

Fleeing the Presence of the Lord

A Sermon by the Rev. Kenneth J. Alden

1. “So they lifted Jonah, and threw him into the sea; and the sea stood still from her gloom.” (*Jonah* 1:15)
2. Jonah had told the sailors to throw him into the sea.
 - A. He had said “I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you.”
 - B. What had Jonah done, and what was in his attitude, that prompted Jehovah to send a great wind on the sea that threatened not only his life but the life of the crew?
3. The Lord had given Jonah a command.
 - A. He had said, “Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim against her; for their evil has come up before Me.”
 - 1 A later chapter gives the words Jehovah told him to speak as, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overturned.” (*Jonah* 3:1,4)
 - B. Instead of doing as he was commanded, Jonah fled in the opposite direction, toward Tarshish.
 - 1 Why would he take such extreme action in the face of such a simple command?
 - 2 Although it is possible he may have feared what the inhabitants of Nineveh might do to a prophet telling them that their city would be overturned—especially a foreign prophet of a foreign god – that was not the case.
 - 3 We learn from the final chapter, that Jonah did not wish well toward the people of Nineveh.
 - a. He would become angry when the inhabitants repented and the city was not destroyed. (See *Jonah* 4:1)
 - b. For this, Jehovah would rebuke him because he did not share Jehovah’s concern for Nineveh with its more than 120,000 people who did not discern between their right hand and their left. (See *Jonah* 4:11)
 - 4 Jonah’s fleeing the face of Jehovah is thus symbolic of his attitude which was opposite to that of Jehovah—an attitude so wrapped up in self-interest that it would be incensed when people not connected with self were spared.

- a. So, after Nineveh was spared, Jonah prayed, “Jehovah, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a God, gracious and compassionate, long-suffering and of much mercy, and repenting of evil. Therefore now, O Jehovah, take, I pray Thee, my soul from me; for it is better for me to die than to be alive.” (*Jonah 4:2-3*)
- b. Imagine that! Being so bitter towards an enemy that you would rather God strike you dead than that He spare people who have repented!
- c. The Heavenly Doctrine indicates that on one level of the spiritual sense of this story, Jonah represents the people and culture from which he came.
 - 1) So the spiritual meaning of Jonah’s fleeing from the Lord is said to be this:
 - A) “Those who were of the Jewish nation were commanded to teach the Word to the nations round about, but they would not, and thus they kept the Word among themselves alone.” (*Prophets and Psalms 211*)
 - 2) Concerning the spiritual meaning of Jonah’s attitude, we read this:
 - A) “The Jewish nation had the Word, and was therefore able to teach those who were outside of the church and who are called Gentiles; these are signified by "Nineveh." Because the Jewish nation was, above others, in the love of self and in the falsities from that love, they did not wish well to any but themselves, thus not to the Gentiles, but these they hated. Because that nation was such, and Jonah represented it, he was very angry that Jehovah should spare Nineveh.” (*Apocalypse Explained 401:36*)
 - 3) Although this meaning is given in the context of the ancient Jewish nation, it is by no means limited to that people or that time.
 - A) The origin of the attitude Jonah embodied may be found in the practice of taking literally what is said in the Word about the Israelites being Jehovah’s “own possession above all peoples...a holy nation.” (*Exodus 19:5-6*)
 - B) The love of self naturally applies such statements to oneself, as being intrinsically better than others.
 1. In reality, it is not Jewishness, Israelitish DNA, or descent

from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that makes a person to be God's own possession and holy.

2. It is being born again in God's image and likeness, having His qualities of love and wisdom as our motivation and principles of life, and living in a way that expresses the Divine purpose in creation.
 - a) These make us belong to God and holy.
3. Thus, in a broad sense, Jonah's actions represent the actions of the love of self in each one of us when we apply the promises and blessings of the Word to ourselves on account of our outward status, rather than on account of our living in God and from God.
 - a) So Jonah represents us when we put ourselves above others because we were born in or converted to the New Church and because we know rational truths about the Word and many spiritual things that others have no inkling of.
 - b) And especially does Jonah picture us if we then hoard what we know lest other people discover it, believe it, and benefit from it.
4. Now it is difficult trying to imagine ourselves keeping the Word to ourselves when we have the opportunity to share it with someone who would receive and benefit from it.
 - A. It is easier to picture ourselves saying nothing about the truth when we are afraid that others might challenge our beliefs, ridicule them, or think us crazy for having faith in spiritual things.
 - B. We can probably think of times when we didn't share what we knew because we thought our audience was so lacking in interest or background knowledge that they would get nothing of what we might say, or because we doubted our ability to put in simple terms a concept that seemed too complex to explain.
 - C. Or we might have been afraid to speak the truth because we didn't want to expose disorder in our listener's way of life, and so put ourselves in the position of seeming to judge and condemn them.
 - D. It is important that we distinguish these more common reasons for not teaching the Word to others from the more insidious attitude that Jonah embodied.
 - 1 He represents the love of self as it is when it dominates our being.

- a. When it does, it despises others in comparison with self and finds its glory in others' demise and destruction.
 - b. Thus it hoards the truth in order to keep others as inferior and to revel in the misery others endure for not having the truth.
 - c. It is not healthy or productive to allow the hells to accuse us of this love of self if it is not active within us.
 - 1) But if it is, we need to take notice and use the story of Jonah to help the Lord deliver us from it.
 - 2) When such love of self is active, we are more likely to see the malevolent attitude that Jonah represents when we bear a grudge against someone and we want them to suffer in some way.
 - 3) When we feed on our anger or hatred so much that it defines who we are, then Jonah's wish to die rather than see Nineveh spared aptly warns us of what we have become by allowing hatred to consume us.
5. Although we may not have active in us the malevolent love of self that Jonah pictures, still there are things in his story that can warn us of other forms of self-absorption.
- A. Earlier, we read this statement about our story: "The Jewish nation had the Word, and was therefore able to teach those who were outside of the church and who are called Gentiles...." (Apocalypse Explained 401:36)
 - B. We, too have the Word—not only the Word of the Old Testament that Jonah had, but the Word of the New Testament, as well as the Heavenly Doctrine.
 - 1 This puts us, too, in the ability to teach those outside of the church.
 - 2 In fact, it obligates us to teach others, as we read in the Heavenly Doctrine of Emanuel Swedenborg's experience:
 - a. "Now because it has been granted me to be in the spiritual world and in the natural world at the same time, and thus to see each world and each sun, I am obliged by my conscience to manifest these things; for what is the use of knowing, unless what is known to one be also known to others? Without this, what is knowing but collecting and storing up riches in a chest, and only looking at them occasionally and counting them over, without any thought of use from them? Spiritual avarice is nothing else." (*Interaction Between the Soul and the Body* 18)

- 3 Jonah's story warns us of the error of fleeing from the presence of the Lord, rather than fulfilling the obligation He places upon us.
 - a. It also shows the danger it can pose to our spiritual life and that of others, just as Jonah's flight put him and the sailors in jeopardy.
6. What are some of the ways in which we come into the Lord's presence or depart from it?
 - A. High on the list is thinking about the Lord.
 - 1 In the spiritual world, thinking about a person brings him present and going to the Lord in thought occasions His presence. (See *Conjugal Love* 341:2-3; *Divine Providence* 326:4)
 - 2 It follows that excluding the Lord from our thoughts would constitute fleeing from His presence, as we might do when we avoid thinking about the Lord and His will.
 - a. For example, when our plans start to alarm our conscience, we silence the disturbance by not thinking about the Lord and His will.
 - B. Reading the Word brings the Lord present for it leads to thought about Him. (See *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 78; *Apocalypse Revealed* 217)
 - 1 We want to beware of developing patterns and habits of procrastination in reading the Word.
 - a. When we turn our minds toward subjects belonging to this world by our choice of activities, to the exclusion of the Word, we may be heading in a direction opposite to the Lord.
 - C. The Lord is present with us in His Divine Humanity. (See *Apocalypse Revealed* 882)
 - 1 If our idea of God is not embodied in the Lord Jesus Christ, His presence is diminished, and if we deliberately bypass Him to worship the Father or Holy Spirit apart from Him, then we remove ourselves from His presence.
 - D. The Lord is present not only in matters of thought and faith.
 - 1 He is especially present in matters of life and affection.
 - a. In fact, as we read in our lesson from *Arcana Coelestia*, the presence of the Lord first exists when we love our neighbor, for the Lord's presence is solely in charity. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 904:2, 981:2,

2915)

- b. It is notable that Jonah's name means "a dove" and that "a dove" represents charity. (See *Apocalypse Explained* 411:14, 443:5)
 - 1) Still, by his life, Jonah exemplifies those who flee not only from the Lord, but also from love toward the neighbor.
 - 2) In general, anyone who turns to the practice of evil flees from the Lord. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 8137:3, 8265, 7926:2, 6677)
 - A) This Jonah did by refusing to preach repentance in hope that those would be destroyed who were in imminent danger of it because their falsities were leading them astray. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 1184, 1188; *Apocalypse Explained* 650:56)
- 7. As Jonah brought his life and that of the ship's crew into danger when he fled from the face of Jehovah, so do we, on a spiritual plane, when we move away from the Lord's presence.
 - A. When we reduce our thought about the Lord, our reading of His Word, or our thought of His Divine Humanity, we open ourselves to more worldly ways of thinking and earth-bound principles that lead astray.
 - 1 When we fail to shun those evils which prevent us from loving our neighbor, we come into those evils and more actively leave the Lord's presence.
 - B. Such actions also threaten the spiritual well being of others, for instead of sharing with them truths that can amend and improve their spiritual life, we share worldly-minded thinking which further leads them astray.
 - 1 By a life absent from the Lord and from charity, we may also turn people away from the truths of the Word.
 - 2 Swedenborg experienced such repugnance among Chinese spirits when he mentioned the name "Christ."
 - a. He found that the source of their revulsion lay in their experience with Christians who lived in less charity and greater evil than they did. (See *Arcana Coelestia* 2596)
- 8. The Lord has called us through His Word and through conscience to teach His Word to others—to family, to friends, and to people who do not have the Word, or who do not have it in fullness.
 - A. Let us not allow our self-absorption, let alone a full-blown love of self, to cause

us to flee from the presence of the Lord.

- B. May we flee, instead, from those evils which lead us away from the Lord.
- C. May we seek the Lord's presence through reading His Word, thought of Him in His Divine Humanity, and especially by a life of love toward the neighbor guided by the truths of the Word.
 - 1 And especially when we experience attitudes that despise others in comparison with ourselves, and rejoice in their demise, may we do to those attitudes as the sailors did to Jonah:
 - 2 "So they lifted Jonah, and threw him into the sea; and the sea stood still from her gloom."
 - 3 *Amen*

Readings: *Jonah* 1:1-16; *Luke* 10:1-17; AC 904.

***Arcana Coelestia* 904.** ...The Lord speaks to everybody, for whatever good and truth a person wills and thinks comes from the Lord. With everyone there are at least two evil spirits and two angels. The former activate his evils whereas the latter instill goods and truths. Every good or truth that angels instill is the Lord's; in this way the Lord is constantly speaking to man, though quite differently from one person to the next. To people who allow themselves to be carried away by evil spirits the Lord speaks as though He were not present, or so far away that He can hardly be said to be speaking. But to those who are being led by the Lord, the Lord speaks as one who is quite present. This becomes clear enough from the fact that nobody can possibly think of anything good and true except from the Lord.

[2] The Lord's presence is relative to the state of love towards the neighbour and of faith present in a person. It is in love towards the neighbour that the Lord is present, for He is present in all good, and not so much in so-called faith that is devoid of love. Faith devoid of love and charity is something severed or disjointed. Wherever conjunction exists there has to be a conjoining agency, which is exclusively love and charity. This may become clear to anyone from the fact that the Lord has compassion on everybody, loves everyone, and wishes to make everyone eternally happy. A person therefore who is devoid of the kind of love that leads him to have compassion on others, to love them, and to wish to make them happy, cannot be joined to the Lord because he is not at all like Him, and is in no sense the image of Him. Looking to the Lord by means of that which goes by the name of faith while hating the neighbour amounts not only to standing a long way off, but also to having between himself and the Lord a hell-like chasm into which the person would fall if he wished to go any nearer. For it is hatred towards the neighbour that constitutes that intervening hell-like chasm.

[3] The Lord is present with a person the moment he starts to love the neighbour. It is in love that the Lord is present, and to the extent that a person has love the Lord is present. And to the extent that the Lord is present He speaks to man....

Through The Week

Recall the Readings

- ◆ Jehovah told Jonah to go to Nineveh to cry out against it, but he fled to Tarshish from His presence.
- ◆ The ship was breaking up in a storm, but all was calm when the sailors threw Jonah overboard, on his instructions.
- ◆ The Lord appointed seventy, and told them to pray the Lord of the harvest to send laborers into His harvest.
- ◆ They returned with joy, saying even the demons were subject to them in the Lord's name.

Reflect on the Message

- ◆ Jonah represented a love of self that hates others and would sooner die than see them spared when they repent.
- ◆ Our possession of the Word obligates us to share it with those who do not have it.
- ◆ The Lord is present with us by reading His Word, thinking of Him in His Divine Humanity, and especially by loving the neighbor.
- ◆ When we remove ourselves from His presence, spiritual danger for ourselves and others grows.

Take Action

- ◆ Draw closer to the Lord's presence by taking steps to remember to think of Him in His Divine Humanity, and read His Word.
- ◆ Be alert to emotions, habits or purposes that turn you away from the Lord's presence.
- ◆ Flee from them.
- ◆ If you see attitudes that despise the neighbor and relish his demise, throw those attitudes into "the sea."