in his life he was then told this:

Then the Lord said to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign country. They will be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years. But I will execute judgment on the nation that they will serve. Afterward they will come out with many possessions. But as for you, you will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will return here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its limit (Genesis 15:13-16 NET).

The Lord predicted that his descendants would someday have to leave this land of promise and go to a foreign country where they would be enslaved for four centuries. Eventually, his descendants would return to the Promised Land and they would do so with much wealth!

So, here is the obvious question, “How is God going to bring all of this about?” What would cause them to leave their land and then eventually return centuries later?

The answer is found in our first section of this book, in the magnificent story of Joseph.

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Joseph

The story of Joseph is by far the longest and most masterful narrative in the Book of Genesis, if not in the entire Bible. There are so many lessons to be learned through a study of what took place in his life, the lives of his brothers, his father, as well as all of the people of Egypt.

Specifically, we will also discover that one of the brothers, Judah, will eventually be singled out for special attention. More on that later.

Joseph And Daniel

The account of Joseph in Egypt is similar to that of Daniel in Babylon. In fact, Joseph and Daniel had much in common. Indeed, both men displayed the divine wisdom of the Lord, as well as supernaturally interpreting the dreams of the pagan leaders in whose countries they were living, Daniel for Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon and Joseph for Pharaoh in Egypt.

Joseph: A Type of Christ

In addition, Joseph's actions, as well as his sufferings, at times, foreshadowed those of Christ Himself. The Bible says:

He was hated and rejected; his life was filled with sorrow and terrible suffering. No one wanted to look at him. We despised him and said, "He is a nobody!" (Isaiah 53:3 CEV).

He came to what was his own, but his own people did not receive him (John 1:11 NET).

The life of Joseph foreshadowed the life of Jesus in a number of ways.

The Growth Of A Nation

The Joseph story also chronicles the migration of Jacob's small clan to Egypt. Starting out with some seventy-five people, they grew into that huge nation that the Lord had promised to Abram.

Joseph's Story Foreshadowed The Life Of The Nation

Furthermore, the life of Joseph would be similar to that of the nation of Israel. Indeed, just as Joseph lived in bondage in Egypt before his deliverance, so would the nation.

Also as the suffering and bondage that Joseph experienced tremendously tested his faith. In like manner, so too Israel's Egyptian bondage was used by the Lord to discipline the people as well as prepare them, as He had done for Joseph, for their future responsibilities.

Finally the culmination of Joseph's story, as well as that of the nation, demonstrated that the Hebrew slaves served the one true God who was infinitely superior to any of the non-existent gods of Egypt.

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Ironically, the account reveals that the slave Joseph, whose wisdom was greater than all the wisdom of the Egyptians, would one day control the economy of Egypt.

God Works His Supernatural Will Through Natural Means

As we will discover, the account of Joseph is all about the Lord, the God of the Bible, working His divine will through the everyday events of life. Interestingly, there are no miracles in the story of his life. Indeed, nowhere do we find God suspending the laws of nature to bring about any desired end. Consequently, his entire life will reveal to us how the Lord supernaturally works in unseen ways in the natural realm.

Indeed, we will discover in the life of Joseph, that time and time again, the hidden hand of God had miraculously arranged everything, whether good or bad, that was taking place.

This is a great lesson for each of us. The Lord Himself is intimately involved in the events that take place in the lives of believers while He ultimately directs everything to His appointed end.

To the point, toward the conclusion of this account, after Joseph had revealed himself to his brothers, we read him saying this:

God sent me ahead of you to preserve you on the earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now, it is not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me an adviser to Pharaoh, lord over all his household, and ruler over all the land of Egypt (Genesis 45:7,8 NET).

Thus we will find that the Lord is a God, not only of the miraculous, but He is also a God of the ordinary. We will discover that His power and wisdom will connect so many seemingly random events.

This includes the evil actions of Joseph's brothers, of someone who just happened to be in a field in Shechem when Joseph was looking for his brothers, of the Midianite traders who just happened to be passing by the pit that Joseph was thrown into in Dothan, of Potiphar, the captain of the Pharaoh's guards, who bought the slave Joseph, of the false charges against Joseph that landed him in the royal prison, of the dreams of the two servants of Pharaoh who were thrown into the royal prison, and even the two dreams of Pharaoh himself.

All of these things were recorded to teach us this valuable lesson; that the Lord will use everyday circumstances, both good and bad, for the ultimate good for His people. As Joseph would later admit to his brothers:

As for you, you meant to harm me, but God intended it for a good purpose, so he could preserve the lives of many people, as you can see this day (Genesis 50:20 NET).

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Joseph And Judah, Front And Center

There is another important thread in the account of Joseph. In this period of Jacob's life, his sons, especially Joseph and Judah, stand in the foreground. However, Jacob remained the head of the household, as well as the person around whom this entire narrative revolves.

God's Providence: Joseph's Rejection, Israel's Salvation

As the story begins, we discover that the Lord, in His divine providence, allows Joseph's rejection by his brothers to take place.

First, it will be by Jacob's sinful behavior of the favoring of Joseph over his older brothers. This will cause the hatred by his brothers toward Joseph to grow stronger each day.

Second, the Lord gave Joseph two supernatural dreams about his own future exaltation above his brothers and even above his father!

While simple human sinfulness will be the reason for Joseph being sold into slavery, this sin will ultimately, and amazingly, set a course that will bring about the national deliverance for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We will now consider what the Bible has to say...

GENESIS 37:1-11

The account begins with this simple statement:

But Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, in the land of Canaan. This is the account of Jacob (Genesis 37:1 NET).

With Esau, Jacob's brother, departing from the Promised Land, Esau had basically acknowledged Jacob's right to it. So, Jacob settled down to stay in the land where his father Isaac had lived, the land of Canaan.

While Scripture says that this is the family history of Jacob, as we will discover, it's basically an account of the life of his favored son Joseph. In a similar manner, just as the Bible had earlier said, "this is the family history of Isaac," the story was mostly about his son Jacob.

Joseph And His Older Half-brothers

The account begins with seventeen-year-old Joseph shepherding his father's flocks along with four of his older half-brothers:

Joseph, his seventeen-year-old son, was taking care of the flocks with his brothers. Now he was a youngster working with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons because he was a son born to him late in life, and he made a special

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tunic for him. When Joseph's brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated Joseph and were not able to speak to him kindly (Genesis 37:1-4 NET).

A bit of background explanation is in order. Jacob, his father, had two wives Leah and Rachel through whom he fathered eight sons. In addition, through two of his concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, he sired four other sons. All in all there were twelve sons of Jacob.

Though these four were full sons of Jacob, he had obviously given them a secondary status with respect to his personal feelings. They knew that they were not the "favored son." Therefore, the older half-brothers did not look favorably upon the younger Joseph.

Bad Or False Report?

Some Bible students think that Joseph defamed his brothers to Jacob. In other words, he was some type of spoiled youngster who looked for an opportunity to be a "tattletale" on these four sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. Whether through immaturity or just plain pride, Joseph took it upon himself to put his older brothers in a bad light.

However, there is another way of looking at this. Joseph's "bad report" indicates that the brothers were participating in some seriously bad behavior. Therefore, Joseph wanted his father to know what these other sons of his were doing.

Consequently, these were not the actions of a "spoiled brat" but rather of a young man who had convictions about what was right and what was wrong. As we look at the entire life of Joseph as Genesis records it, this seems to be the better answer as to why Joseph brought this report to his father.

Jacob's Favoritism

Tragically, as we study the Scripture, we find that favoritism had become a common sin in the family of Jacob. For example, the Bible tells us that Isaac loved his oldest son Esau more than his younger son Jacob. On the other hand, Isaac's wife, Rebekah, loved the younger Jacob more than Esau! Not surprisingly, as the Scripture records, this led to nothing but trouble.

As we mentioned, these four young men were actual sons of Jacob but from his secondary wives. Consequently, they knew that they had no hope of the same type of feeling that Jacob would have for the son of his favorite wife, Rachel.

In fact, we are told that Jacob loved Rachel and her children more than his first wife Leah and her offspring:

Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons because he was a son born to him late in life (Genesis 37:3 NET).

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Jacob's feelings of favoritism were due to the fact that Joseph was the son of Rachel. At the time of this story, though she was deceased, Rachel was never forgotten. Indeed, she was his first and only love.

Add to this, Joseph had been born late in the life of Jacob. This was after many years of the frustration of the couple in trying to conceive a child. All of this caused Jacob to favor Joseph.

However, there is certainly no excuse whatsoever for Jacob's favoritism for Joseph over his other sons. Indeed, his behavior was unconscionable and as we will discover, it led to the circumstances of Joseph's eventual journey to Egypt.

The Special Coat

Jacob made matters worse by making Joseph a special coat:

Also he made him a tunic of many colors (Genesis 37:3 NKJV).

The designation "many colors" is derived from the Septuagint, the Greek, translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, and the Latin Vulgate translation of the Hebrew text.

Actually, we do not know precisely what the coat looked like. Whatever it was, it set Joseph apart from the rest of his brothers. Indeed, Joseph's appearance in the special robe further fueled the hatred of his brothers:

But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him (Genesis 37:4 NKJV).

Joseph's Rejection Is Now Made Complete (Genesis 37:5-11)

If things were not bad enough, two dreams of Joseph would cause his brothers' anger to boil over:

Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf (Genesis 37:5-7 ESV).

The point of this first dream was obvious. His brothers would eventually bow down to him. For some unknown reason, Joseph decided to share it with his brothers.

This Foreshadowed The Future

As we will eventually discover, the dream did indeed foreshadow the future. In fact, as we will note, when Joseph had become a ruler of Egypt, his brothers did indeed bow down to him without knowing that it was their brother to whom they were giving obeisance:

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Now Joseph was governor over the land. He was the one who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground (Genesis 42:6 ESV).

The Response Of The Brothers To Joseph's Dream

The response to the first dream was predictable:

His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words (Genesis 37:8 ESV).

The second dream went far beyond the first with the inclusion of his parents in bowing down to him!

Soon Joseph had another dream, and again he told his brothers about it. "Listen, I have had another dream," he said. "The sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed low before me!" (Genesis 37:9 NLT).

We should note that all of the dreams found in the account of Joseph, whether by him, the chief butler, the chief baker, or by Pharaoh, always come in pairs.

This Was Too Much For Jacob

This second dream was too much, even for Jacob. We read his response:

... his father rebuked him, saying, "What is this dream that you had? Will I, your mother, and your brothers really come and bow down to you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept in mind what Joseph said (Genesis 37:10-11 NET).

While Jacob rebuked Joseph, he did not hate him as did his sons. In fact, there was something in his heart that made him wonder about it. Joseph was different, his father knew it, and so did his half-brothers.

Furthermore, the Lord had spoken to Jacob in the past through dreams. Thus, the patriarch was seemingly not discounting the possibility that the Lord did indeed have a message to the family through these dreams of Joseph.

Summing Up

Joseph's bad report, although truthful, put him in a terrible light with his brothers. Add to this, his father's favoritism of Joseph made his brothers all the more resentful. The two supernatural dreams that Joseph received and shared with his family added further hostility.

Yet, we must remember the main character in all of this is the Lord Himself. Indeed, it is He, who is orchestrating these events. That is why Joseph would one day say to his brothers:

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As for you, you meant to harm me, but God intended it for a good purpose... (Genesis 50:20 NET).

Of course, at this point, none of them would have had the slightest idea as to how these events would fulfill God's prediction to Abraham to bring his offspring to a strange land in which they would live for some 400 years.

GENESIS 37:12-36

The stage has now been set for what will follow. As the story develops, we will continue to see that the Lord has a divine plan in all of these seemingly unrelated events. In fact, among other things, the account of Joseph will clearly demonstrate how the providence of God works through human evil for the ultimate good.

Joseph Is Sent To Determine The Welfare Of His Brothers (Genesis 37:12-17)

This part of the narrative begins harmlessly enough with Joseph, being sent by his father, to check up on the welfare of his brothers:

When his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I will send you to them." "I'm ready," Joseph replied. So Jacob said to him, "Go now and check on the welfare of your brothers and of the flocks, and bring me word." So Jacob sent him from the valley of Hebron (Genesis 37:12-14 NET)

We find that Joseph immediately followed his father's instructions. There was no hesitation, or complaining that he must make this arduous journey by himself. He was certainly not acting like a "spoiled brat" or a son who assumed that he had a special entitlement.

Hebron was some twenty miles south of Jerusalem, and Shechem was another thirty miles north of the holy city. This considerable distance that Joseph had to travel to Shechem was likely troubling to his father. Nevertheless, Jacob sent him and Joseph obeyed.

Why Did Jacob Send Joseph?

Jacob's concern for his ten sons certainly makes sense. However, what is not explained to us is why this father would send his favorite son to check up on his brothers.

In fact, he knew that they hated Joseph, and him showing up in his special coat would have made them hate Joseph all the more. Yet, for some unspoken reason, he sent Joseph anyway.

Whatever the case may be, it seems rather obvious that neither Jacob nor Joseph had the slightest idea that any harm that might come to this favored son from his own brothers.

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Oddly, as we read the account, it appears that Joseph seems to have gone on this journey with the thought that somehow his brothers would be glad to see him. He would soon find out differently.

The First Two Divine Appointments: No Grazing Land In Shechem And The Unnamed Man In The Field

When Joseph arrived in Shechem, he was surprised not to find his brothers and their flocks. It is here we have our first two "divine appointments."

As Joseph was wandering in the fields, looking for his brothers, he just "happened" upon an unnamed individual:

When Joseph reached Shechem, a man found him wandering in the field, so the man asked him, "What are you looking for?" He replied, "I'm looking for my brothers. Please tell me where they are grazing their flocks." The man said, "They left this area, for I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan (Genesis 37:15-17 NET).

Joseph, having not found his brothers, could have returned to his father Jacob. Indeed, he would have had no idea where they were had ventured to.

However, he came upon someone who just "happened" to know precisely where his brothers had gone, they had left for Dothan.

So two things crucial things take place here. First, the brothers leave the area for a better place to graze their flocks. In other words, he did not encounter his brothers at Shechem. Second, he is informed exactly where they did go, Dothan.

The Two Extremes of God's Care At Dothan

Dothan was another fourteen miles farther north from Shechem. This would have placed Joseph some sixty-four miles away from his father Jacob.

Interestingly, Dothan figured into two of the most important accounts in all of Scripture.

In this instance, although Joseph would cry for deliverance in Dothan it would be to no avail. In fact, years later, his brothers would remember his cries for help in Dothan:

They said to one other, "Surely we're being punished because of our brother, because we saw how distressed he was when he cried to us for mercy, but we refused to listen (Genesis 42:21 NET).

However, in the second major event that would occur in Dothan, the prophet Elisha would find himself surrounded by horses and chariots of

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the Syrian army. The situation, when all seemed to be lost, caused his servant to cry out in fear. Elisha then prayed to the Lord:

“O Lord, open his eyes so he can see.” The Lord opened the servant's eyes and he saw that the hill was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:17 NET).

The truth of the matter is that God's protection was just as present for Joseph in Dothan, as it would be many years later for the prophet Elisha.

Indeed, Joseph could not see what was occurring in the unseen spiritual realm when he was pleading for his life. At that time, he had no idea that the Lord was behind all these events that were taking place and that would eventually take place.

Joseph Is Abused By His Brothers (Genesis 37:18-24)

As the brothers were grazing their flocks in Dothan, they observed a familiar figure coming their way. It was Joseph, their hated brother, wearing the favored coat. Obviously, he could not have been missed:

They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams” (Genesis 37:18-20 ESV).

The plot to kill Joseph was immediately set in motion, In fact, it would have occurred if not for the intervention of his brother Reuben.

Earlier in Genesis, we read that Reuben, the eldest of Jacob's sons, had fallen from his father Jacob's favor for his affair with Bilhah, one of his Jacob's secondary wives.

Furthermore, as the eldest son, the responsibility for the death of his younger brother would have been shouldered upon him.

Therefore, we find that Reuben intervened to spare the life of his brother:

And Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father (Genesis 37:22 ESV).

Reuben commanded the brothers to cast Joseph into the pit so that he could somehow rescue him later. But, as we shall see, this was not to be.

Joseph Is Brutally Assaulted By His Brothers

Upon Joseph's arrival, the assault occurs:

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So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it (Genesis 37:23-24 ESV).

The term “they stripped him” is used in other contexts to describe the skinning of animals (Leviticus 1:6). Like wild animals, these brothers assaulted him, leaving him bruised and bleeding in a pit without any water, and with no possible way out.

Another Divine Appointment: Judah comes to the forefront and Joseph Is Sold Into Slavery

From a human standpoint, the situation looked hopeless. Here was Joseph left to die in this pit, suffering from the intense Middle Eastern sun. All the while his evil brothers were feasting upon the food that he had so generously brought to them.

However, another divine appointment was about to take place:

Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him. Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt (Genesis 37: 25-28 ESV).

Notice that this caravan just “happened” to be passing by when Joseph was in the process of dying in this pit.

As it just “happened” that his brothers had left Shechem for Dothan, as it just “happened” that there was a man who had heard Joseph’s brothers saying that they were leaving for Dothan, where there was sufficient grass to graze.

Now we find that the caravan “just happened” along at the precise time that the brothers had thrown Joseph into the pit. And one more thing that we should note: Dothan was on the caravan route; Shechem was not!

Therefore, if they had remained in Shechem, and Joseph had found them in that place, there would have not been any caravan passing by, or any way for Joseph to get to his appointed destination, Egypt.

But as we continue to observe, God had all these divine appointments arranged to bring Joseph to exactly where he needed to be.

Interestingly, these Ishmaelite traders were made up of the descendants of Abraham through his wife Keturah. She is the woman whom he married

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after the death of his wife Sarah. The Midianites were residents of the Ancient Near East who had intermarried with the Ishmaelites.

In other words, both groups were outside the covenant that the Lord had made with Abraham and his descendants through his son, Isaac. Hence, Joseph was sold to people who were not part of God's covenant.

Judah's Role

It would be Judah, not Reuben, who would be responsible for saving Joseph's life. While his motivation is unstated, Judah took charge by coming up with a seemingly better idea, selling Joseph as a slave to these traders.

From this time forward, we will find Judah playing a more active role in the leadership among his brothers, although he was born the fourth-in-line son. In fact, Jacob would ultimately name him as the one through whom the Messiah would come:

Judah, your brothers will praise you. Your hand will be on the neck of your enemies, your father's sons will bow down before you. You are a lion's cub, Judah, from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches and lies down like a lion; like a lioness - who will rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; the nations will obey him (Genesis 49:8-10 NET).

Judah sold his brother for 20 shekels. This reminds us of another Judah, Judas, who 2,000 years later, would sell God the Son, the Lord Jesus, to the religious leaders for 30 pieces of silver.

The irony is that the Jesus was a descendant of Judah.

Therefore, Joseph, who had begun that day as a well-dressed prince among his people, ended his day as a slave bound for Egypt. His troubles had merely begun.

Reuben's Plan Is Foiled

As the oldest, Reuben would have been in charge of supervising Jacob's flocks. While he briefly left the brothers with the idea of returning at an opportune time to save Joseph from certain death, God's supernatural hand intervened.

With the unexpected arrival of this caravan on its way to Egypt, the brothers, upon Judah's suggestion, assumed that there was a much better way in which to deal with their hated brother. They would not kill him; instead, they would sell him to this group going to Egypt. Either way, they assumed that they would never see him again.

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On a natural level this certainly would have been true. Joseph, as a slave in Egypt, would never again be seen by his family. However, as we will continue to observe, the Lord had other plans.

Jacob, The Deceiver, Is Himself Deceived

Joseph's special robe, given to him alone by his adoring father, will now play another important part in this narrative:

Then they took Joseph's robe and slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. And they sent the robe of many colors and brought it to their father and said, "This we have found; please identify whether it is your son's robe or not." And he identified it and said, "It is my son's robe. A fierce animal has devoured him. Joseph is without doubt torn to piece" (Genesis 37:31-33 ESV).

There is a bitter irony here as the ten sons of Jacob deceive the deceiver. They used the clothing of their brother, as well as the blood of a slain goat, to deceive their father.

This is similar to what happened many years previously. Jacob had deceived his own father, Isaac, with his brother's clothing and the skin of a slain goat (see Genesis 27:9-17).

Jacob's deceit had now come full circle. The adoring father Jacob was about to experience years of constant heartache for this horrific crime perpetrated by his evil sons:

Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave." So his father wept for him (Genesis 37:34,35 NIV).

Scripture tells us that grieving usually lasted a week for a parent (Genesis 50:10). When Moses died, the people mourned for the extraordinary period of a month (Deuteronomy 34:8). Jacob, however, insisted that he would publicly mourn for his special son Joseph to his dying day.

Regarding Joseph, we have this postscript:

Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard (Genesis 37:36 NET).

If we were merely dealing on a human level, then the story would be over. Jacob would go through life mourning for a dead son who was still alive, his brothers would be rid of their hated brother, and Joseph would spend the rest of his days as a slave in Egypt, never to see his family again.

However, God had this planned all along to fulfill the promises made to Abraham. His descendants would indeed spend 400 years in a foreign

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country before coming out with great wealth. Selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt put in motion God's ultimate plan for the nation.

Of course, Joseph had no idea of what was to come, or the reasons as to why any of this was happening.

Joseph Never Seems To Doubt The Lord

With all these terrible things that would occur in his life, Joseph would certainly have had sufficient reasons for all sorts of emotions. In fact, this would likely include anger with the Lord, self-pity, and the burning desire for revenge. But as we will discover, he decided not to play the role of a victim, or let any anger overcome him.

It seems what kept Joseph going was his belief in God's promises. As was the case with his great-grandfather Abraham, who exercised great faith in the Lord, Joseph trusted the things that the Lord had revealed to him in his dreams would eventually come to pass. He truly believed that those two dreams would someday be literally fulfilled.

Hence, no matter how difficult circumstances may have been for Joseph, he was confident that his entire family would one day bow down to him. Somehow, this would be part of God's plan for the chosen people.

Add to this, Joseph seemed to have had a biblical view of God, the One who is always in control of all things. This being so, he assumed that God was doing His will throughout these inexplicable events including the sending of him off to be a slave in Egypt.

Chapter 38: Judah Is Now At The Forefront

In the midst of the narrative of Joseph, we have an entire chapter where his story pauses. In fact, Joseph's name is not even mentioned.

As the title of this book reflects, there is another important character whom the Lord now begins to bring to the forefront, Judah. This chapter introduces us to the change of heart in this man who suggested that his brothers sell Joseph into slavery.

As we look closer at this character, who will eventually be prominent in the ancestry of the coming Messiah, there are a number of observations that need to be made.

The Promise Of The Messiah

Among other things, this last section, Genesis 37-50, will continue to trace the progressive fulfillment of the promised offspring. This is the individual who eventually will be the Redeemer, the Savior of the world.

This was first promised in the Garden of Eden. The Lord said the following to the serpent:

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And I will cause hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15 NLT).

It will be the offspring of the woman, the seed of the woman, who will crush Satan.

This Savior is also promised to come through the line of Abraham. He received this promise.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:1-3 NLT)

As Paul would later emphasize, it would be a particular descendant of Abraham who will be the Savior of the world:

God gave the promises to Abraham and his child. And notice that the Scripture doesn't say "to his children," as if it meant many descendants. Rather, it says "to his child"—and that, of course, means Christ. (Galatians 3:16 NLT)

And this will culminate with the coming of the rightful king from the line of Judah. Therefore, this emphasis on Judah is consistent with the promise that the Savior will eventually come from his family.

Where Chapter 38 Fits In The Narrative

To many, chapter 38 does not appear to belong here. The story of Joseph is interrupted with an account of the life of Judah that seemingly has nothing to do with the chapters either before, or after.

However, chapter 38 is in fact quite fundamental to the story of Jacob and Joseph. There are a number of reasons as to why this is so.

First, with its specific focus on Judah, it is "setting up" the crucial place that Judah will come to occupy in the overall plan of God. In fact, his position will be even greater than that of Joseph! Indeed, he will provide the offspring that will be the ancestor of the coming Messiah.

We will also see the evolution of this man Judah. In the previous chapter he was the one who suggested that the brothers sell Joseph to the caravan going to Egypt rather than allowing him to miserably die in the pit in Dothan.

In one sense, Judah probably saved Joseph's life. Indeed, the other brothers could not let Joseph go back to their father after being beaten by them and stripped of his special coat.

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The Links In The Chain From Abraham To Judah

So, here is what the Scripture has told us so far with respect to the coming Messiah. The Lord promised Eve, at the time of the Fall, that her seed would bruise the serpent's head.

Abraham became a major link in the chain of the Lord's activity. The next link was Isaac, not Ishmael, followed by Jacob, not Esau.

It would be natural to assume that either Reuben, the firstborn son of Jacob, or possibly even Joseph, would be the next link in the chain of divine succession that would lead to the coming of the Messiah. But the Lord had other plans.

Now to the story...

The Story Of Judah And Tamar

This chapter begins by explaining the reason that Judah left his brothers, it was to find himself a wife. When we compare his story to the care and concern which Isaac exercised in choosing a bride for Jacob, we discover that Judah's approach to marriage was completely foolish:

About this time, Judah left home and moved to Adullam, where he stayed with a man named Hirah. There he saw a Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua, and he married her (Genesis 38:1-2 NLT).

To begin with, we must remember that the Lord had placed a definite prohibition for His people with respect to marriage to a Canaanite. Judah, however, even if we assume he was aware of the Lord's command, paid no attention to it. Instead he did whatever he wanted to do. As we shall see, disaster followed his foolish behavior.

This chapter informs us that the marriage to this unnamed Canaanite woman produced three sons.

Er

One his sons, Er, married a woman called Tamar. Unfortunately, Er was a wicked individual. Interestingly, there are no details provided for us about Er's lifestyle except the following:

Judah acquired a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was evil in the LORD's sight, so the LORD killed him (Genesis 38:6,7 NET).

This statement is blunt. Basically, it points out God's intervention in the affairs of humanity when He decides that it is necessary! To the point, this family of Judah will eventually be in the lineage of the Messiah. Er, with his evil ways, was not capable of being part of this blessed line.

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This left another son, Onan, to fulfill the duty that Er neglected, to raise up a male offspring. Judah reminded his son Onan:

Then Judah said to Er's brother Onan, "Go and marry Tamar, as our law requires of the brother of a man who has died. You must produce an heir for your brother (Genesis 38:8 NLT).

Like his brother, Onan was a sinful individual. He too would pay the ultimate penalty for his refusal to perpetuate the line of his brother. The Bible records what happened:

But Onan was not willing to have a child who would not be his own heir. So whenever he had intercourse with his brother's wife, he spilled the semen on the ground. This prevented her from having a child who would belong to his brother. But the LORD considered it evil for Onan to deny a child to his dead brother. So the LORD took Onan's life, too (Genesis 38:9,10 NLT).

His reasons for this were that he "knew that the heir would not be his."

The Dilemma Of Tamar

Tamar had every reason to expect that she would be given a husband to replace the one she had lost and the one she never really had. However, for some unstated reason, Judah who had lost these two evil sons, who had been related to her, was not prepared to allow his third son to marry Tamar.

Tamar eventually realized that Judah was not going to help her. This is despite his promise that she could eventually marry his youngest son Shelah.

A Number Of Things Converge

At this point in the life of Judah, we will find three things converge that will bring about his male heir, who will be in the line of the Messiah. Like the divine appointments in the life of Joseph, these three events had to happen together to bring about the desire end.

They include Judah's recent loss of his wife, his refusal to keep his promise to Tamar to marry his youngest son, and a shearing festival that he was to attend.

Each of these events, taken together, set the stage for the male heir that would come from the line of Judah, a male offspring of Judah himself!

Tamar Takes Matters Into Her Own Hands

The background is as follows. Judah had recently lost his wife. After he had finished his period of mourning, he decided to go with a friend to a local village. The idea was to join the festival that was somehow related to sheep shearing.

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Tamar knew her father-in-law was coming. Her perspective husband, Judah's son Shelah, had grown up, but Judah was not going to keep his promise to her and allow them to marry, so as to give her a child. Knowing that Judah was coming to this festival allowed Tamar to put her plan in motion:

Tamar was aware that Shelah had grown up, but no arrangements had been made for her to come and marry him. So she changed out of her widow's clothing and covered herself with a veil to disguise herself. Then she sat beside the road at the entrance to the village of Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah (Genesis 38:14,15 NLT).

Tamar was set on having an heir from the family line of Judah. While it did not happen with Judah's sons, her first two husbands Er and Onan, she was determined to find a way for it to occur. Her plan was to disguise herself and entice her newly widowed father-in-law to have sex with her. The hope was that she would become pregnant and that the child would be a male.

Her plan worked. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute:

Judah noticed her and thought she was a prostitute, since she had covered her face. So he stopped and propositioned her. "Let me have sex with you," he said, not realizing that she was his own daughter-in-law (Genesis 38:15-16 NLT).

She agreed on the promise of payment. Judah gave a pledge by leaving his identification seal with its cord as well as his staff. Their sexual encounter caused Tamar to become pregnant.

"What kind of guarantee do you want?" he replied. She answered, "Leave me your identification seal and its cord and the walking stick you are carrying." So Judah gave them to her. Then he had intercourse with her, and she became pregnant (Genesis 38:18 NLT).

After her plan worked, Tamar knew that there would be a day of reckoning.

Later, when Judah discovered that her widowed daughter-in-law was to have a child he was incensed. To him, the only righteous penalty for this sin would be death!

About three months later, Judah was told, "Tamar, your daughter-in-law, has acted like a prostitute. And now, because of this, she's pregnant." "Bring her out, and let her be burned!" Judah demanded. (Genesis 36:24 NLT).

Here we find a classic example of the double standard. It was not considered something wrong for this man to have sex with a prostitute. However, it was completely sinful for his daughter-in-law to become pregnant without a husband. Consequently, in his mind, the only proper response was her execution.

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At the time Tamar was about to be executed she only had one request; that the owner of the seal and the staff, the father of the child, should be identified:

But as they were taking her out to kill her, she sent this message to her father-in-law: "The man who owns these things made me pregnant. Look closely. Whose seal and cord and walking stick are these?" Judah recognized them immediately and said, "She is more righteous than I am, because I didn't arrange for her to marry my son Shelah." And Judah never slept with Tamar again" (Genesis 38:25,26 NLT).

Obviously, this entire episode came as a complete shock to Judah.

Twin Sons Were Born

Recall that the fact that she was pregnant did not guarantee that the child would be male. However, twin sons were eventually born to Judah and Tamar. Therefore, these seemingly random events, brought about a male heir to the family line of Judah.

At birth, the hand of the first child, Zerah, appeared, and a scarlet thread was fastened around his wrist to identify him as the firstborn. However, the other brother, Perez, preempted him and was born first! While Zerah wore the thread Perez took precedence.

Hence, the Lord not only chose Judah to be in the line of the Messiah but He also appointed Perez to be the one through whom the line of descent would come. In the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew writes:

Judah the father of Perez and Zerah (by Tamar), Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram (Matthew 1:3).

What We Learn From Chapter 38

In sum, this chapter plays a crucial role in the narrative of Genesis. Indeed, it plays an important part in the development of one of the central themes of the book, as well as the entire Old Testament.

It is the line of Judah that now receives the emphasis. This anticipates Jacob's eventual choice of Judah receiving the rights of the firstborn. The narrative reveals that Judah does nothing to further the offspring of his own household. It takes the "righteousness" of Tamar to preserve the seed of Judah.

In addition, we find that the birth order does not necessarily indicate God's choice of who will be preeminent.

This chapter also marks a turning point in the life of Judah. His past attitude toward his brother Joseph, his disobedience to the Lord in marrying a Canaanite woman, his lack of following through with his promise of giving his youngest son Shelah to Tamar, as well as his visiting what he thought was a temple prostitute after the death of his wife, is

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contrasted to his realization that Tamar was the one who acted righteously, not him. As we will discover, Judah will become a changed man.

While his brother Joseph had acted righteously from the beginning, Judah's spiritual journey testifies to God's amazing grace. Indeed, like Jonah, Judah discovered that the Lord, the God of Scripture, is the God of the "second chance."

Chapter 39: Joseph In Egypt

We now return to the story of Joseph. The next divine appointment in the life of Joseph is about to take place. The Bible sums up what had previously occurred:

Now Joseph had been brought down to Egypt, and Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard, an Egyptian, had bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there (Genesis 39:1 ESV)

Joseph is sold to a very important person--Potiphar who is the captain of Pharaoh's guard. We will later discover why this is important! Indeed, this is one of the many "natural" events where the supernatural is indeed at work!

As we just observed in the story of Judah and Tamar, a number of events, that are seemingly random, will actually come together to bring about God's desired result for the family of Abraham.

Joseph Thrives In Egypt

We also learn something important about Joseph's character. Instead of playing the victim, which could certainly be expected given the circumstances, Joseph used this opportunity to be the best person that he could possibly in the situations that he found himself. Scripture explains it this way:

The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man, and he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him and that the Lord caused all that he did to succeed in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him, and he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had (Genesis 39:2-4 ESV).

In spite of all the difficulties that Joseph had experienced, we find that the Scripture emphasizes some six times in this chapter that "the Lord was with him." Indeed, He caused Joseph to succeed in a very unfair situation.

At this point in the narrative, one cannot blame those, either hearing this story being read, or reading it for themselves, for asking this question, "How could the Lord allow this injustice to happen?" Indeed, this righteous young man has become a slave in a foreign country, his sinful

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brothers will get away with their deception, and his father will spend years in mourning for his lost son. The whole episode is simply wrong, evil. Why would the Lord permit this to happen?

Again, we must emphasize that at this juncture the story of Joseph is far from complete. As we will observe, the hand of God will continue to work through both good and evil. Yet, at this particular time, it seems that evil prevailed and good loses out.

All of this should teach us a valuable lesson. Never, should we assume that some difficulty or adversity means that our life is now over, or that somehow, we have been predestined to fail. It may look like this for a time, but the story was certainly not over for Joseph. God did not abandon him and He will not abandon us!

Another Divine Appointment: The False Accusation

While the circumstances were bad for Joseph, they are about to get worse. Joseph is going to get victimized again.

Scripture tells us that Joseph was a good looking young man. This led to the repeated adulterous advances toward him from the wife of Potiphar. However, he did not succumb to her temptations. When confronted with the situation, Joseph told her the following:

How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God? (Genesis 39:9 ESV)

After one instance, when the two of them were in the house alone, Joseph wisely fled from her presence. However, this angered Potiphar's wife to the place where she falsely accused Joseph of trying to force himself upon her.

The Next Divine Appointment: Joseph Sent To The Royal Prison

This false accusation leads to the next divine appointment:

And Joseph's master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison (Genesis 39:20 ESV).

We should not miss this important fact. As a result of working for the captain of Pharaoh's guard, he was thrown into the "royal prison." This was a place where the king's prisoners were kept. In spite of the outward circumstances, in all of this, the Lord was still with him.

Indeed, it would be from this particular prison that the Lord would bring about the rescuing of His people, the children of Israel, from certain death as well as those from the entire nation of Egypt.

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Joseph Does Not Let The Circumstances Get The Best Of Him

In prison, we discover that once again the plan of the Lord would continue to unfold. As was the case when he worked for Potiphar, the Lord granted Joseph favor in the sight of the chief jailer of the prison. In fact, Joseph was given charge over all of the prisoners.

There Is A Valuable Lesson For Us

Too often, Bible believers mistake difficulties and adversity in their lives as a sign of the Lord's abandonment. They assume that they are being punished for something. Because of the horrible circumstances that they find ourselves in, it can cause them to think that the Lord has somehow forgotten all about them.

However, as we constantly have seen in the life of Joseph, despite all of his difficulties, the Lord was always present in his life. Indeed, God was consistently granting him favor, as well as success, wherever he went.

In fact, as we will discover later in this narrative, all of these undeserved events needed to happen in his life to bring him to the exact place where the Lord wanted him, in the presence of the Pharaoh.

It will become obvious that this entire account is clearly revealing the wonderful providence of the God of the Bible. From the outset He has been directing everything to bring about His divine will. All of this is taking place, in spite of these difficult circumstances that Joseph, certainly through no fault of his own, constantly finds himself involved in.

Joseph Is Put in Charge (Genesis 39:22-23)

Again, we find that Joseph did not let the circumstances get him down. Instead of playing the victim, he was determined to be the best person that he could possibly be. This is in spite of all the horrific injustices that continued to happen to him. The Bible explains it in this manner:

The warden put all the prisoners under Joseph's care. He was in charge of whatever they were doing. The warden did not concern himself with anything that was in Joseph's care because the Lord was with him and whatever he was doing the Lord was making successful (Genesis 39: 22-23 NET)

Joseph was again living his life with a certain degree of success and leadership. He did not let the adverse circumstances get him down. Twice in these verses his success was attributed to the Lord, and to Him alone.

Another Divine Appointment: The Imprisoning Of Pharaoh's Men

God's supernatural plan in the life of Joseph would now begin to become all the more apparent. In fact, the Lord will use this next situation to prepare the way for the preservation of the nation of Israel as well as the fulfillment of those two dreams that Joseph had dreamt so long ago.

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Interestingly, it seemed to happen innocently enough. Two men from Pharaoh's court, the chief cupbearer, and the chief baker, were sent to the prison because they had done things that had angered the Pharaoh. As Scripture informs us, Joseph because of his faithful work ethic and proper attitude, was in charge of each of them. The Bible says:

After these things happened, the cupbearer to the king of Egypt and the royal baker offended their master, the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was enraged with his two officials, the cupbearer, and the baker, so he imprisoned them in the house of the captain of the guard in the same facility where Joseph was confined. The captain of the guard appointed Joseph to be their attendant, and he served them. They spent some time in custody (Genesis 40:1-4 NET).

While in prison, each of them dreamed an intense dream that neither of them could not forget:

Both of them, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt, who were confined in the prison, had a dream the same night. Each man's dream had its own meaning. When Joseph came to them in the morning, he saw that they were looking depressed (Genesis 40:5-6 NET).

The dreams were both given on the same night. Though they did not understand the meanings of their vivid dreams, both of them were obviously depressed the next morning because of their experience. They knew that their dreams had some meaning, but who would tell them exactly what they meant?

Joseph's Compassion Is On Display

Though these men were strangers, here we find Joseph displaying his godly compassion toward them. If he had ignored them, then this entire narrative would have turned out differently.

Yet Joseph, after all these years, and all the unfair things he had experienced, still had the proper attitude toward others:

So he asked Pharaoh's officials, who were with him in custody in his master's house, "Why do you look so sad today?" They told him, "We both had dreams, but there is no one to interpret them." Joseph responded, "Don't interpretations belong to God? Tell them to me" (Genesis 40:7-8 NET).

When they told him what their problems were, Joseph sought to resolve their situation by offering to interpret their dreams. As to why Joseph believed that the Lord might reveal the meaning of each dream to him, we are not told.

We do find that Joseph affirmed that the interpretations of all of these types of dreams belong to God and to Him alone. In other words, he was not claiming any supernatural ability for himself.

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To begin with, Joseph interpreted the dream of the chief cupbearer in a favorable manner. He predicted that within three days the Pharaoh would restore him to his former position.

Joseph then asked the chief cupbearer to remember him when he is released from prison because he had been falsely charged:

But remember me when it goes well for you, and show me kindness. Make mention of me to Pharaoh and bring me out of this prison, for I really was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews and I have done nothing wrong here for which they should put me in a dungeon (Genesis 40:14-15 NET).

Next, the chief baker came to Joseph with his own dream. He was likely hoping that he too would receive a favorable interpretation as the other man received. However, it was not to be:

This is what it means," Joseph said. "The three baskets are three days. Within three days Pharaoh will lift off your head and impale your body on a pole. And the birds will eat away your flesh (Genesis 40:18,19 NIV).

Joseph did not tell the chief baker that he had to remember him.

The Supernatural Interpretations Becomes Reality

Amazingly, the events unfolded just as Joseph had predicted. Each dream was fulfilled precisely as Joseph had told them. But there was one problem, a huge one:

On the third day it was Pharaoh's birthday, so he gave a feast for all his servants. He "lifted up" the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker in the midst of his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his former position so that he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand, but the chief baker he impaled, just as Joseph had predicted. But the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph—he forgot him (Genesis 40:20-23 NET).

Joseph Is Thwarted Again

The chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph—even though he had supernaturally interpreted his dream and the dream of the chief baker. Sadly for Joseph, this man had totally forgotten about this Hebrew prisoner.

At this juncture, it certainly seemed that Joseph's problems would never end. No matter what he did, or did not do, no matter how helpful that he was, nothing seemed to change in his life. He was still in prison, stuck in the dungeon, for something that he did not do and was seemingly doomed to stay there for the rest of his life.

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Will this be how his story ends? One can only imagine how frustrated Joseph would have been at this particular time. Again, we ask where is God in all of this?

What Kept Joseph Going?

Let's remember that Joseph had supernaturally interpreted the two dreams of the prisoners. What may have kept him going, even though the chief butler had forgotten about him, was the fact that the Lord had allowed these supernatural interpretations to be given to him. This, of course, would indicate that the Lord had not forgotten about him and still had a plan for his life.

We add to this the two previous dreams that he had experienced so long ago. It appears that all of these events may have inspired Joseph to keep trusting the Lord. Sooner or later, in God's perfect timing, his destiny would be fulfilled.

There is A Similar Principle in Esther

We should also note that there is an important timing factor going on here. Recall from the Book of Esther, the Persian King Ahasuerus had not remembered to reward the Hebrew Mordecai's for his previous good deed done to him.

Yet, there came a providential time when the King remembered, and Mordecai was rewarded. In that instance, the Lord used the timing of the event to help save the entire nation from destruction.

As we shall see, there would also come a providential time when the chief cupbearer will remember Joseph's supernatural interpretation of both his dream and that of the chief baker.

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So far, in the story of Joseph, we have seen at least nine divine appointments. They can be summarized as follows:

Recall that Jacob asked Joseph to check on his brothers who were grazing their flocks in Shechem. As a faithful son, he obeyed his father and set out for Shechem. There was no quarreling, or expectation of some entitlement on the part of Joseph. He simply obeyed.

Divine Appointment 1: The brothers were not in Shechem because it was not good for grazing. So there would be no meeting up of the brothers with Joseph at this destination.

Divine Appointment 2: An unnamed man who was in Shechem just "happened" to overhear them saying they were going to Dothan, so Joseph went to Dothan.

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When he reached Dothan, His brothers plotted to immediately kill him. Reuben intervened so that they did not slaughter him on the spot.

Instead they stripped off his clothes and threw him into a pit without food or water. It looked like he would surely die of starvation, thirst, and exposure. Indeed, there was nobody there to help him.

Divine Appointment 3: While Joseph was in the pit in Dothan, a caravan that was headed for Egypt just “happened” to be passing by at that time.

Divine Appointment 4: Dothan was on the caravan route, Shechem was not. So this episode could never have happened this way if they were grazing where they originally intended.

Divine Appointment 5: Judah, seeing the caravan, suggested selling him into slavery. The brothers, minus Reuben, agreed. Joseph was sold to these traders who were on their way to Egypt.

Divine Appointment 6: In Egypt, Joseph was sold to Potiphar the captain of Pharaoh's guard.

Divine Appointment 7: When Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of attempting to rape her, he was placed in the “royal prison” for the crime in which he was accused of but did not commit.

Divine Appointment 8: In the royal prison, due to his desire to be the best prisoner possible, he was given the job of looking after the incoming prisoners.

Divine Appointment 9: Joseph was put in charge of two prisoners from the court of Pharaoh. They each dreamed a dream that bothered them. Joseph miraculously interpreted the dreams of two people from Pharaoh's court.

These divine appointments are examples of the supernatural working through the natural. These everyday events kept God's plan in motion for the prescribed end that He had determined.

We should note that if “any” of these divine appointments had not happened, then Joseph would not have found himself in a position to be brought before the Pharaoh.

Let Us Not Forget What Happened To Judah

Along with these divine appointments in the life of Joseph, we should also remember all the seemingly random events that happened in the life of Judah.

Along with his callous brothers, he was sitting around, doing nothing, when Joseph was alone in the pit in Dothan, dying of hunger and thirst. When the caravan going to Egypt just happened to be passing by, it was Judah who suggested selling Joseph to the trading party.

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Later, against the express will of God, Judah took a wife from the Canaanites.

Each of his first two sons from this marriage had married the woman Tamar. The first Er, was struck dead by the Lord and the second son Onan, was also struck dead. Judah was without a male heir to carry on his name with only a young son, Shelah, remaining.

Judah promised Tamar that when his youngest son grew up that Shelah would also marry her. However, at this time, his son had grown up but Judah had not keep his word.

This led to a number of seemingly unrelated events that would allow Judah to have a male heir, one that would come from his body. His wife had recently died and after his time of mourning he was heading to a sheep shearing festival in another town.

Tamar was determined to be the mother of an heir in the line of Judah. Dressing as a temple prostitute she positioned herself along the path that he would take to the festival. Seemingly she knew that Judah would proposition her, which he did. The outcome was she became pregnant. Yet there was no guarantee that the child born to them would be a male.

However, Scripture tells us she bore twins, two males. One of them Perez, would become the male heir in the line of Judah that would eventually bring about the Messiah, the Lord Jesus.

Therefore, at this juncture in the lives of both Joseph and Judah, behind the scenes, the Lord had arranged many different events to fulfill His promises that He had made so long before to Abraham.

As we have emphasized, every single one of these events in the lives of these two men had to happen to bring about the desired end. How amazing it was, that all of these seemingly random events miraculously fell into place!

Picking Up From The Last Time

As we left the story, Joseph had one little favor to ask. He requested that when the cupbearer was restored to his former position, he asked him to use his influence to get Joseph released from jail. Joseph was there because of a false charge. The cupbearer, however, forgot all about him.

To this point, Joseph's three major problems can be summarized as follows: his brothers, Potiphar's wife, and now the cupbearer. The first group abused him in an evil manner. The second one had lied about him. The third had forgotten all about him.

There was certainly the temptation for Joseph to be resentful, to be angry, to be depressed, and even to be cynical. How will he rise above the circumstances? Where is God in all of this? Why is this happening?

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Yet, as we will see, through all of this, Joseph continued to trust the Lord.

The Defining Moment

Two more years passed. It had been thirteen years since the brutal attack on him by his brothers in Dothan. Joseph was now thirty years of age. The stage was now set for the event that will be the defining moment in Joseph's life, as well as in the family of Jacob.

Chapter 41: Pharaoh's Two Dreams

The Book of Genesis explains what took place next:

At the end of two full years Pharaoh had a dream. As he was standing by the Nile, seven fine-looking, fat cows were coming up out of the Nile, and they grazed in the reeds. Then seven bad-looking, thin cows were coming up after them from the Nile, and they stood beside the other cows at the edge of the river. The bad-looking, thin cows ate the seven fine-looking, fat cows. Then Pharaoh woke up.

Then he fell asleep again and had a second dream: There were seven heads of grain growing on one stalk, healthy and good. Then seven heads of grain, thin and burned by the east wind, were sprouting up after them. The thin heads swallowed up the seven healthy and full heads. Then Pharaoh woke up and realized it was a dream.

In the morning he was troubled, so he called for all the diviner-priests of Egypt and all its wise men. Pharaoh told them his dreams, but no one could interpret them for him (Genesis 41:1-8 NET)

In the first dream seven fat cows are eaten by seven lean cows. In the second dream seven healthy heads of grain are swallowed by seven thin heads of grain. Pharaoh knew these dreams meant something, but nobody could figure out exactly what their meaning was. Indeed, the diviner-priests and the wise men had no idea.

This set the stage for the appearance of Joseph.

The Cupbearer Remembers Joseph

It is at this point that the cupbearer remembered Joseph:

Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, "Today I recall my failures. Pharaoh was enraged with his servants, and he put me in prison in the house of the captain of the guards – me and the chief baker. We each had a dream one night; each of us had a dream with its own meaning. Now a young man, a Hebrew, a servant of the captain of the guards, was with us there. We told him our dreams, and he interpreted the meaning of each of our respective dreams for us. It happened just as he had said to us – Pharaoh restored me to my office, but he impaled the baker" (Genesis 41:9-13 NET).

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He related how Joseph had supernaturally interpreted the meaning of each dream; both interpretations were fulfilled precisely as he said. So Pharaoh summoned Joseph:

Then Pharaoh summoned Joseph. So they brought him quickly out of the dungeon; he shaved himself, changed his clothes, and came before Pharaoh (Genesis 41:14 NET)

The fact that we are told that Joseph needed to shave serves to authenticate the Egyptian background of the story. The Egyptians, unlike the Hebrews, were always clean shaven. Only the pharaoh wore a beard, and even that was an artificial one.

The Pharaoh addressed Joseph:

Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. But I have heard about you, that you can interpret dreams." Joseph replied to Pharaoh, "It is not within my power, but God will speak concerning the welfare of Pharaoh" (Genesis 41:15-16 NET)

There are two important things we learn from his answer.

The phrase "it is not in me" or "it is not within my power" is one word in Hebrew. This suggests a very abrupt answer. Indeed, it would let Pharaoh know, in no uncertain terms, that his dream was supernaturally given by the Lord. As such, it would be the same God who would supernaturally give the interpretation.

Again, this reminds us of Daniel the prophet who testified that his answer to Nebuchadnezzar was something that no human being could know:

Daniel replied, "There are no wise men, enchanters, magicians, or fortune-tellers who can reveal the king's secret. But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and he has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in the future. Now I will tell you your dream and the visions you saw as you lay on your bed (Daniel 2:27-28 NLT)

Fortunately, there is a God in heaven who can, and will, interpret the meaning of dreams!

Joseph Is Not In The Dream Interpreting Business

We know that Joseph was not a skilled dream interpreter by nature. In fact, he had earlier testified the following to the two prisoners:

And they replied, "We both had dreams last night, but no one can tell us what they mean." "Interpreting dreams is God's business," Joseph replied. "Go ahead and tell me your dreams." (Genesis 40:8 NLT).

He knew who deserved to get the credit.

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We should also note that the ancient world was filled with guilds of these dream interpreters, known as oneiromantics. Seemingly every king surrounded himself with these individuals.

There is something else that we should appreciate. While dreams were common, we find only two places in the Old Testament where someone interprets another person's dreams.

Those two incidents involve Joseph and Daniel—one who lived at the beginning and the other who lived at the end of Old Testament history. We also discover that on each occasion, these young Jewish men interpreted the dreams of a non-Israelite leader of a country that was powerful at that time.

The Dreams Repeated And Then The Dreams Explained

Pharaoh then repeats the dreams for Joseph. After Joseph hears them, he immediately responds with an answer:

Joseph responded, "Both of Pharaoh's dreams mean the same thing. God is telling Pharaoh in advance what he is about to do. The seven healthy cows and the seven healthy heads of grain both represent seven years of prosperity. The seven thin, scrawny cows that came up later and the seven thin heads of grain, withered by the east wind, represent seven years of famine.

"This will happen just as I have described it, for God has revealed to Pharaoh in advance what he is about to do. The next seven years will be a period of great prosperity throughout the land of Egypt. But afterward there will be seven years of famine so great that all the prosperity will be forgotten in Egypt. Famine will destroy the land. This famine will be so severe that even the memory of the good years will be erased. As for having two similar dreams, it means that these events have been decreed by God, and he will soon make them happen (Genesis 41:25-32 NLT).

Several Things To Note

In the response of Joseph there are a number of things that should get our attention.

First, Joseph has an immediate interpretation of these two dreams. In other words, he did not have to think about it, pray about it, etc. The Lord immediately gave their interpretations to him.

Second, these dreams came directly from the Lord to show Pharaoh what He was about to do in the land of Egypt. Consequently, it was the God of the Bible who caused Pharaoh to dream these things.

Third, these coming events have been decreed by God. To the point, they were going to happen and happen soon. Nothing can stop them from taking place.

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So What Should Pharaoh Do?

Not only did Joseph make known the future to Pharaoh, seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, he also suggested a future course of action to prepare for the coming famine:

So now Pharaoh should look for a wise and discerning man and give him authority over all the land of Egypt. Pharaoh should do this - he should appoint officials throughout the land to collect one-fifth of the produce of the land of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. They should gather all the excess food during these good years that are coming. By Pharaoh's authority they should store up grain so the cities will have food, and they should preserve it. This food should be held in storage for the land in preparation for the seven years of famine that will occur throughout the land of Egypt. In this way the land will survive the famine." This advice made sense to Pharaoh and all his officials (Genesis 41:33-37 NET).

Basically, the Lord warned Pharaoh ahead of time so that he could do something about the coming famine while there was still time. Otherwise, the land and the people of Egypt would not survive the devastating famine.

Therefore, Joseph suggested a sensible plan to the Pharaoh. He should find the best man for the job of overseer. This individual would create a system where 1/5 of the overabundance in these first seven years would be stored. This would make certain that the people Egypt would not starve during the next seven years, the time of intense famine.

The Perfect Candidate: Joseph Appointed Second In Command

The response of Pharaoh likely shocked Joseph:

So Pharaoh asked his officials, "Can we find a man like Joseph, one in whom the Spirit of God is present?" So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Because God has enabled you to know all this, there is no one as wise and discerning as you are! You will oversee my household, and all my people will submit to your commands. Only I, the king, will be greater than you (Genesis 41:38-40 NET)

Pharaoh made the obvious choice as to who would oversee the gathering and the distribution of the food, Joseph!

Imagine How Joseph Felt!

At this juncture, we should try to put ourselves in Joseph's place when he heard this decree of Pharaoh. This young man, through no fault of his own, had wrongly suffered some thirteen years of pain, misery, unfairness, and confusion at the hand of others. As he stood next to Pharaoh and heard what was decreed, all of this misery, all of these seemingly unconnected events now began to make sense.

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Indeed, the only way in which he could have arrived at this moment was due to the many divine appointments that had taken place. These random events, that seemingly had no meaning at the time, now converged to bring Joseph to this point in his life.

The List

In fact, he could have never been in this position unless he had been thrown into the royal prison. He wouldn't have been in the royal prison except for the false allegations of Potiphar's wife.

In addition, he would not have been in Potiphar's household had he not been sold into slavery. He would not have been sold into slavery had not the caravan had come by the pit in Dothan at the right time, he would not have been in Dothan had there been sufficient grazing in Shechem.

It is truly amazing how the Lord put all of these things together. And again, we should emphasize that it was necessary for each and every one of these divine appointments to take place. In fact, if only one of them had not occurred, then Joseph would not have been in the position where he became second in command of all of Egypt.

The Contrast

Here is another way of looking at it. Joseph started the day, as he had for the last thirteen years, as a slave in Egypt. He ended the day as second in command over the entire nation. It is hard to imagine the thoughts that were going through his head!

The Lord Was Always With Him

The question as to where God was in all of this is now beginning to be answered. Recall, in chapter 39, that despite the false accusation of Potiphar's wife and Joseph being thrown into the royal prison, we read six times in this passage that "the Lord" was with him.

Now, for the first time we find something happening to Joseph in which he is not a victim. It is only at this time that all these seemingly random events are beginning to make sense. Joseph is now realizing that the Lord was always with him, even in his darkest hours.

It's also important to note that Joseph's commitment to the Lord had not wavered even during those last two years in prison. In fact, his response to Pharaoh was very similar to that which he gave the butler and the baker when they shared their problems with him. He truly believed that the Lord would eventually vindicate him. Now this vindication is there for all to see.

Joseph's Interpretation Of Pharaoh's Dream Becomes Reality

As expected, the dreams of Pharaoh, and their interpretation by Joseph, prove to be precisely what the Lord, through Joseph, said that they would be:

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Now Joseph was 30 years old when he began serving Pharaoh king of Egypt. Joseph was commissioned by Pharaoh and was in charge of all the land of Egypt. During the seven years of abundance the land produced large, bountiful harvests. Joseph collected all the excess food in the land of Egypt during the seven years and stored it in the cities. In every city he put the food gathered from the fields around it. Joseph stored up a vast amount of grain, like the sand of the sea, until he stopped measuring it because it was impossible to measure (Genesis 41:46-49 NET).

The interpretation of Joseph turned out to be 100% accurate! This is something ONLY the Lord, the God of the Bible, can know. Indeed, He, and He alone, knows the future.

The Two Sons Of Joseph And The Lessons For Us

We also are informed that Joseph married and had two sons:

Two sons were born to Joseph before the famine came. Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, was their mother. Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, saying, "Certainly God has made me forget all my trouble and all my father's house." He named the second child Ephraim, saying, "Certainly God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering" (Genesis 50:51-52 NET)

Interestingly, two sons were born to Joseph before the famine arrived. Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, was their mother.

With the naming of his first son, Joseph was putting the past behind. Paul would later write these important words to the Philippians:

I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us (Philippians 3:12-14 NLT).

Instead of dwelling upon all of the misery that those years had brought to him, Joseph, wisely, chose to forget them in the sense that he put the past behind him. He realized that the Lord has miraculously worked all of these things out (the supernatural working in the natural realm) to put him in this position of leadership.

The name of his second child Ephraim, saying, "Certainly God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering," looked forward to the wonderful future that the Lord had in store for him.

This Is A Great Lessons For Us:

We should learn a valuable lesson from this. As Paul would later write:

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And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them (Romans 8:28 NLT).

As believers in Jesus Christ, we should be able to look at certain events in our lives, natural events, that have all been part of a supernatural plan that the Lord has for us.

Not everything will be good, but the Lord will work it out eventually for the good. Therefore, if he has not worked it out for “the good” in your life, remember the story is not over yet!

Genesis Chapter 42

In fact, the story of Joseph and his family is not over yet, not by a longshot. There was much unfinished business that remained.

We should note that there must have been at least seven years between the end of chapter 41 and the beginning of chapter 42. The reality of the horrible famine, which Joseph had predicted per Pharaoh's dreams, was now raging.

The Famine Hits The Promised Land

The plot thickens as the story now moves to the land of Israel. They too were experiencing this scourge:

Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, so he said to his sons, “Why are you just sitting here looking at one another? I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy grain for us to eat, so that we will live and not die” (Genesis 42:1-2 NET).

Jacob has to instruct his sons to go down to Egypt to buy grain. If not, his family would not survive the horrible famine.

The brothers, minus the youngest, Benjamin, decided to go:

So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain from Egypt. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with them, because he was afraid that something terrible might happen to him. Along with many other people, the sons of Israel went to Egypt to buy grain, because the people in the land of Canaan were also hungry (Genesis 42:3-5 NET).

As we indicated, the famine was not restricted to Egypt. The land of Canaan, the Promised Land was also hit hard by it. This caused a migration of people to go to Egypt to buy food.

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The Brothers Of Joseph Arrive

It had been about twenty-two years since Joseph had been sold into slavery. It is now the time that he will meet his brothers once again:

Since Joseph was governor of Egypt and in charge of selling grain, his brothers came to him and bowed with their faces to the ground. They did not recognize Joseph, but right away he knew who they were, though he pretended not to know. Instead, he spoke harshly and asked, "Where do you come from?" "From the land of Canaan," they answered. "We've come here to buy grain" (Genesis 42:6-8 CEV).

It is not difficult to see why the brothers would not recognize Joseph. It had been over twenty years since they last saw him. Also, he was clean shaven and used an interpreter.

Joseph's Strategy

Joseph was now going to test them:

Joseph remembered what he had dreamed about them and said, "You're spies! You've come here to find out where our country is weak" (Genesis 42:9 CEV).

As was predicted so long ago in his two dreams, his brothers bowed down to him. Then Joseph remembered the dreams which he had dreamed about them. Instead of revealing his identity right away, Joseph had a plan. It is interesting to observe Joseph's strategy in dealing with his brothers.

First, he pretended to be a stranger; not to understand their language. Hence the need for an interpreter.

Second, he speaks harshly to them through the interpreter.

Third, he accuses them of being spies. They, of course, object:

"No, my lord!" they exclaimed. "Your servants have simply come to buy food. We are all brothers—members of the same family. We are honest men, sir! We are not spies!" (Genesis 42:10,11 NLT).

Joseph acted as though he did not believe them:

Then Joseph said to them, "No! You have come to learn where this nation is weak!" And they said, "We are ten of twelve brothers, sons of the same father, and we live in the land of Canaan. Our youngest brother is there with our father right now, and our other brother is gone."

But Joseph said to them, "I can see I was right! You are spies! But I will give you a way to prove you are telling the truth. As surely as the king lives, you will not leave this place until your youngest brother comes here. One of you must go and get your brother. The rest of you will stay here in prison. We will see if you are telling the truth. If not,

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as surely as the king lives, you are spies.” Then Joseph put them all in prison for three days (Genesis 42:12-17 NET).

They mentioned two things which will be important as this story continues. They have a younger brother who is not with them, and another brother who is gone.

The mention of the younger brother will allow Joseph to insist that he comes to Egypt, the next time, to prove their story. If he does, then supposedly this overseer of Egypt will know that they are not spies.

He Throws Them In Jail For Three Days

Joseph then put them in jail for three days while claiming they were spies. He will test their integrity by insisting that one brother stay behind while the others return to Canaan and bring back their youngest brother:

On the third day Joseph said to them, I am a God-fearing man. Do this and I will let you live: If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison while the rest of you go and carry grain back to feed your hungry families. Then bring your youngest brother back here to me. If you do this, I will know you are telling the truth, and you will not die. The brothers agreed to this. They said to each other, We are being punished for what we did to our brother. We saw his trouble, and he begged us to save him, but we refused to listen. That is why we are in this trouble now. And Reuben answered them, saying, “Did I not speak to you, saying, ‘Do not sin against the boy’; and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us.” But they did not know that Joseph understood them, for he spoke to them through an interpreter. And he turned himself away from them and wept. Then he returned to them again, and talked with them. And he took Simeon from them and bound him before their eyes (Genesis 42:18-24 ESV)

We must remember that Joseph overhears and understands the conversations of his brothers though they do not realize this.

The brothers now acknowledge that they are being punished for what they did to Joseph so long ago. Though Joseph begged for help, they didn't listen. Reuben reminds them that they did not listen to him at the time. Now it is coming back to “bite them.”

On another note, there is a reason as to why he selected Simeon to stay behind rather than Reuben. Had Joseph chosen Reuben, the oldest, then it is possible the brothers would have started wondering how Joseph knew that he was the oldest.

Furthermore, as Reuben reminded his brothers, it was he who was the only one who had spoken up in Joseph's defense when the brothers wanted to immediately kill him. This is likely the second reason as to why Joseph did not choose Reuben to stay behind.

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Joseph's Harshness Is Just A Facade

We must appreciate that the feigned harshness that Joseph showed toward his brothers was merely a façade, a charade. In fact, Scripture records a number of occasions where Joseph was crying when he was with his brothers (42:24; 43:30; 45:1–2, 14–15; 46:29; 50:1,17).

It is truly astounding that Joseph did not become a bitter person through all the terrible things that he experienced, which, of course, all got started because of the evil deeds of his brothers.

Another Great Lesson

It has been said, if we have to confront sin in someone we love, then it should break our heart to do it. In other words, we should not take any joy or satisfaction, in pointing out someone else's sin. As in the case of Joseph, he was doing these things to get his brothers on the straight and narrow. He wanted to see them change.

The Brothers Return To Canaan

Graciously Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain and to restore every man's money and to give them provisions for the journey:

Joseph gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to put each man's silver back in his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. After this was done for them, they loaded their grain on their donkeys and left. At the place where they stopped for the night one of them opened his sack to get feed for his donkey, and he saw his silver in the mouth of his sack. "My silver has been returned," he said to his brothers. "Here it is in my sack." Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, "What is this that God has done to us?" (Genesis 42:26-28 NIV)

It is interesting to note their responses when they discovered the money in their sacks. Instead of seeing it as a gift from God for His kind provision toward them, they become distraught. They assumed that this was some type of punishment against them for their long-ago treatment of Joseph.

Hence, while Simeon remained behind in Egypt, the other nine returned to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan.

The Change In Joseph's Brothers

We now discover that some twenty years since the brothers sold Joseph into slavery, they were no longer the callous and heartless individuals who did this evil deed to their brother. They had matured.

As the Lord was bringing discipline to them in Egypt, they began to realize that these things that were happening were because of what they had previously done to innocent Joseph. What they did not know, is that this

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discipline was inflicted by the hand of the one whom they mistreated so terribly in the past!

Jacob Refuses To Let Benjamin Go

When the brothers returned to Canaan, they rehearsed to Jacob all that had happened in Egypt. Again, we find more pain and sorrow comes upon their father Jacob:

As they emptied out their sacks, there in each man's sack was the bag of money he had paid for the grain! The brothers and their father were terrified when they saw the bags of money. Jacob exclaimed, "You are robbing me of my children! Joseph is gone! Simeon is gone! And now you want to take Benjamin, too. Everything is going against me!"

Then Reuben said to his father, "You may kill my two sons if I don't bring Benjamin back to you. I'll be responsible for him, and I promise to bring him back."

But Jacob replied, "My son will not go down with you. His brother Joseph is dead, and he is all I have left. If anything should happen to him on your journey, you would send this grieving, white-haired man to his grave." (Genesis 42:35-38 NLT).

These circumstances caused even more turmoil for the old patriarch Jacob. Indeed, his personal unhappy experiences had not yet ended. After all these years, as he predicted, these hurts were still bothering him to the place that he will take this sorrow with him to his grave.

The Second Journey To Egypt (43:1-34).

While Jacob would not allow Benjamin to return with his brothers to Egypt, the problem with the famine remained. Eventually, they ran out of food. Jacob told his sons to go back to Egypt:

But the famine continued to ravage the land of Canaan. When the grain they had brought from Egypt was almost gone, Jacob said to his sons, "Go back and buy us a little more food" (Genesis 43:1-2 NLT).

Judah Reminds Jacob Of The Threat

We now see Judah at the forefront. In this instance he is reminding his father of what the Egyptian governor had said:

But Judah said, "The man was serious when he warned us, 'You won't see my face again unless your brother is with you.' If you send Benjamin with us, we will go down and buy more food. But if you don't let Benjamin go, we won't go either. Remember, the man said, 'You won't see my face again unless your brother is with you.'"

"Why were you so cruel to me?" Jacob moaned. "Why did you tell him you had another brother?"

"The man kept asking us questions about our family," they replied.

"He asked, 'Is your father still alive? Do you have another brother?' So

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we answered his questions. How could we know he would say, 'Bring your brother down here?'" (Genesis 43:3-7 NLT).

Because of the continuing famine, Joseph's brothers had to return to Egypt to purchase some additional grain. Unfortunately for Jacob, this meant that they must bring his youngest son Benjamin with them.

The Emphasis Now Switched To Judah

One of the things we will note in the narratives that follow is that the emphasis will be upon Judah. Indeed, from this point forward, there is no recorded speech of any of the individual brothers besides he and Joseph.

Judah will be singled out for special consideration for his part in the fulfillment of the long-before promises made by the Lord to his great-grandfather Abraham. It is he who reminds Jacob of the terms Joseph set for any future purchase of food. Before he will release any supplies, they must bring Benjamin with them.

The Stage Was Already Set For Judah To Be Pre-eminent

Earlier in Genesis, it is revealed to us as to why Reuben the oldest was disqualified for the line of the Messiah coming through his descendants. We read the following:

Then Jacob traveled on and camped beyond Migdal-eder. While he was living there, Reuben had intercourse with Bilhah, his father's concubine, and Jacob soon heard about it (Genesis 35:21,22 NLT).

Reuben was disqualified for leadership for sleeping with his father's secondary wife, Bilhah.

In chapter, 34, it explains how the second and third oldest sons of Jacob, Simeon, and Levi, fell from favor because of their horrendous conduct toward the people of the defenseless city of Shechem. They too were disqualified.

The next brother in line is Leah's son, Judah. With these older sons excluded, the situation is now set for the development of the line of Judah.

Clearly the point of these passages is to show that Judah, not Joseph, is next in line among the brothers. Consequently, while the following chapters are still devoted mainly to Joseph, the author of Genesis makes it clear that the fourth in line Judah will be the heir apparent.

In other words, the prominence of Joseph does not indicate the final outcome of who will be the favored son.

In fact, as we will later see, the final words about the future of Abraham's "offspring," occur in chapters 48 and 49. In these chapters, Judah is clearly the one through whom the promised "offspring," the Messiah, will come.

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In another irony, the picture of Joseph's brothers bowing down to him actually foreshadows the future relationship between Judah and his brothers. Indeed, among Jacob's last words we read the following:

Judah, you will be praised by your brothers they will bow down to you
(Genesis 49:8 CEV)

Bowing down is an acknowledgment of royalty and kingship.

The ultimate irony is that the royal honor will not reside in the house of Joseph but rather in the house of Judah. In other words, the larger narrative takes over and assures us that the outcome of these events will lead to the house of Judah and its ultimate king, the Messiah. From the New Testament, we know it is the Lord Jesus!

Judah Offers To Be Benjamin's Guarantor

Because of this continuing famine, Joseph's brothers must return to Egypt to purchase some additional grain. Judah now steps up and offers himself as a guarantor of Benjamin's safety:

Judah said to his father, "Send the boy with me, and we will be on our way. Otherwise we will all die of starvation—and not only we, but you and our little ones. I personally guarantee his safety. You may hold me responsible if I don't bring him back to you. Then let me bear the blame forever (Genesis 43:8-9 NLT).

He promises to ensure the safety of Benjamin. Judah declared to his father that he himself would be surety, the guarantee, for his brother.

We should not miss the fact that Judah now takes the positive initiative with respect to a younger brother. This is in contrast to the negative initiative he took at Dothan to sell another younger brother, Joseph, into slavery.

With no real choice in the matter, Jacob reluctantly agrees that Benjamin must go:

Their father said: If Benjamin must go with you, take the governor a gift of some of the best things from our own country, such as perfume, honey, spices, pistachio nuts, and almonds. Also take along twice the amount of money for the grain, because there must have been some mistake when the money was put back in your sacks. Take Benjamin with you and leave right away.

When you go in to see the governor, I pray that God All-Powerful will be good to you and that the governor will let your other brother and Benjamin come back home with you. If I must lose my children, I suppose I must (Genesis 43:11-14 CEV).

The brothers will now return to Egypt, with Benjamin. They also take along some gifts to appease the ruler, Joseph. Since Jacob doesn't want to take any chances, he commands his sons to double the amount of silver that

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Joseph had put back into their sacks. While Jacob may be without food, he is certainly not without money.

Joseph Will Finally See Benjamin

When the brothers arrive in Egypt, Joseph finally sees his younger brother Benjamin:

So the men packed Jacob's gifts and double the money and headed off with Benjamin. They finally arrived in Egypt and presented themselves to Joseph. When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the manager of his household, "These men will eat with me this noon. Take them inside the palace. Then go slaughter an animal, and prepare a big feast." So the man did as Joseph told him and took them into Joseph's palace (Genesis 43:16-17 NLT).

Joseph had a great feast prepared for his brothers, especially his younger brother Benjamin. However, the other brothers remained fearful. They still believed that this was all a plan to make slaves of the entire family:

The brothers were terrified when they saw that they were being taken into Joseph's house. "It's because of the money someone put in our sacks last time we were here," they said. "He plans to pretend that we stole it. Then he will seize us, make us slaves, and take our donkeys." The brothers approached the manager of Joseph's household and spoke to him at the entrance to the palace. "Sir," they said, "we came to Egypt once before to buy food. But as we were returning home, we stopped for the night and opened our sacks. Then we discovered that each man's money—the exact amount paid—was in the top of his sack! Here it is; we have brought it back with us. We also have additional money to buy more food. We have no idea who put our money in our sacks" (Genesis 43:18-22 NLT)

They did not have the slightest idea as to what to expect. Remember, they still believed that it was actually the Lord who was punishing them for what they had done to their younger brother Joseph some twenty-two years previously. This demonstrates that, at least, they still had a conscience and had not forgotten the horrible deed they did to him, as well as to their father Jacob.

We are told that they were reassured by the man in charge of Joseph's household.

"Relax. Don't be afraid," the household manager told them. "Your God, the God of your father, must have put this treasure into your sacks. I know I received your payment." Then he released Simeon and brought him out to them. The manager then led the men into Joseph's palace. He gave them water to wash their feet and provided food for their donkeys. They were told they would be eating there, so they prepared their gifts for Joseph's arrival at noon. (Genesis 43:23-25 NLT).

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Interestingly, the man in charge basically tells the brothers that your God has miraculously put the money in the sacks. He makes it appear that the money they paid is still in the hands of Egypt. This had to have further confounded the brothers. What in the world was going on?

Joseph Greets His Brothers

We should note that Joseph continued to ask the brothers about their father.

After greeting them, he asked, "How is your father, the old man you spoke about? Is he still alive?" "Yes," they replied. "Our father, your servant, is alive and well" (Genesis 43:27,28 NLT)

Joseph again asks about Jacob and he discovers that his father Jacob is still alive. The brothers do not seem to appreciate that this leader of Egypt is interested in their own father.

Now after twenty-two years, he again sees his younger brother Benjamin. Understandable, it is an emotional moment for him:

Then Joseph looked at his brother Benjamin, the son of his own mother. "Is this your youngest brother, the one you told me about?" Joseph asked. "May God be gracious to you, my son." Then Joseph hurried from the room because he was overcome with emotion for his brother. He went into his private room, where he broke down and wept. After washing his face, he came back out, keeping himself under control. Then he ordered, "Bring out the food!" (Genesis 43:29-31 NLT).

As can be imagined, when Joseph saw his younger brother Benjamin, his emotions became uncontrollable. After getting control of himself, he serves a magnificent dinner, with, of course, extra portions for Benjamin.

We can only imagine the emotions that he experienced at this time. The two youngest brothers, the only two with the same mother, Rachel, have a unique bond among this family.

Benjamin does not this understand yet, but he will soon. The other brothers were probably wondering as to why all this lavish attention was being shown to Benjamin. They had no idea.

The Final Test (44:1-34)

Joseph's final plan is to send them back to the Promised Land again. However, before they return, they will experience one more test. Joseph instructs that his silver cup be put into Benjamin's sack of grain:

Later, Joseph told the servant in charge of his house, "Fill the men's grain sacks with as much as they can hold and put their money in the sacks. Also put my silver cup in the sack of the youngest brother." The servant did as he was told (Genesis 44:1-2 CEV).

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Though they left at dawn the following day, they did not get very far. Joseph's servant, speaking for him, caught up with them and wanted to know why they repaid his kindness with evil.

The brothers were confident that they had done no such thing. Together, they made the following statement:

But they replied, "Sir, why do you say such things? We would never do anything like that! We even returned the money we found in our grain sacks when we got back to Canaan. So why would we want to steal any silver or gold from your master's house? If you find that one of us has the cup, then kill him, and the rest of us will become your slaves" (Genesis 44:7-9 CEV).

Assuming that they were all guiltless, the brothers confidently make this rash offer concerning the charge; namely let the person who stole the cup be put to death and the rest of us will be your slaves.

Naturally, they did not expect the outcome that they were about to experience. The servant searched their sacks, going from the oldest brother, Reuben, to the youngest. To their absolute horror, Joseph's silver cup was found hidden in Benjamin's sack.

Their response was the same as that of Jacob's so many years previously, they tore their clothes. Recall that upon hearing the brothers false report of the presumed death of Joseph, Jacob tore his clothes. The same grief that they needlessly caused their father had now come upon them.

At this point, the brothers still did not have the slightest inkling that all of this had been staged by their brother Joseph.

Interestingly, there is nothing recorded of Benjamin denying that he stole the cup. In fact, nothing is recorded whatsoever of anything that Benjamin said or did in this entire narrative. We then read:

When Judah and his brothers got there, Joseph was still at home. So they bowed down to Joseph (Genesis 44:14 CEV).

Notice it is now "Judah and his brothers." Again, the emphasis is on him. Judah is now the leader of this family.

Joseph's plan had turned out exactly as he had orchestrated. We begin to discover what his ultimate purpose had always been. This was not revenge that he had been orchestrating. To the contrary, his goal was to get his brothers to repent of their horrible act that changed his life as well as that of their father.

His plan worked. The brothers are beginning to come to the awareness of the magnitude of their past sin and guilt. Their frustration becomes evident as they repeat the question, "What can we say?" There is nothing that they can say. Their sin has found them out, they are indeed guilty. In other words, they come to the conclusion that "God has uncovered our guilt."

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As readers, we can see clearly that the brothers have only the pressing issue of the stolen “cup” in their minds. However, their words take on a confession of their previous guilt.

Furthermore, we know that Joseph had the cup placed into Benjamin's sack. His brothers knew they did not take the cup, yet, they did not have the slightest idea as to how all of this could have happened.

Again, we emphasize, that they assume that the Lord is punishing them for what they had done so long ago to their brother Joseph:

“Sir, what can we say?” Judah replied. “How can we prove we are innocent? God has shown that we are guilty. And now all of us are your slaves, especially the one who had the cup” (Genesis 44:16 CEV).

Again it is Judah who speaks for the group. He acknowledges that the Lord had uncovered their previous guilt. This, of course, is referring to the guilt they deserved to feel from their horrible actions of some twenty-two years earlier.

In fact, they realized that they were paying the price of lying to their father all of these years as to what really happened to Joseph, as well as sending their innocent brother to Egypt never to be seen again. Of course, they have no idea that Joseph himself is the one orchestrating all of these events.

Judah offers all of the brothers to be the slaves of Joseph. But contrary to his offer, this ruler of Egypt, Joseph, will not allow this to happen. He then says the following:

Joseph told them, “I would never punish all of you. Only the one who was caught with the cup will become my slave. The rest of you are free to go home to your father” (Genesis 44:17 CEV).

Therefore, these words of Joseph make matters all the worse for his brothers.

The Episode Of Twenty Two Years Ago Is Repeated

We should not miss the fact that in his response, Joseph purposely makes the issue closely resembles his brothers' treatment of him.

Indeed, the young lad, Benjamin, will be sold into slavery in Egypt, and the remaining brothers are to return to their father, once again minus one of their brothers. On this occasion, it is the only remaining son of Jacob's favored wife, Rachel. Accordingly, they will have to explain to their father, why his only remaining favored son, is now also lost to him.

Thus the entire episode would, therefore, be a repeat of what happened twenty-two years previously. After having seen firsthand the mourning of their father when they brought the fake news about Joseph, the brothers realize that if this happens again, their father will likely not survive. In other words, they would be condemning their father Jacob to certain death.

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Joseph's plan is working perfectly. The brothers are beside themselves with concern. What should they do?

Judah's Speech To Joseph

We now have one of the most heartfelt speeches in the entire Scripture given by Judah. After rehearsing the history of the experience with Joseph, Judah pleaded his case:

And now, my lord, I cannot go back to my father without the boy. Our father's life is bound up in the boy's life. If he sees that the boy is not with us, our father will die. We, your servants, will indeed be responsible for sending that grieving, white-haired man to his grave. My lord, I guaranteed to my father that I would take care of the boy. I told him, 'If I don't bring him back to you, I will bear the blame forever.'

So please, my lord, let me stay here as a slave instead of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. For how can I return to my father if the boy is not with me? I couldn't bear to see the anguish this would cause my father! (Genesis 44:18-33 NLT).

This is quite a different Judah. He offers himself as a substitute for Benjamin—"take me, but let him return." We find that Judah's concern is as much for his father as it is for his young brother.

Moreover, we should not lose sight of the fact that it is Judah who intervenes in Benjamin's behalf. The irony here is that it will be his words that make the difference, just as his words saved Joseph some twenty-two years previously by suggesting his brother be sold into slavery.

Joseph Reveals His Identity

Understandably, after Judah's words, Joseph can contain himself no longer.

Joseph was no longer able to control himself before all his attendants, so he cried out, "Make everyone go out from my presence!" No one remained with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. He wept loudly; the Egyptians heard it and Pharaoh's household heard about it (Genesis 45:1-2 NET).

We should not miss the fact that Joseph removed everyone from the room, including the interpreter. This would have shocked the brothers because they assumed that he could not understand what they were saying. They were now wondering how will he communicate to them without an interpreter?

Now, only he and his brothers are left. He cries so loud that everyone in the vicinity is able to hear it. Of course, the brothers do not understand the reason for this uncontrollable crying.

But now they will. We now come to one of the most emotional moments in all of Scripture:

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"I am Joseph!" he said to his brothers. "Is my father still alive?" (Genesis 45:3a NLT)

All of them were in shock. Doubtless they now expect the worst:

But his brothers were speechless! They were stunned to realize that Joseph was standing there in front of them (Genesis 45:3b NLT).

However, Joseph is not looking for revenge. Instead he makes it clear that there has always been a divine plan behind all of these events:

"Please, come closer," he said to them. So they came closer. And he said again, "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into slavery in Egypt. But don't be upset, and don't be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place. It was God who sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives. This famine that has ravaged the land for two years will last five more years, and there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. God has sent me ahead of you to keep you and your families alive and to preserve many survivors. So it was God who sent me here, not you! And he is the one who made me an adviser to Pharaoh—the manager of his entire palace and the governor of all Egypt (Genesis 45:4-8 NLT).

Joseph pronounces to his brothers that it was always the Lord Himself, and nobody else, who orchestrated all of these events. Therefore, his brothers should not be angry at themselves. He is informing them that all of this occurred to save lives. This is why God sent him ahead, so that the nation would survive.

Joseph's Role In The Preservation Of The Nation

It now becomes evident that the experiences of Joseph, these divine appointments, were the supernatural means that the Lord had chosen for the salvation of the family of Jacob.

Though Joseph will not be that "special" son whose line will eventually give birth to the Messiah, he is the brother whom the Lord specifically chose to keep Jacob's family, as well as the people of Egypt, from perishing.

Again we emphasize, when the text says he was brought to Egypt "to save lives" it is referring to Hebrew lives as well as Egyptian lives.

At the end of the day, it was not the evil brothers, led by Judah who sold him into slavery, but it was actually the Lord, the God of the Bible, who "sent" him. Obviously, this does excuse their horrific sin, but it does put the matter into the wider biblical context.

The Fulfillment Of The Prophecy Given To Abraham Begins

Recall, that the Lord told Abram that his descendants would live as strangers in a foreign land for some 400 years and then they would come back to the Promised Land. God also promised that they would return with

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great wealth. We now begin to see how this will come to pass as Pharaoh himself will play a part in the fulfillment:

The news soon reached Pharaoh's palace: "Joseph's brothers have arrived!" Pharaoh and his officials were all delighted to hear this. Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Tell your brothers, 'This is what you must do: Load your pack animals, and hurry back to the land of Canaan. Then get your father and all of your families, and return here to me. I will give you the very best land in Egypt, and you will eat from the best that the land produces'" (Genesis 44:16,17 NLT).

From the words of Pharaoh, Joseph could promise his brothers that they would be living in a lush part of Egypt if they would move their families to this country.

Indeed, they would eventually dwell in the area of Goshen, which was a very fertile area in the northeast delta region. Hence, unlike so many foreigners to the country who were sent away to dry and desolate places, Jacob and his sons would be living in an extremely fertile area where their harvests will be abundant.

For many reasons, the land of Goshen was the perfect place for Jacob to settle with his entire family. In fact, they could live in this area without any close contact with the native people of Egypt.

Thus, this planned move to Egypt, will fulfill the promise that the Lord had told Abram about many centuries earlier. As Scripture will later inform us, they did indeed live in this foreign land for some four hundred years before their return to the Promised Land.

The Brothers Go Back To The Promised Land

As the brothers return to their father in the Promised Land, they do not come back empty handed. Instead, they returned with Egyptian carts, new clothes, food, and provisions. There was also with something extra given to Joseph's younger brother Benjamin (Genesis 45:21-23).

Knowing his brothers well, Joseph admonishes them that they do not quarrel with each other on the way back home:

So Joseph sent his brothers off, and as they left, he called after them, "Don't quarrel about all this along the way!" (Genesis 45:24 NLT).

Even after all these years, Joseph has not forgotten the things that his brothers are more than capable of doing!

Jacob Finds Out Joseph Is Still Alive

Once back, the brothers break the news to Jacob that Joseph is still alive:

"Joseph is still alive!" they told him. "And he is governor of all the land of Egypt!" Jacob was stunned at the news—he couldn't believe it. But

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when they repeated to Jacob everything Joseph had told them, and when he saw the wagons Joseph had sent to carry him, their father's spirits revived. Then Jacob exclaimed, "It must be true! My son Joseph is alive! I must go and see him before I die" (Genesis 45:25-28 NLT).

Jacob is obviously stunned to learn that his long-lost son Joseph is still alive and that he is second in command over all of the land of Egypt! Understandably, at first, he did not believe them. What convinced him was seeing the Egyptian carts and wagons.

Fascinatingly, there is nothing contained in Scripture about what his brothers explained to their father as to *how* Joseph could still be alive. How much did they tell their father about their devious acts that caused the separation of Jacob from his son as well as the heartache it caused Jacob all of these years. We are not told.

Joseph was alive because *they* sold him into slavery and have been purposely hiding this truth from their mournful father for some 22 years. Whatever the case may be, Jacob was certainly not impressed with the behavior of these sons of his.

Jacob's (Israel's) Vision

The Lord then reassured Jacob in a vision that going down to Egypt was the right thing to do:

So Israel began his journey, taking with him all that he had. When he came to Beer Sheba he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. God spoke to Israel in a vision during the night and said, "Jacob, Jacob!" He replied, "Here I am." He said, "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down with you to Egypt and I myself will certainly bring you back from there. Joseph will close your eyes." (Genesis 46:1-4 NET).

Though Jacob was now well advanced in years, as can be imagined, he was most eager to the son whom he believed was long dead. Also we should not miss the fact that Jacob is now called "Israel." The name Jacob, the heel catcher, contains a number of very uncomplimentary overtones which, for the most part, reflected his life-long behavior.

Consequently, in this moment of happiness and jubilation, we find Israel, the new name, which means "governed by God" was used. Indeed, this is only proper because this clearly points to the new direction for him and his family. Clearly, better times lie ahead for all of them.

The Lord made it clear to Israel that he had nothing to fear. Eventually his people would return to the specific land that the Lord promised to Abraham, Isaac, as well as to himself. With this encouragement, Jacob, Israel, moved his entire clan to Egypt.

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There is also a significant detail that we should not miss. Indeed, the Lord spoke to Jacob only *after* he has worshiped Him.

Jacob Is About To Meet Joseph

The preparations were made for this heartfelt reunion between father and son:

Jacob sent Judah before him to Joseph to accompany him to Goshen. So they came to the land of Goshen (Genesis 46:28 NET).

Again, let us not miss the fact that Jacob sent Judah ahead to meet with Joseph. In fact, would be Judah, not Joseph, that will lead the sons of Israel into Egypt. By this time, it has become obvious that Judah is the pre-eminent son of Jacob.

In sum, this entire account about Joseph, from beginning to end, revealed that he is responsible for the preservation of the children of Israel in Egypt. In this passage, however, we find that it is Judah who “pointed out the way.”

This focus on Judah is part of the overall aim of the writer of Genesis to highlight the role of Judah in the plan of God which will eventually bring about the deliverance of chosen people. Simply put, again we find Judah in a place of leadership.

The Meeting Takes Place

Finally, after all these years, Jacob and his long-lost son Joseph, once again meet up:

Joseph prepared his chariot and traveled to Goshen to meet his father, Jacob. When Joseph arrived, he embraced his father and wept, holding him for a long time. Finally, Jacob said to Joseph, “Now I am ready to die, since I have seen your face again and know you are still alive” (Genesis 46:29-30 NLT).

When father and son reunite, as we can imagine, it was a very emotional experience for each of them. Jacob is understandably overwhelmed by the encounter. Indeed, for some twenty-two years, he never thought that he would see Joseph again in this life.

Joseph Secures Goshen For His People

Joseph continues to do what is necessary for his family to reside in the best place in Egypt. The plan of Joseph, to secure the land of Goshen as a dwelling place for the sons of Israel, is now set in motion (verses 31–34).

His plan is simple; Joseph will tell Pharaoh that his family members are all shepherds! Since the Egyptians loathed shepherds this would allow the Jacob's family to live by themselves in the land of Goshen.

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Joseph's Brothers And Jacob Meet Pharaoh

Joseph carefully arranged the meeting between his father Jacob and his brother with Pharaoh:

Then Joseph went to see Pharaoh and told him, "My father and my brothers have arrived from the land of Canaan. They have come with all their flocks and herds and possessions, and they are now in the region of Goshen."

Joseph took five of his brothers with him and presented them to Pharaoh. And Pharaoh asked the brothers, "What is your occupation?" They replied, "We, your servants, are shepherds, just like our ancestors. We have come to live here in Egypt for a while, for there is no pasture for our flocks in Canaan. The famine is very severe there. So please, we request permission to live in the region of Goshen."

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Now that your father and brothers have joined you here, choose any place in the entire land of Egypt for them to live. Give them the best land of Egypt. Let them live in the region of Goshen. And if any of them have special skills, put them in charge of my livestock, too." (Genesis 47:1-6 NLT)

The Bible tells us that Joseph's plan succeeds, and Jacob and his family are given the land of Goshen. We should appreciate the fact in these two narratives Joseph and Judah are placed in contrast to one another. Judah leads the brothers to the land of Goshen while Joseph initiates a wise plan that results in their being able to live there.

Interestingly, the family explains to Pharaoh that they have come to live in Egypt as temporary residents. In other words, they do not plan on staying forever.

As we are already well aware, the Book of Genesis emphasizes that the Lord has given them a special "Promised Land" in which the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will dwell. However, as the Lord told Abram, they first had to go to another land before they return to that special land that He had promised them.

Egypt is pictured in the Bible as "the present world system." In the same way, we too are living as temporary residents in this world. Our real home is with the Lord in heaven.

Joseph then brought his father Jacob to be introduced to the Pharaoh:

Then Joseph brought in his father, Jacob, and presented him to Pharaoh. And Jacob blessed Pharaoh. "How old are you?" Pharaoh asked him. Jacob replied, "I have traveled this earth for 130 hard years. But my life has been short compared to the lives of my ancestors." Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh again before leaving his court. (Genesis 47:7-10 NLT)

Fascinatingly, Jacob begins and ends the conversation by blessing Pharaoh.

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This fulfills God's promise to Abraham that the Lord would bless those who blessed Abraham's offspring.

When asked his age, the response of Jacob to Pharaoh is curious. Jacob tells him that his years have been few and difficult. Well, they are less than those of his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac, but he did live over one hundred years.

As the Bible records, when we look back over the life of Jacob, there are only a few shining moments. For the most part, any successes, he may have had, were eclipsed by failures occurring one after another. In fact, Jacob's life was in direct contrast to the promise that the Lord would later make:

Honor your father and mother, as the LORD your God commanded you. Then you will live a long, full life in the land the LORD your God is giving you (Deuteronomy 5:16 NLT).

Jacob did not honor his father nor his mother. Indeed, he gained the blessing by deceiving his father, Isaac. After living a problematic life he is also going to die outside the Promised Land.

In contrast, Abraham obeyed God and lived long in the land:

Abraham lived for 175 years, and he died at a ripe old age, having lived a long and satisfying life. He breathed his last and joined his ancestors in death. (Genesis 25:6,7 NLT).

In sum, Jacob's years were comparatively shorter and much more difficult. In spite of this, God's grace did prevail. The final period of Jacob's life would be lived "in the best part of the land:"

So Joseph assigned the best land of Egypt—the region of Rameses—to his father and his brothers, and he settled them there, just as Pharaoh had commanded (Genesis 47:11 NLT).

Joseph, his long-lost son, has provided for him and his household.

The Sojourn Brought Them The Perfect Setting

The move to Egypt caused a number of things to happen. First, it allowed Jacob and his family to be reunited with Joseph and his family.

However, there was something else of even greater importance. The sojourn also provided the perfect setting where the family of Jacob could grow into the "great nation" that the Lord had previously promised to make them (see Genesis 12:2; 15:5; 17:2; 22:17; 26:4, 24; 28:14; 35:11).

While living in the land of Canaan, Jacob's family was merely one among a great number of tribes and peoples. Furthermore, most of these people groups were stronger and more numerous than Jacob's clan.

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Consequently, they would be constantly contending for land as well as for any of the resources that were available (see Genesis 13:7; 15:19-21; 21:25; 26:18-21; 47:4).

We can contrast this to Egypt where they were given, at Pharaoh's order, a privileged place in the best part of the land in Goshen (Genesis 47:6) the fertile area in the Nile Delta.

It was there that the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had the room to expand and grow. Indeed, they would be free from both the harassment and famine that they experienced in Canaan.

In sum, Joseph's experiences actually fulfilled the Lord's providential purposes for the nation in sending him to Egypt.

The Later Testimony

As we discover in the first chapter in the Book of Exodus, there would come a time when descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob grew into a strong nation while in Egypt:

In time, Joseph and all of his brothers died, ending that entire generation. But their descendants, the Israelites, had many children and grandchildren. In fact, they multiplied so greatly that they became extremely powerful and filled the land (Exodus 1:6,7 NLT).

At this later juncture in history, the people of Israel were numerous enough to return to the Promised Land, their divine inheritance, and to spread throughout it.

All of this was possible because of the strategic place in which they settled in Egypt. The Bible says:

Meanwhile, the people of Israel settled in the region of Goshen in Egypt. There they acquired property, and they were fruitful, and their population grew rapidly (Genesis 47:27 NLT).

Jacob Summons Joseph

We now move to an historic occasion in the life of Jacob as well as of the descendants of Abraham. Before Jacob died, he summoned Joseph:

As the time of his death drew near, Jacob called for his son Joseph and said to him, "Please do me this favor. Put your hand under my thigh and swear that you will treat me with unfailing love by honoring this last request: Do not bury me in Egypt. When I die, please take my body out of Egypt and bury me with my ancestors." So Joseph promised, "I will do as you ask." "Swear that you will do it," Jacob insisted. So Joseph gave his oath, and Jacob bowed humbly at the head of his bed (Genesis 49:29-31 NLT).

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The phrase “put your hand under my thigh” indicates the solemn nature of the oath he was about to take. Joseph bound himself with an oath that he would not bury his father Jacob in Egypt.

Jacob's use of “swear to me” which is directed to Joseph, can be compared with his long ago “swear to me” directed at his brother Esau. Esau who had arrived exhausted and hungry from his time in the wilderness asked Jacob for some stew that he was cooking:

“All right,” Jacob replied, “but trade me your rights as the firstborn son.”

“Look, I'm dying of starvation!” said Esau. “What good is my birthright to me now?” But Jacob said, “First you must swear that your birthright is mine.” So Esau swore an oath, thereby selling all his rights as the firstborn to his brother, Jacob.

Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and lentil stew. Esau ate the meal, then got up and left. He showed contempt for his rights as the firstborn. (Genesis 25:31-34 NLT)

In this earlier instance, the behavior of the schemer Jacob could not have been more wrong. But as we should note, the behavior of the dying Jacob is completely opposite of his dealings in the past. Indeed, there is a tremendous difference between the scheming Jacob of Genesis 25 and the dying Jacob of Genesis 47.

All in all, the Lord's destiny for His people was never to remain in Egypt. Therefore, Jacob wanted no burial plot outside of the Promised Land. He wanted to leave Egypt when the people would eventually leave. His earthly home was always in the land of Canaan.

Jacob Blesses Joseph's Sons

Before Jacob blessed his own sons, he blessed the two sons of Joseph. At this time, Jacob was at an advanced age with a debilitating illness. He is near death. Consequently, while looking back, Jacob reminds his son of the Lord's earlier workings in his own life:

Jacob said to Joseph, “God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me. He said to me, ‘I will make you fruitful, and I will multiply your descendants. I will make you a multitude of nations. And I will give this land of Canaan to your descendants after you as an everlasting possession’ (Genesis 48:3–4 NLT).

This incident was recorded in Genesis 35:11–12.

Jacob Switches The Sons

Jacob will now claim Joseph's sons as his own:

Now I am claiming as my own sons these two boys of yours, Ephraim and Manasseh, who were born here in the land of Egypt before I arrived. They will be my sons, just as Reuben and Simeon are. But any

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children born to you in the future will be your own, and they will inherit land within the territories of their brothers Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 45:5-6 NLT).

We should not miss the fact that Jacob refers to Ephraim first, then to Manasseh. This reverses the order of their birth.

While there is no tribe of Joseph listed in Scripture, Jacob will adopt his two sons. They will eventually be listed among the twelve tribes. It also explains why Manasseh and Ephraim are considered as sons of Jacob. As we will discover, while Jacob's eyes may be failing, his spiritual insight is certainly not.

Joseph Displays Limited Knowledge

The following episode is very telling. Joseph lines up his two sons according to their birth order. Manasseh, who was the firstborn, is placed opposite the right hand of Jacob, while the younger son Ephraim, is placed opposite Jacob's left hand.

When Joseph did this, he assumed that the right hand of blessing would be bestowed upon the head of Manasseh.

As we now discover, Scripture makes it clear that there were limits to Joseph's knowledge. The Bible records that he was able to interpret the dreams of the chief baker and chief butler, and accurately predict their future, as well as the dreams of Pharaoh, which also accurately predicted the coming famine on the land of Egypt. However, Joseph did not know the future when it came to his own sons.

In fact, he is caught completely by surprise by the actions of Jacob when he crossed his hands and put his right hand, the hand of blessing, upon the younger son Ephraim.

There is of course irony here. Jacob, the younger son of Isaac, was given the birthright instead of his older brother Esau. Now this same Jacob blessed the younger grandson Ephraim instead of the eldest Manasseh.

Joseph assumed either his father's failing eyesight, or else his aged mind, is the problem. But neither is the case. Joseph simply does not understand.

In point of fact, Jacob knew exactly what he was doing. While both tribes will be a source of blessing for the nation of Israel, Ephraim will become a more prominent tribe than Manasseh:

But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know. He too will become a people, and he too will become great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he, and his descendants will become a group of nations." He blessed them that day and said, "In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48:19, 20 NIV).

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The blessing of Jacob's two grandsons anticipates the blessings that Jacob will prophesy for his biological sons.

Jacob Prophecies Over His Sons

We now arrive at one of the most important chapters in the Book of Genesis, if not in the entire Bible. While Jacob draws upon events of the past, his final words will predict the future for each of his biological sons:

First, we must recognize that Jacob specifically claims that what he is about to say for each of his sons is actually a prophetic word from the Lord:

Jacob called for his sons and said, "Gather together so I can tell you what will happen to you in the future. "Assemble and listen, you sons of Jacob; listen to Israel, your father (Genesis 49:1-2 NET).

Jacob then prophesied the future of each of them. He begins with his eldest son Reuben:

Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, outstanding in dignity, outstanding in power. You are destructive like water and will not excel, for you got on your father's bed, then you defiled it-he got on my couch! (Genesis 49:3,4 NET).

While Reuben had excelled to some degree in the past, he would not in the future. Indeed, he had lost the right of the firstborn over Jacob's household because he had sexual relations with his father's wife. By doing this, Reuben violated the honor of his father Jacob. Consequently, the rights of the firstborn son, of necessity, would have to go to another of his sons.

The next two sons in line were Simeon and Levi. They too forfeited any chance of receiving the blessing of their father:

Simeon and Levi are two of a kind; their weapons are instruments of violence. May I never join in their meetings; may I never be a party to their plans. For in their anger they murdered men, and they crippled oxen just for sport. A curse on their anger, for it is fierce; a curse on their wrath, for it is cruel. I will scatter them among the descendants of Jacob; I will disperse them throughout Israel (Genesis 49:5-7 NLT).

These two sons of Jacob are grouped together because they were the ones who instigated the horrific bloodshed against the defenseless city of Shechem. The Bible explained it this way:

In three days, when they were still in pain, two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each took his sword and went to the unsuspecting city and slaughtered every male (Genesis 34:25 NET).

Jacob was angry with these two sons for their murderous attack on the unsuspecting people of Shechem. Consequently, neither Simeon nor Levi could receive the blessing from Jacob.

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Judah's Line Is The Favored One

Having eliminated the older brothers as heirs of the blessing, Jacob foretells a future for the tribe of Judah that pictures him as the preeminent son. Though he did not have the right of the firstborn, Judah was chosen over the others as the royal tribe:

Judah, your brothers will praise you. Your hand will be on the neck of your enemies, your father's sons will bow down before you. You are a lion's cub, Judah, from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches and lies down like a lion; like a lioness - who will rouse him? The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; the nations will obey him. Binding his foal to the vine, and his colt to the choicest vine, he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes. His eyes will be dark from wine, and his teeth white from milk (Genesis 49:8-12).

Jacob's words regarding Judah are clear but they are certainly different than the imagery he used of the other sons. Judah is described as a victorious warrior who is greeted by the shouts of praise from his brothers. We should also not miss the prediction found in verse eight, "your father's sons will bow down to you."

This seems to be an obvious allusion to Joseph's dream in which his father's sons would come to bow down before him.

Recall, that Jacob, on the one hand, was upset at Joseph when he shared the dream but, on the other hand, was not angry with him as were his brothers. Even at that time, he seemingly knew that the Lord had something special for Joseph.

The irony of course is what was predicted to happen to Joseph has now been transferred to the house of Judah. Therefore, the bowing down that happened to Joseph is portrayed as a picture of what will happen to the house of Judah "in days to come."

There is no question that the Messiah will ultimately come from the family line of Judah. We should notice how this first verse is variously translated:

The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; the nations will obey him (Genesis 49:10 NET)

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples (Genesis 49:10 ESV)

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, Until Shiloh comes; And to Him shall be the obedience of the people (Genesis 49:10 NKJV)

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The word "Shiloh," found in some English versions, is simply an untranslated form of the Hebrew expression meaning "one to whom it belongs." It is not a proper name, per se, nor should we associate it with the site of the tabernacle in the days of Samuel (1 Samuel 1:3).

The individual to whom this refers has been referred to earlier in Scripture. For example, in Genesis 27:29 and Numbers 24:9, and with the "seed" of Abraham in Genesis 12:3 and 22:18. In sum, He will be a royal offspring from the house of Judah, the Messiah.

The description of this individual from the tribe of Judah is further described with the phrase, "and the obedience of the nations is his."

The use of the plural Hebrew word, translated as "nations," rather than the singular form, predicts that the kingship of this person extends beyond the boundaries of the children of Israel to include all the nations.

Later biblical writers confirmed this in predicting the reign of the future Davidic king, who will be in the line of Judah:

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession (Psalm 2:8 ESV):

And with the clouds of the sky one like a son of man was approaching. . . . To him was given ruling authority, honor, and sovereignty. All peoples, nations, and language groups were serving him. His authority is eternal and will not pass away. His kingdom will not be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13–14 NET)

Then one of the elders said to me, "Stop crying and look! The one who is called both the 'Lion from the Tribe of Judah' and 'King David's Great Descendant' has won the victory. He will open the book and its seven seals." . . . Then they sang a new song, "You are worthy . . . because you were killed. And with your own blood you bought for God people from every tribe, language, nation, and race" (Revelation 5:5, 9 CEV).

As far as the rest of the Jacob's words to his remaining sons, with the exception of Joseph, they are noticeable for their brevity as well as for their enigmatic allusions to major events that will occur at some future time.

There is, however, a central theme that unites each image, prosperity. Just as with find with the image of the victorious king from the tribe of Judah ruling over all the nations in a time of manifold blessing, so also each of the remaining tribes will experience the same sort of prosperity and blessing in their future.

The Death Of Jacob: Joseph Consols His Brothers

After speaking these words, the death of Jacob takes place:

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When Jacob finished giving these instructions to his sons, he pulled his feet up onto the bed, breathed his last breath, and went to his people (Genesis 49:33 NET).

Jacob “went to his people.” In other words, he joined Abraham, Isaac and his beloved Rachel who were alive in the presence of the Lord.

When Jacob died, Joseph's brothers feared that he would retaliate against them. But Joseph reassured them that this would not happen:

But Joseph answered them, “Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant to harm me, but God intended it for a good purpose, so he could preserve the lives of many people, as you can see this day. So now, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your little children.” Then he consoled them and spoke kindly to them (Genesis 50:19-21 NET).

The Promise To Abraham Has Now Been Fulfilled

As God had told Abraham, his descendants would have to live in a foreign land for some 400 years before the Lord would bring them back to the Promised Land.

As we have observed, God used the sin of the favoritism of Jacob, and the jealousy of his brothers to Joseph, to get him to Egypt. In addition, with all of these divine appointments, we see the providential hand of God working all things according to His plan. God does indeed work in mysterious ways. The story of Joseph is a great example of this.

The Purpose Of These Chapters

These chapters show that Joseph's destiny, as prospering in Egypt, will be also duplicated in the destinies of each of his brothers. The land in which they will settle, the land of Goshen, is called the “best part of the land.”

Some have seen these description as an echo of the “good” land that God established in creation (1:31), as well as the ultimate “good” that God intended in all of these events (50:20).

God looked at what he had done. All of it was very good! Evening came and then morning—that was the sixth day (Genesis 1:31 CEV).

You tried to harm me, but God made it turn out for the best, so that he could save all these people, as he is now doing (Genesis 50:20 CEV)

As we have emphasized, the purpose of this last, and longest, section of Genesis the “generations of Jacob,” from 37:2 to 50:26 is not solely to present the story of Joseph, though he has been the main character. Indeed, there is so much more!

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Summary And Conclusion To Joseph and Judah

From these chapters we learn a number of important truths. We can make the following observations.

Observation 1: God's Promises Will Be Fulfilled

While seemingly impossible to conceive of at the time, the promises that the Lord made to Abram were literally fulfilled. The story of Joseph explains how they were brought down to Egypt before returning to the Promised Land some four hundred years later in the Exodus, fulfilling the prediction that God had made to Abram.

Observation 2: They Were Fulfilled Apart From Any Supernatural Event

As we have documented throughout the narrative, the Lord had miraculously arranged a number of divine appointments, non-supernatural events, that brought Abraham's descendants to the Promised Land. All of them had to be in place. This includes events in the life of Joseph as well as in the life of Judah.

Indeed, if only one of them had not occurred, then the story would not have turned out in the way in which it did. In all of this, we see the providential hand of the Lord constantly working.

Observation 3: There Are Practical Lessons That We Learn From These Accounts

The New Testament makes it clear that the accounts listed in the Old Testament were written to teach us God's truth:

These things happened to them as examples and were written for our instruction, on whom the ends of the ages have come (1 Corinthians 10:11 NET).

For everything that was written in former times was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and through encouragement of the scriptures we may have hope (Romans 15:4 NET).

These narratives are recorded in Scripture, not only for the importance of what took place, but also as examples to us.

Indeed, the stories of Joseph and Judah provide a number of important lessons for each believer. They show us how we should act, as well as how we should not act.

Consequently, the entire narrative is something that believers should seriously study as well as ponder the many biblical truths that it so clearly reveals.

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Jonah

The divine appointments that we observed in the accounts of Joseph and Judah were certainly not limited to these two individuals. Indeed, there is another biblical story where we again see the supernatural working in the natural realm.

In this case, it is in the account of the wayward prophet Jonah. Like the narratives we have just considered, there are many lessons for us here in the story of Jonah.

Jonah Introduction

It is a well-known fact that there are a number of stories in the Bible that are ridiculed by unbelievers.

This includes the account of the first humans, Adam, and Eve, for example. Unbelievers in the Bible think this is just a fairy tale. Sadly, there are many believers who do not accept the fact that this account in Genesis is literally true.

The account of the flood in Noah's day is another story which is laughed at. The idea that eight people survived a universal flood in a boat that they built some five thousand years ago is seemingly too fantastic for people to believe.

However, there is one story in Scripture that is ridiculed more than any of the rest. This would be the account of the wayward prophet Jonah who was swallowed by the great sea creature, and lived to tell us about it.

As we will see, this is no "fish story."

This Story Is Different

The account of Jonah is different from all of the other prophetic books in the Old Testament. In fact, Jonah is different from all the other books in the entire Bible!

Jonah is the only individual, among the prophets, whose prophecy does not consist of what he said but rather of his own life and experience.

Indeed, the Book of Jonah does not report on the preaching of a prophet like the other prophetic books. Amazingly we have only one line of preaching from the entire book of Jonah which consisted of five words in Hebrew: in 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed. That's it!

Jonah Is Not The Hero of the Story

Furthermore, Jonah is not a hero! He is the supreme example of how *not* to be God's messenger to a lost world.

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The real heroes of this book are the sailors who wanted to preserve Jonah's life, as well as the people of Nineveh and their king who repented of their sins. We might also add the great sea creature that swallowed Jonah but did not digest him. If it weren't for it, there would be no story about Jonah!

All that being said, this unconventional book has many lessons that it can teach us today.

We Learn Many Important Lessons In This Book

Indeed, there are at least nine important lessons that we learn from this little book.

Lesson 1: The Lord's plan for our lives will ultimately be accomplished

Lesson 2: Sinful human nature is still the same, it never changes

Lesson 3: The providence of God is evident with His "divine appointments"

Lesson 4: God's love for Gentiles is shown during the Old Testament period

Lesson 5: The Lord, the God of the Bible, is control over all things, natural and supernatural

Lesson 6: The Lord also shows His concern for the smallest of details

Lesson 7: Even the vilest of people can be forgiven

Lesson 8: We should rejoice when anyone repents and trusts the Lord

Lesson 9: The God of the Bible, is the God of the second chance

God And Jonah: The Main Story

We discover so many incidental features of this narrative, the ship, the storm, the giant sea creature, the plant, the worm, the hot wind, as well as the inhabitants of Nineveh.

While they are important, they are not the main message of the book. It is the two major characters of the story that give us that, the Lord and Jonah.

In fact, this is the story of the Bible: the living God working with His people. Like a great drama played out on a stage, God and His people are always front and center. Others may come on the stage, but they are not the main story, they are "bit players." The attention is always upon the Lord working His will through those who have believed in Him.

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The Importance Of This Account

At the end of the day, it is the Lord's dealings with Jonah that are even more important than His dealings with the people of Nineveh. These dealings reveal His attitude towards the Gentiles as well as toward His own people, as to how they are to deal with these pagan nations.

Indeed, during that historical period God's people were supposed to be a light to the nations. God told Abram that the entire world would be blessed by his descendants:

I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you, I will curse. Through you every family on earth will be blessed (Genesis 12:3 God's Word).

In the same manner today, believers are to be the lights of the world. Jesus said:

You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill cannot be hidden. People do not light a lamp and put it under a basket but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so that they can see your good deeds and give honor to your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16 NET).

We must allow our "lights to shine!"

The Comparison of Jonah To Israel

Interestingly, we will discover that the experience of Jonah is similar to that of the nation of Israel. Indeed, both were to be witnesses of the Lord to the unbelieving world, but unfortunately, both were disobedient to their unique position and calling.

Consequently, on the one hand, they were both disciplined by the Lord, but, on the other hand, they were also miraculously preserved by Him. Jonah was preserved in the belly of the sea creature and Israel has been miraculously preserved among the nations in their centuries of dispersion among the nations of the world.

In fact, they will also be preserved in the future period of the "Great Tribulation," the "time of Jacob's trouble."

Salvation And A Future Regathering

As the wayward prophet was saved, and then brought back to the land when he cried out to the Lord, the same will be true of Israel in the future when they nationally recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

The Need To Share The Love of the Lord

As mentioned, the nation of Israel has also been guilty of Jonah's sin. They had been greatly loved by the Lord and were commanded to share this love

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with the entire world. However, like Jonah, they failed to follow through with their divine calling.

Jonah needed to learn that the Lord was the “God of Gentiles also.” Paul would later write to the Romans:

After all, is God the God of the Jews only? Isn't he also the God of the Gentiles? Of course he is (Romans 3:29 NLT).

The Text Of Jonah Has Been Preserved Intact For Over 2700 years

In recent studies of the literary character of the Old Testament, the verdict is unanimous, the Book of Jonah exhibits a high degree of literary excellence. In addition, there are numerous word plays in Hebrew, which we will point out along the way. In other words, it is a brilliant literary work with many valuable lessons for us.

Important Issues:

There are also number of important issues in the Book of Jonah that need to be addressed.

Was It A Whale That Swallowed Jonah?

The Bible is often accused of being unscientific and the story of Jonah is used as an example of this. A whale is a mammal, not a fish. Older English translations say “whale,” swallowed Jonah and then they call the whale a “fish.”

But the Hebrew merely says it was a “large sea creature” that swallowed Jonah. So, there is no scientific problem here.

Are There Historical Examples Of People Living For A Time Inside The Belly of a Large Sea Creature?

In previous books, the author had cited often-brought-up examples of this very thing. Indeed, there have been a couple of stories of men surviving for a period of time after being swallowed by a whale. However, upon further research we find that the documentation is lacking.

The miracle was not that a large sea creature could swallow a grown man, the miracle was that the sea creature did not digest Jonah and that he somehow remained alive inside the creature for at least thirty-six hours.

Who Wrote The Book?

The author of the book is not stated. It is only in chapter two, in which we find Jonah's prayer from the belly of the sea creature, is where we find the first person used (I, me, my). The other three chapters are about Jonah and they use the third person (he, him, his). However, this does not rule out the traditional view that Jonah wrote the whole book.

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What Is Its Literary Form?

Commentators are all over the map in describing the form in which the book was written.

Our perspective is that this is an historical narrative. It is not written as a "fish story." This occurred at a certain time in history to an actual prophet, whose father is named, and who had previously been a hero to the northern kingdom of Israel.

While it is an historical narrative, we are going to find satire and humor in the account. However, it is a mistake, as some do, to assume the entire narrative is merely satire. It is not.

Was Jonah A Missionary?

While Jonah is frequently associated with missionary work the differences between Jonah and godly missionaries are striking. In fact, Jonah provides a negative example of how *not* to be a messenger for God to a lost world.

Jonah does not want to go to Nineveh. Indeed, upon his divine call he immediately flees in the opposite direction.

The only message Jonah preaches in the book is the coming destruction by the Lord. We find no call to repentance, no hope for deliverance, no instruction whatsoever about God. In fact, God is not even mentioned in Jonah's proclamation to the sinful Ninevites!

When the people of Nineveh do repent, the man of God, Jonah, is disappointed and angry.

To sum up, Jonah does not have the attitude of a missionary, he did not bring the message of a missionary, and he certainly did not show the objective of a missionary, to convert the lost to faith in the Lord, the God of the Bible.

Again, we emphasize, the book is a commentary on Romans 3:29:

Is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also.

There Is Possible Evidence Of Why The People Of Nineveh's Repented

Jonah prophesied during the days when Assyria was threatening the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Eventually, in 721 B.C, Assyria would take the northern kingdom of Israel captive. Jonah's ministry would have been during the first half of the eighth century B.C. 793-750.

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There Are Many More Divine Appointments

We have already documented the various divine appointments in the lives of Joseph and Judah, the supernatural working of the Lord through the natural realm to bring about His desired results.

We will also note a number of natural occurrences in the life of Jonah, his own divine appointments, that will bring about what the Lord had always intended for the prophet, as well as for the people of Nineveh.

There is something else to consider. What we also have here are certain natural events that had previously happened to the people of Nineveh to set the stage for the arrival of this foreign prophet who would proclaim their doom. In other words, they had their own "divine appointments."

For example during this time, there were a number of events that took place in Nineveh that seemingly caused the people to more easily believe the doomsday message that was pronounced by Jonah.

A plague occurred in the year 765 B.C. During this time the Assyrian Eponym Canon also records a total eclipse of the sun some four miles north of Nineveh in 763 B.C.

Then there were revolts in the following four years. These events would only confirm in the mind of the Assyrians that they were under divine displeasure.

Therefore, it seems that these seemingly random natural events had caused the people to expect some type of supernatural message to explain to them why all of this had happened. Enter Jonah.

And there is this: there was peace in Nineveh from 758 B.C to 746 B.C.

It is possible, even likely, that the years of peace, the lack of rebellions as well as the lack of plagues for those 11 years, were a consequence of God's mercy because of their repentance. If so, Jonah's appearance was either in 759 or 758 B.C.

Outline Of The Book

There are many ways in which to outline the book of Jonah. We will simply label it a "Five Act Drama."

- Act 1:** Jonah receives divine instructions to go to Nineveh, ignores them, and flees in the opposite direction toward Tarshish
- Act 2:** The miraculous timing of the storm at sea results in Jonah being thrown overboard by the sailors and then swallowed by the sea monster
- Act 3:** The miracle of Jonah being preserved inside the belly of the giant sea creature and then his eventual exit from the sea monster

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Act 4: Jonah goes to Nineveh, proclaims judgment, Nineveh repents

Act 5: The distraught Jonah learns a valuable lesson from a plant, the hot sun, and a worm

With these things in mind, let us now look at the story of Jonah which reveals to us, like in the case of Judah, the God of the Bible is “the God of the second chance!”

JONAH 1:1

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying

This little book begins by claiming Jonah had a special calling, or a commission, from the Lord. In other words, this is NOT a fish story!

Jonah An Historical Character

Indeed, we discover from Scripture that Jonah was an historical character who delivered an important prophecy to the northern kingdom of Israel:

He [Jeroboam II] did evil in the sight of the Lord; he did not repudiate the sinful ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat who encouraged Israel to sin. He restored the border of Israel from Lebo Hamath in the north to the sea of the Arabah in the south, in accordance with the word of the Lord God of Israel announced through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher (2 Kings 14:24,25 NET).

This reference connects him with the reign of Jeroboam II, king of Israel, who reigned from 793–753 B.C.

This puts Jonah in the generation after Elisha and immediately prior to the beginning of the great era of prophecy that began with the minor prophets Amos and Hosea, as well as with the major prophet Isaiah.

Jonah himself was from Gath Hepher which was located a few miles north of Nazareth.

Jonah, as God's prophet, gave Jeroboam the divine authority to extend the Northern Kingdom's territory almost to the extent of promise that was given to the Davidic kingdom. This would have made Jeroboam the greatest of all the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Consequently, in the minds of the people of Israel, Jonah would have been the greatest of all the prophets of the Northern Kingdom. Therefore, Jonah, was a national hero because his previous prophecies that had led to military victories for Israel.

The Bible Calls Him A Prophet

A biblical prophet had to predict something in his own lifetime to come to pass. We read in Deuteronomy:

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Now if you say to yourselves, 'How can we tell that a message is not from the Lord?' Whenever a prophet speaks in my name and the prediction is not fulfilled, then I have not spoken it; the prophet has presumed to speak it, so you need not fear him (Deuteronomy 18:21 NET).

Hence, Jonah was an historical character who proved he was a divinely inspired prophet. Indeed, according to this passage in 2 Kings, he predicted something that came to pass during his own lifetime.

Confirmed By The Lord Jesus

There is further evidence. The Lord Jesus confirmed the historicity of Jonah, as well as him being in the belly of the sea creature:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to Him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign (attesting miracle) from You [proving that You are what You claim to be]." But He replied and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation [that is morally unfaithful to God] craves and demands a [miraculous] sign; but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah; for just as JONAH WAS THREE DAYS AND THREE NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF THE SEA MONSTER, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up [as witnesses] at the judgment against this generation, and will condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and now, something greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South (Sheba) will stand up [as a witness] at the judgment against this generation, and will condemn it because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon; and now, something greater than Solomon is here (Matthew 12:38-42 The Amplified Bible).

From Jesus' statement we learn a number of things:

First, Jonah existed. Indeed, he is compared with two other historical figures, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

In addition, he was swallowed by a great sea monster.

Third, Jonah spent three days and three nights in its belly, and survived.

Fourth, then he preached to the people of Nineveh who repented of their sins.

Hence, according to our Lord, the account which is recorded in the Book of Jonah is true. We will proceed on that basis.

Indeed, if Jesus is the One whom He claimed to be, God the Son, then whatever He said about any subject is the last word. If He said Jonah existed, and did the things the Scripture says he did, then that settles the issue. End of story.

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the son of Amittai

The account in Second Kings confirms that Jonah was the son of a man named Amittai. Again, this designation would have made him well-known to the people of his day.

Now comes Jonah's commission by the Lord.

JONAH 1:2

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.” (NKJV)

There are three imperatives, or commands, in the verse. “Arise,” “go” and “cry out” or “announce.”

Arise, go

These two imperatives, arise and go, have the idea of, “Go immediately.” This construction in Hebrew emphasizes the urgency of the command. It is not, “get up and go” but rather “go now!”

Nineveh: Founded By Nimrod

The city of Nineveh is mentioned early on in Scripture:

From that land he [Nimrod] went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen, which is between Nineveh and the great city Calah (Genesis 10:11 NET).

Nineveh was the last capital city of the ancient Assyrian Empire. Occupying about 1800 acres, it was located on the east bank of the Tigris River across from the modern city of Mosul, Iraq. The site has been excavated on several occasions.

The later biblical predictions of its demise, which were made by Nahum and Zephaniah, were literally fulfilled.

“The” Great City

The Hebrew article “the” draws attention to a well-known fact and may function as a demonstrative pronoun: “that great city.”

The phrase has a number of possible meanings. It may designate a city that was (1) large in size or (2) great in power: This would mean an important city-state or perhaps a prominent capital city.

The phrase (both with and without the article) is used four times in Jonah (1:2; 3:2,3; 4:11). This phrase is twice qualified by a statement about its immense dimensions (3:3) or large population (4:11), so it might denote size.

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The Powerful City Of Nineveh

However, size does not seem to be the issue in verse two. At this time period in history, Nineveh was the most powerful city in the ancient Near East as the capital of the mighty Neo-Assyrian Empire. It is likely that here the emphasis is that this “important city” is the “capital city” of the empire.

In fact, the New English Translation renders this verse as follows:

Go immediately to Nineveh, that large capital city (Jonah 1:2 NET).

and cry out against it for their wickedness

This nuance “cry out” is reflected in several English versions: “Announce my judgment against it” (NLT) and “preach against it” (NCV), or:

Announce to the people that I can no longer overlook the wicked things they have done” (God's Word).

The people of Nineveh were well-known for their barbaric and cruel treatment of their captives. Later prophetic books would describe the Ninevites as arrogant and godless (Zephaniah 2:13; Nahum 3:19).

has come up before me

It is the degree of Nineveh's moral decline that has drawn the attention of the Lord, the God of the Bible. In this instance, the term *wickedness* is personified. It is pictured as something that ascended heavenward into the very presence of the Lord.

This figuratively also depicts how the Lord became aware of their evil – it had ascended into heaven right into his presence. The Hebrew term often has the idea of “in the full cognitive knowledge of” or “in the full mental view” of someone.

Of course, the Lord knew all the time that the evil among the people of Nineveh was increasing. Scripture sometimes uses this type of figure of speech to describe actions, or situations, on earth that have got the attention of the Lord in heaven.

In a nutshell, God was always fully aware of the evil of the Ninevites, but it had gotten to the place that something had to be done. This is why the prophet Jonah was commissioned.

JONAH 1:3

But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord (NKJV)

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but Jonah arose

The phrase is a wordplay on the Lord's command "Arise! Go!" in verse two. By repeating the first verb the narrator sets up the reader to expect that Jonah was intending to obey God.

to flee

But Jonah did not "arise to go to Nineveh!" Instead, this wayward prophet "arose to flee" to Tarshish. Jonah might have looked as though he was about to obey, but he did not. Jonah actually chose to go in the opposite direction.

Sadly, this man, who was a famous prophet, with the full knowledge of the Lord God, decided to disobey this commission that the Lord had given to him, and to him alone.

The writer of this book does not reveal the motivation of Jonah to the reader at this point in the story. Rather, this revelation is not revealed until 4:2–3.

We can contrast Jonah to Joseph, whom we just studied about. When his father commissioned him, the seventeen year old lad immediately obeyed. In this case, the famous prophet of God did not.

to Tarshish

Tarshish refers to a distant port city or region located on the coastlands in the Mediterranean somewhere west of the Holy Land.

Though the location remains uncertain, it is used in texts to refer to the farthest known point in the west. The conflicting geographical indications in ancient texts suggest the possibility that it refers, in a more general sense, to far off islands. In Solomon's day the ships going to Tarshish would not return for three years!

Tarshish could just be the farthest port imaginable. In English we might say that he headed for Timbuktu.

Most English versions render it as "Tarshish" (KJV, NKJV, NASB, NRSV, NIV), but the CEV renders it more generally as "to Spain."

The NLT emphasizes the point: "in the opposite direction," though "Tarshish" is mentioned later in the verse.

In sum, Jonah arose to go west to Tarshish, far away from the place where the Lord had assigned him.

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away from the presence of the Lord

The term is used with “to flee” only here in biblical Hebrew so it is difficult to determine its exact meaning. In what sense was Jonah fleeing from the presence of the Lord?

The Best Answer

The expression seems to mean that Jonah was trying to escape from his commission ordered by God. He is fleeing from God's call on his life.

Later we discover that Jonah confesses in 4:2–3 that he fled to avoid carrying out his commission—he was concerned that God might relent from punishing Nineveh if its populace would repent.

But, as we will observe, it is also clear from chapters. 1–2 that Jonah could not escape from the Lord himself.

Escape

Three times in this chapter 1, Jonah's voyage in the ship is described as an attempt to escape *away from the Lord*—from the Lord's presence.

On one level, Jonah was attempting to avoid a task that was profoundly disagreeable to him.

However, more than this, the description found in the book of Jonah personalizes his rejection of his calling. Simply put, Jonah's issue was with the Lord Himself, not just his commission.

The narrator's description is also highly ironic, as the rest of the book shows. Jonah tries to sail to Tarshish, in the opposite direction from Nineveh, as if by doing that he could somehow escape from the Lord,

However, the Lord is the One who knows all about Nineveh's wickedness and is intimately involved in all that happens to Jonah throughout the book.

We should note the ironies. The Lord commissioned Jonah to go to Nineveh, which was some 500 miles northeast of the Holy Land. Instead of going east, Jonah went the opposite direction, hoping to go 2000 miles to the west.

Furthermore, the Lord wanted Jonah to take an overland trip via the Fertile Crescent. Instead Jonah took a sea voyage.

The Lord had sent Jonah to the greatest city of the day. Instead Jonah was headed for some remote trading post on the outskirts of civilization.

The Lord wished to go with Jonah. Instead His prophet attempted to flee from the presence and power of His Lord.

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In other words, everything that the Lord had commanded Jonah to do was summarily rejected by the prophet. He simply would not obey.

To sum up, Jonah was finished with the Lord, and his calling as a prophet, but the Lord was NOT finished with Jonah!

“he went down.”

The verb translated “to go down” can refer to a journey that is physically downhill. This may suggest that Jonah had started out from Jerusalem, which is at a higher elevation from his home in the Galilee. Some have contended that he may have received his commission while in the temple.

down, down, down

The verb “to go down” is repeated four times in chapters 1–2 for rhetorical effect (1:3a, 3b, 5; 2:7).

We find that Jonah's “downward” journey was from Jerusalem *down* to Joppa (1:3a) *down* into the ship (1:3b) *down* into the cargo hold (1:5) and ultimately *down* into the bottom of the sea, pictured as *down* to the very gates of the netherworld (2:7).

This downhill movement does not end until Jonah prays. Then it is the Lord who brings him “up” from the brink of death (2:6–7).

Joppa

Joppa was a small harbor town on the coast of the Holy Land. It was a port through which imported goods could flow into that part of the world (Joshua 19:46; 2 Chronicles 2:15,16 and Ezra 3:7).

It was never annexed by Israel until the Maccabean period about 148 B.C. (1 Maccabees 10:76). In other words, Jonah chose a port where the people he would meet, and the ships he could take, were not likely to be Israelite.

Thus, once he arrived in Joppa he was already partly “away from the Lord” as he perceived it in his own mind.

so he paid the fare

There is a question as to the meaning of this. Did Jonah merely pay to go with these sailors, or did he hire out the entire ship? If so, he would probably have had to sell everything he owned to make a one-way trip.

and went down into it, to go with them

The “them” refers to the other passengers, if any, and the sailors on the ship.

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to Tarshish

We should not miss how often “to Tarshish” is mentioned in this verse:

So Jonah rose
to flee to Tarshish from before the Lord.
He went down to Joppa,
he found a ship going to Tarshish,
he paid its fare
and he went down into it
to go with them to Tarshish from before the Lord.

from the presence of the Lord

Again this phrase is emphasized. To sum up, verse three ends with Jonah on this ship sailing to Tarshish.

The end of the story, right?

Wrong! Just like when Joseph was sold in slavery by his brothers, from a human perspective, it looked like they would never see each other again. In other words, the story was over.

But as we shall see, as was the case with Joseph, the Lord had other plans! Jonah is about to experience his first “divine appointment.”

JONAH 1:4

But the Lord hurled a powerful wind on the sea. Such a violent tempest arose on the sea that the ship threatened to break up! (NET)

But the Lord

Again, if this story of Jonah was merely on the natural level, then it would be over after verse three. Jonah would sail off into to the sunset, seemingly never to return to Israel, the Ninevites would have no idea of the impending judgment of the Lord and thus would be destroyed at that time in history. However, God had other things in mind.

hurled

This verb is used here and several times in this episode. In fact, God's power over nature is a prominent theme throughout Jonah (see 1:4, 9, 13-16, 17; 2:3, 10; 4:6-7).

a great wind on the sea. Such a violent tempest arose on the sea

Though it's the same word in Hebrew (wind, tempest), typically English versions vary the adjective here and before the word translated “tempest” to avoid redundancy.

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We find this in the KJV, NRSV “great...mighty; NIV “great...violent;” NLT “powerful...violent.”

The obvious point is that this was no ordinary storm.

that the ship threatened to break up

The Hebrew says, “the ship seriously considered breaking apart.” The use of this term in Hebrew in the piel, the intensive form, means “to think about, to seriously consider.” Basically, it personifies the ship to emphasize the ferocity of the storm.

The lexicons, dictionaries, render the clause idiomatically: “the ship was about to be broken up.”

These Were Not Small Ships

Ships traveled the Mediterranean Sea between Egypt and the Syrian coast as early as 2700 B.C. Evidence comes from paintings and reliefs, models of ships dedicated to the gods, and the archaeological discoveries of sunken ships.

The Phoenician seagoing merchant ships averaged seventy-five feet long and twenty feet wide and were steered by a rudder mounted on the port side near the stern. The crew rarely exceeded twenty, and the payload ranged from 100–500 tons. The cargo was stored in the bottom beneath the deck. Thus, we need to get a proper view of these ships from the time of Jonah around 750 B.C.

In 1999, two sunken ships from that era were discovered; each had cargo of over twelve tons of wine! Obviously, these were vessels designed to travel long distances, and held huge cargoes.

Another Storm, Another Miracle

This episode reminds us of the storm on the sea of Galilee during the ministry of Jesus. Matthew 8 records a similar situation with a horrific storm that arose on the sea of Galilee:

As he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. And a great storm developed on the sea so that the waves began to swamp the boat. But he was asleep. So they came and woke him up saying, “Lord, save us! We are about to die!” But he said to them, “Why are you cowardly, you people of little faith?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it was dead calm. And the men were amazed and said, “What sort of person is this? Even the winds and the sea obey him!” (Matthew 8:23-27 NET).

We will discover a number of parallels between this account and the experience of Jonah. What is clear is that this was no ordinary storm. In other words, this is our first divine appointment in this episode of the wayward prophet Jonah.

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We know that these were experienced seamen. This means that they would not even had begun to sail if there was any indication whatsoever of a storm brewing.

Evidently, everything looked fine for the beginning of their journey. However once they had gotten a little distance out to sea, from seemingly nowhere this storm arose, and as we shall see, it was certainly no ordinary storm. This violent tempest will set the stage for all the events that will follow.

JONAH 1:5

Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep (NKJV)

This abnormal storm caused them great fear.

Then the mariners were afraid; they cried out, each one to his god

The sailors were so afraid that each cried out to his own god. It appears that they had never experienced a storm of this magnitude, certainly not one that was so close to shore.

The shift from the Hebrew plural verb “they cried out” to the singular subject “each one” is a rhetorical device used to emphasize that each one of the sailors individually cried out. They were scared!

As members of a polytheistic culture, one whom believed in many gods, each sailor might appeal to several gods. However, individuals could also look to a particular god for help in trouble.

Targum Jonah 1:5 interpretively renders the line: “Each man prayed to his idols, but they saw that they were useless.” Useless indeed.

and threw (hurled) the cargo that was in the ship

hurled

The Hiphil of “to hurl” is again used, repeated from verse four. The Lord hurled the storm, the sailors hurled the cargo.

The plural word rendered “cargo” is variously translated “articles, vessels, objects, baggage, instruments.”

As a general term, it fits here to describe the sailors throwing overboard whatever they could. The English word “cargo” should be understood in a generally sense. It included the ship’s payload as well as whatever else could be thrown overboard.

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into the sea to lighten it from them

What the sailors throw overboard is most likely their supplies of food and water for the journey. If Jonah was the only passenger, there were no merchants aboard and therefore little merchandise for trade. The crew would have been made up merely of sailors, not merchants. Whatever the case may have been, everything had to go!

but Jonah had gone down had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship

We are now given a parenthetical description of his earlier actions before the great storm began. In contrast, to all the fury that took place above deck, the prophet of God had gone below to the “inaccessible, innermost part” of the ship.

had lain down, and was fast asleep

Not only had Jonah had gone down below deck, he had also lain down, and was sound asleep! The LXX, the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, includes a further description of Jonah. He was snoring!

To sum up, Jonah went from Israel down to Joppa, down to the ship, down to the lower deck of the ship in fleeing from the calling of the Lord upon his life. Add to this, he was fast asleep, clueless, when this horrific storm was taking place.

What a picture of the believer who is out of the will of God, they find themselves somewhere that they are not supposed to be and will remain clueless to God's plan for them, until they repent.

JONAH 1:6

The ship's captain approached him and said, “What are you doing asleep? Get up! Cry out to your god! Perhaps your god might take notice of us so that we might not die!”

The ship's captain approached him and said, What are you doing asleep?

The expression can express surprise, or indignation and contempt. Accordingly, the captain may have been surprised that Jonah is able to sleep so soundly through the storm.

The NIV has “How can you sleep?” The NEB “How can you be sleeping so soundly?” and the REB “What, fast asleep?” The CEV and NLT “How can you sleep at a time like this?” “Why are you sleeping?” (NCV) fittingly reflects the surprise from the captain.

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There is also indignation that Jonah would sleep in a life-threatening situation when he should be praying, or at the very least, helping the sailors to lighten the load.

Get up, arise, and cry out

The imperatives “arise!” and “cry out!” are repeated from verse two for ironic effect. The Lord had said, “Arise, go to Nineveh and cry out to them. Now, he is to arise and cry out to his God so the people on the ship do not perish.

These words of the captain would certainly have rung loudly in ears of Jonah! Indeed, it would have been a stinging reminder of that which the Lord had previously commanded him.

Jonah was now hearing them now for a second time because he had disobeyed these words the first time he heard them.

Perhaps your god might take notice of us (give thought to us ...pay attention to us)

The verb translated “take notice of us,” “give thought to us,” etc. is found only here in the Old Testament. The captain hopes for divine help from some god who may be to act on behalf of the people in the ship.

Ironically, the captain woke up Jonah for a prayer meeting! The captain wanted to cover every possible base. Hence, every god whom the people on the ship knew about, or worshipped, was to be called upon.

Irony of Ironies

The irony, of course, is that this heathen seaman is telling an Israelite prophet of God that he ought to be praying!

Furthermore, the precise exhortation that Jonah should “call on” his God repeats the verb found in his original commission from God to the now wayward prophet.

What The Sailors Were Asking For

The scheme of the sailors is clear. They assume that the more gods they could possibly make contact with, the better chance they had of one of them listening, possibly this god could deliver them from this deadly storm.

They would have assumed that some god was responsible for the unprecedented storm, and they were right, it was the God of the Bible. Their problem was they did not know who it was at this moment. Hence, they are crying out to any god who might “take notice of” them.

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JONAH 1:7

The sailors said to one another, “Come on, let’s cast lots to find out whose fault it is that this disaster has overtaken us.” So they cast lots, and Jonah was singled out.

And they said, a man to his companion (to one another).

The plural verb is individualized by translating it as “a man.” The idea is that they all agreed it was necessary to find out if anyone on the ship could explain to them why such a storm rose up out of nowhere.

“Come on, let’s cast lots to find out whose fault it is that this disaster has overtaken us.”

The English word translated as “lots” is a generic term. This procedure for “casting lots” is similar to “drawing straws” so that the person who receives the short straw ends up being the chosen one. In other situations, it might be a colored stone that would select the person.

The Purpose Of Casting Lots

In the ancient Near East, at this time in history, the casting of lots was a custom used to try to receive some type of message or revelation from the gods. In this instance, the sailors cried out to their gods, as well as casting lots with the hope that one of their gods might explain why it is so angry with them as to bring such a violent storm so soon after they had set sail.

On whose account this calamity is upon us.

The CEV has well captured the sentiment of verse seven:

Let’s ask our gods to show us who caused all this trouble.

the lot fell on Jonah. (It turned out to be Jonah).

While there were probably close to twenty people on board, the Lord supernaturally allowed the lot to fall upon Jonah.

Here we have divine appointment number two. The odds that the lot would fall upon Jonah were remote. Yet the Lord wanted it to be made known who the responsible party was, his wayward prophet, the famous Jonah!

JONAH 1:8

They said to him, “Tell us, whose fault is it that this disaster has overtaken us? What’s your occupation? Where do you come from? What’s your country? And who are your people?”

Now their questions begin. From the questions posed to Jonah, it does not appear that they immediately realized that he was the one responsible for

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the storm. Instead, they seem to think that he was the one chosen by their gods to reveal to them the one responsible for their plight.

It is only after he admits, verses 9–10, that he boarded the ship to flee from his God that they realized that Jonah was in fact the cause of their trouble.

Whose fault...What's...Where...What's... These questions, which are asked in rapid succession, indicates the urgency of the crew to quickly learn the reason for this unusual and unprecedented storm.

Accordingly, the casting of the lots tells them that Jonah is to be the one who has the answers to their questions.

They said to him, “Tell us, whose fault is it that this disaster has overtaken us?”

Notice that they didn't assume that he was the cause. Jonah was to tell them whose fault it was.

What's your occupation?

They wanted to know what exactly this mysterious person on the ship did for a living.

Where do you come from?

They had never seen him before. What was his origin?

What's your country?

They had no idea he was from Israel.

And from what people are you?

This is similar to the previous question.

Jonah's answers will now cause them further alarm.

JONAH 1:9

He said to them, “I am a Hebrew! And I fear (worship) the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

I am a Hebrew!

This is the only time in the entire Old Testament that a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob designates himself as a Hebrew. This term is rare and we usually find it in the presence of, or from the lips of, foreigners. It was used to indicate the distinctive racial features of the people from Israel. Simply put, “Hebrew” was the way foreigners identified Israelites.

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The Lord, the God of heaven, I fear (worship)

Now that he has identified himself, Jonah goes on to give one more description to the sailors, he mentions the name of his God.

In doing so he emphasized the divine name—Literally he proclaimed: “the Lord, (*Yahweh* or *Jehovah*), the God of heaven, I myself am fearing [He is the One] who made both the sea and the dry land.” In other words, He is the Creator of “all things.”

The Hebrew word order is unusual. Normally the verb appears first, but here the direct object “the Lord, the God of heaven” precedes the verb. This is a Hebrew method of placing our attention on this name, rather than on Jonah himself, as subject of the sentence. Jonah emphasizes the object of his worship; it is the Lord!

In contrast to the Phoenician sailors, who worshipped heathen gods, Jonah seems to be proud of his theological orthodoxy. He worships the only God, the true one!

I Fear (I worship, respect)

The verb has a broad range of meanings, including “to fear, to worship, to revere, to respect.” Obviously, at this moment, Jonah is not doing a very good job of respecting or worshipping the Lord!

Jonah Feared The Lord In His Head, Not In His Heart

Ironically, his “fear” of the Lord, in this instance, was limited to this profession of what he believed. Indeed, it certainly had nothing to do with his behavior.

Interestingly, the word *fear* appears in verse five, here in verse nine, and later in verses 10 and 16. Except for this use in verse nine, every other use describes the response of the men on the ship. In other words, it is an emotional fear prompting their frenzied physical actions either to the storm, or to the Lord.

By contrast, Jonah claims to fear, or worship, the Lord, but his attitude and actions do not reflect this. It is clear that Jonah does not “fear” in the same way that they do.

The God of Heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

Notice it is a singular God that Jonah serves. He's not one of many. He is the only God. The Bible records the Lord saying:

But you are my witnesses, O Israel!” says the LORD. “You are my servant. You have been chosen to know me, believe in me, and understand that I alone am God. There is no other God— there never has been, and there never will be (Isaiah 43:10 NLT).

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The Lord is the “only God.” Furthermore, He is the God who made “all things.”

JONAH 1:10

Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, “Why have you done this?” For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them (NKJV)

Then the men feared exceedingly

After Jonah described the God whom he served, the Hebrew text says the men “feared a great fear.”

In this instance, we have what is known as the “cognate accusative construction.” In other words, it is using the verb “to fear” and the noun “fear” which both come from the same root. This was used to emphasize that those on the ship were now even more afraid than before. Putting it another way, “they became very very afraid!”

Why have you done this?

Great question! What in the world were you thinking?

For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord

The first two times that Jonah is said to be running *away from the LORD* the Hebrew word order puts this phrase last. Now in the third occurrence, it comes emphatically before the verb that describes Jonah's action.

To the point, it is emphasizing the fact that Jonah was fleeing from the presence of the only God who exists!

Hence, the sailors were even more afraid once they had heard who it was that Jonah had offended.

because he had told them

The verb translated “he had told” functions as a past perfect, referring to a previous event. The way the Hebrew text presents the idea that the sailors know Jonah is fleeing from his God is unusual. When had Jonah told them?

If he told them in his speech in verse nine the text could have quoted another line of Jonah's narrative to include it.

There are two alternatives that should be considered.

(1) Possibly they knew because Jonah had told them in a long, drawn out account of what had happened. If so, the writer of Jonah is merely summarizing the main points of what he said.

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(2) It is possible that Jonah mentioned this detail before the storm. This mere fact would not have caused alarm with the sailors. It is only when this tremendous storm arrived did it become troublesome.

Now these sailors are overwhelmed by the significance of Jonah running away from his calling. Basically they are saying, "You did not let us know that it is your God who made the ocean!"

In sum, previously they would not have had any reason to believe that the God whom Jonah served was "the" deity who made everything, "land and sea." That the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is such a God as this, certainly provided just cause for their fear.

Therefore, the result of the casting of the lots, the identity of the God of Jonah, and the obvious sin against his God, in running away from His commission, made it clear that Jonah himself was the *only* reason for this unusual storm and powerful storm that caught them unaware and unprepared.

JONAH 1:11

Because the storm was growing worse and worse, they said to him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

(Hebrew) Because the sea was walking and storming.

The two Hebrew participles "walking and storming" form an idiom that means "the storm was growing worse and worse."

they said to him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"

become quiet for us, "may quiet down for us" (NRSV)

In other words, what should we do "to you" to fix this life-threatening situation? Please tell us, we do NOT want to die!

JONAH 1:12

And he said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me

Pick me up and throw me into the sea

Jonah's answer as to what they should do to him was simple, throw him into the raging sea.

Jonah was seemingly willing to die. We are not told why. He may have thought that this would be a fitting penalty for one who disobeyed the direct command of the Lord.

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We must also need to make the distinction between willing to die, and actually wanting to die, they are not the same thing. Perhaps he thought that this was the proper punishment for his act. We are not told his motivation.

then the sea will become calm for you.

In other words, Jonah says that your only hope is to get rid of me. If I die, then the storm will stop.

For I know that this great tempest is because of me

Jonah reckoned that the storm would cease once he was off of the ship since he was the only cause for this disaster.

There is something missing here! We do not find Jonah offering to repent, to pray to His God for forgiveness, to ask for mercy for all on board.

No, we see none of this from the prophet of God. All he says is “throw me overboard and the storm will cease.”

JONAH 1:13

Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. (NKJV)

Nevertheless the men rowed hard

The Hebrew word translated *row* is used in Ezekiel to describe digging through a wall (Ezekiel 8:8; 12:5, 7, 12). The use of it in this context gives a vivid picture of the sailors digging into the water with their oars as hard as they could. In other words, they were going to dig themselves out of this catastrophe rather than throwing this pathetic man overboard.

to return to land

The Hebrew noun for *land* here is connected with a Hebrew verb meaning “to be dry.” In fact, it is same noun used in verse nine when Jonah contrasted the sea to the dry ground.

it was no use, for the sea was running higher and higher (REB)

Again, we have the same idiom as in verse 11, the sea was “walking and storming.” Finally, crew realized that all their work of rowing was to no avail.

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JONAH 1:14

Therefore they cried out to the Lord and said, "We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O Lord, have done as it pleased You."

Therefore they cried out to the Lord and said,

They are crying out to Jonah's God, the Lord, the God who made all things, the only God.

We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man's life

These are honorable men. While God's prophet put their lives at risk, they still did not want to throw him overboard. Consequently, they asked the Lord to keep them from perishing.

do not charge us innocent blood

They made a specific request to the Lord, "Do not assign innocent blood to our account." In other words, you have not given us any choice.

The sailors were a bit of a quandary. On the one hand, they were afraid that they would die if they kept Jonah aboard the ship, on the other hand, they reckoned that they might be punished with death by the God who made the land and sea if they threw his prophet overboard. They were seemingly in a "no win" situation.

JONAH 1:15

So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea

The word "hurl" again shows up. Jonah is now off of the ship.

and the sea ceased from its raging.

Divine appointment number three!

This is a miracle of timing. There is nothing supernatural that a storm would cease from raging, these things do happen. However, the miracle was in the fact that as soon as Jonah's body hit the water, the storm immediately ceased!

This miracle of timing is similar to other miracles that we read about in the Bible. Indeed, on two separate occasions, the gospels record Jesus being involved in a miraculous catch of fish. Luke records one of these incidents:

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered, 'Master,

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we were hard at work all night and caught nothing; but if you say so, I will let down the nets.' They did so and made such a huge catch of fish that their nets began to split. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They came and loaded both boats to the point of sinking (Luke 5:4-7 REB).

There is nothing remarkable about fishermen putting out their nets and bringing in a huge catch of fish. However, the miracle here is in the timing of the event.

After Jesus' resurrection, John reports an incident between Jesus and several of His disciples on the Sea of Galilee. The Bible says:

When it was already very early morning, Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. So Jesus said to them, "Children, you don't have any fish, do you?" They replied, "No." He told them, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they threw the net, and were not able to pull it in because of the large number of fish (John 21:4-6 NET).

Again, there is nothing miraculous about throwing a net into the water and having it filled with fish. This event, however, was a miracle because they had been fishing all night and had not caught a thing. However, when Jesus told them where to put their net, it immediately became full.

The same sort of thing is happening here, a miracle of timing.

JONAH 1:16

Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows.

Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly,

This amazing miracle was obvious to all!

Again, it is the personal name of God, Yahweh, or Jehovah, whom they feared. The word translated "fear" is repeated in the verb as well as in its noun form. Again, we have the cognate accusative construction, used for emphasis. The idea is that they had a great fear of the Lord.

they sacrificed sacrifices they vowed vows

Here we again have two sets of the same Hebrew cognate accusative form here. The word "sacrifice" is repeated in the verb and noun form, as is the word for "vow." The idea seems to be that they earnestly vowed to the Lord to make lavish sacrifices once they reached the dry land.

It was unlikely that anything was left on the ship for them to sacrifice at this time.

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We should not miss the contrast between these heathen sailors and God's prophet Jonah. Jonah piously proclaimed that he served the one true God but certainly did not act like it. On the other hand, these pagan sailors, seeing what had transpired, had a reverence for the Lord that this prophet of God certainly did not have.

Well, it seems that this is now the end of the story. The innocent men aboard the ship have miraculously had their lives spared, Jonah is drowned in the ocean, and the people of Nineveh will never hear about the coming punishment that the Lord is about to mete out upon them.

Again, if we were only dealing with events on a natural level, then this would be the end of the story. Like the patriarch Joseph in Egypt, when sold into slavery, it seemed that he would never see his family again. It too looked like the end of the story.

However, as was true in that case, we find the same thing taking place here. Indeed the Lord, the only God, the One who had made the land and the sea, had other plans!

Just when it seemed that the death of Jonah was imminent another divine appointment was about to take place.

We should note that beginning with 1:17, the verse numbers through 2:10 in the English Bible differ from the verse numbers in the Hebrew text. For example, 1:17 in English translations is 2:1 the Hebrew text.

JONAH 1:17 (HEBREW 2:1)

And the Lord ordered (provided) a great sea monster to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the sea monster three days and three nights

And the Lord ordered a great sea monster to swallow Jonah,

The Hebrew says that "the Lord provided" a great sea monster to swallow Jonah. The word translated "provided" or "ordered" has been the subject of varying translations.

The KJV says "prepared." This gives the perception that God created a special creature for the specific purpose of swallowing Jonah without digesting him.

However, seemingly a more accurate translation would be something like the Lord "appointed" (NASB), or the Lord "had arranged for" (NLT) this great sea monster.

The verb means "to send, to appoint." It is used four times in the Book of Jonah and always points to the power of the Lord to accomplish his will.

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Here it shows the Lord's complete control over His creation. Along with the stoppage of the storm the moment Jonah hit the water, we discover that the creatures of the sea are also obedient to His command.

Later, we will again see His mighty power over plants (4:7), over tiny creatures who crawl, as well as His power over the wind (4:8).

While the Lord may indeed have created a special sea creature for Jonah, the text merely indicates that He summoned the creature, nothing more. Whether this was an animal common to the sea, or some sort of a special Jonah-swallowing creation of the Lord, we do not know.

What we do have is another divine appointment! This gigantic sea creature was in exactly the right place at the right time by the command of the Lord.

Furthermore, as the next verse will make clear, this creature is ordained to swallow Jonah but *not* to digest him.

and Jonah was in the belly of the sea monster three days and three nights

Three days and three nights

This does not necessarily mean seventy-two hours. To the Jews, any part of a day was considered an entire day. We deal this question of three days and three nights in detail in our book *The Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ*, Appendix 1.

How Did The Lord Do It?

If this is an accurate account of what happened, then how did the Lord preserve the life of Jonah?

As to how Jonah could have survived those three days and three nights, we must remember a few things from Scripture:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).

God spoke and the entire universe came into existence. This is the basis of all miracles. In other words, if you can believe this verse, the rest should be simple! He certainly has the ability to do it.

The Power Of God Is On Display

The Lord has also said:

I am the LORD, the God of all humankind. There is, indeed, nothing too difficult for me (Jeremiah 32:27 NET).

Indeed, there is nothing too difficult for the Lord, the God of Scripture. So if God can speak, and something can come out of nothing, then

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preserving a wayward prophet inside the belly of a huge sea creature is not beyond His ability.

We will now move on to chapter two to discover what will happen to Jonah. However, first there are some things that we must summarize.

The Divine Appointments Up To This Point

So far, we have seen a number of divine appointments.

First, the storm occurred soon after the ship had set sail. If there was any indication that this horrific storm would have taken place, the mariners would not have ventured out. In other words, there were completely taken by surprise.

Second, when the lots were cast, the lot which would determine who could explain what was going on fell upon Jonah. With likely as many as 20 men on board, the odds were stacked against this happening by chance.

Third, the moment Jonah's body hit the water, as he predicted, the storm stopped. Storms do sometimes quickly cease but this cessation took place at the exact time that Jonah was thrown into the Mediterranean Sea.

Fourth, there just "happened" to be a large sea monster in the area, whom the Bible says the Lord "appointed" to swallow Jonah. So the prophet did not drown as would have been expected.

Fifth, though swallowed by this sea monster, Jonah was not digested; he was preserved alive.

We will also discover a sixth divine appointment at the end of this chapter; the sea monster vomited Jonah near, or directly onto, the dry land. This allowed our wayward prophet to begin his journey to Nineveh.

It should be noted that this is the only occasion in Scripture of a prophet being sent directly to the heathen. It is also the only instance of a prophet, charged with delivering a prophetic message, actually disobeying that divine commission!

And of course, this is the only example in the Bible of God making sure that a prophet fulfilled his commission by miraculously turning him around!

JONAH CHAPTER 2

The scene will now shift from the sailors and the ship to only Jonah, the sea monster, and of course, the Lord; the God who created both the land and the sea.

Jonah obviously assumed that he was going to die when the sailors hurled him overboard. But, as we know, the Lord was not finished with him. The

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Lord appointed a great sea monster to swallow Jonah, but not to ingest him.

One can only imagine the misery of Jonah as he was certain that he would drown. However, it must have come as a huge shock when this giant creature came at him and then swallowed him!

Then, of course, Jonah thought that his worst nightmare had taken place. Indeed, instead of drowning he was going to be eaten by this huge creature of the sea.

Yet, neither happened. Jonah was miraculously preserved alive in the belly of this creature for at least 36 hours.

Again, the miracle here is both in the timing of the appearance of the sea monster as well as in the fact that Jonah was not eaten.

In the previous chapter we found Jonah willing to risk death for the sake of the sailors on the ship. There is nothing specifically said that indicated that he wanted to die.

Later, in chapter four, however, we will find that Jonah will indeed ask to die, but, as we shall see, this will be for entirely different reasons.

Jonah's Prayer

Commentators are divided upon the meaning of this prayer. Some view this as a prayer for deliverance from the belly of the sea monster.

Other commentators believe that his prayer, which also is a psalm of praise, expresses gratitude, not for deliverance from within the great sea creature, but rather for deliverance from drowning. This seems to be the best solution.

Indeed, it is clearly *before* Jonah was swallowed by the sea monster that he is threatened by the sea. As we will observe, there are a number of interesting questions that this chapter brings up.

Jonah will eventually realize that the Lord sent this sea creature to save him, not to kill him. Yet, it seemed to take a while for our wayward prophet to become aware of this.

Personal Pronouns Are Used

As we mentioned in our introduction, this is the only chapter where we find person pronouns used. Jonah contains prayer has twenty-seven first person personal pronouns. In other words, these are references to himself. There are also fifteen second-or third-person references to the Lord.

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Jonah And The Sailors Shared Similar Experiences

We also discover a number of similarities between Jonah's experience and that of the sailors.

For example, each had a crisis at sea (1:4; 2:3-6). There was prayer directly to the Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (1:14; 2:2,7). Each were delivered, the sailors from the storm and Jonah from drowning (1:15; 2:6). Finally, in each case, sacrifices and vows were to be offered to the Lord (1:16; 2:9).

JONAH 2:1

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the fish's belly

It is possible that Jonah waited for the entire three days and three nights, at least 36 hours, before praying to the Lord. In other words he was assuming that he was going to die in the belly of the sea monster but he eventually realized that the Lord would not let him!

Recall in the previous chapter, Jonah had been asked by pagan sailors to call upon his "God" for their deliverance (1:6). We are not told whether or not Jonah prayed at that time.

Now he finally does indeed pray to the only God who exists, the One who made the land and the sea, and who alone will listen to his cry.

At that time in history, prayers were always spoken out loud. Hence, Jonah must have had a difficult time mouthing the words from the belly of this sea monster! We can probably find a little humor in this, as we can with other parts of this story!

JONAH 2:2 (Hebrew 2:3)

And he said: "I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction, and He answered me. "Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice.

Jonah begins to pray to the Lord. This verse summarizes the whole ordeal. He finds himself in trouble, therefore, he called out to the Lord for help. The Lord responded to his prayer and rescued him.

Since his prayer, and his words of thanksgiving, are similar to prayers that are found in the psalms, some commentators call this "Jonah's psalm."

I cried out to the Lord because of my affliction

Jonah begins by describing his predicament. Finding himself in this seemingly impossible situation, he asks the Lord for deliverance because of the horrific ordeal in which he finds himself.

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and He answered me

The Lord answered his call and heard his cry. To “hear” means “to respond to one’s cry for help.” In this instance, it was by delivering Jonah from dying at sea.

This is an important distinction. God certainly “hears” the prayers of everyone but only “answers” those prayers which come from his children, those who have believed in Him. Jonah is a child of God, though a wayward one.

Today the access to the one true God is only through the person of Jesus Christ:

For there is one God and one intermediary between God and humanity, Christ Jesus, himself human (1 Timothy 2:5 NET).

Why? Because none of us can approach the Lord without an intermediary.

He alone possesses immortality and lives in unapproachable light, whom no human has ever seen or is able to see. To him be honor and eternal power! (1 Timothy 6:16 NET).

Therefore, as in the case of Jonah, the Lord not only hears the prayers of His people, He also answers them. Unbelievers have no access to God apart from the person of Jesus Christ.

out of the belly of Sheol

Whether Jonah was describing the inward parts of the sea monster, or the sea that engulfed him before the sea creature swallowed him, he nonetheless described his distress as being in the “depths of the Sheol” or the “depths of the grave.”

The Hebrew word Sheol has a number of meanings. It can refer to the abode of the dead, the grave. This is certainly the place where it seemed that Jonah would enter. In fact, he pictures himself in the belly of Sheol. Basically the wayward prophet views himself being as good as dead (for a more thorough look at the subject of Sheol see our book *What Happens One Second After We Die?*, Appendices 1, 2 and 3).

I cried and You heard my voice

Jonah cried out to the Lord, and the Lord answered him. The term “voice” in this context, functions as a figure of speech for the entire content of what Jonah uttered. This is known as a metonymy. In other words, Jonah said the Lord heard his passionate plea for help when he prayed.

Instead of “my voice, some English translations render this as “my cry.” This includes the KJV, NASB, NRSV.

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Did Jonah Actually Die In The Belly of the Sea Monster?

While most commentators believe that Jonah was close to death in his harrowing experience, a few believe that Jonah was referring to an actual death experience in which he was miraculously brought back to life.

The miraculous event in this case would be resuscitation, or a re-animation back to life, as well as the later rescue from the belly of the sea monster.

The idea behind this belief is that experience of Jonah would conform to Jesus' statement:

Then some experts in Moses' Teachings and Pharisees said, "Teacher, we want you to show us a miraculous sign." He responded, "The people of an evil and unfaithful era look for a miraculous sign. But the only sign they will get is the sign of the prophet Jonah. Just as Jonah was in the belly of a huge fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights (Matthew 12:38-40 God's Word).

Thus, since we know that Jesus' body was dead in grave for three days, the thought here is that Jonah too was dead for that period of time.

While this is not impossible, there is nothing in the narrative that would suggest that Jonah actually died in the belly of this sea creature.

Even if he had been brought back to life, it would not be the same experience as what happened to Jesus. Jesus came back to life in a glorified body, never to die again.

If Jonah had died, then he merely would have been resuscitated, or re-animated. In other words, he would have been brought back to life in the same body that had died. This, of course, means that someday he would have died again and then stayed dead.

JONAH 2:3 (Hebrew 2:4)

For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the floods surrounded me; all Your billows and Your waves passed over me.

This prayer, or psalm, now begins with a detailed description of Jonah's experience which resulted from being thrown into the sea.

For You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,

Even though the sailors had hurled him into the sea (1:15), Jonah saw this as the Lord's divine hand behind their action. He knew that the Lord had orchestrated all of this.

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into the deep, into the heart of the seas

Many translations say, "the deep" (KJV, NASB, NIV). The NLT has "into the ocean depths." Also some English versions have "heart" of the seas. The CEV says "to the bottom of the sea."

The idea is that they are far enough away from land to the place where the water is deep.

all Your breakers and Your waves passed over me.

The phrase "Your breakers and your waves" is a figure of speech known as a hendiadys. This means the first noun functions as an adjective modifying the second noun. In other words it speaks of "your breaking waves." Simply put, the waves enveloped Jonah as he was sinking down deep into the ocean.

Jonah recognized that the Lord was in charge of the sea. It was "His" breaking waves that surrounded him. The psalmist wrote:

Your anger bears down on me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves (Psalm 88:7 NET).

Jonah had previously testified to the sailors that His God, the Lord, had made the sea and the dry land. In this instance, the prophet is confessing that the Lord Himself is alone responsible for vexing him with the sea waves that were crashing down upon his head and threatening to drown him.

God was indeed disciplining the wayward prophet for his refusal to obey the call to go to Nineveh. As a child of the living God, like all believers, Jonah received God's discipline; the purpose of which was to get him back on the straight and narrow path.

The writer to the Hebrews makes it clear that the Lord does indeed discipline those whom He loves:

As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? If God doesn't discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all (Hebrews 12:7-8 NLT).

JONAH 2:4 (Hebrew 2:5)

Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight; Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.

While recognizing his hopeless situation, we seemingly now have a glimmer of hope from Jonah.

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Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight

As a result of his sinful behavior, Jonah recognizes that he has been cast out of the sight of the Lord.

It is important that we realize that the "sight" of the Lord does not mean that God could not see Jonah once he went underwater! Instead, it has the idea that Jonah was now away from the blessed presence of the Lord.

Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.

A number of English translations see this as a statement of hope.

"Yet I will look again to your holy temple" or "Surely I will look again to your holy temple." In other words, Jonah is making a positive statement that he will once again worship the Lord in Jerusalem.

Is he doubting that he will see the Lord again?

However, it is also possible to translate this verse as a question Jonah is asking, one where he is expressing doubt. For example, the Revised Standard Version reads:

Then I said, 'I am driven away from your sight; how shall I look again upon your holy temple?' (Jonah 2:4 NRSV).

In other words, Jonah is asking "Will I ever see your holy temple again?" This question would then indicate that he despaired of ever seeing the temple again.

If this is the proper understanding of what he said, then Jonah is lamenting the idea that he will *not* be able to worship again at the temple in Jerusalem again. In fact, he seems certain that he is about to die.

Put another way, he is expressing his continual distress and misery as he is slowly drowning in the deep waters of the sea.

JONAH 2:5 (Hebrew 2:6)

Water engulfed me up to my neck; the deep ocean surrounded me, seaweed was wrapped around my head.

We now have a further graphic explanation of Jonah's situation at the time. It was becoming more and more hopeless by the minute.

water engulfed me up to my neck

The REB has "the water about me rose to my neck." The New Revised Standard version says: "The waters closed in over me."

Jonah's death seemed to be near at hand as he was swept under the waters of the waves and engulfed in seaweed as far as the throat.

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This Hebrew word *nephes* is translated in some 46 different ways in the King James Version of the Old Testament. It is the normal word for "soul." It refers sometimes to the "throat" or "neck." The water was up to his neck. The point was that his life was in great danger.

the deep ocean (the abyss) surrounded me

This Hebrew word speaks of the sea at its vastest. It is not merely referring to the ocean itself. It is the "deep sea" that is surrounding him.

seaweed was wrapped around my head

This description speaks for itself.

This Hebrew word normally refers to "reeds," which are freshwater plants that grow in Egyptian rivers and marshes. In this instance, it refers to "seaweed." While the same freshwater plants do not grow in the Mediterranean sea, the name may be seen to fit the long plants growing in the seawater.

JONAH 2:6 (Hebrew 2:7)

I went down to the very bottoms (extremities) of the mountains; the gates of the netherworld barred me in forever; but you brought me up from the Pit, O Lord, my God.

Jonah continues to describe his plight, but this verse does claim that the actions of the Lord ultimately rescued him.

I went down to the very bottoms (extremities) of the mountains

Jonah continues to go down! Here he uses the symbol of the very bottoms, or the extremities, of the mountains. Jonah was expressing his feeling of being in the deepest part of the ocean.

In other words, he was about as far removed from the world of human beings as it was possible for anyone to conceive. Hence, any help or hope was completely out of reach.

the gates of the netherworld barred me in forever (the earth's gates shut behind me forever! CSB)

The Hebrew noun *eret* usually refers to the "earth." As we just observed, the Christian Standard Bible translates it in this manner. In this translation, the "gates of the earth" are pictured as forever shut behind those who are dead, or about to die.

In this instance, however, it seems to refer the next world, the netherworld, the unseen realm of the dead. It is symbolically referred to as having gates that lock someone in forever.

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Either way we translate it, the idea is the same. Once this life is over there is no coming back to this world. We are gone from this life once and for all.

Of course, that does not mean that there is not life after death somewhere else. But, as far as this world is concerned, life is over.

but you brought me up from the Pit

He is another one of the “but God” statements in Jonah.

The prophet testifies that Lord, the One to whom he is addressing, is the One who brought him up from the pit (which is symbolic of death itself)

Therefore, Jonah is not only at the gates of the netherworld, he is already within the “pit” itself. In other words, without the direct intervention of the Lord he will soon be dead. Fortunately, the Lord did intervene.

O Lord, my God

He refers to Him as the Lord, my God. As we have observed during this entire episode, Jonah was certainly not acting as though the Lord was his God.

To the contrary, he purposely disobeyed God's direct commandment to go immediately to Nineveh and instead went the opposite direction.

JONAH 2:7 (Hebrew 2:8)

When my life was ebbing away, I called out to the Lord, and my prayer came to your holy temple.

When my life (soul)

Nephesh, the Hebrew word can mean, among other things, life, or soul.

was fainting away from me

The verb “to faint away” is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures in three different ways.

It can be used to describe the onset of death, when a person's life begins to slip away:

They [the children] faint like a wounded warrior in the city squares.
They die slowly in their mothers' arms (Lamentations 2:12 NET).

It is also used the loss of a person's senses due to turbulence in one's life:

They were hungry and thirsty. They began to lose hope (Psalm 107:5 God's Word).

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Third, it may refer to the loss of all hope of surviving some sort of tragedy:

Look on my right hand and see—there is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for me. (Psalm 142:4 NRSV)

These options are reflected in various English versions:

As my life was fading away (CSB), when my life was slipping away (CEV),
As my senses failed (REB), When I had lost all hope (NLT).

I called out to the Lord

The Hebrew verb *zakar* usually means “to remember, to call to mind.” For example, the name Zechariah means, “God Remembers.”

However, in some contexts the word also means “to call out.” The Hebrew idiom “to remember the LORD” has the idea of calling to mind His character and past actions and then appealing to Him for the much-needed help.

and my prayer came to your holy temple.

While this may be a reference to the holy temple in Jerusalem, it is more likely referring to the Lord's heavenly abode:

The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven. His eyes watch; his eyes examine all people (Psalm 11:4 NET).

Jonah could only look one direction, up.

JONAH 2:8 (Hebrew 2:9)

Those who worship worthless idols forfeit the mercy that could be theirs.

The English translations render this verse in a number of different ways:

Those who hold on to worthless idols abandon their loyalty to you (God's Word Translation)

Those who cherish worthless idols abandon their faithful love (CSB)

The idea here seems to be that those who abandon their source of confidence in the One true God, the Lord, will not experience His faithfulness. This will lead to manifold sorrows, in particular if one turns to idolatry. The psalmist wrote:

Those who quickly chase after other gods multiply their sorrows. I will not pour out their sacrificial offerings of blood or use my lips to speak their names (Psalm 16:4 God's Word).

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Indeed, no lifeless idol could bring about such a great a deliverance as the Lord, the God of heaven, who made both the sea and the dry land (see 1:9).

As we saw earlier, we can contrast God's deliverance with those aboard the ship who trusted these idols, their non-existent gods for a deliverance that never came.

Why did Jonah bring up the subject of idols?

In the midst of his situation, Jonah makes a statement concerning idols. Why would he do it at this time? While there is no evidence that Jonah was an idol worshipper, we should recognize that an idol is anything that takes away from our devotion to God.

Seemingly, Jonah was admitting that there were such idols in his life that robbed him of the blessing of the Lord. Exactly what they were, we are not told. If Jonah was admitting this at this particular time, he certainly had not learned his lesson as we will see in the next two chapters.

JONAH 2:9 (Hebrew 2:10)

But as for me, I promise to offer a sacrifice to you with a public declaration of praise; I will surely do what I have promised. Salvation belongs to the Lord!

But as for me, I promise

In contrast to idolaters, and perhaps even his own idolatry, Jonah, the wayward prophet, who to this point has not showed the same humanity as the pagan idolaters on the ship, will now make a vow to the Lord.

to offer a sacrifice to you

he says that he will offer some sort of sacrifice.

with a public declaration of praise

Along with the sacrifice there will be his public declaration of praise for the Lord.

The Hebrew says with a "voice" or "sound" or "with a sound of praise." His voice will produce hymns of praise. This specifies the kind of public statement that will accompany the sacrifice.

I will surely do what I have promised. (what I have vowed I will pay)

The verbs translated "I will sacrifice" and "I will pay" are Hebrew expressions of the resolve and intention of Jonah to follow through with which he has now promised to do. If he survives, Jonah promised to offer a sacrifice and publicly announce why he is thankful to the Lord.

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Salvation belongs to the Lord!

Or salvation “comes from the LORD.”

Deliverance belongs to the LORD!” (Jonah 2:9 NRSV)

Victory is the LORD's! (REB)

This is one of the greatest statements in the entire Old Testament! Salvation, deliverance, and victory, they all come from the Lord.

Jonah certainly learned this lesson in a supernatural way. His life was spared by this huge sea monster who swallowed him, but did not ingest him, keeping him alive for at least thirty-six hours. Only the Lord, and the Lord alone, could do something like this!

Even as the Lord had physically delivered the sailors (chapter 1), and now Jonah (chapter 2), He also will also deliver Nineveh (see chapter 3).

JONAH 2:10 (Hebrew 2:11)

Then the Lord commanded the sea monster and it vomited Jonah onto dry land

It seems that once Jonah recognized that salvation, or deliverance was something that belonged to the Lord alone that his time in the belly of the monster had ended.

The sea monster received another command by the Lord. It has already swallowed the prophet on a previous command but now it is commanded to vomit him, specifically onto the dry land.

We should not miss the contrast to Jonah who immediately fled the opposite direction when the Lord commanded him. Here the sea monster once again immediately obeys God's command.

This is our sixth divine appointment. The sea monster could have just as easily vomited Jonah somewhere in the ocean, but it did not. Jonah is saved by the Lord in order to fulfill his destiny, to preach the warning of doom to the sinful people of Nineveh.

Interestingly, we find no confession of sin in this prayer, no acknowledgment that he had disobeyed the Lord's commands in his office as a prophet, and no sorrow whatsoever for his past behavior. Obviously, Jonah had not yet learned his lesson.

Our next chapter will resume this adventure of the wayward prophet. We will continue to see the mighty hand of God in his life but unfortunately Jonah will not learn the various lessons that the Lord is showing him.

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What's Happened So Far?

Jonah has now been vomited up by the sea monster onto dry land. His life had been miraculously spared in two ways. First, he did not drown because the sea creature swallowed him.

Second, the monster of the deep, though swallowing Jonah, did not ingest him but rather vomited up on dry land.

While we are not told as to precisely where the great fish vomited Jonah onto dry land, what we do know is this: wherever Jonah was, the Lord was there with him.

In fact, during the entire time of Jonah's rebellion against the Lord, we know that He was displeased with His wayward prophet, but the Lord never abandoned him.

Accordingly, it was the Lord who controlled the beginning, as well as the end, of the horrific storm. In addition, God miraculously prepared the great sea monster to rescue Jonah from certain death. As the Scripture testifies:

Now, this is what the LORD says, the one who created you, O Jacob, and formed you, O Israel: "Don't be afraid, for I will protect you. call you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I am with you; when you pass through the streams, they will not overwhelm you (Isaiah 43:1-2 NET).

Jonah experienced this firsthand. Indeed, the waters of the vast ocean did not overwhelm him.

The Saddest Verse In The Bible

The author of this book once heard a sermon by a Rabbi about the "saddest verse in the Bible." Since he only accepted the Old Testament as divinely inspired, the verse would have to come from the Hebrew Scriptures. His answer: Samson died with the Philistines.

The idea was that Samson, who was so gifted by God squandered those gifts that were his and died an ignoble death among his enemies. The congregation was exhorted not to follow Samson's example. Do not be like Samson and waste your God-given talents.

After giving this question some thought, and also considering the New Testament, the author concluded that the saddest verse in the Bible was actually John 1:10:

He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, but the world knew Him not (John 1:10 KJV).

Even though He created the world, Jesus was not acknowledged by the people that He created. This, to the author, was the saddest verse in the entire Bible. As one person expressed it:

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He was crucified on a cross of wood
Yet He made the hill on which it stood

Sad indeed.

On the other hand, the most comforting verse in the entire Bible, is the next verse that we will read!

JONAH 3:1

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying,

This is indeed the most comforting verse in all of Scripture! We serve the God of the "second chance."

The Lord would have had every right to let Jonah die in the ocean, or in the belly of the giant sea monster. But in His amazing grace and wonderful mercy, the Lord gave Jonah a "second chance."

This is an important lesson for anyone who has received a "second chance" by the Lord. The Apostle Paul said we are to run the race of life on the narrow road, moving straight toward our goal while keeping our eye on the prize, and not looking back:

It's not that I've already reached the goal or have already completed the course. But I run to win that which Jesus Christ has already won for me. Brothers and sisters, I can't consider myself a winner yet. This is what I do: I don't look back, I lengthen my stride, and I run straight toward the goal to win the prize that God's heavenly call offers in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14 God's Word).

Therefore, we are to confess our sins, put the past behind us, and then move forward in our service to the Lord. And above all, we thank the Lord that He has given us a second chance!

JONAH 3:2

"Go immediately to Nineveh, that large city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."

The original commission is restated, interestingly, without a rebuke from the Lord. This demonstrates that He is gracious in offering Jonah a second chance.

The grace, such as the Lord has displayed here, should be received with humility and gratitude. However, we have no recorded response of Jonah, no thanks to God from him for allowing a second chance.

We have other illustrations in Scripture of God giving his servants a "second chance." For example, Simon Peter after his multiple denials of Jesus, was told by the resurrected Christ to "feed the sheep." In other words, continue with the ministry:

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Then when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these do?" He replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus told him, "Feed my lambs." Jesus said a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He replied, "Yes, Lord, you know I love you." Jesus told him, "Shepherd my sheep." Jesus said a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was distressed that Jesus asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" and said, "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you." Jesus replied, "Feed my sheep (John 21:15-17)

The ministry of Simon Peter, the one who denied knowing Jesus on three different occasions, was not over, not at all!

In fact, it was he who opened the door of the gospel to the Jews (Acts 2) along with John to the Samaritans (Acts 8) and to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

John Mark had deserted his ministry with the Apostle Paul. However, after his desertion from the ministry he was eventually restored. In his last letter before his death, Paul wrote of John Mark:

Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is a great help to me in ministry (2 Timothy 4:11 NET)

These are testimonies of the Lord giving someone a second chance after failure. Peter and John Mark succeeded. We can too!

Be Careful Not To Presume On God's Grace

However, we should be careful not to presume that this will always occur. In fact, in some cases, Scripture reveals that certain acts of disobedience did not result in a second chance. We read the following examples of this in Scripture:

When the old prophet who had invited him to his house heard the news, he said, "It is the prophet who rebelled against the LORD. The LORD delivered him over to the lion and it ripped him up and killed him, just as the LORD warned him (1 Kings 13:26 NET).

In another example, because of disobedience, neither Moses nor Aaron were allowed to enter the Promised Land:

But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'You did not trust me so far as to uphold my holiness in the sight of the Israelites; therefore you will not lead this assembly into the land I am giving them' (Numbers 20:12 REB).

Therefore, Jonah, when given this second chance, should have lived up to not only the calling and commission that the Lord had given to him, but he should have also gone to Nineveh with the right attitude. Unfortunately, as we will discover, he did not.

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This Command Sounded Familiar To Jonah

The Lord mercifully repeated the original command to Jonah (1:2). He is to go immediately on the 500-mile trip to Nineveh.

Nineveh, the great city

Nineveh is again called a great city

proclaim to it the message that I tell you.

This is also repeated from 1:2 but there is a variation here which may, or may not, be significant.

In 1:2 the command was “proclaim against.” In Scripture, this often designates an announcement of threatened judgment. For example, we read the following in the book of First Kings:

For the prophecy he announced with the LORD's authority against the altar in Bethel and against all the temples on the high places in the cities of the north will certainly be fulfilled (1 Kings 13:32 NIV)

However, there are some commentators who believe that the particular phrase used here may be more positive. Instead of “proclaim against” it is “proclaim to.” It is argued that this often designates a message of deliverance or a call to repentance. The offer of deliverance is either explicit or it is implied in this particular phrase.

It is, therefore, claimed that this shift to the more positive phrase might be either sending a signal of a shift in God's intentions, or it is also possible the phrase makes the Lord's original intention clearer.

In sum, this subtle change in the wording of the call of Jonah is perhaps intended to prepare the reader for the unexpected events that are about to take place.

However, in response to this we find that Jonah's message, as recorded in verse four in this chapter, gives no indication whatsoever of the option of repentance.

We will discover that God was indeed willing to forgive the people of Nineveh when they repented of their sins (3:8–10). However, it seems that nothing in the message of Jonah even allowed for this possibility.

In fact, as we shall see, the initial response of the King of Nineveh makes it clear that Jonah's message did not seem to allow for any holding back of the pronounced doom.

Jonah would later complain that he knew all along that the Lord was likely to call off the threatened punishment (4:2). Yet there is no indication whatsoever that this was part of his original message to the Ninevites.

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Indeed, all that is recorded is a stern warning of the coming doom, nothing else.

These words again emphasize the divine origin of the proclamation that Jonah was to make. Indeed, as a genuine prophet of God his message was actually God's message.

Interestingly, the Hebrew can be read as either past, present, or future. In other words, it could be either: the message that I gave you, the message that I am now giving to you, or the message that I will give you.

Whatever the case may be, Scripture is emphasizing that this is the message of the Lord, not of Jonah.

JONAH 3:3

So Jonah went immediately to Nineveh, as the LORD had said. (Now Nineveh was an enormous city - it required three days to walk through it!)

So Jonah went immediately to Nineveh as the LORD had said

We do not want to miss the irony here. When the same commission from the Lord was originally given to him, as recorded in chapter one, Jonah immediately went the *opposite* direction.

Now, the wayward prophet immediately obeys. His experience with the storm, the ship, the lots being cast, being thrown overboard, and the entire episode with the great sea monster was something that he certainly did not want to see repeated. Thus, he obeyed. But as we shall see, his heart was truly not in it.

Now Nineveh was an enormous city (a great city to God)

The greatness of Nineveh has been mentioned twice already (1:2 and 3:2). Something new has been added here which has commentators coming up with different answers as to its meaning.

To the point, the Hebrew text adds that Nineveh was, "a great city to God." So the obvious question is, "What does this mean?" What specifically is now being added to Nineveh's description?

Basically, four answers have been given.

- (1) It may refer to the LORD's personal evaluation of the city
- (2) It may speak of the city as actually "belonging to God Himself"
- (3) It may be emphasizing that Nineveh was a city with many shrines and gods

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(4) Or it may simply an idiomatic expression which reinforces the great size of the city

Bible interpreters do not agree on the correct answer. Many argue that to introduce the idea of God's ownership of the city is not spoken of anywhere in the text. Neither is the idea that Nineveh was a city dedicated to idolatry, though we know from history that it truly was a city of idols.

This basically leaves two alternatives.

Option 1: This Sinful City Of Nineveh Was Important To God

One possibility is that the Lord was stressing that Nineveh was important from His viewpoint. In other words, He cared about the many people who lived there and their lost condition.

The psalmist would later write of the dreaded condition of Jerusalem when it was in ruins from God's judgment:

He has become an object of disdain to his neighbors (Psalm 89:41 NET)

He has become the object of his neighbors' scorn (Psalm 89:41 God's Word)

If this is the correct understanding of these words, then it is emphasizing God's perspective of the sinful population of this city as well as the necessity of repentance.

Option 2: The Physical Size And Large Population Are Emphasized

The other possibility is that it idiomatically is emphasizing the physical size of the city. Therefore, "great" does not mean "important" here. It is the size and population that is in view. Indeed, in the next phrase, Scripture does again put our attention on its size.

it required three days to walk through it!

This next statement seems to give support for this second option. The Hebrew reads "a three-day walk." Some translations add the words "required...to walk through it" for the sake of clarity. What does "three days to walk" mean?

No one is certain as to what "a three-day walk" precisely means. A number of suggestions have been offered.

Option 1: The time it took to walk around the walls of the city

While this explanation has been offered, because of the existing archaeological remains that have been discovered of the ancient city of Nineveh, some feel that it cannot describe the time it would take to walk

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around the city walls, or walk from one end to the other. The city was not that big at that time.

Option 2: This referred to Nineveh and its environs

Another suggestion is that it is more than the city of Nineveh proper that is in view here. In other words, it refers to Nineveh and the outlying regions.

In fact, the Book of Genesis had already described Nineveh proper as a great city along with its suburbs. All of this had been built by Nimrod:

From that land he [Nimrod] went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, and Resen, which is between Nineveh and the great city Calah (Genesis 10:11-12 NET).

Option 3: The time that is necessary to do business

Some believe it indicates the amount of time required to arrive in the city, to do whatever business is necessary, and then leave Nineveh.

JONAH 3:4

When Jonah began to enter the city one day's walk, he announced, "At the end of forty days, Nineveh will be overthrown!"

Interestingly, while Scripture has already focused so much attention on the efforts to get Jonah to go to Nineveh, his activity while he was there is recorded with only a few words.

Instead, prominence will be given to the reception of his message by the Ninevites which will result in God not carrying out the threatened destruction.

When Jonah began to enter the city one day's walk

This does not mean that Jonah traveled into the city for an entire day before he began his message of doom. Instead, it means that on the very first day that he entered Nineveh he immediately began preaching.

It has been suggested that Jonah's first day consisted of making contact in the manner of an ambassador. In the ancient world prophets were often viewed as having an office similar to that of ambassador, since they represented a particular god or gods.

This would give them a type of diplomatic immunity. This may explain why Jonah was allowed to preach the message of the coming destruction without being arrested or having something worse happen to him.

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he announced, At the end of forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown!

The message of Jonah consisted of only five words in Hebrew. The warning of God's prophet was very specific: There is a limited amount time before destruction will take place, forty days.

As we have emphasized, there is nothing about repentance, or that God may hold back His coming punishment. Nothing whatsoever.

will be overturned

The Hebrew word translated "overthrown," or "overturn," can refer to destruction, as in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah:

So he overthrew those cities and all that region, including all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation that grew from the ground (Genesis 19:25 NET).

However, it can also be translated as "to transform, or "to turn around."

The use of this particular word here is certainly not accidental. Although Nineveh was not overturned, it did indeed experience a "turn around."

The Number Forty Is Significant

We should also recognize that the number "forty" is found a number of times in the Old Testament. It is often associated with periods that have special significance:

Moses went into the cloud when he went up the mountain, and Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights (Exodus 34:18 NET).

The wayward nation was doomed to wander in the wilderness for forty years after complaining that there were "giants" in the Promised Land that they were about to enter:

According to the number of the days you have investigated this land, forty days - one day for a year - you will suffer for your iniquities, forty years, and you will know what it means to thwart me (Numbers 14:34 NET)

JONAH 3:5

The people of Nineveh believed in God, and they declared a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.

This verse gives us a summary of the response in Nineveh. We find that the people of all ranks believed in the pronouncement of doom given by Jonah. Furthermore, they gave evidence of their contrition for their many sins by fasting and wearing sackcloth.

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Verses 6–9 will provide specific details about their belief, focusing on the reaction of the king. Interestingly, we will find that the response of the Ninevites will be similar to that of the pagan sailors recorded in chapter one (1:6 and 13–16).

The people of Nineveh believed in God

Amazingly, the words of Jonah spread rapidly through every part of greater Nineveh. The doomsday message of the prophet was instantly believed by all.

We should also note that they believed “in God.” The Hebrew idiom translated “believe in,” denotes more than just believing what someone has said. It has the idea of trusting a person.

In fact, the response of the people of Nineveh is presented here in terms of what the Lord has expected from his own people. For example, we read in Exodus:

When Israel saw the great power that the LORD had exercised over the Egyptians, they feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses (Exodus 14:31 NET).

While we are not specifically told that it was Yahweh, or Jehovah, the God of the Bible, that they believed in, it seems rather obvious that this must have been the case. Indeed, the response of the Lord to their repentance makes this clear.

and they declared a fast and put on sackcloth

In demonstration of their newfound belief, the people did two outward things. First, they declared a fast, the abstaining from food, and then they dressed themselves in sackcloth, which is coarse cloth.

This was a common means in the ancient world of expressing grief, humility, and penitence. These displays were the hallmarks of true repentance of their past sins.

from the greatest of them to the least of them.

We should note that this was done by the entire population.

Did this really happen? Are we to believe that the people of Nineveh truly repented at the warning of Jonah?

We are indeed meant to believe it!

The Testimony Of Jesus

Jesus made it clear that their conversion was genuine:

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The people of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented when Jonah preached to them - and now, something greater than Jonah is here! (Luke 11:32 NET)

In this instance, we have the testimony of God the Son that the people of Nineveh “repented at the preaching of Jonah.” This will result in them being present at the day of judgment condemning those who rejected Jesus’ preaching while He was here upon the earth.

Accordingly, it cannot be denied that this revival actually took place. Matthew records Jesus saying the following:

One day some teachers of religious law and Pharisees came to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we want you to show us a miraculous sign to prove your authority.”

But Jesus replied, “Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign; but the only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.

“The people of Nineveh will stand up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, for they repented of their sins at the preaching of Jonah. Now someone greater than Jonah is here—but you refuse to repent. The queen of Sheba will also stand up against this generation on judgment day and condemn it, for she came from a distant land to hear the wisdom of Solomon. Now someone greater than Solomon is here—but you refuse to listen (Matthew 12:38-42 NLT).

There is something else which must be noted. The Lord would have never stayed His hand of punishment against the evil Ninevites if they had been acting out of mere hypocrisy. Indeed, there had to have been sincere repentance on their part for the Lord not to destroy them.

While their change in behavior may have been relatively short-lived, it was indeed a genuine repentance that led those who believed to eternal life. How long the people of Nineveh submitted to the Lord is unknown.

As we have earlier indicated, Jonah’s visit seemingly occurred during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel. Scripture does not mention the Assyrian Empire for some thirty to forty years later until Pul, the Assyrian king, came up against the Israelite king Menahem.

We should also recall that the northern kingdom of Israel had kings that were consistently evil. Indeed, all of them had turned their back on the Lord.

It was not until the reign of Hezekiah that the southern kingdom of Judah was invaded by the Assyrian king Sennacherib. This was the first time after Jonah’s visit, that the king and people of Assyria defied the Lord.

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The Assyrian Empire, with Nineveh as its capital, was not finally destroyed until 612 B.C. Therefore, this repentance by the people of Nineveh allowed them to continue for approximately 150 more years.

The prophet Jonah himself may have been a sign

We must also consider Jonah's experience in the belly of the great sea monster as possibly being one of the reasons as to why the people so quickly believed him.

What do we mean by this? Well, it is possible that people actually saw Jonah being vomited up by the sea monster. If this had happened, the story would have quickly spread far and wide.

Even if nobody saw it, there is something else that must be considered. It is likely that Jonah's body would have undergone a number of changes by being in the stomach of this beast for at least thirty-six hours.

Indeed, he must have looked very odd. We should assume that some people probably asked him what had happened to him, including those in Nineveh.

Jesus emphasized that Jonah himself was a "sign" to the Ninevites (Matthew 12:38-41). Consequently, it seems likely that this included the way he looked after his harrowing experience in the belly of the sea monster.

JONAH 3:6

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, took off his royal robe, put on sackcloth, and sat on ashes.

The "king of Nineveh" is the title given to the ruler. This title would have been the way the Hebrews described the office of this ruler. In other words, from the point of view of the Ninevites, he may not have necessarily been a "king" in their eyes but he was a "king" to those who were from Israel.

It is possible that the repentance started on the very first day of Jonah's visit. The king who was either in the city, or could be reached by messenger elsewhere, joined the groundswell of the response of the public and thus made the repentance an official act. His official proclamation (verses 7-9) may have taken place on either the second or third day of Jonah's visit.

There is evidence in the ancient neo-Assyrian records of similar general proclamations which called for fasting and the wearing of sackcloth, even by animals. Sackcloth was an uncomfortable prickly fabric which was worn as a means of self-denial, as well as to demonstrate some type of sorrow.

The description of the king's behavior was as follows: first he arises, then he takes off his royal clothes, then he puts on the sackcloth, then he sits back down. However, it is not on his throne, but rather in dust or ashes.

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This act showed genuine repentance as well as setting an example for the rest of the populace. It was truly an amazing occurrence!

JONAH 3:7

He issued a proclamation and said, "In Nineveh, by the decree of the king and his nobles: No human or animal, cattle or sheep, is to taste anything; they must not eat and they must not drink water.

The leader of Nineveh, as well as the nobility, issued a decree that affected every single citizen, as well as all the beasts. The command was that every person must show specific evidence of repentance.

What led to this commandment was their immediate fear of punishment from God! In this instance, they did indeed rightly fear the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

No human or animal, cattle or sheep, is to taste anything; they must not eat and they must not drink water.

This was a complete abstention from all food and drink. Obviously, the people could not exist for very long if they kept to this decree. Something had to give! This is another reason to believe that the repentance was immediate as well as the response of the Lord.

JONAH 3:8

Every person and animal must put on sackcloth and must cry earnestly to God, and everyone must turn from their evil way of living and from the violence that they do.

Every person and animal must put on sackcloth

In an outward sign of their contrition and repentance for past behavior, all living creatures in Nineveh, humans as well as animals, were to have their bodies covered with this extremely uncomfortable sackcloth. It must have been some sight to see!

and must cry earnestly to God

It is not specified which God that they were praying to. However, it is possible, even likely, that Jonah would have explained to them which God it was who was pronouncing this coming doom. If not, the Lord would have communicated this truth some other way.

The royal summons to call urgently on God reminds us of earlier statements in Jonah concerning prayer:

The ship's captain approached him and said, "What are you doing asleep? Get up! Cry out to your god! Perhaps your god might take notice of us so that we might not die!" (Jonah 1:6 NET).

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Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the stomach of the fish and said, "I called out to the LORD from my distress, and he answered me; from the belly of Sheol I cried out for help, and you heard my prayer" (Jonah 2:1-2)

Hence this is the third instance in the Book of Jonah where God is directly called upon to save lives.

First, it was the people in the ship who were perishing, second, Jonah himself as he was drowning and now, third, the people of Nineveh. Each prayer was answered by God in the affirmative.

and everyone must turn from their evil way of living

In addition to this outward show, there must also be a change of behavior. The evil ways in which these godless people have acted must come to an immediate end.

In other words, it is not enough to merely "say" that you believe something, there has to be actions to back it up. This is the idea behind true repentance.

and from the violence that they do (that is in their hands)

The Hebrew text reads the violence "in their hands." By speaking of the harm they did as "in their hands," the king recognized the personal awareness of the people of Nineveh that they, and they alone, were responsible for their sinful behavior.

The term "hands" can be understood in one of two ways. It may be a figure of speech, referring to the entire person. For example we read:

Is not the hand of Joab in all this? (2 Samuel 14:19 NET)

In this instance, the hand of Joab referred to his entire person.

It is also possible that the hands are symbolic of the guilt of the entire person.

Either way, this descriptive figure of speech by the king reinforces the fact that they acknowledged their guilt before God.

They Knew They Were Guilty

Obviously, the people of Nineveh made the connection between the promised punishment predicted by this visiting prophet Jonah and their own evil behavior. Hence, they hoped that if they abandoned their wicked ways, they may be able to receive mercy from God.

The Emphasis Was On Their Violence

Interestingly, the Hebrew word that is translated "violence" is *hamas*.

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It represents the attitude and the conduct of a person, or a people group, who have attained power over others and then misused that power.

This reference to violence would immediately cause any reader, who knew the Scriptures, to recall that the very same word was used twice in Genesis as a reason for the Lord sending the flood of Noah:

The earth was ruined in the sight of God; the earth was filled with violence. God saw the earth, and indeed it was ruined, for all living creatures on the earth were sinful. So God said to Noah, "I have decided that all living creatures must die, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. Now I am about to destroy them and the earth" (Genesis 6:11-13 NET).

Accordingly, since the Lord, the God of the Bible, had previously destroyed the entire world in the days of Noah because the people were so violent, we now find Jonah bearing the same message of the coming doom on another violent civilization in the ancient world.

We know from other passages of Scripture that the soldiers from Assyria soldiers were especially violent. In fact, about one hundred years later, we find the prophet Nahum predicting their doom because of their violent actions:

Woe to the city guilty of bloodshed! She is full of lies; she is filled with plunder; she has hoarded her spoil! ... The charioteers will charge ahead; their swords will flash and their spears will glimmer! There will be many people slain; there will be piles of the dead, and countless casualties -so many that people will stumble over the corpses. "Because you have acted like a wanton prostitute - a seductive mistress who practices sorcery, who enslaves nations by her harlotry, and entices peoples by her sorcery - I am against you," declares the LORD who commands armies (Nahum 3:1, 3-5 NET).

To sum up, from what we know from the Bible, as well as secular history, the people of Nineveh were prime candidates for God's destruction because of their continual wicked and extremely violent behavior.

Why Would They Repent?

Amazingly, it is possible it was after only one day of the preaching of Jonah that the people of Nineveh immediately repented.

The big question is why would the people, from the king to the all the inhabitants of Nineveh, instantly repent of their wicked ways?

In other words, what would have caused this huge population of Nineveh to react so favorably to the preaching of this obscure prophet from a foreign country?

Interestingly, we know from the Assyrian omen texts, there were five circumstances that could cause the people, even its king to fast and to go

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into a period of mourning. They include invasion by an enemy, a total solar eclipse, famine, a major outbreak of disease, or a major flood.

Among other things, we know that a major earthquake had occurred in the reign of one of the kings with the name Ashurdan (who was possibly the king at this time). As we mentioned in our introduction, on June 15, 763 B.C. in the tenth year of Ashurdan III, there was a total solar eclipse covering Nineveh and the rest of Assyria!

Circumstances such as these may have caused the superstitious population of Nineveh to immediately respond to this message of the foreign prophet Jonah. Indeed, this would finally explain to them as to why they were experiencing so many unnatural events.

Accordingly, a foreign god had sent his prophet to warn them of their impending doom. It seems that the Lord had indeed set the stage for their repentance with a number of unusual natural events that truly got their attention. In other words, the divine appointments at just the right time!

JONAH 3:9

Who knows? Perhaps God might be willing to change his mind and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we might not die.

We now get an insight into the mind of the king.

Who knows?

The king expresses his uncertainty about the exact meaning of the warning. In other words, he was not assured whether Jonah's message constituted a conditional warning or an unconditional decree.

perhaps God

Again, the king is unaware of any promise of God of stopping the predicted destruction of Nineveh. He, of course, is hoping that the Lord would respond to their genuine repentance, but it is clear from his response that there was no guarantee of this.

might be willing to change his mind

Thus, he wondered if God may change His mind and not do what He had proclaimed through His prophet. Interestingly, the king did indeed recognize that the Lord was rightly angry enough at the evil actions of the people to send His prophet to warn them. Therefore, he took seriously the possibility that they all would indeed die.

and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we might not die

Like the captain of the ship that we observed earlier (1:6), as well as his crew (1:14), the king and his nobles all acknowledge the complete freedom that the Lord has to do whatever He pleases.

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They also realized that mere outward actions and prayers would not guarantee forgiveness from God. In sum, they understood that He was certainly not under any obligation to forgive them of their many sins.

However, they held out the hope that, perhaps, God would indeed look upon them mercifully and turn away His righteous anger. Accordingly, a total turnabout by the people of Nineveh may possibly be enough for God to do likewise and not punish them.

Actually, the populace of Nineveh stumbled upon an important biblical truth. The Lord truly does consider the behavior of individuals, as well as nations, when it comes to exacting His threatened punishment upon them.

For example, in Jeremiah, the Lord emphasized that sometimes He will give people an opportunity to repent when they heed His warning of the coming judgment:

There are times, Jeremiah, when I threaten to uproot, tear down, and destroy a nation or kingdom. But if that nation I threatened stops doing wrong, I will cancel the destruction I intended to do to it (Jeremiah 18:8,9 NET).

According to this passage, the Lord declares that He may cancel a threatened punishment “if the people would truly change their behavior.”

We find the same words echoed in the Book of Joel to the people of Israel:

Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and boundless in loyal love-often relenting from calamitous punishment. Who knows? Perhaps he will be compassionate and grant a reprieve, and leave blessing in his wake-a meal offering and a drink offering for you to offer to the LORD your God! (Joel 2:13,14).

Who knows indeed! In fact, we are going to see Jonah quoting this same language about the nature and character of God in the next chapter.

However, while the Lord is slow to anger, His patience is not endless.

In fact, as the prophets Amos and Isaiah learned, if a people who were constantly warned, but still refused to repent of their sins over a period of time, the patience of the Lord could indeed be exhausted.

To the point, about fifty years after Jonah's time, the refusal of the northern kingdom of Israel to change their sinful ways would cause them to be taken into captivity by none other than the Assyrian army!

Therefore, it is a biblical truth, that the Lord's offer of a conditional announcement of punishment can certainly be withdrawn and, in its place, an unconditional decree of judgment could be issued.

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How Do We Know When It Is Conditional Or Unconditional?

This brings up an important question. In many situations, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine on the front end whether or not a prophetic message of the coming judgment of the Lord is conditional or unconditional.

This would explain the uncertainty of the king of Nineveh because there is nothing in the recorded message of Jonah that would indicate that the Lord would potentially stop His predicted punishment.

Turn and Relent

The king was hoping that God would “turn and relent” These two verbs “turn” and “relent” may function in one of two ways. Possibly they are functioning independently, “turn and relent.” It’s also possible that they form the idea being “willing to turn.”

Repent and Relent

There is an important distinction that we must make here. The verb translated as “repent,” when used in reference to past actions, can mean “to be sorry” or “to regret” something that someone did in the past.

When “relent” is used with respect to future planned actions, it can mean “to change one’s mind” about doing something that has not yet happened. In this case, “to relent” from sending judgment.

Therefore, the English term “relent” is better suited to describe God’s future actions than the word “repent.”

These two Hebrew verbs are used together in other passages that consider the question as to whether or not God will change his mind and relent from His threatened judgment. For example, we read in Jeremiah:

The earth will be in mourning for this and the heavens above turn black; for I have made known my purpose, and I shall not relent or change it (Jeremiah 4:28 REB).

The Lord may or may not relent of predicted future actions. Indeed the decision is entirely up to Him and to Him alone.

Again we find a parallel between the king of Nineveh and the captain of the ship (1:6). Indeed, each were hoping that God would listen to them and allow their lives to be saved.

In each case, their prayers were answered in the affirmative! The Lord is indeed a loving, merciful God!

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JONAH 3:10

When God saw their actions - they turned from their evil way of living! - God relented concerning the judgment he had threatened them with and he did not destroy them.

The theme of repentance, which was emphasized in verse nine is further stressed in the tenth verse. As a result of their outward actions, the Lord did indeed withdraw the planned destruction that they so richly deserved.

When God saw their actions

Of course, the God of the Bible sees everything, and He knows everything that will happen. In other words, this contrition and repentance by the Ninevites did not take Him by surprise. As we find often in Scripture, the actions of God are explained to us from a human perspective.

The technical term is “anthropopathism.” We explain this figure of speech in more detail in our book *What Everyone Needs To Know About God* (Question 54).

they turned from their evil way of living

A number of translations say, “wicked way” (KJV, ASV, NASB)

God relented

From a human point of view, God changed His mind about what He was going to do. But, from Scripture, we know that the Lord never changes His mind:

I am the LORD, and I do not change (Malachi 3:6 NLT).

We will have a little more to say about this when we conclude this chapter

concerning the judgment

The Hebrew noun that is used in this context has the idea of a calamity. Here it functions as a figure of speech which represents the result of God's warning—the threatened judgment of the entire city.

Interestingly, the root of this Hebrew word is repeated three times in verses eight and ten. Twice it refers to the moral “evil” of the Ninevites. In this final instance the word is used in reference to the “calamity” that the Lord had threatened to bring upon the sinning populace (verse 10).

This wordplay in Hebrew emphasizes that the response of God was certainly appropriate: Why? It is because the Ninevites repented from their moral “evil,” and, in turn, the Lord then relented from the “calamity” that He had threatened upon the sinful people.

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he had threatened them with and he did not destroy them.

While the threat was indeed real, the genuine repentance of the people kept it from taking place. As we mentioned earlier, the Lord has gone on record saying that sometimes He does not follow through with His predicted punishment upon people if there is indeed a change of heart.

Did The People Immediately Know That The Lord Relented?

What we are not told is how, or if, this change of direction from the Lord was communicated to the people of Nineveh. Did Jonah tell them? Or did they wait the entire forty days to discover if they would be destroyed.

Obviously, they could not go without water for forty days and still survive. These questions are not answered for us in the text.

We End With An Unexpected Twist

Therefore, chapter three ends with a shocking twist in the narrative. Their actions were something that was entirely unexpected. The evil people of Nineveh actually believed the message of the Hebrew prophet Jonah to the degree that they humbled themselves with fasting, wearing the extremely uncomfortable sackcloth clothing, and admitting their past guilt to the Lord. In other words, their behavior completely changed!

At this point, one would think that Jonah would be delighted that his excursion to Nineveh resulted in the conversion of the people in that vast city. Yet, as we will see, this would not be the case.

Before we look at chapter 4 there is an issue that we need to further explain.

Does God Change His Mind?

As we have an example in this chapter, there are a number of passages in Scripture which seem to say that God changed His mind when certain circumstances presented themselves.

Furthermore, in other passages, the Bible says that God was actually sorry about something He had done.

One instance is found in the Book of Genesis. It seems to say that God was sorry or grieved, that He had made humanity. As an explanation as to why God sent the flood, we read the following words:

And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart (Genesis 6:6 RSV).

The New International Version translates the verse in this manner:

The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain (Genesis 6:6 NIV).

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Does this mean God was truly sorry that He created the human race? Did the Lord think He had made a mistake? Does this mean that He actually regretted His original creation? Was God second-guessing Himself?

There have been a couple of ways in which Bible-believers have responded to it. They are as follows.

**Option 1: The Expression Is Anthropopathic Language:
Human Terms Are Used To Describe God's
Emotions**

The usual way of dealing with this passage is to assume that we have an anthropopathism. This consists of attributing human feelings and emotions to God.

In other words, God does not actually feel these emotions as we feel them. Instead these terms are used of God to help us understand His response.

Thus, these words are for our benefit—they are not describing God's true feelings. God does not become happy when we obey, or sad when we disobey, in the same manner as humans become happy or sad.

In other words, His emotions do not change based upon whether we obey Him or disobey. In this instance, the Scripture is using these human terms in expressing God's displeasure at the sin of the people.

There Is The Belief That God Does Have True Emotions

Some Bible students believe that the idea that God is without emotions is not exactly correct. While His emotions are certainly not the same as ours, we should not think of Him as an emotionless Being. He does have genuine emotions, but they are not the same as ours.

In other words, while He does experience definite feelings such as love and hate, they are not in response to our behavior. Neither does He express these emotions because He was unaware of what was to occur. Therefore, there is not a one-to-one comparison of His emotions and our emotions.

God Knew Ahead Of Time What Would Happen

This brings us to the next point. As far as God's knowledge is concerned, since He knows all things, He certainly knew, in the situation in Noah's day, that the people were going to rebel to the point where He would have to send a flood. This was not something He merely learned when the people reached a certain level of sinful behavior.

From all eternity He had known that this would occur. However, at a certain point in time, the knowledge became experiential. The fact that God personally experiences events in time has nothing to do with His lack of knowledge of the event. He always knew how the people were going to behave and, at the time of their rebellion, the Lord then experienced what He had known would take place.

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Also, we must emphasize that this verse says nothing about God being ignorant of the future behavior of the people. The verse does not say that God did not know what would happen in the future. This is only an inference which some people draw from this text.

But there is nothing in the text itself to suggest this. When we examine other passages in Scripture which state clearly that God knows all things, we must interpret this verse, and other similar verses, in light of these statements.

Accordingly, we should not take this statement in isolation and infer that it means that God was surprised by the events which lead up to His change of mind. In other words, this should not be our "control passage" in understanding what the Bible says about God's knowledge of things.

Therefore, we find nothing taught in this passage, or any other passage, which would make us alter the traditional view of God and His behavior. He did not have to switch His plans because humans behaved in a manner that He was not expecting.

We examine this subject of God's knowledge in detail in our book, *Does God Know Everything?*

Option 2: The Word Translated Regret Has An Entirely Different Meaning

There is also the possibility that the word translated "repent" or "regret" has a different meaning than what is usually assigned to it. Indeed, the Hebrew word translated "repent" is translated by a number of different English terms elsewhere in Scripture.

Therefore, the idea may not be that or being sorrowful, or repentant, but rather the idea may be that God wanted to set things right. In other words, as in Noah's day, He wanted to right the wrongs that the human race brought about.

If this is the proper understanding of this word, then it has nothing to say, one way or the other, about God's feelings or emotions. It is merely stating that the sinful behavior of humans needed to be dealt with. Nothing more, nothing less.

In sum, however we interpret this passage in the Book of Jonah we do not have to assume that God was regretting past decisions that He had made.

Consequently, when we read in Jonah that the Lord did not follow through with His intended punishment of Nineveh, we should not understand it as though He changed His mind, or that He was surprised by their response.

What we do know from the totality of Scripture is that God does not change in His attributes or in the ways that He operates with the human race. He is not a fickle God; Indeed, He is consistent and trustworthy in all things.

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Now that we understand this, let us go on to the next chapter and see how it unfolds.

Summarizing Where We Are To This Point

In the last chapter, we were told of the repentance of the people of Nineveh. They truly believed that their city would be destroyed because of their consistent evil behavior. Consequently, from the king on down, as well as all the animals, they wore sackcloth, and the people changed their evil ways. The warning of Jonah was heeded. Nineveh was spared.

If the last verse of chapter three would have ended the account of the prophet Jonah, then we would have considered him a further hero, a man who was used by the Lord to proclaim a warning that led to one of the greatest revivals in history.

Yet this was not the end of the story. This last chapter will provide us with the pitiful response of Jonah.

As we previously mentioned, one would think that God's prophet would rejoice in this fact. But, as we shall see, this is not what happened!

Jonah's Second Chance

Jonah received a second chance. Likewise, in God's mercy, each of us may also. But this cannot be interpreted as the moral to the story in the specific case of Jonah. In fact, there is no principle expressed here that guarantees that the Lord will always work this way with those believers who actively rebel against his will.

Jonah Is Not Typical of All Believers

This brings us to one of the greatest lessons in the little book. Jonah is *not* a typical figure. Indeed, his situation is by no means representative of all believers. Indeed, to the very end of this chapter, we will find Jonah expressing his consistent rebellion against the Lord.

Jonah's horrible attitude towards his enemies should serve as a warning to all believers. As we will discover in this chapter, his error will be visibly dealt with. This lesson will also be for our benefit.

In other words, we must never assume that God would ever go to such lengths to correct our own open rebellion against him.

Sin, of course, can be forgiven. But this is more than mere sin. In fact, it is open defiance to the expressed will and purpose of God! Accordingly, we should never think that we can get away with something like this and that the Lord will immediately restore us.

And lest we forget, Jonah continued to despise his divine calling even though he submitted to it. And, as we shall see, he later suffered yet more.

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Finally, we are never told what happened to Jonah. Did he repent? Did he see the error of his ways? Did he learn his lesson? We don't know. His legacy is not one that any of us should want to have!

JONAH 4:1

This displeased Jonah terribly and he became very angry

This chapter begins on a very troubling note. We find that what pleased the Lord (3:10), the repentance of Nineveh and then the holding back of their punishment, greatly displeased Jonah.

To make matters worse, this prophet of God considered the actions of the Lord as something wrong, something evil. Indeed, Jonah's hatred for the Ninevites was so great that he resented the very nature and actions of the God who had spared his life in the Mediterranean Sea!

Accordingly, this first verse we read will speak volumes about the disturbing attitude of this wayward prophet of God. Scripture emphasizes that believers are to obey the Lord, to think His thoughts.

For example, in the New Testament, believers are to be commanded to conduct their lives after that of the Lord Jesus:

Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did (1 John 2:6 NLT).

We are "His" servants, we belong to Him. Hence, His commandments are to be followed. And whatever He says, is the last Word on every matter, we have no right to second guess Him!

Therefore, this first sentence in this chapter informs us that Jonah, the unwilling prophet of God, was not willing to accept the grace and mercy that the Lord extended to the Ninevites. This is all the more contemptible when we recognize the amazing grace and mercy that the Lord had continually extended to him throughout his entire ordeal!

The Wordplay In Hebrew

We also find a wordplay here in the Hebrew. This is done to emphasize the immenseness of Jonah's disapproval of God's actions.

The use of the verb which is translated "to be evil, bad" and the noun variously translated as "evil, bad, calamity" creates a wordplay in this verse with the previous use in 3:8–10.

In sum, when the Lord saw that the Ninevites had repented from their moral evil (Hebrew *ra'ab*), He relented from the calamity (*ra'ab*) that he had threatened – and this incident greatly displeased (*ra'ab*) Jonah.

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and he became very angry

The Hebrew says, "it burned to him." This verb "to burn" is functioning here as a figure of speech referring to the overwhelming anger that Jonah was feeling. It is related to the noun found earlier in 3:9 in the phrase "the heat of his anger."

Simply put, the repetition of the word in its various forms emphasizes the contrast in the attitudes between the Lord and Jonah.

Therefore, what we have here is a prime example of what, as believers in the God of the Bible, we should never do, actively rebel against the expressed will of the Lord.

Indeed, Scripture informs us that the burning anger of the Lord "cooled off" when the people of Nineveh believed the warning of doom that Jonah had proclaimed and unanimously repented of their evil ways.

In complete contrast to this gracious act of the Lord, the anger of Jonah was "ignited" when the Lord did not destroy Nineveh as He had warned the people, through His prophet, that He would do.

To sum up, the sincere repentance of the people of Nineveh caused God's wrath to be averted. Hence, His merciful response cancelled the predicted punishment they had so richly deserved. However, this grace and mercy of what the Lord extended to the Ninevites made Jonah angry.

Jonah Was NOT A Changed Man!

While we are earlier told Jonah had indeed obeyed the Lord by going to Nineveh and preached the message that the Lord had given him (3:1-3), it is now becomes obvious that his behavior was a mere formality.

In other words, it was not done in any spirit of submission or obedience to the Lord's divine will. Simply put, Jonah unwillingly obeyed the Lord. While outwardly going through the motions, his heart was never in it.

Other Biblical Illustrations Of This Attitude

Jonah's sinful attitude toward the repentance and deliverance of the Ninevites is similar to a couple of illustrations that the Lord Jesus gave.

Jesus delivered the parable of a certain debtor who was forgiven of a huge amount of money that he owed to his master. However, he did not extend the same grace and forgiveness to one who owed him a very small amount (Matthew 18:21-35).

In this account, the debtor was thrilled with the idea that his master forgave him the huge debt. As far as he was concerned, that was wonderful. On the other hand, he could not find it in his heart to forgive a small debt that another man owed him. The Lord Jesus then offered this conclusion:

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Then his lord called the first slave and said to him, 'Evil slave! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me! Should you not have shown mercy to your fellow slave, just as I showed it to you?' And in anger his lord turned him over to the prison guards to torture him until he repaid all he owed. So also my heavenly Father will do to you, if each of you does not forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:32-34).

It is the attitude of the heart that the Lord is mainly concerned about, not merely the outward actions.

We also find a similar attitude in the elder brother towards his younger brother, in the story of the wayward son who returned to the father (Luke 15:25-30). He was angry that the father rejoiced that this wayward son of his had come to his senses and returned home:

Then the father said to him, Son, you are always with me, and everything that belongs to me is yours. It was appropriate to celebrate and be glad, for your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found (Luke 15:31,32 NET).

These examples provide an important lesson for each of us. We must always strive to have God's point of view on matters. We should never want to act like Jonah, only being concerned about our own selfish interests, and not the interests of others. Paul wrote:

Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too (Philippians 2:3,4 NLT)

Jonah certainly missed this biblical truth. It seems he assumed that merely going through the motions was sufficient. This attitude would cause the Lord to teach him a valuable lesson

JONAH 4:2

He prayed to the LORD and said, "Oh, LORD, this is just what I thought would happen when I was in my own country. This is what I tried to prevent by attempting to escape to Tarshish! - because I knew that you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and one who relents concerning threatened judgment

He prayed to the LORD and said

This is the first recorded time in this entire episode that Jonah prayed to the Lord outside of the belly of the sea monster. Though he was asked by the sailors to pray to his God that the great storm would cease, there is no record of him praying along with the men on the ship.

Therefore, the prayers of Jonah, as recorded in this little book, speaks volumes to us. Indeed, it will be clear that the basis of this prayer reveals

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the completely wrong attitude of God's prophet. Unfortunately, this an attitude that never changed during this entire narrative. Indeed, we will now discover what was always in his heart!

Oh, Lord

To begin with, Jonah addresses the Lord by His divine name, Yahweh, or Jehovah.

this is just what I thought

The Hebrew reads, "this was my saying." This would likely refer to the inner thoughts of Jonah. We are now going to find out what was really on his heart.

Interestingly, we do not find the slightest hint, anywhere else in the book of Jonah, that he had openly argued with the Lord when he received his original commission. Instead, he immediately disobeyed without seeming saying a word. While most of our English translations render it "I said" or "my saying," a few translate this as his inner speech:

"It is just as I feared" (REB)

"I knew from the very beginning" (CEV).

would happen

The phrase "would happen" is not part of the Hebrew text. Rather, it is supplied in some translations for the sake of clarity and smoothness.

A Rhetorical Question Expecting A Positive Answer

This can be translated as a rhetorical question. In doing so, the rhetorical saying of Jonah implies a positive answer.

"Was this not my saying while I was in my own country?"

In other words, yes, this was the very thing that Jonah had assumed would happen all along! Indeed, the prophet was afraid that this would be the outcome of him going to Nineveh.

Jonah knew that his God, the Creator of all things, was certainly willing to forgive these sinners. However, he did not want his enemies to know it. Now we discover why he went in the opposite direction the moment he received his commission.

This is what I tried to prevent by attempting to escape to Tarshish!

Tragically, Jonah admitted that he purposely tried to prevent this revival in Nineveh from happening. He did not want to see those evil people turning to the one true God in faith! This attitude of a prophet of God could not have been more wrong!

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We need to be reminded of the most famous verse in the Bible:

For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16 NET).

The Lord loved the evil people of Nineveh. Thus, He gave them a chance to repent of their evil ways. In this case, they did and He withheld His punishment.

this is why I originally fled to Tarshish.

The verb, translated as “fled,” or “to flee” has a broad range of meanings in Hebrew. It can have the idea of “fleeing previously,” “fleeing quickly” or possibly “fleeing to forestall something” (as in the message getting to Nineveh).

English translations reflect this wide variety of possible meanings:

“That is why I fled before” (KJV)
“I fled previously” (NKJV)
“I fled at the beginning” (NRSV)
“I first tried to flee” (NJB)
“That is why I was so quick to flee” (NIV)
“I hastened to flee” (ASV)
“I made haste to flee” (RSV)
“I did my best to run away” (Today's English Version)
“it was to forestall this that I tried to escape to Tarshish” (REB)
“in order to forestall this I fled” (NASB).

For the first time, the author of the Book of Jonah has revealed the reason as to why the prophet originally fled from the Lord's commission as recorded in Jonah 1:3.

Simply put, the truth of the matter is that the prophet did not want to give the Lord the opportunity to relent from punishing the people of Nineveh!

because I knew that you are gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, and one who relents concerning threatened judgment

Jonah now correctly cites the wonderful attributes of the Lord. It seems that he is angry that the Lord possesses such marvelous characteristics! Again, we should note, that Jonah was not upset when the Lord showed mercy to him in not letting him drown or be eaten by the sea monster.

gracious and compassionate

Indeed, Jonah was not upset at the Lord when He was gracious and compassionate to him! It reminds us of Jesus' saying from the Sermon on the Mount:

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Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For by the standard you judge you will be judged, and the measure you use will be the measure you receive. Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye, but fail to see the beam of wood in your own? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye,' while there is a beam in your own? You hypocrite! First remove the beam from your own eye, and then you can see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye (Matthew 7:1-5 NET).

slow to anger

The same can be said about the Lord being "slow to anger." Jonah was not bothered by it when God was patient with him.

abounding in mercy

"great" (KJV, ASV), NASB "abundant"

Again, abundant in mercy. Earlier, Jonah was on the receiving end of this abundant mercy of the Lord.

and one who relents concerning threatened judgment

As we mentioned, this is a biblical principle that is found throughout Scripture. Jonah knew full well that the Lord would likely forgive the people of Nineveh if they repented. In fact, we read that judgment is the Lord's "strange work:"

The LORD will fight as he did at Mount Perazim. He will be angry as he was in the Valley of Gibeon. He will do his work, his strange work. He will finish his job, his strange job (Isaiah 21:28 NCV).

This is important for us to understand. The Lord delights in showing mercy to those who obey His will. Judgment, or punishment, only comes after people continually rebel against His expressed will.

Jonah was afraid that all these wonderful attributes of God would be extended toward the horrible Ninevites, and, to his chagrin, this is precisely what happened!

The Motivation Is Now Revealed

From the very beginning, the readers of this little book of Jonah would have kept asking themselves the obvious question, "Why would Jonah do such a thing?" Now, the shocking truth as to why Jonah ran away in the beginning is revealed.

Therefore, by Jonah refusing to obey the direct Word of the Lord, he was assuming, or perhaps hoping, that their fate would be sealed. Indeed, if they did not hear the warning, there would have been no reason for them to turn to the Lord. Accordingly, this prophet of God fled in the precise opposite direction from where the Lord had commissioned him.

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Somehow Jonah seemed to believe that the Lord would have given up the idea of warning these evil people if he alone did not fulfill his commission, Consequently, God would destroy the entire population without giving them any advance warning. In sum, Jonah thought his inaction would lead to the destruction of Nineveh.

It never seemed to dawn upon Jonah that the Lord would do whatever it took to cause him to fulfill his calling, or possibly, that the Lord would commission another prophet to do his job.

Seemingly, Jonah thought so much of himself, that he believed that if *he* did not go to Nineveh, then there would be no hope for these evil people. None. Among other things, Jonah learned that the world does not revolve around him!

Why Would Jonah Want To Do This?

Though not stated “why,” Jonah wanted the Lord to destroy Nineveh. There are a number of possible reasons as to why he had this attitude.

Possibility 1: To Keep Assyria From Taking Israel Captive

The prophets Amos and Hosea had recently announced that God would use the evil Assyrians to judge the unrepentant northern kingdom of Israel and take them into exile:

They will not remain in the LORD's land. Ephraim will return to Egypt; they will eat ritually unclean food in Assyria ... They will return to Egypt! Assyria will rule over them because they refuse to repent! (Hosea 9:3; 11:5 NET)

The prophet Amos recorded the following:

I will drive you into exile beyond Damascus,” says the LORD (Amos 5:27 NET).

Accordingly, Jonah may have figured that if God destroyed Nineveh, then the Assyrians would not be able to destroy the northern kingdom of Israel.

Of course, a much better solution would have been for Jonah to work for the repentance of both Nineveh *and* Israel.

Possibility 2: He Was Concerned About His Reputation

He may have been concerned about being labeled a “false prophet” if his warning did not come to pass. Remember he was a national hero for a previous prophecy that came true. Maybe, he did not want to risk his reputation as the hero of the northern kingdom.

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Possibility 3: He Was A Bigot

Perhaps it was simply racial hatred toward a people different from Israel. In other words, Jonah was a bigot.

Whatever the case may be, Jonah cited his reason for fleeing to Tarshish was because of the fear of the success of his ministry! As to precisely why he was afraid of this, we are not told.

Irony

Again we emphasize the irony that is found in this narrative. Jonah did not want the people of Nineveh to experience the very same mercy of God that had been shown to him. In other words, it's fine for me but not for thee!

Contrasting Prayers

We should also note the contrast between this prayer and his previous prayer made from the belly of the sea monster.

When he was dying from drowning, he called upon the Lord for mercy and help. This was a heartfelt prayer of someone who knew that the Lord could rescue him.

On the other hand, this later prayer is basically a self-centered complaint to the Lord. We note that it is full of words like "I" and "me." Sadly, Jonah, like so many people, was only thinking about himself.

What a contrast to the Lord Jesus. Matthew describes His entire ministry in the following words:

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28 NLT).

The life and ministry of Jesus was all about "others." Jonah reveals that his "ministry" was all about "self." What a lesson for each of us to ponder!

To sum up, in his anger Jonah prayed. The same Hebrew word for prayer is used here as in Jonah 2:1. Yet Jonah's prayer was different.

Basically, he bawled out the Lord for being a loving merciful God! In fact, he even quoted the Scripture about the things in the Lord's nature that he did not like! We read in Exodus:

The LORD passed in front of Moses and said, "I am the LORD. The LORD is a God who shows mercy, who is kind, who doesn't become angry quickly, who has great love and faithfulness and is kind to thousands of people. The LORD forgives people for evil, for sin, and for turning against him" (Exodus 34:6,7 NCV).

All in all, Jonah failed in a number of ways.

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He failed to appreciate his absolute privilege of being God's instrument in these miraculous circumstances.

In addition, he failed to recognize the plan of the Lord in all of this.

Jonah also failed to experience the joy of seeing sinners repent.

There is also the likelihood that Jonah felt like a fool in all of this. The message of the doom of Nineveh did not occur as he proclaimed.

Even though God is a God of love, Jonah scolded Him because His love went beyond the limits of what Jonah thought was right. The evil Ninevites were not worthy of His love, though, of course, he thought that he himself certainly was!

JONAH 4:3

So now, Lord, kill me instead, because I would rather die than live!

With the result of the Ninevites being spared, Jonah not only wanted to die, he wanted the Lord Himself to kill him!

In other words, it was wrong for the Lord to spare the people of Nineveh but, in his perverse mind, there would be nothing wrong with the Lord killing him for actually fulfilling his commission!

Jonah's request to die was the depressed plea of a pathetic man. Indeed, he had seen things that were important to him go in the exact opposite direction from what he had hoped. Since the righteous actions of the Lord, who is the Living God, had not served Jonah's own sinful desires, he now requested that the Lord to kill him!

Who knows why he said this? Was it because he lamented about what the people in Israel might think about him and his mission? Would this national hero now be assumed to be a false prophet for publicly proclaiming something that did not happen? We do not know what was going through his mind.

Jonah Never Thought About Taking His Own Life

We should note that Jonah, along with Job and Elijah, are the three biblical characters who asked the Lord to take their lives. Of course, the Lord did not comply with the wishes of any of them.

There is something else that we should appreciate in their situations. None of them even considered the idea of taking their own life, the thought never crossed their mind.

Indeed, each of them, though dejected, realized that life is a precious gift from God, and only He has the right to take it. We do not.

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JONAH 4:4

The Lord said, “Are you really so very angry?”

The Lord asks Jonah a searching question.

We should note that this question from the Lord will occur again in verse nine when Jonah becomes further angered at the miraculous works of God. In that instance, it had to do with the withered plant that shaded Jonah.

The Hebrew can be translated in several ways: “Does it so thoroughly burn to you?” or “Does it rightly burn to you?” or “Does it burn so thoroughly to you?”

The verb to “burn” functions in this instance as a reference to very strong anger. The same verb is repeated from verse one and will be used again in verse nine.

In other words, the Lord is asking Jonah the question as to why he is so very angry. There is no recorded answer from Jonah of this question from the Lord.

JONAH 4:5

Jonah left the city and sat down east of it. He made a shelter for himself there and sat down under it in the shade to see what would happen to the city.

The events in 4:5–11 occurred during the forty days between the first day of Jonah's visit and the at the end of that period.

Jonah left the city and sat down east of it.

After Jonah's outburst against the Lord, we would have expected him to leave the city immediately, as Elijah the prophet did when had fled from Israel and sought refuge far from it to the south. However, while Jonah does leave the city of Nineveh proper, he did not immediately go back home. Instead he decided to go outside of the city and then proceeds to sit down and mope.

“from the east” or “from the front” “of the city”

Jonah evidently settled down somewhere on the slopes of the mountains that rise to the “east” of Nineveh. This vantage point would have provided a good view of whatever would happen to the city.

It looks like Jonah hoped to witness some type of spectacular punishment by the Lord such as the one that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. For some reason, Jonah seemed to think that the Lord might change His mind and destroy Nineveh after all. If so, he wanted a front row seat.

Furthermore, he probably was in no hurry to get back home to Israel.

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He made a shelter for himself there and sat down under it in the shade to see what would happen to the city.

Jonah, while hoping for the worst, decided to construct a shelter for himself in the shade. Sadly, from beginning of this story until the end, the attitude of Jonah was never the same as that of the Lord.

JONAH 4:6

The LORD God appointed a little plant and caused it to grow up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to rescue him from his misery. Now Jonah was very delighted about the little plant.

Because trees were not plentiful in this part of the world, Jonah would have likely made his shelter out of stone, without a roof. We again find that the God of the Bible, who is the Lord over all things, used His all-powerful control over nature to teach Jonah a lesson.

The Lord God

We should notice the shift in the name of God, from the Lord, “Yahweh” to “Yahweh Elohim,” in this verse. This is one of the few times this compound name “Lord God” is used in Scripture. We read the same description of Him in the creation account:

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created - when the LORD God made the earth and heavens (Genesis 2:4 NET)

It is the Lord God who is at work here, not merely God. The divine name, *Yahweh*, or *Jehovah*, coupled with the word *Elohim*, emphasizes precisely what God is doing, His supernatural work.

appointed

The verb in this particular form in Hebrew is used elsewhere in Jonah with the meaning “to send, to appoint” (Jonah 2:1). In the previous instance, it refers to the “appointing” of the great sea monster that swallowed Jonah.

a little plant

It not possible to identify the precise “little plant” that the Lord provided to give Jonah shade. It has been speculated that it could have been the castor bean plant. In Mesopotamia, this plant grows rapidly to as high as 12 feet tall with has large leaves.

Actually, it does not matter, since like the great sea monster, this is a plant that the Lord God Himself, the Creator, appointed.

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and caused it to grow up over Jonah to be a shade over his head

First, the Lord caused a vine to grow next to, as well as over Jonah's shelter. Thus, seemingly out of nowhere Jonah had shade—basically, a roof.

to rescue (deliver) him from his misery

This would temporarily deliver or rescue him of his misery from the intense heat.

But we must remember, it is Jonah who puts himself, once again, in a place that he should not be in. When the Lord had proclaimed that Nineveh would be spared, that was the last word on the subject. Accordingly, it was wrong for Jonah to wait around to see if the Lord might again change His mind.

Hence, we will discover the primary motivation of the Lord. It was not to “deliver” this wayward prophet from his physical discomfort brought on by the scorching heat. To the contrary, the Lord wanted to deal with his sinful attitude, about his nonstop willingness to see the city of Nineveh meet its doom.

This gives this Hebrew word that is translated as “rescue or deliver” a rather ironic twist. The one and only concern of Jonah was that he would be delivered from his present physical “discomfort.”

On the other hand, the concern of the Lord was to deliver Jonah from the “evil attitude” that has plagued him throughout this entire episode.

Now Jonah was very delighted about the little plant.

The Hebrew construction repeats the verb and noun of the root word “rejoice.” This is done for emphasis. It has the idea that Jonah “rejoiced with great joy” or “he was greatly delighted.”

This Hebrew construction ironically mirrors the identical wording of verse one, “he was angry with great anger.” This construction emphasizes the sad contrast between Jonah's great anger that Nineveh was spared and his great joy that he was rescued from his discomfort.

We should not miss the fact that this is the only time in the entire account of Jonah that we read that he was “happy.” In this case, his happiness was based upon the fact that he was physically comfortable. Seemingly, nothing else in his experience, from his initial commission, until this point, made Jonah happy.

Unfortunately, the ongoing mercy of the Lord to this undeserving prophet is a theme that has consistently eluded Jonah throughout this entire episode.

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JONAH 4:7

So God sent a worm at dawn the next day, and it attacked the little plant so that it dried up.

The physical deliverance of Jonah did not last long. As quickly as the plant arose to rescue Jonah, it would also quickly perish.

God sent a worm

God caused the plant to die, through a worm or a grub. The same Lord of nature who caused the plant to miraculously grow, also caused it to perish.

at dawn the next day

This took place the first thing in the morning

and it attacked the little plant so that it dried up.

This plant was specifically targeted by the worm, and of course by the Lord, to prevent it from shading Jonah even further. He was about to learn another valuable lesson.

JONAH 4:8

When the sun began to shine, God sent a hot east wind. So the sun beat down on Jonah's head, and he grew faint. So he despaired of life, and said, "I would rather die than live!"

Now we find that the Lord again used nature to get the attention of Jonah. In this instance, it was by means of a withering eastern hot wind along with the bright sun.

When the sun began to shine

As the plant was destroyed first thing in the morning the sun begins to shine.

God sent a hot east wind

Then this very hot wind from the east made Jonah all the more uncomfortable since he was once again without a cover for his head.

So the sun beat down on Jonah's head, and he grew faint.

The hot sun then mercilessly beat down on Jonah's exposed head. If, as it has been suggested, that Jonah had lost all of his body hair from the experience in the sea monster, this would mean he was bald. This would make his suffering all the more unbearable.

and he grew faint.

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Jonah was not able to concentrate on what might happen to Nineveh, he was growing faint because of the circumstances the Lord had orchestrated.

So he despaired of life, and said, "I would rather die than live!"

The Hebrew reads "he asked his soul to die" "better my death than my life." Jonah repeats his previous desire to die, found also in 4:3.

So he was upset when the Lord spared Nineveh and wished to die. Then all of a sudden, he became momentarily happy when the plant shaded him. Now once again Jonah wants to die because of the circumstances he finds himself in.

This is truly a great lesson as to what will happen when we look to circumstances to make us content. Our circumstances will always change, sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad. But the Lord remains the same:

I the LORD do not change (Malachi 3:6 NCV).

This is an important truth to remember. Jonah is a prime example of letting circumstances dominate his contentment. The Apostle Paul would later write:

I have experienced times of need and times of abundance. In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of contentment, whether I go satisfied or hungry, have plenty or nothing. I am able to do all things through the one who strengthens me (Philippians 4:12,13 NET).

We should learn this lesson that unfortunately Jonah never learned.

Jonah 4:9

God said to Jonah, "Are you really so very angry about the little plant?" And he said, "I am as angry as I could possibly be!"

Now God is going to ask Jonah another question about his anger.

God said to Jonah, "Are you really so very angry about the little plant?"

"Does it burn so thoroughly to you?" or "Does it burn rightly to you?" This is the same expression as we find in verse four.

And he said, "I am as angry as I could possibly be!"

"It thoroughly burns to me" or "It rightly burns to me."

Jonah is basically answering the Lord as follows: "I have a right to be *truly* angry." With his plant gone, he was suffering horribly. Death seemed to be the only relief that he could end his suffering.

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JONAH 4:10

The LORD said, “You were concerned about this little plant, something for which you have not worked nor did you do anything to make it grow. It grew up overnight and died the next day.

The Lord then reminded Jonah about the things that are truly important

The Lord said, You were concerned (upset, angry) about this little plant

God is referring to Jonah's concern when the plant died (verses 7–9). Therefore, it has the idea of him “being troubled” or “being angry.”

something for which you have not worked nor did you do anything to make it grow.

God is letting him know how misplaced his priorities are.

It grew up overnight and died the next day.

The Hebrew reads: “which was a son of a night and perished as a son of a night.”

JONAH 4:11

Should I not be even more concerned about Nineveh, this enormous city? There are more than one hundred twenty thousand people in it who cannot tell their right hand from their left, as well as many animals!

The Lord is teaching Jonah about the value of human life as compared with the life of a plant. Jonah, while being overcome with heat exhaustion, was incensed at the death of this plant that was shading him.

Obviously, Jonah had realized that the Lord was orchestrating this series of events. Instead of asking himself if he might be doing something wrong, the wayward prophet moaned in his anger that he wanted to die.

Ironically, the same Jonah who had recently thanked the Lord for rescuing him from death, now again wanted the Lord to put him to death! To make matters worse, the entire episode was over something so trivial as a plant that had lived only one day.

The Book of Jonah ends with this final question.

Should I

In the Hebrew text, there is an emphatic use of two independent pronouns, “you” in verse 10 and “I” in verse 11.

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They are used to emphasize the comparison as well as the strong contrast between the attitudes of Jonah and that of the Lord, his Lord!

not be even more concerned about Nineveh, this enormous city?

The contrast between the concern of Jonah for this "little" plant (verse 10) and the concern of the Lord about this "enormous" city (verse 11) could not be more pronounced. Indeed, the priorities of Jonah, compared with Lord's, could not be more misplaced.

This is known as an argument "from the lesser to the greater." Jonah was concerned about such a trivial issue as the death of a little plant (the lesser). In contrast to Jonah, the Lord, the God of the Bible, had every right to "spare" the hugely populated city of Nineveh (the greater).

with its hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left,

Interpreters wonder exactly what is meant by the phrase "do not know their right from their left."

The expression does not appear elsewhere in biblical Hebrew.

Does it refer to young children?

Commentators have a difference of opinion as to the meaning of this phrase. It has been suggested that this refers to the number of young children in Nineveh.

In other words, those who have not reached the place as to where they know their right hand from their left.

While it is argued that the population of Nineveh was not that large at the time, if we consider "greater Nineveh" instead of just the city proper, then this could very well illustrate the number of children who would have been destroyed along with the adult population.

As the Lord compares these two concerns, Jonah is shown to be completely self-centered, as well as extremely foolish, when compared to the Lord's concern about the fate of the number of children residing in Nineveh, 120,000!

and many animals

Interestingly, this book closes with God also noting that innocent animals would have been destroyed also.

The moral of the story is simple. If this prophet of God, this national hero, could care so deeply about a vine, and earnestly desire that it should not die, could not the Lord care all the more about the multitude of people, as well as the animals?

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All cultures value animals above plants and they also value human beings above animals.

This final point that the Lord was making to Jonah was clear. Jonah had wanted a simple plant to be spared, but not human beings, who were made in the image of God and have infinite value. The values of Jonah were as wrong as they could possibly be!

Summing It Up

Such is the sad ending of the story about this wayward prophet of God. Throughout this entire episode, the attitude of Jonah has been in complete contrast as to how a genuine prophet of God should act.

Therefore the lessons are clear for the readers of Jonah. In fact, it should cause us to answer a number of questions about ourselves.

Is our attitude and behavior like that of Jonah in any sense?

Are our values the same as the Lord's values?

Do we, like Jonah, despise our enemies? Do we wish trouble will always come their way while assuming that we alone have some entitlement to the Lord's gracious forgiveness and amazing grace?

We must remember that the Lord Jesus taught us to love their enemies:

But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, (Matthew 5:44 NET).

It is a command that, on the human level, is impossible to obey. However, with the help of God the Holy Spirit, we can indeed obey it.

To sum up, one of the main lessons of this little book is that the God of the Bible loves the entire world—not just the Jews, but the heathens as well. Our hearts should feel the same for those who are lost in sin. The Lord loves them too.

Hence, we should desire to bring His message of salvation through Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of sin, to a lost world who so desperately needs it!

God's Divine Appointments

Appendix 1:

The List Of God's Divine Appointments In The Accounts Of Joseph, Judah, And Jonah

As we have documented in this book, there have been a number of divine appointments where the Lord worked supernaturally through everyday events. Indeed, seemingly unrelated occurrences in the natural realm miraculously came together to fulfill the plan of God in the lives of Joseph, Judah, and Jonah. These "divine appointments," as we call them, make it clear that that hand of God is always working in the lives of those who are His. We can summarize them as follows:

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The various divine appointments that the Scripture records for the life of Joseph can be listed as follows:

Divine Appointment 1: The Brothers Left Shechem Since There Was No Grass For Grazing

Jacob asked his son Joseph to check on his brothers who were supposed to graze their flocks in Shechem. Joseph obeyed his father and set out for Shechem. But the brothers were not in Shechem because it was not good for grazing.

So there would be no meeting up of the brothers with Joseph at this destination. This was the first divine appointment in his story, no area to graze in Shechem. The importance of this will soon become clear.

Divine Appointment 2: A Man In Shechem Knew Where The Brothers Went

Joseph had no idea to where his brothers had ventured off. An unnamed man who was in Shechem just "happened" to overhear the brothers saying they were going to Dothan to graze. After informing Joseph, he went to Dothan to find them.

Divine Appointment 3: The Caravan Going To Egypt Was Passing By Dothan

When Joseph arrived in Dothan his evil brothers threw into a pit to die. However, a caravan headed for Egypt just "happened" to be passing by at that time Joseph was suffering in the heat and the waterless pit.

Divine Appointment 4: Dothan Was On The Caravan Route, Shechem Was Not

Dothan, where these events were taking place, was on the caravan route. However, the place they were supposed to be, Shechem, was not. So this episode could never have happened the way it turned out if they were grazing where they originally intended. Simply put, no Dothan, no caravan.

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Divine Appointment 5: Judah Suggests Selling Joseph To The Caravan Heading For Egypt

Judah, seeing the caravan, suggested that rather than killing Joseph, they should sell him into slavery. The brothers, minus Reuben, agreed. Joseph was sold to these traders who were on their way to Egypt.

Divine Appointment 6: In Egypt, Joseph Was Sold To Potiphar The Captain Of Pharaoh's Guard

In Egypt, Joseph was sold to a very important person, Potiphar the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Events that would later transpire will explain why this transaction was central to the story of Joseph.

Divine Appointment 7: Joseph Was Sent To The Royal Prison When Potiphar's Wife Falsely Accused Him

When Potiphar's wife falsely accused Joseph of attempting to rape her, he was placed in the "royal prison" for the crime in which he was accused of but did not commit. Again, this is another crucial element in the narrative, the meaning of which, will eventually be made clear.

Divine Appointment 8: Joseph Was Given The Job Of An Overseer At The Royal Prison

In the royal prison, even with all the horrible events that had transpired in his life, Joseph still wanted to be a model prisoner. Consequently, he was given the job of looking after the incoming prisoners. The fact that Joseph remained faithful to the Lord allowed him to be placed in this position.

Divine Appointment 9: Joseph Correctly Interpreted The Dreams Of Pharaoh's Chief Butler And Chief Baker

Joseph was put in charge of two prisoners from the court of Pharaoh, the chief butler and the chief baker. They each dreamed a dream that bothered them. Seeing them downtrodden, Joseph, asked what was wrong. When each explained their dream to Joseph, he supernaturally interpreted the meaning of each dream, accurately predicting their future.

Divine Appointment 10: Two Years Later Pharaoh Had Dreams That Needed To Be Interpreted

Our last divine appointment concerns two dreams of the Pharaoh. He had two vivid dreams that he knew meant something. As nobody was able to interpret them, the chief butler then remembered the Hebrew slave Joseph who was able to correctly interpret his dream two years previously. This led to Joseph being brought before Pharaoh.

Joseph correctly interpreted Pharaoh's dreams as a warning from God about the coming seven years of severe famine after seven years of plenty. He also mentioned the need of an overseer who would store the grain during these years of plenty to be used for the years when the famine

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occurred. Pharaoh, realizing the unique ability of Joseph, appointed him to be that overseer.

These events eventually caused the family of Jacob to settle down in Egypt and live in a place where they could thrive. In doing so, it began the fulfillment of the promise that the Lord had made to Abraham. His descendants would spend four hundred years in a foreign land before returning to the Promised Land as a great nation, one with sizable wealth.

We emphasize again, that each and every one of these ten natural events, or divine appointments, had to take place for this to happen as the Lord predicted to Abraham. At the time each event seemed meaningless, in the grand scheme of things. However, the Lord Himself was working behind the scenes to cause them to fulfill His promises with respect to the destiny of the descendants of Abraham. This entire episode, Genesis 37-50, is truly remarkable!

The Divine Appointments In The Life Of Judah

Along with these divine appointments in the life of Joseph, we should also remember all the seemingly random events that happened in the life of Judah that brought him to the place that the Lord had desired.

We can summarize his "divine appointments" as follows:

After encouraging his brothers to sell Joseph to the caravan going to Egypt, against the express will of God, Judah took a wife from the Canaanites. The results were disastrous.

Each of his first two sons had married the woman Tamar. The first Er, was struck dead by the Lord because of his evil ways as was his second son Onan.

Judah was without a male heir to carry on his family name with only a young son, Shelah, remaining. While he had been promised to Tamar when he would grow up, Judah did not keep his word to Tamar.

This led to a number of seemingly unrelated events that would allow Judah to have a male heir, one that would come from his body.

His wife had recently died and after his time of mourning he was heading to a sheep shearing festival in another town.

At this time, his son Shelah had grown up but, as we mentioned, Judah had not kept his promise to Tamar. She would not be the mother of an heir in the line of Judah through Shelah.

But Tamar had different plans. Dressing as a temple prostitute she positioned herself along the route that Judah would take to the festival. Seemingly she knew that Judah would proposition her, which he did. The outcome was she became pregnant. Yet there was no guarantee that the child born to them would be a male.

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However, Scripture tells us she bore twins, two males. One of them, Perez, would become the male heir in the line of Judah.

For all of this to come about, so many random things would had to have fallen into place. And, as we have just seen, they all did.

Therefore, at this juncture in the lives of both Joseph and Judah, behind the scenes, we find the Lord was ordering events to fulfill His promises that He had made so long before to Abraham.

As we observed, Judah, although born fourth in line, became the leader of the sons of Jacob. This caused the dying Jacob to prophesy his future as well as the future of his heirs. Among other things, the Messiah would come from the line of Judah.

As we have emphasized, every single one of these events in the lives of Joseph and Judah had to happen to bring about the desired end.

As the Lord worked supernaturally through the natural realm, each of the essential events, these divine appointments, did indeed come to pass.

The Divine Appointments In The Life Of Jonah

In the account of the wayward prophet Jonah, we also saw a number of divine appointments that led him to be precisely where the Lord wanted him.

First, while Jonah in the ship bound for Tarshish as he was running away from his calling, a monster storm suddenly occurred soon after the ship had set sail. If there was any indication that this horrific storm would have taken place, the mariners would not have ventured out. In other words, they were completely taken by surprise by the divine appointment of this devastating tempest.

Second, lots were cast by the men on the ship which would determine who could explain the meaning of the freakish storm. The lot fell upon Jonah. With likely as many as twenty men on board, the odds were stacked against this happening by mere chance. In fact, it was all arranged by the Lord. Jonah explained that the storm was sent by the Lord in response to his disobedience.

Third, though at first unwilling, the members of the crew tossed Jonah overboard in an attempt to cause the Lord to stop the storm. Miraculously, the moment Jonah's body hit the water, as he had predicted, the storm suddenly stopped.

Storms do sometimes quickly cease but this cessation took place the moment Jonah was hurled overboard. This natural event was another divine appointment, the supernatural working through the natural.

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Fourth, then there just “happened” to be a large sea monster in the area, whom the Bible says the Lord “appointed” to swallow Jonah. So the prophet did not drown as would have been expected.

Fifth, though swallowed by this sea monster, Jonah was not digested; he was preserved alive.

A sixth divine appointment occurred when the sea monster vomited up Jonah onto the dry land. This allowed our wayward prophet to begin his journey to Nineveh again, this time going the proper direction, east instead of west.

A seventh divine appointment took place after Jonah had proclaimed the message to Nineveh; God was going to destroy the city in forty days. The people repented and the Lord did not destroy them as He had warned.

A depressed and angry Jonah bawled out God for his mercy. Instead of leaving Nineveh he chose a spot where he could observe the city, hoping the Lord would change His mind again and destroy them after all. This is where the seventh divine appointment occurred. The Lord caused a plant to quickly grow up next to Jonah to shade him from the sun.

Jonah's happiness was short-lived because the next day, God, who is the Lord over the natural world, sent a small worm to eat the plant, divine appointment number eight.

The last of the divine appointments was a hot east wind, sent by the Lord, to make Jonah's situation all the more miserable. For the second time, Jonah asked to die!

The last words recorded in the Book of Jonah make it clear that his priorities were all wrong. He was upset about his plant dying, and the misery from the hot wind, but he was not in the least upset that the Lord might destroy this huge city with over one hundred and twenty thousand children in it. Jonah never seemed to connect the dots from each of these divine appointments that were brought about to teach him a lesson.

The moral of the story for the reader is clear: God is working in our lives in seemingly unrelated everyday events to fulfill His plans for us. Are we, unlike Jonah, going to pay attention to them?

These Accounts Should Cause Us To Examine Our Own Lives

As we have looked at these three examples of God's “divine appointments” we can only marvel at the wonderful ways in which the Lord ordains seemingly random events to fulfill His plan for time and eternity, the supernatural working through the natural. Realizing this, should put us in awe!

It also should cause us to look back at events, good and bad, that have put us in the place that we now find ourselves. Do we too see the hand of God having worked through seemingly unrelated events in our lives? Have we

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been the beneficiary of “divine appointments” though at the time we had no idea what was taking place?

This is also a good time to presently evaluate our own lives. Which of these three characters represents us. Like Joseph, have we been faithful, but not perfect believers, since we trusted Christ.

Perhaps we presently find ourselves in a situation like Joseph while he was still in prison. While we have tried to serve God, and do our best, things seem to continue to go wrong.

If this is your present situation, it would do good to remember what happened to Joseph. The story is not over yet. Sooner or later the Lord will work out the circumstances that will fulfill your destiny.

The life of Judah, on the other hand, was one of spiritual growth. His early years consisted of rebelling against the commands of the Lord. Yet, as we meet him later in life, he was a changed man. Indeed, he had matured and became the leader of Jacob's sons.

Perhaps the Lord has worked circumstances in your life, and is still working, to bring you, like Judah, to a place of spiritual maturity.

Finally, there is Jonah. There is nothing at all good to say about his character as recorded in the book that bears his name. From the very beginning of the narrative to the very last line, his life displays what a believer in the God of the Bible ought NOT to be. Hopefully, we are not like Jonah, doing just the opposite of what we know the Lord has intended for us

Whatever the case may be, this is a good time for us to evaluate ourselves and ask the Lord to make us more like our perfect example, Jesus. He is the One to whom we should always look!

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