

Jonah – A Lesson on the Sovereignty of God

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[Scripture quotations taken from the NASB](#)

God not only prevails over the wills of His elect in bringing them to faith in Christ, as we can see demonstrated in the conversion of Saul on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1), but He will also prevail over the will of one of His own people in order to accomplish a particular task that He is determined to accomplish through them. God had chosen the prophet Jonah for just such a task. In the opening verses of the Book of Jonah, we read:

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.” But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. (Jonah 1:1-3)

God had a specific task that He wanted Jonah to accomplish, which was to go through the city of Nineveh and preach that His judgment was coming upon them because of their wickedness, unless the people repented. Nineveh was a large city in Assyria, which was a Gentile nation and an enemy of Israel. Jonah did not want to go there as the Lord had commanded him, because he knew that God was “a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity” (Jonah 4:2). And therefore he was afraid that the Ninevites would indeed repent of their wickedness, and that God would then relent from sending the calamity of His judgment upon them.

Jonah did not want to see Israel's Gentile enemies receive God's mercy, but he wanted to see God's judgment fall upon them. So he rebelled against God's command to go to Nineveh, and he actually headed in the opposite direction. He headed toward Tarshish, an ancient city believed to be in what is today Spain, which would have been one of the most remote locations in the known world at that time.

Jonah must have thought that by running away in the opposite direction that God told him to go, to the furthest place he knew about, that he could escape the command of the Lord to do what would be for him a very undesirable and distasteful task. Jonah probably reasoned that if he did not go as he was told, the Ninevites would continue in their wickedness, resulting in God's judgment falling upon them, which was exactly what he wanted.

The problem with Jonah's plan was that his sovereign God was determined to use him for this task, and of course He knew exactly how much pressure to apply and how to apply it in order to force Jonah to comply with His will. God intervened in the life of Jonah to prevail upon him and to force Jonah's will into compliance with His own will, *to make Jonah will and act in order to fulfill His plan and purpose.* (Consider Philippians 2:13).

God could have chosen someone else to preach to the Ninevites, but He did not. He was determined to use Jonah for this task, which as we see from reading the Book of Jonah, became a very big problem for him and one that would be resolved in no other way except for him to obey God and do as he was commanded.

As Jonah was sailing to Tarshish, going in the opposite direction that God had told him to go, the Lord sent a storm that threatened the safety of the ship and all who were aboard. The men on the ship, who were apparently Gentiles from various nations, cast lots to see who was responsible for the calamity they were facing, and the lot fell to Jonah. Then they questioned Jonah about the matter, and he answered them saying: "... '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." (Jonah 1:9-10).

Jonah then told the men to throw him overboard, and the sea would become calm again. So great was his disdain for the task that God had given to him that he would rather drown in the sea than have to carry it out. At first the men did not

want to throw Jonah into the sea, but the storm became worse, and they had to save themselves and the ship. After they threw him overboard, the sea became calm again. At this point we read: “Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.” (Jonah 1:16-17).

The great fish that swallowed Jonah was the pressure that God applied to make Jonah willing to do what He wanted him to do. At this point we as God’s people might wonder what form the “great fish” might take in our own lives, if we decided to embark on a course that would take us in the opposite direction from obedience to the word of God. Is there any doubt that in the end, obedience to God would prove to be much better than the belly of that fish? Jonah found out that obedience to God was by far a better thing, and this is one of the lessons here for all of us as God’s people.

From the belly of the great fish Jonah cried out to God for deliverance, after which God commanded the fish to vomit Jonah out onto dry land. Then we see from Jonah 3:1-3 that God commanded Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh and preach the message He gave to him. This time Jonah obeyed the Lord, and he went to Nineveh to proclaim God’s message to them. As distasteful as the task was to him, Jonah was made to see that it was far better than the belly of the great fish.

As it turned out, the Ninevites did repent when they heard Jonah’s preaching, and God did relent from sending the judgment that He had planned for them. We might think that Jonah should have felt honored to have been used by the Lord in such a way, but Jonah was angry that he had been used as an instrument of God’s mercy shown to one of Israel’s Gentile enemies (Jonah 4:1-4). However, the decision to show mercy to Jew or to Gentile belongs to our sovereign God alone, as Paul taught in Romans 9, and as we can see from several other New Testament passages.