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The Book of Jonah, A Survey, Part 3

Sometime in the ninth century B.C. a man by the name of Amittai had a son whom he named after the animal prescribed by God in the sacrificial service for the poor and needy, the commoner (יֹנָתָן (*yônâ*)/Jonah) which is the Hebrew for “dove.” Perhaps that is why this prophetic book is so down to earth and applicable to where you and I live, Jonah was intended for the common man!

Upon a first glance at this prophecy, it is tempting to conclude that Jonah was a silly, selfish man. He had a problem with any race or religion outside of Judaism. He seems petty, argumentative, and childish, running from God and the responsibility given to him. But then we look in the mirror and realize that if our inner-most thoughts were recorded as were Jonah’s, we too might appear to be petty, childish, and foolish, as we...

- Argue with God.
- Struggle with loving those different from ourselves.

- At times, forsake the calling and so the ministry given us by God.
- Truly, this prophecy was written with us in mind! Last week we began looking at...

The Call and Rebellion of Jonah, Jonah 1:1-3

As is typical of the commissioning of an Old Testament prophet, “the word of the Lord came to Jonah” in and around 780 B.C. by which he was charged to preach a message of warning and so judgment to Nineveh. Yet this message involved a rather large risk as seen in this chapter, notice that it wasn’t the possibility of persecution from those in Nineveh (which would have been a valid concern) rather it was the possibility that Nineveh, a pagan city, might heed the warning, repent, and so be spared!

This possibility threatened Jonah’s nationalism, his pride for his religion and country. As a result, he did more than just rebel against the Lord’s command. He abandoned his call to preach! And this led us to a discussion of the resulting conflicts.

The Resulting Conflicts, Jonah 1:4-14

After paying his fare and boarding a ship which was headed to the east coast of Spain, Jonah went into the belly of the boat, climbed into a hammock, and fell into a deep sleep. Meanwhile God in His grace and compassion both for Jonah and the crew (as we’ve seen and will see), hurled a severe storm against the boat. The crew did their best to survive. However it quickly became obvious that the ship was going down unless something was done. Thus, all on board began to pray. Yet the storm just got worse.

It was then that the captain discovered Jonah in the belly of the boat, roused him from his sleep, and then questioned him. Meanwhile the crew on deck cast lots by which God revealed what we already know; Jonah was the reason for the storm. In a mini-climax, Jonah is confronted at which time he confessed that he was a servant of God fleeing from His presence. He was the one behind the storm!

This shocked the crew for they knew the power and glory of Yahweh, but heretofore they assumed that He was a land god. Now they knew that He reigned supreme both on land, in the heavens, and on the sea!

With this and with great hesitation, Jonah is cast overboard where God sent another vehicle of grace, a large fish, to swallow the prophet and so preserve Him alive. After three days in this awful place, Jonah is brought to his senses realizing that he had made the destruction of Nineveh an idol. With this realization, the prophet repented of his sin, is expelled from the large fish, and travels to Nineveh, and so fulfilled his call.

Last time we stopped at this point to take in the multiple messages interwoven throughout the first part of this book. Recall that the first message conveyed is the seriousness of rebellion in the

Kingdom of God.

The Cost of Rebellion, Jonah 1:3a; 2:4

Jonah 1:3a, “But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord...”

As we’ve seen it was NOT Jonah’s intent to forsake God here, just the ministry/calling of a prophet. Truly on account of its requirements, the life of a prophet no longer suited him. And so he called it quits! Yet in so doing he failed to realize that “the gifts and calling of God” (Romans 11:29) not only are irrevocable, but they are also inseparable!

With every calling of the Lord, whether that be formal or informal-, God grants what has been described as Covenant Blessings which provide these things:

- Strength in weakness.
- Hope in the face of utter ruin.
- Joy in the midst of sorrow.
- Contentment in want.
- The ability to rejoice in and through all things. The incomprehensible peace of God.

When Jonah rejected the calling of a prophet, he unintentionally rejected these glorious gifts (Jonah 2:2-4)!

I have no doubt that there will come times in your life when you will be tempted to walk away NOT from Christ, BUT from the calling and service of the Lord. Yet here we learn that when we do this, we forfeit NOT the love or good pleasure of God! Far from it! On account of His love, the Lord chases after the prophet to temper him unto maturity, but the Covenant treasures which accompany every calling of the Lord! If Jonah were alive today and could address a Christian on the verge of walking away from the ministry to which he had been called, he’d say this:

Don’t do it! At first the peace and satisfaction that comes from the lifting of momentary burdens is wonderful (it had been a long time since I slept as I did in the bowels of that boat). But this lasts only so long. For in the providence of God, my life became a living hell NOT because God was punishing me, BUT because He loved me too much to allow me to forsake that for which I was made.

This brings a second theme found in the opening chapters of Jonah the sovereignty of God.

Jonah 1:2, “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

Recall the commission God gave Jonah. Jonah was charged here with two things: (1) Arise/go to a Gentile land and (2) cry! Yet we’ve seen that this was the last straw when it came to Jonah’s calling. As such, rather than heading east to Nineveh, the prophet deigned to settle in Spain where he could live a life free from the burdens and care of ministry.

Now heretofore we've addressed the ramifications of Jonah's decision from the perspective of Jonah and so the impact his decision had on his life. Yet what about God's will when it came to Jonah? And what about God's covenant will for the nations? Recall that as far back as Genesis 12 we read of God's plan for the world.

Genesis 12:1-2, "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing.'"

By confining the outworking of His grace to Abraham, it was God's intention to bless the world! That is why after 2,000 years of neglect on the part of the people of God concerning this calling; God used the persecution which arose from Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 8:1) to disperse His people unto "the blessing of the nations." Get this, in the 2,000 years of Redemptive History from Abraham to Christ, the gospel pretty much remained confined to Palestine.¹ But in a little short of 100 years following the persecution of Stephen, the gospel had spread to...

- Asia Minor!
- Greece!
- Rome!
- Europe!

From all of this it is obvious that God has a plan and a purpose for all nations! And that is why when God called Jonah around 780 B.C. to preach the gospel in Nineveh, we must NOT conclude that this was an inconsequential calling or that the Lord wasn't serious. In fact, it is this truth that the first chapter of Jonah clearly highlights! See, Jonah fell into the error of thinking that God's covenant will was predicated upon the prophet's cooperation. If Jonah did not preach, Nineveh could not be saved. Yet, one cannot thwart God's calling not for the nations or for you!

Jonah 1:6, "So the captain approached him and said, 'How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps *your* god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish.'"

In the providence of God this is a most amazing happening. Do you remember the irony which accompanies this verse? God in His providence had the captain parrot the initial call which the Lord gave to Jonah.

Jonah 1:2, "Arise/Call."

For Jonah no doubt there was a strange familiarity in the language of the captain, but it most likely was quickly forgotten on account of the crew of the ship who at that moment barged into the hold of the ship and began peppering him with a host of questions.

Jonah 1:7-8, "And each man said to his mate, 'Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity *has struck* us.' So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, 'Tell us, now! On whose account *has* this calamity *struck* us? [again, *we cast lots and it fell on you. Did it work? Are you in fact the reason for this storm?* They continued...] What is

your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

As I have referenced many times before, the genre of Hebrew narrative is akin to our understanding of stage play. As we read Jonah, it is as if we are watching a play unfold before our eyes. We know that Jonah has been called by God to preach to Nineveh, that he is fleeing from God. And when the captain confronted Jonah he used the same words which God used to summon the prophet.

Though Jonah and the captain have just been rudely interrupted by the ship's crew, Jonah at the time most likely missed the similarity between God's call and the captain's command, but we haven't. As the audience we begin to suspect that try as he might, Jonah is not going to be able to avoid the calling of God! In fact, when we get to Jonah 1:9 we are left to smile, wonder, and stand in awe.

Jonah 1:9, "And he [Jonah] said to them, 'I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land'"

The wording of the blind, ignorant crew's question struck at Jonah's pride so that he stood up and boldly said, *"I am not a backwards, fool as are you! I am a Hebrew! I worship the LORD [and so THE sovereign] GOD of Heaven who is over all and in all! This storm is from Him. And unless you turn from your backwards religion unto God, you all will perish!"* That is the essence of what is being conveyed by Jonah. Are you smiling in amazement?

You must see that this is a pregnant moment in the book of Jonah where we the audience are left to marvel at the wisdom, glory, and sovereignty of God. For what did Jonah just do? He just fulfilled the calling of God to preach the gospel to a pagan people!

We can conclude that no man can run from God, His will, or His purposes. If God has deigned to save a people-group, that people-group is going to be saved! There is no question! If God has summoned you to serve Him in a specific way, you are going to serve Him unto that end with or without your cooperation. There is no way around it.

Recall how the wicked King of Israel, Ahab, met his demise. He had invited the southern King of Judah, Jehoshaphat, to attend a carnival-like environment where the two kings sat in their robes on their thrones as the citizenry of Israel honored them, proclaimed their praises, and celebrated their powerful reigns. It was his plan at this time to invite Jehoshaphat, and so the Kingdom of Judah, to join him in battle against the Arameans. Upon hearing the request, Jehoshaphat who was a righteous king naturally inquired as to the will of God on the matter. Four hundred prophets unanimously proclaimed the success of the planned battle!

Now Jehoshaphat wasn't blind or dumb. He could see that the prophets were speaking to please the king rather than God. And so he asked if there were other prophets that could be summoned. Micaiah was brought forth. After mocking the false-prophets, this true prophet of the Lord gave this statement from God:

1 Kings 22:17, "So he said, 'I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep which have no shepherd. And the Lord said, 'These have no master. Let each of them return to his house in peace.'" - IOW, not only would the battle end in failure, but Ahab himself would be killed!

So what did the manipulating Ahab do? He got Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, to ride into battle in full ceremonial regalia. He then dressed one of his soldiers in his own royal clothing, placed him in a chariot, and sent him into battle in his place. Meanwhile in the attempt to outsmart God, Ahab dressed as a common soldier, mounted a chariot, and took a station which most likely would have kept him far from the battle.

And what do we read? Was Ahab able to thwart God's will?

1 Kings 22:34-35, "Now a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel in a joint of the armor. So he said to the driver of his chariot, 'Turn around, and take me out of the fight; for I am severely wounded.' And the battle raged that day, and the king was propped up in his chariot in front of the Arameans, and died at evening, and the blood from the wound ran into the bottom of the chariot."

Family of God, the purpose and plan of God cannot be thwarted! Even in his resistance, Jonah invariably proclaimed the gospel to gentiles! With this we are brought to the third and final theme that arises from the opening chapters of Jonah, the fear of the Lord.

The Fear of the Lord, Jonah 1:5, 9-10, 16

Jonah 1:9-10, Jonah said, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them."

You wouldn't know it by looking at it, but these verses are the focus and key to chapter 1. Here we have a chiasm. When the Bible was written, Hebrew and Greek did not have punctuation marks. Neither was there the ability to bold a line or write in italics. In order to emphasize a point, the writer utilized such things as word placement, repetition, or sentence structure. For example, when Paul wanted to emphasize something, he often times place it in what we call, "The Emphatic Position." That means he placed whatever he wanted to emphasize first in the sentence (Ephesians 2:4, "But God..."). Or when Christ wanted to emphasize a truth, often times He'd say, "Truly, truly I say to you..." (e.g., John 5:24).

Another way emphasis could be indicated was through the use of a literary tool we call a Chiasm, a name which comes from the Greek letter Chi (X). If you look at the first half of the letter from the side, you will note that it looks like a sideways V. It was this pattern which scholars often times observed in Hebrew poetry. By labeling the lines of a passage with A, B, C and those lines which appear to be a repetition as A¹, B¹, and C¹, they observed a pattern which served to emphasize a point. Again, consider the example from Jonah 2:

A: God is great!
 B : God takes care of the earth.
 C: Let us praise Him!
 B¹: God oversees everything that exists.
 A¹: Awesome is His name!

The clear focus and thus the emphasis of this poem is C; the praise and so the worship of God. If we came upon a passage like this we would conclude that the author wanted to emphasize the fact that God ought to be praised!

Well Jonah 1:4-16 is another Chiasm. Notice its parts:

A: VV. 4-5a: God hurls a wind on the sea; the storm begins; sailors FEAR and cry to their gods.
 B: VV. 5b-6: Jonah sleeps; cry to your god; we shall not perish; divine sovereignty.
 C: V. 7: that we may know on whose account
 D: V. 8: the sailors question Jonah
 E: V. 9: I FEAR!
 E¹: V. 10: the sailors FEAR!
 D¹: V. 11: the sailors question Jonah
 C¹: V. 12: I know that it is on my account.
 B¹: VV. 13-14: sailors strive for land; sailors cry to Yahweh; let us not perish; divine sovereignty.
 A¹: VV. 15-16: sailors hurl Jonah into sea; the storm ceases; sailors FEAR YAHWEH and sacrifice.

As you gaze upon this notice this chiasm demonstrates visually the focus and emphasis of Jonah and the sailor's ordeal: The Fear of God! However, this chiasm is more involved. For you will note that it begins with the concept of fear, climaxes with the concept of fear, and then ends with the concept of fear. Furthermore there is a progression/intensification to "the fear" of the sailors here.

- The fear of vv. 4-5a is general.
- By vv. 9 and 10 it clearly is the result of God.
- By vv. 15-16 it revolves around God.

Jonah is making a clear statement in this chapter: Jonah's flight from God and the sailor's flight to God were on account of the fear of the Lord or a lack thereof. Had Jonah at the time truly revered the Lord he would not have fled from His calling. And when the sailors behold the glory and sovereignty of God over all creation, they fall down in reverence/fear and worship the Lord. They here become Christians! (Baker, Alexander, & Waltke, 1988)²

The reverence/fear of God is what is behind not only this ordeal, but that which constitutes healthy kingdom living! In fact as "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10),

we are not surprised to learn in Scripture that “the fear of the Lord” is:

- A synonym of the child of God- they are ones who live in reverence for God, Psalm 103:10-14.
- The purpose and focus of all tempering in the Kingdom of God, Exodus 20:20.
- The place of maturation God is bringing all His children, Deuteronomy 10:12-13.
- The ground from which spiritual fruit arises, Deuteronomy 10:20-21.
- The focus and essence of all worship, Psalm 86:11-13.
- How we ought to conduct ourselves as children of God, Philippians 2:12-13.
- One of the reasons God forgives our sin, Psalm 130:3-4.
- THE environment from which genuine growth arises when it comes to the child of God, 2 Corinthians 7:1.
- THE standard by which we measure genuine growth when it comes to a church body, Acts 9:31.
- Prompted by God’s sovereign control over life and death, Matthew 10:28
- Fostered by trusting the Lord, Proverbs 29:25.
- Ought to be the passion and pursuit of each and every individual on earth, Ecclesiastes 12:13-14.

From this I hope you see that Jonah’s focus on the “Fear of God” is no accident. It was the KEY to Jonah’s restoration and the sailor’s conversion! Truly, if we could learn the fear of the Lord:

- In the words of Korah, we would go “from strength to strength” (Psalm 84:7)!
- Our perspective when it comes to the problems we face in life would be dramatically changed!

I want to share with you a couple quotations from writing of John Piper:

Years ago during the January prayer week at our church, I decided to preach on the holiness of God from Isaiah 6. I resolved on the first Sunday of the year to unfold the vision of God’s holiness found in the first four verses of that chapter... So I preached on the holiness of God and did my best to display the majesty and glory of such a great and holy God. I gave not one word of application to the lives of the people. Application is essential in the normal course of preaching, but... that day [I decided] to make a test: Would the passionate portrayal of the greatness of God in and of itself meet the needs of the people?

I didn’t realize that not long before this Sunday one of the young families of our church discovered that their child was being sexually abused by a close relative. It was incredibly traumatic. They were there that Sunday morning and sat under that message. I wonder how many advisers to us pastors today would have said: ‘Pastor Piper, can’t you see your people are hurting? Can’t you come down out of the heavens and get practical? Don’t you realize what kind of people sit in front of you on Sunday?’ Some weeks later I learned the story. The husband took me aside on Sunday after a service. ‘John,’ he said, ‘these have been the hardest months of our lives. Do you know what has gotten me through? The vision of the greatness of God’s holiness that you gave me the first week of January. It has been the rock we could stand

on.'

The greatness and the glory of God are relevant. It does not matter if surveys turn up a list of perceived needs that does not include the supreme greatness of the sovereign God of grace. That is the deepest need. (Piper, 2004, pp. 9-10)

Now in introducing this story, Piper said this:

People are starving for the greatness of God. But most of them would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives. The majesty of God is an unknown cure. There are far more popular prescriptions on the market, but the benefit of any other remedy is brief and shallow. Preaching that does not have the aroma of God's greatness may entertain for a season, but it will not touch the hidden cry of the soul, 'Show me thy glory!' (Piper, 2004, p. 9)

The storm brought the sailors to this point and they became worshippers of God. The fish brought Jonah to this point and he rededicated himself to the ministry of God's Kingdom. If you and I will come to know the majesty and glory of God- if we would live in reverence for the God who has made holy the ground upon which we stand on account of His presence- surely in and through all things we will go "from strength to strength."

End Note(s)

¹ Although we might argue that at one point it did spread to Babylon/Persia such that by the time of Christ there were strong covenant communities in the Fertile Crescent.

² "When Jonah's instructions are eventually obeyed, the predicted results follow immediately. With the calming of the sea the sailors are filled with awe; the narrative stresses yet again their fear. However, an important development has occurred; they now worship... the Lord... Consequently, they offer him sacrifices and make vows... The double occurrence of God's name in verse 16 emphasizes that the sailors are now familiar with his identity. **Thus, in spite of Jonah's disobedience, they acknowledge his God as their own.**" (T. Desmond Alexander, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, Tyndale, emphasis mine, p. 106).

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About the Preacher

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