

JONAH - THE RELUCTANT MESSENGER IN A THREATENED WORLD *

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I. The Messenger Who Refused **(Jonah's Freedom and the Freedom** **of God - Jonah 1:1-16)**

In the book of Jonah we are told a story of unexpected twists. To begin with, Jonah was supposed to journey to Nineveh at God's command to deliver a sermon (v. 2). But instead of ending in Nineveh, the story ends — at least at first — in the depths of a raging sea (v. 15). From the man commissioned by God there emerged a recalcitrant fugitive. On the other hand, the heathen sailors who threw him over-board placed reverent trust in the very God from whose presence Jonah had fled (v. 16).

Such a startling reversal of roles could also come to us in our lives: the one who has been entrusted with an exalted calling is swallowed up by huge waves, while nameless strangers whose understanding of the world does not go beyond their particular trade, commit their lives to the God of that famed deserter. As readers we would have difficulty avoiding the question, which of these roles we are really playing, and in which phase we presently find ourselves.

The first chapter of Jonah challenges us to consider what noteworthy turning-points are possible in our own lives. It teaches us to ask questions

concerning the different types of freedom which are possible in man's life. In so doing we learn to distinguish between three different kinds: the freedom which man exerts for himself, the freedom in which God catches up with him, and the freedom which man experiences as God's own liberation.

1. Jonah demonstrates for us the freedom which man arbitrarily usurps for himself, and shows what becomes of it.

Right here we have to ask the fundamental question: who exactly is this Jonah in our narrative? To do so, however, we must determine what literary genre we have before us in this little book. We can pick up our first clue in the opening words: "Yahweh's word came to Jonah, the son of Amittai." We are not told any more at this point than the names of him and his father. We learn, however, from II Kings 14:25, that Jonah ben Amittai's home was Gathhepher in Galilee, and that he appeared on the scene during the reign of King Jeroboam II in the 8th century. Why does the narrator suppress these details? Evidently he is not aiming at giving us an historical report, for which such facts would have been indispensi-



ble. Obviously, he is not interested in cluttering the reader's mind with historical data. For this same reason, later on, he does not bother giving us the name of the king of Nineveh, nor the dates of his reign. He does not want the reader to get lost in the past, so he turns resolutely to the present. The people in his story are standard character types, and the events are typical ones, so that what he is offering us is an artistically related didactic narrative. In the person of Jonah he holds up a mirror in front of the reader and asks, "Do you by chance recognize yourself?" As an instructive, imaginative composition, our story strives to be clearly distinguished from proper historical accounts.

It is also a surprising fact that Jonah is not even called a prophet, though this is the designation given to the historical Jonah in II Kings 14:25. The mirror is not intended only for people holding a particular office. But at the same time, our narrator's Jonah is by no means just anybody. In the middle of our chapter, in v. 9, as he is being cross-examined by the sailors, he identifies himself as a "Hebrew and confesses his faith using a creed any Israelite could have used. Thus Jonah represents first and foremost Israel, who acknowledges her God, a God who as the lord of all powers differentiates himself from the gods of the heathen. Jonah knows his Bible, yet he blatantly rejects his task. He was supposed to speak out in the world with frankness, but he only talks after being forced to do so. Our story

strips off Israel's mask — and now the Church's as well — revealing wretched deserters. Members of God's people should recognize their reflection in the mirror of this story.

We must keep in mind the narrator's firm appeal to present-day hearers. People have often made it unnecessarily difficult to understand this splendid book. We can enjoy the beauty of this pearl in the Old Testament only when we have come to grasp that this little book is not attempting to drag us into the thicket of questions relating to what was supposed to have taken place in the dim past. We are confronted as readers of today. Chapter one asks precisely: Does your freedom, Israel, or yours, Church at the end of the second millenium, or yours, you Christian in 1976, follow the lines of this man Jonah?

Jonah was given a job to do: to go to Nineveh and to level with the people there. We have said that the reader is to see in Jonah not a long-dead prophet, but himself. Likewise he should not see in Nineveh only an ancient political power belonging only to the past. What Nineveh stands for we could only comprehend if it were the goal of a journey of ours today. The narrator characterizes it with two criteria: it is great, and it is wicked (v. 2). From the eighth century onwards Israel had known Nineveh as that huge power-center of the Neo-Assyrian empire, which had subjugated the entire ancient Near East. In its practice of waging war, in its policy of resettlement and its

methods of torture, it surpassed all of its predecessors and successors in brutality. Israel had never suffered so greatly under any other world power. And now an Israelite was supposed to carry out a mission for his God in the capital of that empire, Nineveh! We should note that the narrator makes no mention of the historical background just sketched out. All he cites is that which is generally characteristic: size and wickedness. The reader then becomes perfectly free to look for Nineveh in his own contemporary world. At first we are not told what Jonah's orders are, only that they are in some way connected with the wickedness of this metropolis. It is only later that we learn he is to pass a verdict of death on the city (3:4), but also that his mission is anchored both in God's pity and in his longing to redeem. We also learn that Jonah suspected this from the very outset (4:2).

Let us consider where we as today's readers should look for our own Nineveh. The Christian himself surely fails to recognize Jesus' cause if he merely connects it with petty private and individual concerns and difficulties. Nineveh is that place which is pregnant with meaning for the world. In the New Testament Bethlehem is juxtaposed with the Emperor Augustus as is Golgatha and Pontius Pilate, Paul and Rome, and Jesus and all the Kingdoms of the world. Likewise Jonah confronts Nineveh as we confront the power and problem centers of the contemporary world. Going to Nineveh today means

for us to allow our life's risks and toil to be completely directed and determined by the enormous peril and wickedness which engulfs the world. The punch of the Bible becomes purely private and piddly when we do not allow our eyes to see what is happening in Moscow and Washington, in Asia and Africa, when we become blind to what worldwide misery results when man says, "No!" to the sick and the elderly, when man says, "No!" to the task of educating people here and in the third world, when man poisons his environment through unbridled industrialization, through the mismanaged management of creation, when we close our eyes to the demonic dangers inherent in the development of the psychopharmacological manipulation of man, to the world-wide spread of terrorism and the corresponding impotence of governments, and last, but by no means least, when we realize the grave shortage of genuine pastoral concern, the lack of a truly world-wide pastoral care.

But Jonah isn't to cover the entire world. "Go to Nineveh!" Go to that one place to whose immense and central suffering your eyes have been opened by God. Jonah is a single individual. Kierkegaard has said, "Truth is content to be in the singular. In eternity you will look in vain for the crowd." Why is it that not many young people today consider becoming preachers, pastors, or teachers? Doesn't it dawn on them that Jonah is sent as a single individual to *Ninez'eh*, the focus of world horror? Why are so many mature Christians so



meek and mild in public, social, and political problems? Do they seriously believe that God dialogues only with individual souls in pious isolation or at best with a community where everyone is marching to the same beat? Let us never forget: the format of God's mission is the world, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city!"

Instead of going, Jonah runs away. We are told twice "from the presence of the Lord", and three times "to Tarshish"! What does this suggest? Tarshish is likely to be found on the southwest coast of Spain, at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River. The name Tarshish probably means "smelting works". In any case, people set out for Tarshish to acquire "silver, iron, tin and lead" (Ez. 27:12). The famed Phoenecian ocean-going ships were called "Tarshish-ships", named after the harbour for which they set sail. Tarshish is a perfect place for Jonah to flee to for two reasons: first, it lies at the furthest extremity from Nineveh, where he was supposed to go. Tarshish belonged (according to Is. 66:19) to those far-off shores which had never received the news of Jonah's God. In Tarshish there were nobody and nothing that would remind him of his mission or of Him who commissioned him. Second, in Tarshish a man could get filthy rich. "Beaten silver products from Tarshish" were (according to Jer. 10:9) much in demand even in Israel. Life in Tarshish, even if not a raging success, would still probably offer a measure of security and wouldn't be without some luxury.

In any case, Jonah much preferred the world of trade and industry to that dirty business in Nineveh with its politics and armed force. Jonah bristled at the very thought of having to deliver a highly embarrassing message in Nineveh and possibly causing a crisis. In short, Jonah does not ask what God desires, or who needs him; he asks what will provide him with some peace and quiet. So Jonah sets sail westward across the Mediterranean instead of travelling eastward across the wilderness. He joins the business world instead of visiting hospitals. He mingles with export-import dealers instead of looking for a pulpit and podium in the big city. He is too proud to follow the call to action in the secular center of world need. In this way Jonah chooses his freedom today. Freedom means for him being free from the mission assigned to him by his Lord, departure from living fellowship with Jesus. Freedom means Tarshish, getting away from it all, where nothing reminds him of the charge he has been given and where he can have the security of leading his own life.

After setting sail the first thing that Jonah wants, and in fact the only thing in which he at first succeeds, is *sleep*. "Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship, had lain down, and had fallen fast asleep" (1:5). This sleep is the most telling symbol of his freedom: hear no evil, see no evil. Please do not disturb! This is the freedom of the narrow-minded Neanderthal in every age. Do the majority of Sunday Christians belong to this group? People speak

of a remarkable inability of Christians to lead Christian lives. To refuse to do that which is plainly commanded, that is the freedom we all only too readily claim for ourselves.

But it is Jonah who must pay the price for his own freedom. Terse though the narrative is, the teller does not forget to say: "He paid the fare" (1:3). The ship's passage could have taken everything he had. Jesus asks his followers if, in their discipleship, they have ever lacked anything. They respond, "Never a thing!" (Luke 22:35). On the other hand, the freedom that is won by running away from one's responsibilities brings with it considerable financial headaches. Then a man has to pay for everything himself. During the thirties an experienced Christian once encouraged us young pastors in the Confessing Church by saying, "When the Lord sends you on a mission into the world, he will take care of the expenses." During the most difficult times in Germany we have seen: it is the truth! If we attempt to sneak away from our mission, if we cut ourselves loose from him who sends us, then we are forced to do that which no man, even with a fixed income, can do in the long run: take care of himself. When in our self-achieved freedom we discover our desires and financial worries are always increasing, be assured that this is quite certainly connected with our running away from the mission. So freedom in Tarshish, the self-acquired security purchased by obstinate refusal, in fact remains an unattainable dream. The

heavy costs are always paid in vain. Stolen freedom collapses.

2. All the more then should that other freedom be considered, *God's Freedom*, which catches up with Jonah, the deserter who refused; it seizes him and overpowers him.

Jonah had convinced himself that in Tarshish he couldn't be reminded ever again of the task with which he had been saddled. But could he really believe that the first goal also of his *Lord's* freedom was sleep? In any case he had to learn that the charge to pronounce judgement on Nineveh did not come from a God who abdicates when man turns his back on him, a God who could be left behind and forgotten. And Christians must know that Jesus' command, "Go into all the world!" is the word of a Lord who has overcome death. Jonah, who regarded God's word as a slight breeze, experiences the full blast of the storm in his own life. "Then the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea" (4). The Hebrew text reads hail, to hurl or to catapult. With this, a key word in the rest of the chapter of our artistically composed narrative is introduced. It is repeated another three times. The very next verse uses the same word to portray how the sailors *throw* (wayyatilu 5) the ship's cargo overboard when it is in danger of breaking up. Later Jonah pleads, "*Throw* me into the sea!" (hat lum 12); and the narrator continues, "... and they took Jonah and *threw* him into the sea" (wayyetildhu 15). So God's "throw" triggered all the rest of the throws that followed. This key-



word shows that the God who called Jonah with his word is likewise the author of the sequence which follows. This is the same God who addresses us with his word and who challenges us in the midst of the adversities of everyday life. When one's conscience strives to escape his *word*, God stretches out his *hand* and grabs hold of the very being of the fugitive. That is the overpowering freedom of God.

But cannot the storm be just as easily explained as an accidental natural phenomenon? How then would the man who tears himself loose from his task be confronted by *it*? The narrator gives precise information about how events proceed from the "throwing" of the storm to the "throwing" of Jonah into the sea. It is an entirely human process. The sailors are first of all driven by the storm to take purely practical measures: they lighten the ship (5) and later row feverishly in an attempt to reach dry land (13). They even try out their religion: everyone prays to his god (5). Oddly enough, Jonah has to be roughly shaken awake by the captain to join the prayers (6). Still the storm doesn't ease up at all. Then, as a third expedient, they cast lots (v). The lot falls on Jonah, and that brings their perplexity to a head. Waves of questions crash in on this peculiar passenger (8). And now the most human thing of all happens, and it is precisely here that God's Freedom reigns victorious. Jonah, the recalcitrant, explains what no seaman's skill and no religious experiment could ever

possibly explain: he confesses his human failure to carry out a commission which had been laid upon him as a human, and which was to have served as help for those humans most deeply in trouble. In Jonah's confrontation with the unknown sailors, God, who out of love *former/* binds himself *soh/maid*) to a particular *man*, this God displays his *diri//e* freedom. Only Jonah knows the commission and the commissioner. Only he knows what is really at stake in this display of nature on the high seas. He must now point to the one who had called him and who now, as the lord of all powers, has caught up with him. Overpowered by God's freedom, Jonah is now free to serve as a self-sacrifice for the deliverance of his fellow man.

Whoever has heard the call to go to Nineveh and is on the way to Tarshish has his eyes opened by this account to the fact that he is in the grasp of God's dominating power. This involves deadly peril, but yet happens for the good fortune of all those involved. Disobedience is not only expensive, but also fatal. The storm at sea does not come by pure chance, regardless of the form in which it confronts us and no matter what those who are on deck with us attempt to do about it. It is always that individual who has taken to his heels who is confronted and questioned first. Just as Israel was confronted as the people of God, so also churches and congregations are confronted when they move in the direction of security, finances, and business rather than carry out their mission in the center of world

need. The storm insures that we do not escape the painful questions of those around us: "What, are you sleeping? Where do you come from? Why has this evil come upon us?" (verses 6 and 8). The questions perplex us. But precisely in such perplexity we discover that he who has called us is the living Lord. It is amazing how he transforms Jonah from a person looking for self-gratifying freedom to a person willing to serve, not merely in reciting a modest creed, but also in sacrificing his own life to silence the raging of the sea. Anyone can test for himself which freedom is truly free: that which is plundered by man himself in insolence, or the willingness which, midway through the flight, is generated by God's living freedom.

Such a testing should help spare us the costly and time-consuming wild detours caused by obstinate, self-asserted freedom. Kierkegaard once wrote, "What robs man of freedom when he complains of being short on time is perplexity, absent-mindedness, half-thoughts, semiresolves, indecisiveness He, who in his decision, wants to be on the side of the good and stay there can gain time - time for all that is possible; no, he can't really do that, but then it is not necessary that he should, for then he desires only one thing, and won't bother with all that is possible; and for this reason he gains abundant time for the good." This liberation for the great task is what Israel needs, what the Church needs, and what every individual needs. We

can count on God's dominating freedom. It could be, however, that we must learn this fact the hard way in our own experiences. But either way can help us quench our self-gratifying thirst for freedom and instill a willingness to work at life's great mission. What we have seen of Jonah in this respect is but a small preview.

3. The *heathen sailors* show us more clearly how the recognition of the unbeatable freedom of God serves to liberate man. We can learn from them what an antithesis to the freedom plundered by the run-away Jonah is the freedom which is *given as a gift*. We modern people are perhaps closely related to those sailors. In contrast to Jonah, they know nothing of a God of Israel or His particular designs for the world. They are actively engaged in life, seek to make an honest living, and reach out for any help which, for its part, promises success. Out of the blue, however, their lives become wrapped up in the fate of that hard-headed failure Jonah. They discover that in fooling with Jonah, they're not fooling merely with one man's fate and one man's belief. Rather in the life of this one passenger God himself is at work, the Lord of all elements. Thus it is also their God without whom they would have neither gotten into this predicament, nor could they possibly get out of it. So they experience in their lives a turn of events which is no less astonishing for them than for that curious lone-wolf sitting with them in the same boat. Let us look, step by step, at the



broad distance traveled in the few hours, a trip which frees the men from their fear of the elements to thankfulness and the fear of God.

Exegetically, the four essential stages of the journey are most easily recognized by the fact that the key word "to fear" (yare') occurs four times in various connections. It occurs for the first time at the onslaught of the raging storm: The sailors were afraid ... (wayyir^{ei} u 5). This is the fear resulting from helplessness and terror. It's easy to see how nervously the sailors squirmed about: "Every man cried to his own god, and threw the cargo into the sea." They reacted with a mixture of technical skill and religion. In a panic one will do anything possible, precisely because one doesn't recognize the only thing that will really help. That is, one doesn't even suspect the reason for such a disaster, let alone find the composure to diagnose it. In less than no time fear of this kind breaks up a ship's crew into a group of totally-separated individuals. Those who otherwise can only work hand in hand now plead "each to his own god" (5). Here we suddenly see this motley crew before us in the form of a lot of individual close-ups. They have been herded together from all corners of the earth; they've grown up with every conceivable religion. Jonah is surrounded here by heathen no less than were he in Nineveh. But now the raging storm, which threatens all their lives, causes every man to fend for himself, just as Jonah must do. When fearing for one's life, man is trapped by

the limits of technical skill and also by the limits of gaining help through religion. No wonder then, "They were afraid". They remain trapped in help-less fright — up until we hear for the second time of the word "fear".

This second occurrence of "fear" comes once Jonah is finally dragged out on the deck and has been cross-examined. The catch word falls in the middle of the solitary initial remark that Jonah makes. "I am a Hebrew, and I *fear* (yare') the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (9). We will shortly see how this sentence introduces the decisive turning point in the lives of the sailors. Precisely for this reason one cannot possibly overrate either the fact *that* Jonah speaks or *what* it is he says.

Jonah's recitation is in no way a noble missionary endeavor. We shouldn't forget that the captain had to go to the trouble of shaking him out of his sleep. It is never even so much as intimated that he, as he was begged to do, called on his God in the interest of the fate shared by all. He only talks now because he is forced to, having been bombarded by questions. In the background of verses 7 and 8 we can clearly feel the tension in which the stranger is stormed by the terrible din of voices: "Why has this evil fallen upon us? What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What's your nationality? What people do you belong to?" So only now when he is absolutely forced to give an answer does he cough it up. "I fear the Lord." What trouble his (iOd

had to go to! He hurled the storm in order to bring Jonah to this point. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that this confession is not due at all to Jonah's endeavor, but rather is the work of his God who, with the storm, with the anger of the captain, with the casting of lots and the indignation of the ship's crew — "What kind of man are you exactly?" — has forced him to talk.

Therefore, we should not regard too highly *what* Jonah said. It is little more than a purely rote confession of faith. The question, "Which God do you fear?" had about the same significance then as a question about religious affiliation would have today which one might reluctantly fill in on some application blank. Thus what Jonah says about God here has at first very little to do with a personal confession about his flight. It hardly shows an attempt to win the heathen over to his faith. "I fear the Lord," Jonah says and adds a quote from the Bible: "the God of Heaven, who made the sea and the *dry* land." Even during his flight over the sea he apparently saw no consequences in this addition. He threw a confession of faith at the people which not even he really grasped.

All the same we shouldn't dismiss this statement too hastily. Jonah plucks out that very thing from his Biblical knowledge that is most important for these sailors to know in the face of this storm. Though short and crisp, it brings home the point: What is happening here on the sea is directly connected with my God (the sea is mentioned

before the dry land!). Jonah's God has at his disposal the sea as well as the dry land. (The creator is at the same time the undisputed owner, who alone has control over his creation.) It's amazing how God is able to put to use a confession pried out of the stubborn Jonah. As we subsequently learn in verse 10, Jonah had freely acknowledged himself to be just that — stubborn. His statement "I fear the Lord" triggers off the decisive reaction on the part of the sailors.

This reaction is described by the narrator directly after Jonah's statement, as we hear for the third time our catch word: "Then the men became terribly afraid" (wayyir^eu . . . yir' ge dolA 10). Literally it reads, "Then the men feared a great fear." This great fear is quite different from the confused panic at the beginning. It produces pointed questions: "Why have you done this?" (10); "What shall we do with you (11). The men now realize that the blustering sea and the story of this Jonah go hand in hand. More exactly, this Lord mentioned by Jonah can no longer be separated from their own life and death fate. The coughed-up confession of their passenger and the present catastrophe point to one and the same Lord. The sailors discover the difference between every religion and the God of the Bible. In religion man actively strives to insure his luck with prayers and other pious endeavors. But the God of the Bible acts in absolute freedom. He is even able to make use of the man who screamed "No!", this



Jonah, who not so much as once knelt down in prayer. He who has every power at his disposal had entrusted to this man a distinct mission. Thus the new fear which gripped the sailors gave rise not merely to a vague prayer but to real inquiry aimed at this man. "Why have you done this?" The messenger himself now becomes the most interesting character. That is why the messenger becomes interesting for us, too, who stand at the end of the era of all religions. Our interest is riveted on the obedient messengers of the Bible as well as those who refused the call, but above all on him who stands in the center, Jesus of Nazareth, in whom the decisive Word has come to man. The Church, which, like Jonah, has stubbornly rejected its task as God's messenger, is always bound to attract the world's greatest interest even in the midst of all the perplexities of our technological world and its impending crises. The Church and all who belong to it are asked, as was Jonah by the sailors, "What shall we do with you?" What do we answer? In view of what has happened in the past, we will accomplish no more through self-assertion than did Jonah. Only in being prepared to sacrifice ourselves will we remain on the path trodden by Jesus. So we must stand by our guilt. Only in this way can we testify that the world is not going to be healed by religious executives. Rather, the lord of all deniers, the lord of all worldly powers, leads his people, through his absolute freedom, to an incalculable and excel-

lent goal.

The close of our chapter, in which our catch-word is mentioned for the last time, will help us appreciate this more clearly. In spite of Jonah's plea, "Throw me into the sea!" (12), the sailors turned in vain to an attempt at salvaging the situation through technical skill, but although they rowed with all their might *they* just couldn't reach the safety of a harbor (13). Then after they cried to Jonah's God the first time (14), they finally did what the messenger had advised (15). "Then the sea became calm and ceased from its raging." Here is where that decisive word occurs: "And the men *feared* the Lord greatly and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows" (wayyIr'u... yir'a g'dola 'et yhwh 16). For the first time it reads, "They feared *the* Lord greatly." Now Jonah's creed has become their own, only it is even more intense. Their rows show clearly that they intend to bind themselves permanently to this Lord. What the messenger declared has now proved itself in their own lives to be the word of the all powerful Lord. In this way, living faith is given birth. The terror of helpless people has been transformed by means of a confession pried out of a man who screamed "No!" into a new acknowledgement and thus to a lasting respect.

That is the path of liberation. The acknowledgement of the perfectly free Lord, passed on by his reluctant, hard-headed messenger, is able to change disheveled panic into thoughtful inquiry. Whoever is unable to

withstand this Lord's demands becomes, like Jonah, free for self-sacrifice. He also might, like the sailors, experience the liberation brought about by catastrophe.

We have taken a look at three types of freedom. Centrally and predominantly stands the freedom of God. Jonah teaches us how to recognize this freedom in our own lives. Whenever we go astray, the perfectly free Lord hauls us in. By using both natural and human instruments he brings us to his destination. We learn, sometimes humorously, that even when we resist His efforts we still only succeed in furthering them, never in defeating them. Jonah ends up in Nineveh in any case. We hear about this in chapter 3. In addition, an entire ship's crew has now found new life. These sailors, who come from the four corners of the world and from all sorts of religious backgrounds give, in the story of Jonah, yet another picture of mankind as a whole. So free is God. We discover the seal and meaning of this divine freedom at the end of the Old Testament, when the despised and rejected Jesus becomes the pioneer for all mankind. Whoever stubbornly casts the word of his reconciling love to the winds will be overpowered by the storm. It is the life-long task of us all to serve as the emissaries of this persistent, patient, and conquering freedom of God.

It surpasses all freedom which we plunder by our own efforts. We saw that the deserter must foot the bill for his flight down to the very last penny, and

even then he never reaches the goal of genuine freedom. Tarshish could never satisfy us, even if we were to reach it. Our mission is still in Nineveh; our mission is God's own action on behalf of a world in desperate need. Brothers and sisters, let us never lose the scent as we track that immense need. The young generation now in the process of choosing occupations should ask themselves if they are looking in the direction of Tarshish or of Nineveh, if they are interested only in comfort and security or in the people, their fellow men, who are most endangered as concerns body and soul. Whoever already has a profession must stop and think; today the decision between Nineveh and Tarshish in all of our life's activities is acute, and no less so as our leisure time continues to increase. Today we ought to have learned to laugh at our time-consuming and money-wasting wild goose chases and at the ridiculous freedoms we have indulged in. At the same time we should be ready to rejoice in the God who is able to make use of us on the deck of the very ship on which we are attempting to escape. Even our grasping after freedom is in itself unable to prevent us from ultimately experiencing the freedom of a new life. Peter the betrayer, who at the kindled fire said of Jesus, "I don't know this man!" none-the-less later becomes the witness of his Lord who triumphed over death.

But Peter is not the first who encourages us to hold fast to that other freedom, the freedom *girt-it to* as an

out-and-out gift. It is the Jonah story which already coaxes us on to the freedom for which Christ has set us free. It is freely offered even down to the last heathen, as with the sailors in our story, who never in their lives had belonged to the people of God. Their rescue from life's gravest danger has subsequently become for us a very special type of parable. Jesus was swallowed up by the raging torrents of death, the entire New Testament shouts, "for us!". That means we have been acquitted although each and every one of us deserves only the sentence of death. We are permitted to live! "Then the sea became calm and ceased from its raging." Nothing can possibly separate us from God's unconditional love which has been granted to us in Jesus. Every single gift-given day, each and every thankful offering of joy, every vow to do that which is fair and kind-hearted is a sign of this free and gift-given freedom. Its climax, however, is the willingness to sacrifice one's entire life.

This is but intimated when the sailors offer vows. Jonah's plea, "Take me and throw me into the sea", might have resulted from his becoming disgusted with life. One can't be sure. But Jesus summons us to the freedom found only in love's total self-sacrifice. "Whoever loses his life for my sake will surely find it." The willingness for total commitment is Jesus' most precious *gift*. Whoever accepts it is bathed in the radiant light of a completely new world. It is held out before the entire church as the most urgent offer today. Let us consider then which freedom we want to choose: that short-lived and extorted self-gratifying obstinacy, or rather the willingness of those set free from death who, in acknowledgement of God's freedom, gratefully dedicate themselves to his gracious will.

Dr. Wolff will give us further reflections on the character of Jonah in the April *Currents* with "Jonah: The Messenger who Obeyed," and in the June issue with "Jonah: The Messenger who Grumbled."

