

Should I Not Have Concern for...

Jonah 4:1-11 on June 23, 2024

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Please read Jonah 4:1-11 before going further in this transcript.

The message of Jonah helps us to...

1) Honestly measure our own concern for the spiritually lost.

Jonah 4:1 begins, “But to Jonah this seemed VERY wrong, and he became angry.”¹ What was Jonah so angry about? Well, if you missed last week’s sermon from Jonah 3, Jonah finally obeyed God’s commission to go to Nineveh and deliver God’s warning, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”² And the Ninevites responded to God’s warning by: believing God, by giving up their evil ways, and by fasting and repenting. God used Jonah to preach one of the most powerful and effective sermons ever recorded. The response was immediate and broad spread. Jonah 3:10 concludes, “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.” The Ninevites repented, and God relented! Praise be to the LORD God of Israel! Now, at this point, you’d think Jonah would be marveling at God’s grace. You’d think he’d be struck with awe and wonder at God’s abounding love toward sinners. ...NOPE!

Jonah 4:2-4 goes on, “[Jonah] prayed to the LORD, “Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. 3 Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” 4 But the LORD replied, “Is it RIGHT for you to be angry?”³ It seems like Jonah would change his attitude once God rebuked him with this question. Much like back in Jonah 1, when God lovingly rebuked him by hurling a great storm onto the Mediterranean Sea, and then provided a HUGE fish to put him in a timeout. You’d think that God’s rebuke would have humbled him and helped him to see his own callous and uncompassionate heart. ...NOPE!

Jonah 4:5 tells us, “Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.” Are you kidding me? What would happen to the city, had already happened! Jonah had just personally witnessed an incredible demonstration of God’s grace toward lost sinners! However, rather than praising God for the beauty of His grace, and rather than being moved to compassion himself, Jonah’s heart still showed absolutely no

¹ The *ESV* says it this way, “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.”

² Jonah 3:4.

³ Note how in chapter 4, Jonah is quick to anger, which stands in contrast to God who is “slow to anger.”

concern for their wellbeing. Jonah's heart stands in contrast to God's heart. The book crescendos in Jonah 4:11 with these final words, "And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" 120,000 people, who had no understanding of right and wrong! As I mentioned a few weeks ago, my Bible app gives a good summary of the book of Jonah: "Jonah's role in the book is to represent the attitude of many in Israel toward other nations. Instead of accepting their own calling to help these nations come to know the true God, they considered them enemies and expected God to destroy them. The book teaches that God's love extends beyond Israel to other nations, indeed, to the whole creation. God's final question [at the end of chapter 4] is intended for all the book's readers."⁴

"And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh?" All 48 verses in this short book of the Bible lead up to this final question, which should serve to shake us from our spiritual lethargy, and to awaken us to our own spiritual responsibility to share the compassionate heart of God with the lost people around us, in our city. Jonah's uncompassionate heart reminds us to measure the condition of our own hearts. God's desire is that His people, His deeply devoted followers, would share His same heart of compassion for lost sinners.

Well, despite their repentance, Jonah was still rooting for Nineveh's destruction: "Give me a 'D!' Give me an 'E!' Add the word, 'Struction!' What's that spell? Destruction! Destruction! Yay, destruction!"⁵ But why this open hostility toward this repentant Gentile city? Our best clue is found in the one other place we read about Jonah in the Old Testament. 2 Kings 14:23-25 says, "In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit. He (Jeroboam II) was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher."

Now this is the kind of prophetic commission that Jonah preferred: prophesying the restoration of Israel's land. He preferred to bring a message from God that was for the benefit of his own people, not for the

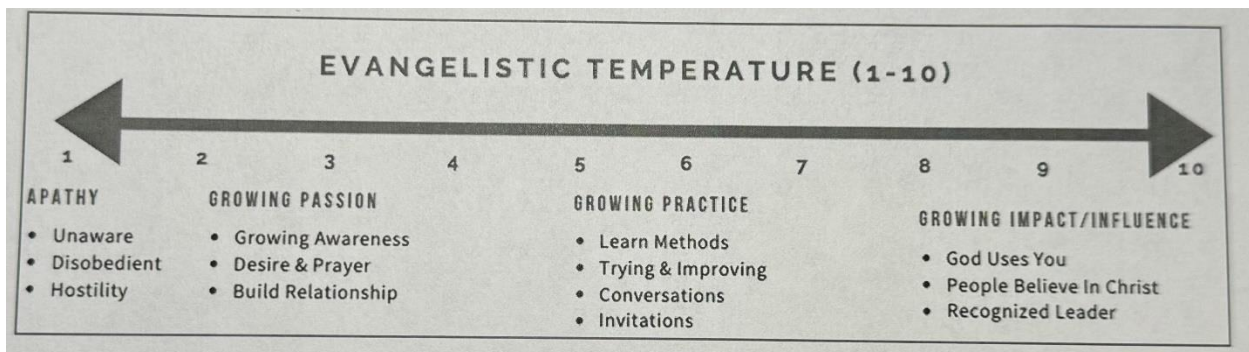
⁴ YouVersion Bible App introductory notes to Jonah.

⁵ Two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, had a similar response in Luke 9:51-56, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village."

benefit of some foreigners! Jonah represented the common state of mind of God's chosen people: SELF-focused, lacking any concern for the spiritual needs of other people.^{6 7} As my Study Bible notes: "Jeroboam II was able to free the northern kingdom from the oppression it had suffered [previously].... He also extended Israelite political control over the Arameans of Damascus, an undertaking that had been begun by his father, Jehoash. Assyrian pressure on the Arameans... had weakened the Arameans enough to enable Jeroboam II to gain the upper hand over them. Meanwhile, Assyria also became too weak to suppress Jeroboam's expansion."⁸

In other words, Old Testament Israel was more interested in strengthening their own political position, and in reacquiring their land, than they were in sharing the truth about Yahweh with foreign nations. At this particular time in history, Israel was strong; it was on the rise, gaining strength over the nations that surrounded it. And it was at this particular time, that God sent Jonah to warn their Assyrian enemies who were living in the city of Nineveh.

The message of Jonah helps us to honestly measure our own concern for the spiritually lost. Over this past year, I've been driving down to the Twin Cities for a monthly evangelism training class. My fellow students are fellow pastors from other E-Free churches throughout Minnesota. We begin every class the same way, by measuring our Evangelistic Temperature. We use a scale from 1-10 on this chart:



The chart begins on the far left with apathy, that's like a 1 or a 2 out of 10. Apathy toward the spiritually lost is defined with words like unaware, disobedient, or even open hostility to the lost. The Old Testament prophet

⁶ One of Jonah's contemporaries was the prophet Amos. Amos 6:1 says, "Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria, you notable men of the foremost nation, to whom the people of Israel come!"

⁷ "[Israel] felt jealously complacent about her favored status with God. She focused her religion on expectations of the 'day of the LORD' (Amos 5:18-20), when God's darkness would engulf the other nations, leaving Israel to bask in his light. It was in such a time that the Lord sent Amos and Hosea to announce to his people Israel that he would 'spare them no longer' (Amos 7:8; 8:2) but would send them into exile 'beyond Damascus' (Amos 5:27), i.e., to Assyria. During this time the Lord also sent Jonah to Nineveh to warn it of the imminent danger of divine judgment." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1491 background notes.

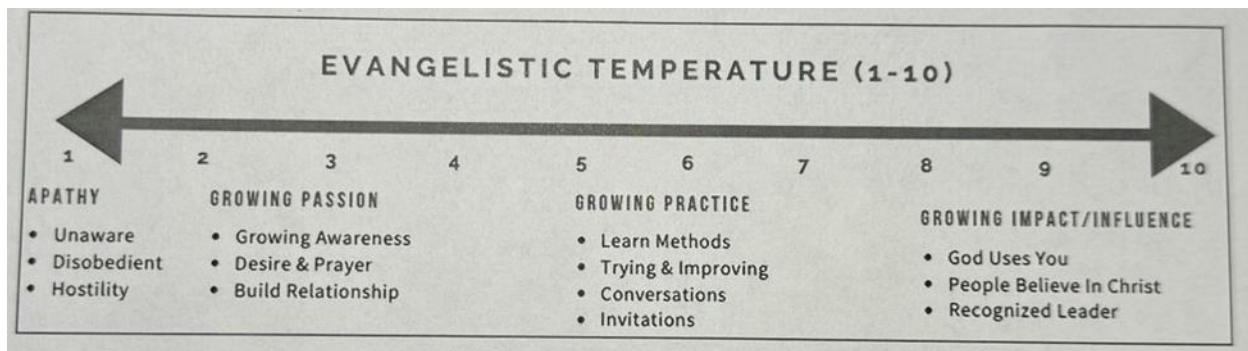
⁸ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 592-593 footnote on 2 Kings 14:25.

Jonah fits this description well, and it's not where any of us want to be today. Now, you might assume, that in a classroom full of pastors, certainly most of us would score pretty high on this chart. Maybe not all 10s, but at least an 8 or a 9. Well, I hate to break it to you, but not too many of us pastors rank ourselves on the high end of this chart, including me. (*That's one of the reasons I'm taking this class.*) You see, it's all too easy for us, as devoted followers of Jesus, to neglect our Great Commission mandate to win the lost. Many of us believers spend the majority of our time working on our own personal faith, and helping other believers to grow in their faith. But winning the spiritually lost, well... that often doesn't get the time and attention it deserves.

Now I will say that each one of us pastors sincerely wants to increase our evangelistic temperature, and we're working on it diligently and prayerfully. I should also say that we're greatly encouraged by the fact that God wants to use us in reaching the spiritually lost, despite our evangelistic temperature. God doesn't just want to use us pastors though; He calls each and every deeply devoted follower of Jesus to join Him in sharing His compassionate grace with the spiritually lost. This is our Great Commission mandate, to make disciples, and the very first step in making disciples is helping people become disciples.⁹ (This is the first step in the discipleship pathway.)

The message of Jonah helps us to...

2) Intentionally increase our concern for the spiritually lost.



Let's look a bit more closely at this chart. There's a continuum here as we move our way from left to right, from 1, all the way up to 10. So even though many of us might have to admit that we're beginning with a certain level of apathy, there's no reason we can't pursue godly growth and improvement. It begins by committing ourselves to pursuing a growing passion for the lost. Growing our passion means intentionally growing our awareness, moving from a 1 or a 2, to a 3 or a 4. It's about asking God to

⁹ Again, that's why I'm taking this class; you'll hear more about this in the months to come. And later this fall, we elders are prayerfully considering how we can launch an infusion of evangelistic passion in and through our entire church. If you'd like a sneak peek, read Kevin G. Harney's book, *Organic Outreach for Churches*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

give us a heart that is more like His heart. It's praying that God will help us to make efforts to build relationships with people who don't know Jesus yet. And to be clear, this isn't about bragging rights, or racking up more conversions than the person next to you. This is about growing in our evangelistic concern for people who are spiritually lost and headed for an eternity apart from God.¹⁰

We try to gradually move our way up to a 5, or a 6, or a 7. Our growing *passion* will lead to a growing *practice*, of being evangelistically minded and evangelistically focused. We begin to study and learn helpful ways to share our faith. It's challenging to know just how to share our faith in today's environment, because there's so much tension in our world today, and there's so much political polarization. So we need to learn to be prayerful and discerning. We need to be intentional about trying, and improving, new approaches to sharing our faith. As God raises the evangelistic temperature within our hearts, we'll get into the good and godly habit of striking up spiritual conversations; conversations that become more and more a natural part of our everyday lives.¹¹ This will then set us up with opportunities to extend genuine, heartfelt invitations to those who are seeking spiritual truth and spiritual answers. Over time, and through much prayer and dependence on God, our evangelistic temperature may even increase to 8 or 9, or even 10, as God uses us to help someone believe in Christ! And it doesn't get any better than THAT!

From all that we've seen in the text, the only reason that Jonah ended up obeying God and delivering the warning to the Ninevites, is that God made him go. Even so, look at what incredible results his message brought about in the hearts and lives of the wicked Ninevites.^{12 13}

¹⁰ So how can we develop a passionate burden for lost sinners? Well, to be honest, I'm still working on that, but a good place to start is to admit that it's lacking. Admit it (if our evangelistic passion is lacking). Rather than running away from our commission, like Jonah did, we need to admit that our heart is not in the right place. Then... Talk to God about it (pray). Ask God to transform our selfish and uncaring hearts to be more like His compassionate heart. Pray for a burden for the lost; ask God to give us tears for the spiritually lost. Then... Prioritize our proximity (with lost people). Get to know the names and stories of the people around you who might not yet know Christ. Spend time with them; invest our lives in them. Sacrifice other things in your life in order to make space for them in your busy schedule.

¹¹ And even if things get bumpy or embarrassing along the way, even if we mess up and blow it a few times, we'll keep trying and improving with God's help, fueled by a growing compassion within our hearts.

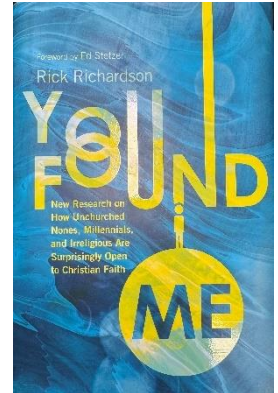
¹² The fact is, the success of the gospel isn't about us, it's not about our level of advanced training, or about how smoothly we can deliver the message, it's about the power of God at work in human hearts. Consider Paul's surprising words in Philippians 1:15-18, "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice..."

¹³ In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 Paul explains it this way, "...When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power."

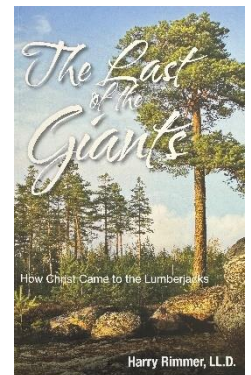
The message of Jonah helps us to...

3) Find encouragement: God wants to use US to reach the lost.

One of the books that I've been reading this year is called, "You Found Me," by Rick Richardson. It lays out convincing research that details how the unchurched, and millennials, and the irreligious are surprisingly open to the Christian Faith. Unfortunately, we Christians have become more and more convinced that no one's interested in the gospel good news anymore, which is actually incorrect, but exactly what our enemy the devil would like us to believe.



Now, at the risk of mentioning too many books today, please bear with me as I mention just one more. It's one of the most encouraging and inspiring books that I've read in a long time; it's "The Last of the Giants," by Harry Rimmer. It's the fascinating local history of how the gospel came to the lumberjacks in northern Minnesota in the early 1900s. This is just a little bit before our church came into being in 1924. Rimmer's book recounts the real-life history of how God was at work in places like Duluth, Grand Rapids, Aitken, Cass Lake, Bemidji, and International Falls, as well as further south down into St. Cloud and even Delano. We have copies of this book available at church for \$10. To be clear, this book is not deeply theological, and it's not a Bible study, but it is a book that will make you belly laugh, and it will make you think deeply. It will also inspire you, and challenge you, toward greater evangelistic fervor in your life. God burdened the hearts of a few of His devoted followers, to go deep into the logging camps of northern Minnesota, where few of His people dared to go. They faithfully brought the Good News about Jesus Christ to these rough and tumble lumberjacks. Those of us who've already been saved by God's grace won't be surprised to learn, that even though these men were dirty and sweaty on the outside, and foul-mouthed and dirty-minded on the inside, these drunken, sexually immoral men responded to the love of God with heartfelt repentance. God put a heart of compassion in these messengers which enabled them to see through their hardened, external veneer, and their belligerent, offensive behaviors, right into the broken spirits and thirsty souls of these men. God used these "Apostles of the Pines" to reach the spiritually lost lumberjacks of northern Minnesota a little over 100 years ago.



In Jonah 4:11, God declares... "...there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left...." This was the condition of the lumberjacks in northern Minnesota; tens of thousands of men who were like little children who didn't know any better,

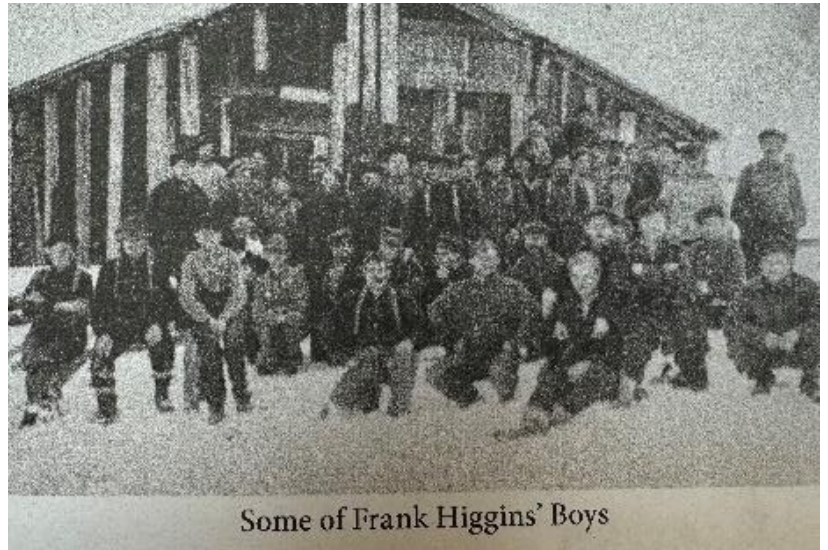
children who needed their Heavenly Father to come and rescue them.¹⁴ Now I don't want to spoil it for you, but I'd like to share a few snippets from the book:¹⁵

- “They were a rude, rough, roistering, brawling, and lusty generation... All winter long they logged... They were a hardy breed... they only had contempt for those who were soft and weak.”¹⁶
- “More than any other class that ever lived in our land, the old-time lumberjack could truthfully say, ‘No man cared for my soul.’ His rough and rude ways would scare the average preacher into hiding. His language would shock a pirate, and his roaring habits when he came to town drove the godly to cover.”¹⁷

And so, God the Father, out of the vast reserves of His compassionate grace and abounding love, sent men into the woods by the names of Frank Higgins, John Sornberger, and Al Channer.

Frank Higgins actually pastored a church right here in Bemidji for a while, until he got kicked out by the leaders, for spending too much time leading men to Christ out in the woods.¹⁸ He's

described as “one of the most powerful physical specimens the North ever saw. He was [only] five feet eight inches tall ...[but he] weighed 236 pounds, every ounce of which seemed to be bone and muscle... ‘He was an axe handle and half across the shoulders, and two axe



handles across the hips.’ He had a great, booming voice and a contagious laugh that could set any crowd of jacks chuckling within minutes of his arrival. ...he also brought a heart as big as all outdoors, a love for men that burned like a flame, a desperate desire to see men saved. [*He had a concern for the spiritually lost.*] ...he dealt with them so tenderly and wisely that many of them turned to Christ and a better way of life.”¹⁹

¹⁴ See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1497 footnote on Jonah 4:11.

¹⁵ Harry Rimmer, LL.D., *Last of the Giants*, Aneko press, Life Sentence Publishing, Inc., Abbotsford, WI, 2015.

¹⁶ ...There was no compensation for a sick or injured man and no insurance to bother about if he was killed.” Harry Rimmer, LL.D., *Last of the Giants*, Aneko press, Life Sentence Publishing, Inc., Abbotsford, WI, 2015, pp. 16-17.

¹⁷ Harry Rimmer, LL.D., *Last of the Giants*, Aneko press, Life Sentence Publishing, Inc., Abbotsford, WI, 2015, p. 19.

¹⁸ See pp. 30-31 of Harry Rimmer, LL.D., *Last of the Giants*, Aneko press, Life Sentence Publishing, Inc., Abbotsford, WI, 2015.

¹⁹ Harry Rimmer, LL.D., *Last of the Giants*, Aneko press, Life Sentence Publishing, Inc., Abbotsford, WI, 2015, pp. 21, 25.

Another Christ-follower that God used to reach these spiritually lost lumberjacks went by the name of John Sornberger (his fighting name was “Jack McWilliams”). He was one of the most renowned prize fighters this area has ever seen, winning literally hundreds of fights, both inside and outside of the boxing ring. John also went on to become an infamous outlaw (*including multiple encounters with the Bemidji sheriff*).^{20 21} But then, then something truly remarkable happened in John’s life, God got ahold of his heart, and saved him from his life of sin. After that, he became one of the most effective witnesses for Jesus Christ the lumberjacks had ever seen. Not only could John personally relate to the rough backgrounds of these men, but he cared for them deeply. He shared God’s heart of compassion for these spiritually lost men all throughout northern Minnesota. In the words of Jonah 4:2, John Sornberger came to understand that... “[God is] a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”

Rimmer’s book says it this way: “Just as Paul knew himself to be called to make God’s grace known to the despised Gentiles, so John knew he was elected to be an apostle to the men of the woods. For generations they had been forgotten by the church... there was very little spiritual help offered them. They were condemned for their way of life but not shown any better way.”^{22 23} When God saw the spiritually lost condition of the lumberjacks, He responded to them in the same way that He did to the wicked Ninevites. He didn’t ignore them, but He also didn’t send them the destruction they deserved; instead, He sent in His messenger to warn them. Friend, even still today, there is wickedness in Bemidji, and there are lost sinners in our beloved city, how do you suppose God is going to respond to them?

²⁰ See pp. 76-77 and the surrounding context in Harry Rimmer, LL.D., *Last of the Giants*, Aneko press, Life Sentence Publishing, Inc., Abbotsford, WI, 2015.

²¹ Governor Johnson of Minnesota, who was a devoted follower of Jesus himself, later granted John a full pardon for the 42 indictments and warrants against him. Johnson explained, “I will be misunderstood; I will be condemned; I will be criticized for this, but I have a duty as a Christian, which means more than my political career. I am going to give this man a full and complete pardon and leave him free to serve our blessed Savior.” Page 109 of Harry Rimmer, LL.D., *Last of the Giants*, Aneko press, Life Sentence Publishing, Inc., Abbotsford, WI, 2015.

²² Harry Rimmer, LL.D., *Last of the Giants*, Aneko press, Life Sentence Publishing, Inc., Abbotsford, WI, 2015, p. 148.

²³ We didn’t have time to talk about the ministry of Elwyn “Al” Channer, who was the third of the three key gospel workers recorded in Harry Rimmer’s book.