

#### Jonah 4. Spanish Wells. May/June 2003.

While you are finding the passage, let me remind you about something of the background. When originally commissioned by God to go to Nineveh, Jonah had fled from 'the presence of the Lord' – ie from God's special and localised presence.

I suggest that Jonah's reason for running away wasn't :

- because he was intimidated by the magnitude of the task set before him; nor
- because he feared for his own safety; nor
- because he feared for his own reputation as a prophet; nor
- because he feared that God would be charged with being fickle and irresolute; nor even
- because Nineveh was a Gentile city. Jonah's concern for the well-being of the heathen mariners, 1.12, make this most unlikely.

I suggest that Jonah's dislike for the people of Nineveh stemmed entirely from the city's status as capital of Assyria. Israel had already suffered badly at the hand of Assyria and, although at this time the Empire was relatively weak, it still represented a major threat to Israel's future prosperity and blessing. It was then for Jonah a question – not of *what* they were (gentiles) – but of *who* they were (Assyrians). I have no doubt that Jonah's reason for fleeing lay *in his love for his own nation* rather than *in hatred for other nations in general*. According to 2 Kings 14.25, Jonah had earlier foretold that God was to *save Israel* by the hand of Jeroboam II – and he had absolutely no intention of being the one by whose preaching God was to *save the capital of Assyria!*

In the stomach of the great fish, Jonah had offered to God – not only his sacrifice of thanksgiving – but his re-dedication and recommitment to Him – "I will pay that I have vowed", 2.9. But – although God had graciously spared Jonah's life – the prophet really had no right to expect that God would ever condescend to re-employ him in His service. But Jonah soon discovered that, such was the mercy of his God, he was not only pardoned but fully restored to his office as God's servant – just as much later in New Testament days Simon Peter and John Mark proved the wonder of God's complete forgiveness.

In Luke 11, the Lord Jesus made it clear that the 'sign' of Jonah played no small part in bringing Nineveh to its knees before God. That is – that Jonah's 3-day experience in the stomach of the great fish was the occasion of Nineveh's faith in his message and therefore of its repentance and faith – just as our Lord's own death and resurrection was to provide the same kind of convincing sign of the truth of His message. It follows therefore that – if the prophet had not been swallowed and later disgorged by the fish – he would not have been a 'sign' to any one of anything – and – in which case – it seems clear – Nineveh would never have repented.

And here lies one of the main twists to the story about the great fish – the twist in 'the tail', we might almost say! For we all know that Jonah enjoyed the fish's hospitality as a direct result of his own disobedience. It follows, therefore, that the Lord (as part of His own sovereign purpose) must have overruled Jonah's very waywardness and disobedience to bring about the repentance of Nineveh and therefore its deliverance. According to 4.2, at the outset Jonah had suspected that God planned to use him as His appointed means of sparing Nineveh from its well deserved destruction. But what Jonah never imagined in his wildest dreams was just how God was going to bring this about.

#### READ CHAPTER 4

At the opening of our chapter, Jonah is already aware that the repentance of Nineveh has prevailed with God and that Israel's most dangerous potential enemy is to be spared. I think we must conclude that – as it seems clear from v.5 that the 40 days clearly weren't yet up – God had revealed His change of plan to His prophet. And Jonah was now aware that he had been outwitted and completely outmanoeuvred by the God whose gracious purpose he had sought to frustrate – and he was not a happy bunny!

For we find that the fact that God had 'repented of *the evil*' which he had said that he would do to the Ninevites, 3.10, was itself '*evil*' to Jonah, 4.1 lit. We are told that the prophet was *filled with anger*, 4.1, because God had *turned away from* his anger, 3.9. And Jonah's hot displeasure over Nineveh's salvation stands in marked contrast with his earlier joy and thanksgiving over his own – recorded in chapter 2.

Jonah responded by voicing his feelings to God in no uncertain manner – telling Him that he had suspected all along that this had been God's purpose – reasoning no doubt, that – if God had really wanted to destroy Nineveh – He would simply have gone ahead and done so. That fact that the Lord gave the men of Nineveh advance warning of impending judgement was conclusive evidence to Jonah that God's *real* intention was to bring Nineveh to repentance and so to salvation. Although the King and the nobles of Nineveh had been somewhat unsure about God's likely

response to their repentance ('*who can know...if God will turn*', 3.9 lit), Jonah had no such doubts and asserts with complete confidence, '*I knew...*', 4.2.

Jonah's words at the end of v.2 tell us that he was familiar with the character of God as revealed to Moses long ago – when the Lord proclaimed His name to him – 'the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth', Exod. 34.6. And clearly Jonah believed that God's character affected His dealings – not only with the nation of Israel – but with other nations as well – including that of Assyria. And it was his knowledge of the character of God which led him to interpret his original commission to go to Nineveh as God's appointed means of sparing Nineveh. Hence his flight to Tarshish. Alas that a man should know so much about the character of God and be so little affected by it! Of course, we wouldn't be like that – would we? Ouch!

Bitterly disappointed that the advertised fireworks display wasn't now likely to take place – Jonah prayed in effect, 'If Nineveh must live, then let me die', 4.3 – and the man who, when in the depths of the Mediterranean Sea, had pleaded for his life to be spared – now begged to have that very life taken from him.

When questioned by the Lord about the rightness of his anger, the prophet simply turned his back on God (for a second time!) and stormed off in high dudgeon, v.5. He decided however to remain in the area until the end of the 40 days period – on the off-chance that God would change His mind again.

The east side of Nineveh was skirted by hills and no doubt it was on one of these that Jonah found himself some suitable vantage point from which he could see what would become of the city. And there, under his makeshift shelter, he sat – a pathetic, sullen, solitary figure. Though his own name meant 'a dove' – there was nothing dove-like about the prophet now. If anything, he resembled rather some great vulture – sitting, perched, waiting hungrily for the death of its prey.

In heaven the angels were no doubt rejoicing over – not just one – but many, many sinners repenting, Luke 15.10 – but on earth God's servant could only fume and frown. How out of touch he was with the feelings of God – and how dramatically different his emotions from those of One so much greater than he, who, around 800 years later, looked over another great city – which was irreversibly doomed to destruction – and wept over it, Luke 19.41 - 44.

But the Lord proved himself exceedingly gracious and patient with his prophet right to the end. For God didn't leave Jonah to sulk and ultimately destroy himself. Although the prophet had successfully accomplished the mission which God had given him, the Lord refused to discard him now. God was deeply concerned about the inner feelings of His servant and showed tremendous consideration and care for him.

But there was obviously no point in the Lord attempting to argue or reason with Jonah. In the circumstances this would have done far more harm than good – Jonah was in no mood for being lectured. Indeed he was no longer on speaking terms with God – we note the contrast between verse 8 and verses 2-3 – in verses 2-3 '*he prayed to the Lord, and said ... O Lord, take, I beseech Thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live*' – whereas in verse 8 it is said only that *he wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live* – ie he now spoke only to himself and not to God. But the all-wise God knew how best to handle His servant – and set about creating a situation to help Jonah understand (and hopefully to come to share) His own feelings for Nineveh.

First, God prepared (appointed) a large-leafed spreading plant to supplement the rough booth which Jonah had constructed for himself. The same God who had earlier 'prepared' a fish, 1.17, to deliver Jonah from *the terrors of the ocean beneath*, now 'prepared' a plant to deliver him *from the broiling sun of the sky above*. So it was that – though still 'exceedingly' displeased on account of the sparing of Nineveh, v.1 – Jonah was 'exceedingly' glad on account of the gourd and the welcome shade it provided, v. 6.

Ah but – alas for Jonah – his much-appreciated, divinely-provided shelter proved to be short lived. For God caused the plant to wither as quickly as it had grown, v.7. Jonah was utterly devastated – his gourd, his lovely gourd, was gone. And then, to add to Jonah's general discomfort, God set in motion, like the blast of a furnace, the burning and blistering hot wind of the desert. And then – to cap it all – the sun's unbroken rays beat down mercilessly on the prophet's defenceless head. And now it was Jonah's turn to wither! All of which proved too much for the poor prophet and he '*wished in himself to die*', v.8. And, when God ventured to raise with Jonah the question whether he was really justified in being so angry on account of the gourd, Jonah well nigh exploded, v.9.

The Lords' response to Jonah's outburst provides both the conclusion and the climax of the book. 'You pitied the plant', He pointed out, 'which cost you nothing – and which was indeed of little value – and yet you presume to find fault with Me because I have had pity on a city – a city 'great' not only in terms of its wickedness, 1.2, but in terms of its large population of human souls – which are of infinitely greater value than any number of leafy plants – not to speak of its many cattle. You maintain that you do well to be *angry* – I maintain that I do well to be *merciful*'.

In the Greek Bible, the book of Nahum comes immediately after that of Jonah – and in many ways this isn't surprising – both books are about the same length - both deal with the fate of Nineveh – and both refer back to God's revelation to Moses that He – the Lord – is slow to anger. More interestingly to me, both books also end with a question. Nahum ends with the question which God addressed to Nineveh through His prophet, 'upon whom has not your wickedness passed continually?' But Jonah ends with the question which God addressed about Nineveh to His prophet, 'and I, should not I pity Nineveh...?'

God had then – with the utmost wisdom and skill – redirected Jonah's fierce anger from something which had been spared (the city of Nineveh ,v.1) to something which had been destroyed (the gourd, v.9). For God wanted to lead Jonah *to have pity on something* – and to long passionately that it had been spared. And Jonah had indeed been terribly distressed over the loss of a mere plant – which, as the Lord pointed out, was not of his making, v.10. Could he not now appreciate something of God's feelings of pity for the city of Nineveh? Yes, it was true that in due course – according to Isaiah 10 – the Assyrian people would be a 'rod' and 'staff' in the Lord's hand to punish His backsliding people – but they were also the object of His compassion and care – and had a proper place in the heart of a faithful Creator.

And here the book ends very abruptly – leaving us to speculate if we will about Jonah's response to God's gentle argument.

But we are left *in no doubt* about the tremendous concern which God showed for His servant – and the tremendous lengths to which He was prepared to go to help him understand why He had done what He had done. How thrilling to realise that when God's people fail Him – and some of us sometimes fail Him abysmally – He doesn't stop loving them or being concerned for them.

It is altogether a remarkable story. But let me tell you another remarkable story – about *another man* who received a missionary call – and who became angry with God – but who God refused to let go. My story begins a little over 80 years ago.

### **The story of David and Svea Flood<sup>1</sup>**

In 1921, a missionary couple named David and Svea Flood went from Sweden with their two-year old son to what was then called the Belgian Congo. They met up with another young Scandinavian couple – Joel and Bertha Erickson. In those days of much devotion and sacrifice, they felt led of the Lord to set out from the main mission station and take the gospel to a remote area. This was a huge step of faith. At the village of N'dolera they were rebuffed by the chief, who wouldn't let them enter his town for fear of alienating the local gods. The two couples opted to go half a mile up the slope and build their own mud huts. They prayed for a spiritual breakthrough, but there was none.

Their only contact with the villagers was a young boy, who was allowed to sell them chickens and eggs twice a week. Svea Flood – a tiny woman only four feet, eight inches tall – decided that if this was the only African she could talk to, she would try to lead the boy to Jesus. And in fact she succeeded. But there were no other encouragements.

Meanwhile, malaria continued to strike one member of the little band after another. In time the Ericksons decided they had faced enough suffering, and returned to the central mission station. David and Svea Flood remained near N'dolera to go on alone. Then, of all things, Svea found herself pregnant in the middle of the primitive wilderness. For several months Svea endured a raging fever. When the time came for her to give birth, the village chief softened enough to allow a midwife to help her. A little girl was born on 13 April 1923, whom they named Aina.

The delivery, however, was exhausting, and Svea Flood was already weak from bouts of malaria. The birth process was a heavy blow to her stamina and she only lasted another 17 days before she died.

Something snapped inside David Flood. He dug a rough grave, buried his 27 year old wife, and then took his children back down the mountain to the mission station. Giving his newborn daughter to the Ericksons, he announced, 'I am going back to Sweden. I've lost my wife, and I obviously can't take care of this baby. God has ruined my life'.

With that, he headed for the port, rejecting not only his calling, but God himself. When he arrived in Stockholm, he went into the import business and later began drinking heavily.

Within eight months both the Ericksons were stricken with a mysterious illness and died within three days of each other. Some suspected poisoning. Little Aina was given to an American Assemblies of God missionary couple, Arthur and Anna Berg. The Bergs took Aina to a village called Massisi in northern Congo. They named her Agnes and called her Aggie. She played with the African children and spoke Swahili.

When the Bergs returned to the U.S. on furlough, Aggie went with them. Born in the Congo of Swedish parents, Aggie had only a birth certificate – with no evidence of Swedish citizenship and no Congolese citizenship. She was given a six month alien visa to enter America – or ‘Ameh-eeka’ as she excitedly said it. She had no ‘r’s’ from Swahili to carry over to English. The Bergs decided to stay in their home country and switch from missionary work to a pastoral ministry. And that is how Aggie grew up in South Dakota. For many years the Bergs had to repeatedly travel to Canada to renew Aggie’s visa and then re-enter the U.S. The question always hung in the air, ‘Will the visa be renewed?’ Aggie carried alien status and no citizenship. She was a girl without a country.

As a young woman, she attended North Central Bible College in Minneapolis. There she met and married a young man name Dewey Hurst in 1944. Years passed. The Hursts enjoyed a fruitful ministry. Aggie gave birth first to a daughter Gigi, then a son Rick. In time, her husband became president of a Christian college in the Seattle area and Aggie was intrigued to find so much Scandinavian heritage there.

One day a Swedish Christian magazine appeared in her mailbox. She had no idea who had send it and she couldn’t read the words. But as she turned the pages, all of a sudden a photo stopped her cold. There in a primitive setting was a grave with a white cross – and on the cross were the words ‘SVEA FLOOD’. Aggie jumped in her car and went straight to a college faculty member who, she knew, could translate the article. ‘What does this say?’ she asked.

The instructor summarized the story : It was about missionaries who had come to N’dolera long ago ... the birth of a white baby...the death of the young mother .. the one little African boy who had been led to Christ.... and how, after the whites had all left, the boy had grown up and finally persuaded the chief to let him build a school in the village.

The article went on to say that gradually he won all the students to Christ ... the children led their parents to the Lord ... even the chief became a Christian. Today there were 600 Christian believers in that one village... all because of the sacrifice of David and Svea Flood.

For the Hurst’s twenty fifth wedding anniversary, the college presented them with a gift of a vacation to Sweden. In Stockholm Aggie tried to find her real father. She discovered that, an old man now, David Flood had remarried, fathered four more children, and generally dissipated his life with alcohol.

Her three step-brothers greeted her at the hotel. She asked them, ‘Where’s David, my older brother?’ They pointed across the lobby to a lone figure slumped in a chair – David Flood Jnr had nearly destroyed his life with alcohol. When Aggie asked about her father, her step-brothers flushed with anger. None of them had talked to him in years. ‘He’s very ill now’, they said, ‘But you need to know that whenever he hears the name of God he flies into a rage’.

When Aggie’s step-sister arrived at the hotel, she told Aggie, ‘All my life I’ve dreamed about you. I used to spread out a map of the world, put a toy car on it and pretend to drive everywhere to find you.’ Aggie and her sister left to find their father and drove to an impoverished area of Stockholm. There they entered a rundown building and climbed the stairs to the third floor. Inside, liquor bottles lay everywhere. And lying on a bed in the corner was their father – the one-time missionary, David Flood. He was now 73 years old. He suffered from diabetes, had had a stroke, and cataracts now covered both his eyes.

Aggie fell to his side, crying, ‘Papa, I’m your little girl, Aina - the one you left behind in Africa.’ Tears formed in her father’s eyes. After a silence he answered, ‘Aina, I never meant to give you away. I just couldn’t handle both you and your brother.’ ‘It’s all right, Papa,’ she replied, taking him gently in her arms, ‘God took care of me’. Her father instantly stiffened. The tears stopped. ‘God forgot all of us’, he said sharply, ‘Our lives have been like this because of Him.’ And he turned his face back to the wall.

Aggie stroked his face and continued, undaunted, ‘Papa, I’ve got a little story to tell you, and it is a true one. You didn’t go to Africa in vain. Mama didn’t die in vain. The little boy you brought to the Lord grew up to win his whole village to Jesus Christ. The one seed you planted just kept growing and growing. And today there are at least 600 African people serving the Lord because you were faithful to the call of God in your life ... Papa, Jesus loves you. He has never hated you.’

The old man turned back to look as best he could into his daughter’s eyes. His body relaxed and he began to talk. Aggie sang several hymns, much as her mother had once done, and prayed with her father. And David Flood broke. Tears of sorrow and repentance flowed down his face, and there and then he recommitted his life to Christ– and came back to the God he had openly and bitterly resented for so many years.

Over the next few days, father and daughter enjoyed many warm moments together. But Aggie and her husband soon had to return to America – and within a few weeks, David Flood had gone into eternity.

Several years later, the Hursts were attending an evangelism conference in London, England, where a report was given from the nation of Zaire (the former Belgian Congo – and now ‘Democratic Republic of the Congo’). The superintendent of the national church there was a man named Ruhigita Ndagora. Representing some 110,000 baptized believers, brother Ndagora spoke eloquently on the gospel’s spread in his nation. Aggie couldn’t help going to the superintendent afterwards to ask if he had ever heard of David and Svea Flood. The superintendent spoke French and through a translator replied, ‘Yes, madam, ‘Svea Flood led me to Jesus Christ when I was just a boy. They had a baby girl, but I don’t know what happened to her.’ Aggie exclaimed, ‘I’m that girl! I’m Aina.’

‘And I’, Ruhigita Ndagora continued, ‘was the boy who brought food to your parents before you were born. To this day your mother’s grave and her memory are honoured by all of us.’ He embraced Aggie in a long, sobbing hug. Then he continued, ‘You must come to Africa to see, because your mother is the most famous person in our history’.

In time that is exactly what Aggie Hurst and her husband did. On arrival there, they were welcomed by throngs of villagers – and Aggie even met the man who had been hired by her father those many years before to carry her down the mountain to the mission station in a hammock-cradle. But the most dramatic moment was when the pastor of the church escorted Aggie to see her mother’s white cross for herself. And there she knelt in the soil to pray and give thanks.

Later that day, in the church, the pastor read from John 12:24: ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain’. He then followed with Psalm 126:5: ‘Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy’.

Some time later, Aggie wrote down the complete story – which was later published. But during the time she worked on her book, it was discovered that she had cancer. And Aggie Hurst went to be with the Lord on March 18, 1982, soon after the book was completed. Her husband, Dewey Hurst, an Assemblies of God minister, served for 25 years as president of Northwest College of the Assemblies of God and, as far as I know, still lives in Kirkland, Washington.

Many lessons spring out from the amazing story of David and Svea Flood. Not least, that we can’t always expect to see the harvest down here. David and Svea Flood went as a young missionaries to the jungles of Africa. Svea gave her life for Christ, having led only one person to Him – a young African boy who sold chickens to her. But through her influence on this young boy, she reached many hundreds – even thousands. And so, in one sense, just as Jonah, David and Svea Flood accomplished a mighty work for God. ***Their story assures us that – even when some awful tragedy strikes – and no-one can begin to understand why the Lord saw fit to allow it – He can be trusted.***

But, in closing, I want to focus in particular on the love and compassion of God for David Flood – the love and compassion of God for someone who – like Jonah – had been extremely angry with Him – and had turned his back on Him. But God worked through a chain of providences to show beyond doubt that He still cared deeply for His child and one-time servant – and wasn’t prepared to let him die before he was restored to Him.

After returning to America, Aggie learned that in her father’s final days, he had begun painting scenes of Africa. Indeed, in his closing hours, in delirium, he had begun speaking in Swahili. In one sense, therefore, before God took David Flood to heaven, He first took him back to Africa. But not before He brought him back to Himself.

What a thrill to know that God’s love for us isn’t diminished – even when it isn’t returned.

It was so sad – and so unnecessary – that David Flood was away from God for over 50 years. What wasted potential – and nothing could possibly restore to him the years the locusts had eaten. But David Flood’s last days on earth bear eloquent testimony to the love of the Lord for His own – and to the way that, if a person is truly the Lord’s, the Lord is simply not going to let that person go.

---

## Footnote

<sup>1</sup> Sources : ‘Aggie: The inspiring story of a girl without a country’, Aggie Hurst, Access Publishing (Gospel Publishing House), Springfield, Mo. ©1986. Plus excerpts from ‘Fresh Power’ by Jim Cymbala and ‘Finishing Strong’ by Steve Farrar. Also see other sources located under ‘Aggie Hurst’ on ‘Google’. Finally, note the film at <http://www.1voicefilms.com/1voicefilms.htm>