

The Compass

Week 50

OT Readings: Amos 1:1 – Micah 7:20

NT Readings: Revelation 2:1-7:17

Things to Watch for in Your Readings this Week

Old Testament

- **Amos** attacks the covenant infidelity and social injustice of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, at a time of unusual economic and political prosperity.
- **Obadiah** pronounces judgment on Edom (Judah's southeastern neighbor) for Edom's sins against God's people. This is the shortest book in the OT.
- **Jonah** is a prophetic oracle concerning and directed toward one of Israel's most hated and dreaded enemies, Nineveh (Assyria). The story is fascinating on several levels. See below.
- **Micah** delivers a message over a period of twenty years, one very similar in emphasis to Amos by attacking covenant disloyalty and social injustice.¹

New Testament

- Rev. 2-3 identifies seven churches in Asia Minor to whom Jesus speaks, "to him who has ears to hear."² Chapter 4 begins a series of visions filled with OT allusion.³

Highlight of the Week: Who is God?

Jonah 4:2. Jonah is a fascinating little book. We tend to get focused on someone getting swallowed by a great fish and miss the real (intended) truth of the story. The people of Nineveh were Israel's enemies, they were wicked and cruel and consequently they were feared and hated. Jonah surely would want nothing more than to see them destroyed.⁴ So why does he run away from the call?

He runs because he knows God! Though there is no qualification to the message of destruction, no "loophole" for repentance, Jonah knows God's heart, "I knew that you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. I knew how easily you could cancel your plans for destroying these people." (4:2) Jonah was angry that God didn't destroy those Jonah and Israel hated so much and he was angry that his word didn't come to pass. Jonah felt God left him hanging out to dry – what kind of a prophet is it whose word doesn't come to pass?⁵ God is greater than our pictures of mercy and greater than our idea of justice. At the moment of turning in true repentance, He quickly extends mercy (3:10).⁶ Do we share His heart?

Application: "What about me? How does this apply?"

Revelation 3:14-22. Laodicea receives no praise at all from Jesus, only the promise of being vomited (NLT "spit") out of His mouth (3:15-16).⁷ Doesn't seem all that encouraging, does it? Their arrogance and complacency has left them deceived about their true condition, "they need nothing." But in fact their true need is great (3:17-18). Even now, their situation is not without remedy! They must listen, repent and open their hearts and lives to the truth and the True One.

Revival, both personal and corporate begins with an absolutely honest appraisal of ourselves. The Holy Spirit leads us into a place of understanding so that we can see the truth of the matter, so that our perspective can change. We must respond to His appeals, we must invite His scrutiny and His loving reproof (3:19). It should be surprising that this insight is called "light" in the Bible.⁸ It can be uncomfortable, even shocking to one "awakened" by its power.⁹ But it is the way to freedom and reality. Will we ask God to show us the truth? If not, then we are certainly already Laodiceans, smug, proud and in "need of nothing."

Difficult Question of the Week

Jonah 3:9-10, 4:2. Q. "Does God actually 'change His mind' and what does that mean?"

Jonah's message was rather absolute, forty days and you will be destroyed; no qualification, no possibility of mercy explicitly extended. God's intention for Nineveh was expressed through the word of his messenger, Jonah. So why wasn't this "absolute" word carried out? Because God changed His mind! (3:10) The responsiveness and repentance of Nineveh prompted God to extend mercy;¹⁰ to change His intended course of action: "When God saw that they had put a stop to their evil ways, he had mercy on them and didn't carry out the destruction he had threatened." (3:10) It is interesting that both the people of Nineveh and Jonah believed that God might do just that thing, change His mind. Nineveh staked their lives on it; Jonah ran (4:1-2).

Other examples in Scripture could be cited of this characteristic of God.¹¹ While He never changes His character or nature, He does respond to the changing circumstances in the world *He* has created. Some find this assertion difficult. However, the Biblical evidence seems substantial.¹² Is not God free to do what He chooses to do, i.e., to both create a world where people have authentic freedom and then be responsive in His actions to accommodate that freedom? Is He not "sovereign over His own sovereignty?"¹³

The Bible presents God as the Lord and Sovereign over the earth and over history and so He is! He is "omnipotent" and brings about His overarching purposes for the world.¹⁴ He is not surprised or befuddled by our choices and freedom, rather He knows exactly how to move things on to the wonderful conclusions He has in His heart for the world and for history.

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¹ The OT books Hosea through Malachi are collectively called The Book of the Twelve or the Minor Prophets. They are minor, not because they lack importance, but because they are shorter in length than the Major Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah.

² There have been a variety of interpretations for these churches; however, the obvious one is best: these were real churches resident in these 1st century cities in Asia Minor.

³ See Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, 426-436.

⁴ Note the message he preaches when he finally gets there, "in forty days you will be destroyed." There is no explicit condition here, "If you repent, you won't." While repentance is clearly God's heart and hope, He gives them no loophole.

⁵ Did that make him a false prophet? God is far more concerned about the lives of Nineveh than if Jonah's word comes true! (4:10-11)

⁶ In 4:2 Jonah quotes from Exodus 34:6, one of the most directly autobiographical statements God ever makes about His own character, "He passed in front of Moses and said, 'I am the LORD, I am the LORD, the merciful and gracious God. I am slow to anger and rich in unfailing love and faithfulness.'" Interestingly Jonah adds to God's own words this: "a God who relents from sending calamity." (NIV) So true was this of God, His willingness to change His mind ("relent") and extend mercy, that by this time in Israel's history (500 or more years later than Exodus) they saw this characteristic on par with God's own statement of Who He is! Amazing!

⁷ The hot and cold water image is one that those at Laodicea would have quickly understood. Contrary to some interpreters, the passage is not saying that it is better to be "cold" toward God than lukewarm. "Cold" water refers to the cold water that was refreshing to drink and "hot" to the hot spring water that was useful for bathing. Because the water was brought in to Laodicea came from a distance it was "lukewarm" upon arrival, not great for either drinking or bathing. Thus, cold and hot were both good things, lukewarm was not.

⁸ E.g., see 1 John 1:5-7.

⁹ Historical accounts of revival are filled with the power of truth being applied by the Holy Spirit to the conscience of persons. At times they are driven to the ground and cry out as if in pain as they see their true condition before God.

¹⁰ Which was His heart all along!

¹¹ The OT principle for nations and applied to Judah is explicitly stated in Jer. 18:1-17. In Jeremiah's day, Judah believed God could change His mind and they even looked back into their own history to cite an example of Him doing so to substantiate their belief! See Jer. 26.

¹² Some would say that "God changing His mind" is "anthropomorphism," i.e., meaning a human characteristic applied to God. However, even anthropomorphism must mean something, so what does "God changing His mind" mean if it is not to be understood literally? Unless we have some clearer understanding elsewhere, we need to take these passages at face value. Some will cite 1 Sam. 15:29 and Num. 23:19 to show that God *doesn't* change His mind (same Hebrew word is used). However, I believe these only support the point that God is **unchanging in character** and yet *flexible* in how He brings about His purposes in history.

¹³ I believe this phrase comes from John Sanders, see *The God Who Risks* for a careful Biblical look at this issue.

¹⁴ All of the other "omni's" apply as well: He is omniscient (possesses all knowledge), omnipotent (all power) and omnipresent (present always).