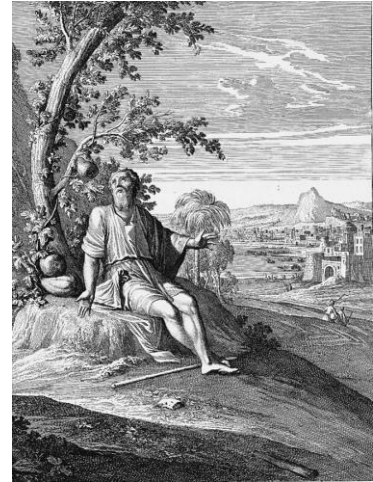


A HOUSE FOR ALL THE WORLD'S PRAYERS
A Devotional Meditation from
Isaiah 56:4-8; Jonah 3:10-4:10; Matthew 12:41; Mark 12:15-17
Albert J. McCarn
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What kind of prayer touches the heart of our heavenly Father? We see examples of flowery prayers uttered by poets like David and Solomon. Then there are heartfelt prayers of intercession such as Daniel presented when he wanted to know about the end of the Babylonian Captivity. Those were formal prayers, spoken by saints who knew the protocols of the Kingdom of Heaven, but they are not the only ones God answered. We have the humble prayers of Hannah and Nehemiah, who spoke no words at all, but received enormous favor from the Almighty. Then there is the Syrian general Naaman, who sullenly approached Elisha for healing of his leprosy only as a last resort. But perhaps the most astonishing of all is the prayer of repentance uttered by the Assyrian people of Nineveh when Jonah came to proclaim God's word of judgment against them.



“Jonah sits under the miracle tree near Nineveh,” Caspar Luyken, 1708, [Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam](https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/SK-A-1708).

You may be wondering where that prayer is recorded. It may be that there was no spoken prayer, but the deeds of the people, from Assyria's king down to the lowest servant, indicated the attitude of their hearts. That is why the Bible says,

When God saw their deeds—that they turned from their wicked ways—God relented from the calamity that He said He would do to them, and did not do it. (Jonah 3:10 TLV)

This is the same Assyria whose kings devastated Israel's northern kingdom just a few years earlier, and who would destroy Israel and threaten Judah a few decades later. Far from understanding the ways of the God of Israel, the Assyrians considered Him and His people their enemies. Yet something happened to get their attention in the first half of the 8th century BC, when Jonah was prophet to King Jeroboam II of Israel. Perhaps they had heard of Jonah's miraculous survival from his ordeal in the great fish, or perhaps they had endured hard times, such as political, economic, and social unrest, as well as natural disasters and sickness. We can search the historical records for the answer, but the important thing is that Jonah's message reached receptive ears and hearts. Not knowing the protocol of Adonai Elohim, nor perhaps even His Name, the Assyrians still found ways to demonstrate their turning away from wickedness and toward righteousness. It was a genuine repentance, just as Messiah Yeshua testified to the people of His day:

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah. And behold, something greater than Jonah is here. (Matthew 12:41 TLV)

But this is where the real tragedy of Jonah's story occurs –

But it greatly displeased Jonah and he resented it. So he prayed to *ADONAI* and said, "Please, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my own country? That's what I anticipated, fleeing to Tarshish—for I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and full of kindness, and relenting over calamity. So please, *ADONAI*, take my soul from me—because better is my death than my life." Yet *ADONAI* said, "Is it good for you to be so angry?" So Jonah went out from the city and sat east of the city. There He made a *sukkah* and he sat under it, in the shade, until he saw what would happen in the city. Then *ADONAI* God prepared a plant and it grew up over Jonah, to give shade over his head to spare him from his discomfort. So Jonah was very happy about the plant. But God at dawn the next day prepared a worm that crippled the plant and it withered away. When the sun rose, God prepared a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint. So he implored that his soul would die, saying, "My death would be better than my life!" Then God said to Jonah, "Is it good for you to be so angry about the plant?" "It is," he said, "I am angry enough to die!" But *ADONAI* said, "You have pity on the plant for which you did no labor or make it grow, that appeared overnight and perished overnight. So shouldn't I have pity on Nineveh—the great city that has in it more than 120,000 people who don't know their right hand from their left—as well as many animals?" (Jonah 4:1-10 TLV)

The tragedy may be in what the biblical doesn't say. What if Jonah's mission was not merely to proclaim judgment, but also to teach the Ninevites the ways of righteousness? Is it possible that in so doing he might even have averted the worst of the judgment the Lord caused to come on rebellious Israel? We do not know if this possibility even entered Jonah's mind, but we can see that he had little regard for the Ninevites. Because they worshipped other gods and opposed Israel at every turn, did Jonah consider them beneath his dignity as a righteous follower of YHWH? Was he unwilling to entertain the possibility that they might also have value in God's sight, and that He might want to redeem them also? And even if Jonah did consider such things, was he willing to endure their clumsy and, perhaps to him, offensive efforts to approach the One True God?

If any of this is true, then the tragedy of Jonah is greater than we have supposed. Not just because a great people from ancient times perished, but because the people of God exhibit these same tendencies at all times and in all places – even to our day. Too often we forget what God said through Isaiah –

Also the foreigners who join themselves to *ADONAI*, to minister to Him, and to love the Name of *ADONAI*, and to be His servants—all who keep from profaning *Shabbat*, and hold fast to My covenant—these I will bring to My holy mountain, and let them rejoice in My House of Prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar. For My House will be called a House of Prayer for all nations." *ADONAI Elohim*, who gathers the dispersed of Israel, declares, "I will gather still others to him, to those already gathered." (Isaiah 56:4-8 TLV)

Who are the foreigners? All of us. We are admitted to the throne room of the Most High only because He Himself paid the price for us to be there, and only because we have humbled ourselves to call on Him and turn from our wicked ways. Whether we are saved from childhood, or come in adulthood after a lifetime of sin, we still enter by grace

through faith. Yet all too often we forget this, insisting that others appropriate grace in the same way that we have, and then walk it out in ways that we deem acceptable according to our own cultural and religious norms. Mind you, it is the same grace, but it might manifest differently in, say, an Arab from a Muslim nation, or an Aborigine from Australia, or a Roman Catholic from France. Trying to put them all into the same mold – a mold of our own fashioning – undermines the purposes of our Creator, who calls people of all tribes, tongues, and nations.

Yeshua was angry at the supposedly righteous people of His day who prevented humble sinners from coming before the Living God. That is why He overturned the tables of the money changers in the Temple, declaring, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’” (Mark 12:15-17 TLV) The buying and selling was not as great a problem as the fact that the pious ones of His day demanded that people come to God only on terms they had established. Which meant, sadly, that much of the world was excluded from the Kingdom simply because they did not come up to those unattainable standards.

How are we different? Let us not miss the opportunity to help others into the Kingdom – even those who don’t do it right according to our standards, or whom we might consider irreconcilable enemies of God. Those who come will enter with stains upon them, ignorant of the protocols of our God, and even ignorant of exactly what is right and wrong according to His standards. Instead of continuing to judge or exclude them, we should be ready to show the same grace and humbly help them along their journey.