

GOD WON'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER

Jonah 1

In U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, the magazine of the Naval Institute, FRANK KOCH wrote of two battleships that had been at sea on training maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. Koch was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities. Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing reported, "Light, bearing on the starboard bow." "Is it steady or moving astern" the captain called out. The lookout replied, "Steady, Captain," which meant they were on a collision course with that ship. The captain then called to the signalman, "Signal that ship: 'We are on a collision course, advise you change courses twenty degrees.'" Back came the signal: "Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees." The captain said, "Send: 'I am a captain, change course twenty degrees.'" "I'm a seaman second class," came the reply. "You had better change course twenty degrees." The captain became furious. He spat out, "Send: 'I am a battleship. Change course twenty degrees.'" Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse." They changed course.

You are that battleship. The Lord is the lighthouse. When you rebel against the Lord, you are on a collision course with spiritual disaster. Your only hope is to acknowledge God's authority, change course, and line up with God's will for your life. That is the message of the prophecy of Jonah. The Book of Jonah is not about the fish that swallowed Jonah, which is mentioned four times. It is not about the city of Nineveh, which is mentioned nine times. It is not even about Jonah, although the book is named after him and mentions him eighteen times. The Book of Jonah is about the Lord God, who is mentioned thirty-eight times in these four short chapters. It reveals two fundamental attributes of God. First, Jonah reveals the mercy of God. We see God's micro-mercy in his dealing with the rebellious prophet, Jonah. And we see God's macro-mercy in his dealing with the sinful people of Nineveh. Likewise, Jonah reveals the sovereignty of God. A.W. PINK said, "Divine sovereignty simply means that God is God." And the practical outworking of divine sovereignty is that God will not take no for an answer.

It had been well said that for every major doctrine in scripture, there is an apparent contradiction. So it is with the doctrine of divine sovereignty. In scripture, there is theological tension between divine sovereignty and human free will. All too often, we error on the side of free will. Indeed, God has made us free moral agents who are able and allowed to obey or disobey God. But do not overemphasize that choice, because human free will is limited. Jonah was free to choose to run from the presence of the Lord. But he was not free to choose the consequences of that decision. Likewise, you can make all the choices you want. But the consequences are in the hands of God. Ultimately, God is the only one who truly has a free will. Psalm 33:11 says, "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations." God has the last word in every situation. And God will not take no for an answer. Jonah 1 teaches us this important truth as it recounts Jonah's disobedience, downfall, and deliverance.

I. JONAH'S DISOBEDIENCE

The prophesy of Jonah begins with the call of God on his life. Verse 1 opens with a general statement of that divine call: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai." Verse 2 records the specific details of that call: "Arise, go to Ninevah, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." The Lord called a specific person to a specific place for a specific purpose. That is God's standard operating procedure. There are no accidents in our lives. Our infinitely wise and perfectly good God designs every detail of our lives to accomplish his eternal purpose. Jeremiah 29:11 says, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

But notice how Jonah responded to the plan of God for his life. Verse 3 says, "But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presences of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presences of the Lord." God said, "Go." Jonah said, "No." Jonah 3:3 says, "So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh." But that was not Jonah's initial response. When God called Jonah to go to Nineveh, he went to Joppa and boarded a ship going to Tarshish. Scholars have educated guesses about where Tarshish is. But no one is sure. What is important is that Tarshish was in the opposite direction of Nineveh. God told Jonah to go east to Nineveh. And Jonah went west to Tarshish. When the Lord called Isaiah, He said, "Here I am! Send me" (Isaiah 6:8). This is the typical response of the prophets to the divine call. But that was not the case with Jonah. When he called Jonah, he replied, "Here I am. Send someone else. I am not going to Nineveh."

Why did Jonah respond this way? Why did he resign? Why did he run? Why did he rebel? It has been suggested that Jonah was indifferent to the call. But that could not be the case. If so, he would not have ran away. It has also been suggested that Jonah's actions were motivated by righteous indignation. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was famous for its cruelty and brutality. After defeating their enemies, they would torture them. After killing their enemies, they would make art out of the skulls and remains. In verse 2, God said that their evil had come up before him like a horrible stench. A century later, God would use the prophet Nahum to announce final judgment on the Ninevites. Yet God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh and cry out against it. It is the first and only time in scripture God commands a prophet to go into a foreign land to declare God's message against them. Without a doubt, Jonah had a list of logical reasons why he did not want to go to Nineveh. But I contend that Jonah's real issue did not have anything to do with Nineveh.

So why did he do it? In Jonah 4:2, Jonah himself tells us why he ran: "And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?" That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." Jonah's real problem was not with the Ninevites. It was with God. Jonah knew that if the Ninevites responded to his message with repentance, faith, and obedience, God would be merciful to them. But Jonah did not believe the Ninevites deserved mercy. And if God was going to give the Ninevites another chance, he did not want to have any part of it. So Jonah ran. In fact, Jonah 1:3 states twice that Jonah ran from the presence of the Lord.

Psalm 139:7-10 says, “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.” God is omnipresent. God is never late, tardy, or absent. God is fully present everywhere at the same time all the time. There is no place you can go to get away from God. Yet Jonah foolishly determined to run from God. And Jonah’s sinful rebellious ways warns us that there is never a good reason to disobey God. We could think of that in terms of “THE GREAT COMMISSION.” Jonah had an assignment to reach lost people. So does every follower of Christ. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Unfortunately, “the Great Commission” has become the “great omission” in our generation. But the Lord has not rescinded his commission to the church to make disciples. There is no excuse for our disobedience to THE GREAT COMMISSION. The message of this text also applies to whatever personal commission God would give you.

- **It may be a call to saving faith.**
- **It may be a call to personal holiness.**
- **It may be a call to spiritual maturity.**
- **It may be a call to marital fidelity.**
- **It may be a call to Christian service.**
- **It may be a call to faithful stewardship.**
- **It may be a call to vocational excellence.**

There are times when we do not know what the Lord would have us to do in a particular situation. But that is not what this text is about. This text warns us about those times when you know exactly what the Lord would have you to do and fail to do what you know is right. James 4:17 says, “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” This verse declares the sin of omission. And note that it is not about the revelation of God’s will in sacred scripture. It is about the revelation of God’s will in your individual conscious. It is a personal matter. God has specific expectations that he commands you to live out that do not apply to anyone else but you. To fail to obey the will of God is sin. JEREMY TAYLOR, the 17th century Puritan said, “God threatens terrible things to those who will not be happy in him.”

II. JONAH’S DOWNFALL

When Jonah resigned from his service to God, he went down to Joppa. Then he went down into the ship. Then he laid down and went to sleep. Later, he would go down into the water. Then he found himself inside the belly of the fish. Down is the direction of disobedience. Down is the course of spiritual rebellion. Down is the way of sin. You cannot rebel against God and go up. When you disobey God, there will be an inevitably downfall. You will either fail miserably or succeed miserably. CHARLES SPURGEON said: “God will not let His children sin successfully.” And do not be deceived by favorable circumstances. When Jonah decided to run from God, everything seemed to work out his way. He escaped to Joppa. He found a ship going to Tarshish. He had the money to buy a ticket. And when he boarded the ship, he was so comfortable and confident that he went to sleep. But Jonah was

on the wrong ship, going in the wrong direction, headed for a violent encounter with the wrath of God.

Verse 4 says, "But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up." This was not an ordinary storm. It was a God-sent, supernatural, miraculous, cataclysmic, perfect storm that almost broke the ship into pieces. The mariners had been in extreme weather on the sea before. But they had never seen a storm like this. So they began to check in with their gods and throw the cargo overboard. Apparently this did not work. So the captain began to check the boat to make sure all hands were on deck. And he found Jonah fast asleep. Verse 6 says, "So the captain came and said to him, 'What do you mean, you sleeper?' Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish." These pagan sailors had more spiritual discernment than the man of God. They knew something – or someone – was behind this storm. Verse 7 says, "And they said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah." Casting lots was a crude, ancient equivalent to pulling straws. These ancients cast lots superstitiously. But God was in control. Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." The existence of a sovereign God excludes the possibility of luck, fate, or chance. God is in control. So when they cast lots, the lot fell on Jonah.

Jonah's unavoidable confrontation with the living God warns us that spiritual rebellion is costly. Galatians 6:7 says: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that he will also reap." (THE MESSAGE). Spiritual rebellion is costly. God may make you pay with cash up front. Or he may make you pay by credit later. Either way, spiritual rebellion will cost you.

**SIN WILL TAKE YOU FURTHER THAN YOU WANT TO GO.
SIN WILL TEACH YOU MORE THAN YOU WANT TO KNOW.
SIN WILL COST YOU MORE THAN YOU WANT TO PAY.
SIN WILL KEEP YOU LONGER THAN YOU WANT TO STAY.**

Sin costs. Worse than that, sin will cost you and you won't get what you paid for. Jonah paid for a ticket from Joppa to Tarshish, but he never reached his destination. That's what happens when you rebel against God. It will cost you. But you will never get what you pay for. Ironically, spiritual devotion is also costly. But if you obey, God will pay you back whatever it costs. The Pharaoh commanded that all the male Hebrew children be executed during childbirth. But one woman obeyed God and protected her child from this infanticide. When she could hide the baby no longer, she put him in a little boat and sat him in the river. Around the same time, the Pharaoh's daughter came to the river to bathe. And when she heard the baby crying, she had one of her servants to fetch it. She decided to keep the baby as her own, naming it "Moses" (meaning, "Out of the water"). Then she told one of her servants to fetch a Hebrew woman to nurse her new baby. The servant was Moses' sister, who got Moses' mother and brought her to the Pharaoh's daughter. And Pharaoh's daughter told Moses' mother, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages" (Exodus 2:9). That's what happens when you obey God. It will cost you.

But God will pay you back. But when you go your own way, it will cost and you will never get what you paid for.

In verse 8, the sailors interrogated Jonah: “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” In verse 9, Jonah answers: “I am a Hebrew.” And he tells them something they did not ask, “I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” Here is a glimpse of the ironic providence of God. Jonah was on that ship because he did not want to deliver the word of God to pagans. But here is Jonah on that ship telling pagans about the Lord who created the sea and the dry ground. In response, the sailors made a statement that rebukes Jonah and all of us who have played the Jonah: “What is this that you have done!” In the NKJV, this exclamation is rendered as a question: “Why have you done this?” What a question? You know who the Lord God is. You have a personal relationship with the creator of the land and sea. You belong to the one who knew you were on this ship and who is strong enough to hurl a perfect storm at us. Why have you done this? This is what I want to ask someone here who is in rebellion against God. Knowing who God is and what God can do, not to mention all that God has done for you, why are you doing what you are doing?

In the second century A.D., Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna was famously martyred. The Roman authorities did want to kill Polycarp. But he refused to say, “Caesar is Lord.” They had no choice. Before the execution, they gave Polycarp a final opportunity to save his life. “Take the oath and I will let you go,” said the Pro-Consul. “Revile Christ.” Polycarp replied: “For eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” May that be your testimony.

III. JONAH’S DELIVERANCE

In verse 11, the sailors ask Jonah one more question, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” This was an understandably selfish question. They did not want to die in that storm. Yet it was also a noble question. These sailors recognized that there was nothing they could do to get themselves out of this situation. They were caught in the crossfire of a conflict between the living God and his rebellious prophet. God made his move by commanding Jonah to go to Ninevah. Jonah made his move by boarding a ship heading in the opposite direction. God made another move by sending the storm on the sea. Now it was time for Jonah to make another move. And the fate of these sailors was contingent upon what Jonah would choose to do next.

Verse 12 records Jonah’s response: “ ‘Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” Consider how Jonah could have responded. He could have said, “Give me an oar. I will help you row to land.” But Jonah knew better than that. He could have played the hypocrite and started witnessing to the sailors: “If you want to get out of this situation, you must repent of your sins and put your faith in God.” But Jonah himself was in sin. He could not witness to anyone else. Or Jonah could have said, “You are in this because I am in

rebellion against God. God told me to go to Nineveh. But I went in the opposite direction. And none of us will survive this storm unless I do what God commanded. So turn this ship around and take me to Nineveh." I believe that if Jonah would have responded this way, not only would the storm have ceased, God would have given them a strong headwind to get him to Nineveh quickly.

But that is not how Jonah responded. Instead, he said, "Do you want to get out of this? Then pick me up and throw me into the storm-tossed sea." This seemingly act was just another act of rebellion on Jonah's part. In telling the sailors to throw him overboard, Jonah was saying, "I would rather die than go to Nineveh." If Hollywood ever does a big budget feature film on the story of Jonah, to get it right, they would have to depict Jonah crashing into the water with a smile on his face. The sinister smirk would have to reflect Jonah's thoughts: "I am about to drown. But at least I won't have to go to Nineveh." And when Jonah's body drifted to the shore, they would have found him with a same demented smile on his face.

But, again, we see that these sailors were more upright than Jonah. They did not want to be responsible for Jonah's death, even though he did not care if they lived or died. They tried harder to row to land. But the storm only grew worse. And they were left with no choice. Verse 14 says, "Therefore they called out to the Lord, 'O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.'" These sailors recognized what Jonah would not. The Lord does what pleases him. Psalm 115:3 declares, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." The sailors came to grips with the unimpeachable authority of God. So they threw Jonah into the sea, and the storm ceased. Verse 16 says: "Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly," the same language Jonah used in verse 9, "and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows."

This passage is a clear statement of the sovereignty of God. God is sovereign over individual lives, personal circumstances, and natural elements. But God is also sovereign over human souls. Notice that God converted these sailors in spite of this rebellious prophet. Jonah's conduct was more unethical than these pagan sailors. Yet God reached around Jonah's hypocrisy and saved them anyway. And God is still able to do that. John 3:8 says, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Don't give up on that unbelieving child, mate, parent, sibling, neighbor, coworker, or classmate. God can reach them. He can do it through you. Or he can do it without you. But there is no obstacle to the plan of God and no limit to his power to save.

There was Jonah, drowning with a smile on his face. He thought he was finally free from the command of God. But verse 17 says, "And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."

A skeptic confronted a young Christian one day. "Do you really believe the Bible is the word of God?" he asked. "Yes, I do," answered the Christian. "Do you believe all of it is the word of God?" "I sure do." "Does that mean you believe in miracles?" "I do." The critic pressed, "You mean to tell me that you believe a fish swallowed a man, and kept him for three days?"

“Absolutely.” “Well, how did it happen?” “I don’t know. When I get to Heaven, I’ll ask Jonah about it.” Mocking the Christian, the critic asked, “What if you get to heaven and find out that Jonah is not there?” The Christian answered, “Then you can ask him.”

Some commentators try to prove there are fish that have mouths big enough to swallow a man and hold him for three days. But those arguments are really necessary for me. If the word of God says God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, I believe it. Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” If you believe that, you will have no problem believing anything else the Bible says.

Let me go on record by declaring that I believe the Bible.

- **So I believe God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah.**
- **I believe God parted the Red Sea so that the Israelites could cross on dry ground and that he drowned the Pharaoh’s army**
- **I believe that God made the sun stop and time stand still for Joshua and his fighting men.**
- **I believe God brought the three Hebrew boys out of the fiery furnace without the smell of smoke on their clothes.**
- **I believe Jesus turned water into wine.**
- **I believe Jesus spoke and made the winds be quiet and the waves lie down.**
- **And I believe that Jesus died on the cross, was buried in Joseph’s tomb, and rose from the dead on the third day with all power in his hands.**

So I have no problem believing that God prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. In fact, all of creation obeyed God in the book of Jonah, except this runaway prophet. The waters, the sea, the winds, and even the fish obeyed God. But Jonah did not. And he had to learn that God won’t take no for an answer.

There are two miracles in Jonah 1. There is the miracle of “the great storm” and the miracle of “the great fish.” The great storm was an act of divine judgment against the rebellion of Jonah. But the great fish was an act of mercy. Jonah concluded that God was trying to kill him. So he determined to do it himself before God did it. But God was not trying to kill Jonah. God was making Jonah change his mind. So God appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah. This was a great act of divine mercy. And I want you to know that God has likewise been merciful to you. Jeremiah said, “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, he mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22-23). If you want proof that God has been merciful to you, run to the cross and look to Jesus. When the unbelieving Jews asked Jesus for a sign that would prove his messianic credentials, Jesus gave them “the sign of Jonah.” Matthew 12:40 says: “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

**HAVE THINE OWN WAY, LORD! HAVE THINE OWN WAY!
THOU ART THE POTTER. I AM THE CLAY.
MOLD ME AND MAKE ME, AFTER THY WILL,
WHILE I AM WAITING, YIELDED AND STILL.**

HAVE THINE OWN WAY, LORD! HAVE THINE OWN WAY!

**SEARCH ME AND TRY ME, MASTER, TODAY!
WHITER THAN SNOW, LORD, WASH ME JUST NOW
AS IN THY PRESENCE HUMBLY I BOW.**