

## Jonah on True and False Worship<sup>1</sup>

Based on commentary by John Calvin

### Jonah 2:8-9

"Those who regard worthless idols Forsake their own Mercy. But I will sacrifice to You With the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay what I have vowed. Salvation *is* of the LORD." (NKJ)

Here Jonah says first, that men miserably go astray, when they turn aside to vain superstitions, for they rob themselves of the chief good: for he calls whatever help or aid that is necessary for salvation, the mercy of men. The sense then is that as soon as men depart from God, they depart from life and salvation, and that nothing is retained by them, for they willfully cast aside whatever good that can be hoped and desired. . . .

I doubt not . . . but that Jonah here sets his own religion in opposition to the false intentions of men; for it immediately follows, *But I with the voice of praise will sacrifice to thee*. Jonah, then, having before confessed that he would be thankful to God, now pours contempt on all those inventions which men foolishly contrive for themselves, and through which they withdraw themselves from the only true God, and from the sincere worship of Him. For he calls all those devices, by which men deceive themselves, *the vanities of falsehood*; for it is certain that they are mere fallacies which men invent for themselves without the authority of God's Word; for truth is one and simple, which God has revealed to us in His word. Whosoever then turns aside the least, either on this or on that side, seeks, as it were designedly, some imposture or another, by which he ruins himself. *They then who follow such vanities, says Jonah, forsake their own mercy*, that is, they reject all happiness: for no aid and no help can be expected from any other quarter than from the only true God.

### False religion, superstition, and vanity

But this passage deserves a careful notice; for we hence learn what value to attach to **all superstitions**, to all those opinions of men, when they attempt to set up religion according to their own will: for Jonah calls them **lying or fallacious vanities**. **There is then but one true religion, the religion which God has taught us in His word**. We must also notice, that men in vain weary themselves when they follow their own inventions; for the more strenuously they run, the farther they recede from the right way, as Augustine has well observed. But Jonah here adopts a higher principle, — that God alone possesses in Himself all fullness of blessings: whosoever then truly and sincerely seeks God, will find in Him whatever can be wished for salvation. But God is not to be sought except by obedience and faith: whosoever then dare to give themselves loose reins, so as to follow this or that without the warrant of God's word, recede from God, and, at the same time, deprive themselves of all good things. The superstitious do indeed think that they gain much when they toil in their own inventions; but we see what the Holy Spirit declares by the mouth of Jonah.

The Lord says the same by Jeremiah "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and cisterns have they digged for themselves" (Jeremiah 2:13). There the Lord complains of His chosen people, who had gone astray after wicked superstitions. **Hence, when men wander beyond the word of God, they in a manner renounce God, or say adieu (goodbye) to Him; and thus they deprive themselves of all good things; for without God there is no salvation and no help to be found.**

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<sup>1</sup> From John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Twelve Minor Prophets*, Vol. III, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 86-89, emphasis added, some English updated.

Jonah therefore rightly adds, *But I, with the voice of praise, will sacrifice to thee*; as though he said, While men as it were banish themselves from God, by giving themselves up to errors, I will sacrifice to thee and to thee alone, O Lord. And this ought to be observed by us; for as our minds are prone to falsehood and vanity, any new superstition will easily lay hold on us, except we be restrained by this bond, except we be fully persuaded, — that **true salvation dwells in God alone**, and every aid and help that can be expected by us: but when this conviction is really and thoroughly fixed in our hearts, then true religion cannot be easily lost by us: though Satan should on every side spread his allurements, we shall yet continue in the true and right worship of God. And the more carefully it behooves us to consider this passage, because Jonah no doubt meant here to strengthen himself in the right path of religion; for he knew that like all mortals he was prone to what was false; he therefore encouraged himself to persevere: and this he does, when he declares that whatever superstition men devise, is a deprivation of the chief good, even of life and salvation.

It will hence follow, that **we shall abominate every error when we are fully persuaded that we forsake the true God whenever we obey not His word, and that we at the same time cast away salvation, and every thing good that can be desired.**

Then Jonah says, *I will sacrifice to thee with the voice of praise*. It must be noticed here farther, that the worship of God especially consists in praises, as it is said in Psalm 1:1: for there God shows that He regards as nothing all sacrifices, except they answer this end — to set forth the praise of His name. It was indeed His will that sacrifices should be offered to Him under the law; but it was for the end just stated: for God cares not for calves and oxen, for goats and lambs; but His will was that He should be acknowledged as the Giver of all blessings. Hence He says there, ‘Sacrifice to me the sacrifice of praise.’ So also Jonah now says, I will offer to thee the sacrifice of praise, and he might have said with still more simplicity, “Lord, I ascribe to thee my preserved life.” But if this was the case under the shadows of the law, how much more ought we to attend to this, that is, — to strive to worship God, not in a gross manner, but spiritually, and to testify that our life proceeds from Him, that it is in His hand, that we owe all things to Him, and, in a word, that He is the Source and Author of salvation, and not only of salvation, but also of wisdom, of righteousness, of power?

And he afterwards mentions his vows, *I will pay*, he says, *my vows*. We have stated elsewhere in what light we are to consider vows. The holy Fathers did not vow to God, as the Papists of this day are accustomed to do, who seek to pacify God by their frivolous practices; one abstains for a certain time from meat, another puts on sackcloth, another undertakes a pilgrimage, and another obtrudes on God some new ceremony. There was nothing of this kind in the vows of the holy Fathers; but a vow was the mere act of thanksgiving, or a testimony of gratitude: and so Jonah joins his vows here with the sacrifice of praise. We hence learn that they were not two different things; but he repeats the same thing twice. Jonah, then, had declared his vow to God for no other purpose but to testify his gratitude.

And hence he adds, *To Jehovah is, or belongs, salvation*; that is, to save is the prerogative of God alone. . . . It is then to Jehovah that salvation belongs; the work of saving appertains to no other but to the Supreme God. Since it is so, we see how absurd and insane men are, when they transfer praises to another, as every one does who invents an idol for himself. As, then, there is but the one true God who saves, it behooves us to ascribe to Him alone all our praises, that we may not deprive Him of His right.