

SERIES: The Battle of the Wills: A Study of the Book of Jonah

SERMON: *Chicken of the Sea*¹

SCRIPTURE: Jonah 1:1-16

SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black

DATE: September 13, 2009

There are a lot of challenges in life; a lot of things we have to deal with: relationships, health, the economy, our work or lack of work, families, etc. There's a lot to deal with in ministry as well: not enough time, conflict among believers, differing opinions on how things should be done, and sometimes it seems like you're just not making a difference.

But there is another challenge we have to deal with...what about God; how do you deal with God? God calls each of us to conform to his will by being obedient to his Word. But our will is often times in opposition to the will of God, in our individual lives, and in the church. Did you know that if you are a believer in Jesus you are called to ministry? You are called to serve within your giftedness to build up the body of Christ. But did you know that it's estimated that 75% of the people in church are NOT using their God given gifts to serve Christ and build his church? I think First Free has more than 25% of the people serving, but even here there are many of us who are not serving God the way that we should be and as a result we are missing out on the abundant life God has for us and robbing God of the glory due his name.

I think God has much to say to us in the book of Jonah. I wonder if our biggest challenges as a church are due to the fact that we are unwilling to go in a direction in ministry that God has been leading us for years. As we hear from the book of Jonah over the next four weeks I want you to think about that. Begin thinking about how you as individuals need to be obedient to the Word of God and how we as a church need to be obedient to the Word of God.

Jonah is both one of the best known and least known characters in the entire Bible. Jonah is not a story about a big fish. Jonah is not a story about second chances. Jonah is a story about competing wills; the battle between the will of God and the will of Jonah. God goes to great lengths to get Jonah to see things his way. Jonah on the other hand goes to great lengths to get God to see things his way.

The book of Jonah is a satire.² It is humorous, but tragic. It is humorous and tragic because Jonah's response to God's call on his life is ridiculous. The reader sees clearly how ridiculous it is to contend with the will of God, by observing Jonah's battle with God.

Let's turn in our Bible to the book of Jonah and begin this story. This morning we're going to look at Jonah 1:1-16.

¹ The title of the series and the title of the sermon are used by permission from Dr. Dennis Magary, associate Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Most of the material in this sermon comes from and/or is influenced directly by Dr. Magary's OT exegesis class I took at TEDS during the summer of 2009 and from audio sermons Dr. Magary gave at a leadership conference in July, 2003. Dr. Magary has given me permission to use and adapt his work.

² ESV Study Bible

I'll be reading from the English Standard Version throughout this series. I normally preach from the NIV, but find the ESV to be a little more faithful to the original text in the book of Jonah. The NIV will be close to the ESV in most places, but in a few critical places I prefer the more literal translation of the ESV. I'll be putting the ESV up on the screen, but I encourage you to keep your nose in your own Bibles as well.

Sermon in a Sentence:

Here's God's word for us this morning: ***To live within the will of God one must respond obediently to the Word of God.***

We'll look first at Jonah's response to God's Word in vv. 1-3. Then we'll look at the contrast between the response of Jonah and the response of the sailors to God's Work in vv. 4-16.

Jonah's response to the Word of God in vv. 1-3 teaches us that...

Knowing God's Word is an opportunity to participate in God's will. (vv. 1-3)

Verse 1: *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying...*

Jonah was a prophet under king Jeroboam II during the 8th century B.C.³ Jonah is somewhat of a contemporary with Amos, Hosea, and Micah. However, the book of Jonah is very different from the books of Amos, Hosea, and Micah. But then again Jonah is also a very different prophet from these guys.

Normally the word of the LORD comes to a prophet who then speaks that word to the people. But in the book of Jonah we have a story about how a prophet responds to the word of the LORD and only a sentence or two about what the word actually was.

What was *the word of the LORD* that was given to Jonah?

Verse 2: *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.*

There are 3 commands here: Arise, go, and call out. A lot of translations, including the NIV lump the first two commands together and view the command to rise and the command to go as one command. But I think it is important to keep all three of these commands separate as the ESV, NLT, and NASB do.⁴ Again, the three commands: Arise, go, and call out. You may write these in the margin of your Bible if your translation lumps the first two together.

Why is Jonah commanded to "arise, go, and call out"? The text tells us it is because Nineveh's evil has come up before the LORD. History has a lot say about the wickedness of the Ninevites, but the writer doesn't dwell on the wickedness of the Ninevites here. Rather the author is setting the stage for what will follow. The reason the writer includes this phrase here may have more to do with God's omniscience and omnipresence than the Ninevites wickedness. God knows what's going on in Nineveh. He sees all things. Which means God sees beyond the borders of

³ 2 Kings 14:25

⁴ In your own Bible study, it is always valuable to compare good English translations

Israel. Bear that in mind as we look at the next verse. What did Jonah do in response to the Word of God?

Verse 3: *But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.*

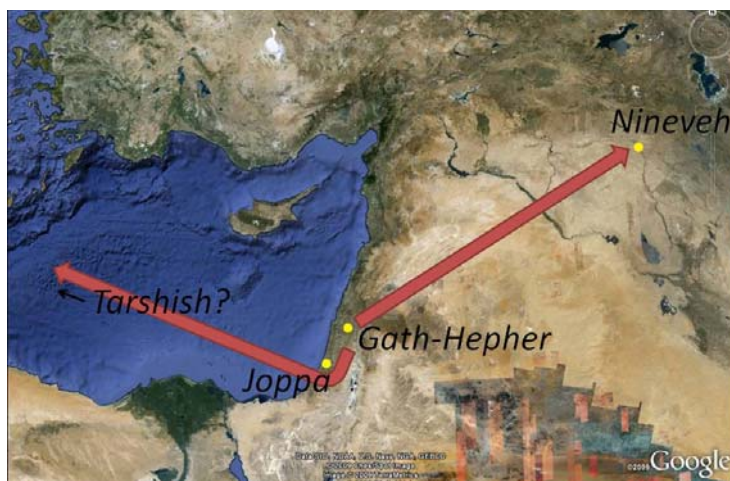
Notice that Jonah obeyed the first command; he rose.⁵ But he rose in order to flee, not to go to Nineveh. Also, notice the tremendous amount of activity going on in this verse. There are five verbs: he rose, went down to Joppa, found a ship, paid the fare, and went on board. This is the most activity you are going to see out of Jonah for the rest of the book. And what was his energy spent on? It was spent on disobeying the Word of the LORD. The Word of God provided an opportunity to participate in the will of God, but Jonah expended his efforts on disobeying God's Word and his will. Are we any different? Do we spend more time and energy disobeying God's Word than obeying it?

Look at 1 Kings 17:8-10 where God gives Elijah a command: *Then the word of the LORD came to him, Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you.* So **he arose and went** to Zarephath...

And look at Jeremiah 13:6-7: *And after many days the LORD said to me, "Arise, go to the Euphrates, and take from there the loincloth that I commanded you to hide there." Then I went to the Euphrates...*

This is what prophets do. When the LORD tells them to "arise and go" they get up and go; but not Jonah.

Where was Jonah supposed to go? Nineveh. But where did he go? Tarshish. Jonah intentionally went in the wrong direction.



⁵ NIV also leaves this out – they combine the main verb and the infinitive of purpose into one action

There has been a lot of speculation as to why Jonah fled to Tarshish. But speculation concerning Jonah's flight is not needed, for the text is explicit in telling us why Jonah fled. What the writer wants us to know now is that Jonah fled to Tarshish to flee from the presence of the LORD. That's why the text tells us twice in one verse.

But this is ridiculous. Remember what verse 2 said. The Ninevites evil had risen up to God. If the actions of Nineveh are known to God, which are beyond the borders of Israel, how does Jonah think he can flee from God? We will see in chapter 2 that Jonah knew his Bible very well, especially the Psalms. Did Jonah never read...

Psalm 139: 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.

Does Jonah really think he can get away from God? I don't know, but it seems like he thought he could get away from participating in the will of God. God had a work to do in Nineveh and God wanted Jonah to participate in that work. God wanted Jonah to play a role in his major work of salvation for lost people.

But Jonah, who is
a prophet of God, didn't want to participate in
the work of God and so he responds to
the Word of God by fleeing from
the presence of God.

This is very disturbing! But this happens with us every day! God wants his people to want what he wants in every area of life. God wants us to care about the people he cares about. But do we? Or do we want what we want and care about what we care about?⁶ God wants to bless us by using us in his great work of salvation. It is a great privilege and a great opportunity to participate in the will of God.

But some of you are thinking, "I don't know what the will of God is for my life." And while I agree that sometimes it is hard to discern what God's specific will is for your life I also know that a large part of the "will" of God is made plain in the Word of God. Jonah was called specifically to go to the lost people of Nineveh. We are called to go to lost people as well. As Christians we all have the same mission statement. It's given in various places throughout Scripture, but some of the best known passages are still challenging each of us and calling us to obedience:

Matthew 28:19-20: 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. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

⁶The irony is that if we would want what God wanted then we would eventually discover it was the very same thing we wanted.

Acts 1:8: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*”

God’s will for your life is maybe not as difficult to figure out as you think. It wasn’t for Jonah either; God’s Word for him was “arise, go, and call out to the Ninevites.” Our biggest challenge is not a lack of knowledge concerning the will of God. Our biggest challenge is we don’t do the will of God. In evangelism the biggest challenges we face are not people’s rejection of the gospel or their rejection of the church. The biggest problem is us. We don’t do evangelism. And our failure to obey the Great Commission communicates that we don’t want to participate in the work that God is doing. Dennis Magary has said it this way: “*The biggest threat is from God’s own people. From their careless and casual attention to the Word of God and their calculated acts of disobedience that undermine everything God is doing.*” When God’s Word speaks to us do we respond in obedience or do we flee from God’s presence?

God has made his Word known to us so that we can participate in what *He’s* doing. When we respond to his Word we experience life within the will of God, but when we run from the presence of the LORD we live an unfulfilled life, in disobedience to his revealed will. I pray that God’s Word would move in your heart this morning and that you would respond in obedience to what you know he’s calling you to do.

We have created a brochure that lists a number of ministries in Wichita. The ushers will be handing it out as you exit at the end of the service. Most of these ministries are outreach ministries and most of them take place outside the walls of this church. We have provided this for you to offer some ideas about ways you can get involved in what God is doing in this community to move his gospel forward among the lost. I encourage you to look at it and ask if God may be leading you to get involved in one of these ministries.

I’m also praying that God might do a crazy work in some of your lives and that maybe someone from this church in the next month might begin to respond to a call to foreign missions. But regardless of whether you get involved in one of these opportunities, I can assure you that God is calling you to share the gospel. He is calling you to share the gospel with the people you know in your neighborhood; the people you know where you work; and your closest friends and family members. And I am also confident that he is calling you to care about global evangelization. The only question is whether you will obey his Word and participate in his work, however, God’s work will happen whether you obey or disobey.

That brings me to my second point in this sermon, which vv. 4-16 will cover.

The will of God will be done in spite of human disobedience. (vv. 4-16)

Verse 4: *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 section begins with a “*but.*” The writer is contrasting Jonah’s disobedience with God’s action. Although God’s Word is his primary means of revealing his will in our lives, God has more ways to accomplish his will and expose disobedience than just his Word.

The text says *the LORD hurled a great wind* (NIV says “sent”, you may write “hurled” or “threw” in your margin). Why does the writer tell us that the wind was hurled? You don’t hurl wind. This is one of the examples of a literary device the author is using in the book of Jonah to get us to see more clearly what is going on. God’s hurling of the wind is the action that sets the stage for this entire scene upon the boat; the language used is intentional.

In addition to the contrast between Jonah’s disobedience and God’s action there is a constant contrast between how Jonah responds to God and how the sailors respond to God. Every line in the chapter is symmetrical and the symmetry is intended to draw out these contrasts. I want to show you what I mean with just a few lines. There is a more detailed diagram found in Appendix A; I encourage you to reference it.

First, in verses 1-3 we see Jonah’s response to the Word of God. Then the scene closes in verse 16 with the sailors’ response to the work of God. Next, in verse 4 God hurls a great wind to the sea. In verse 15 the sailors hurl Jonah into the sea. Finally, in verse 9 Jonah gives a speech where he *says* that he fears God. Then in verse 10 we are told that the sailors were greatly afraid.

Narrative Symmetry:

Jonah’s response to the Word of God (1-3)
 God hurls the wind (4-5)
 Jonah fears the LORD? (9)
 Sailors fear the situation (10)
 Sailors hurl Jonah (15-16)
 Sailors’ response to the work of God (16)

At the heart of this chapter is this statement by Jonah that he “fears the LORD.” The question burns in the minds of the readers: Who really fears God? Is it the prophet of God, or the sailors? Or who has more appropriately responded to the work of God? Is it the prophet of God, or the sailors?

Let’s look a little closer at the contrast between Jonah and these pagan sailors.

Verse 5a: Tells us, *Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.*

These sailors are pagans. A pagan is someone who doesn’t worship the one true God. These pagan sailors are afraid. And as a result they do two things. 1) They cry out to their gods, and 2) They hurl the cargo to the sea. So they pray and get busy doing something about their situation. But what does Jonah do?

Verse 5b: *But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.*

The prophet of God does nothing. He goes down into the guts of the ship. This is the third time we see Jonah descending. First he “went down” to Joppa, and then he went down *onto* the ship.⁷

⁷ The English doesn’t make this clear, but the Hebrew uses the same word (y’dah) here as it does in the other places.

Now he's going down *into* the ship. In chapter 2 we will see Jonah finally going down to the bottom of the sea (v. 6). This language is very intentional.

In Hebrew, the verb "go down" is also used as a euphemism for death.⁸ The writer is describing the downward spiral of the prophet of God who disobeys the Word of God and seeks to separate himself from the will of God. The author is showing us that as Jonah moves further away from the will of God he is moving closer to death. As a matter of fact the sleep that is being spoken of here is a "deathlike" sleep. Could it be that Jonah would actually prefer death to living within the will of God?

This is not how prophets are supposed to act. The pagan sailors' response to the work of God seems much more appropriate than Jonah's.

One thing that has been extremely troubling to me during Ramadan is seeing the pious devotion of Muslims who are living their lives according to a lie, in contrast with Christians who know the truth, but who live so much like the world. Why am I not as committed to prayer as they are? Why am I not fasting and praying for them as they fast and pray in vain? Do we live like we have hope and like we know the one true God, who is mighty to save? What do others notice about us? Do our lives give testimony to the hope we have?

Everyone on the boat is responding to God, who hurled the wind, by hurling cargo, and praying; everybody that is, except for Jonah.⁹ And the captain of the ship notices this and is dumbfounded.

Verse 6: *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."*

Here we find another intentional literary device of the author. The captain says, "Arise, call out;" the very words God used when he called Jonah: "Arise, go, call out." Jonah is trying to get away from the Word of God, but it keeps shouting in his ear.

And so the captain says, "Call out to your god! Maybe your god cares about our situation and will save us!" Do you see the irony in this? Maybe God cares about pagan sailors. It is obvious Jonah doesn't care about any lost people. He doesn't care about the Ninevites and he doesn't care about these sailors. Jonah doesn't care about what God cares about at all. And he's unwilling to help in the midst of a desperate situation; he's even unwilling to pray. He would rather die. And his actions prove that he obviously doesn't care if these pagan sailors die with him.

What about you? Do you care if people die and spend their lives separated from God? God cares. Our actions will prove if we care. Jonah didn't care and his actions proved it. So God has used a wind to accomplish his will. Now he is using the captain to reveal Jonah's disobedience, but that is not all God has to use. God also used the casting of lots to reveal Jonah's disobedience.

⁸ ESV Study Bible

⁹ Later, even the fish "hurls"

Verses 7-8: *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. Then they said to him, "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?"*

The sailors now know this storm, which is threatening to take their lives, is all Jonah's fault; Jonah's disobedience has been exposed. But look closely at what the sailors do when they find out who is to blame for this horrible storm. They ask Jonah questions; this is amazing. Why didn't they simply get rid of him? Why waste time deliberating in the middle of this raging storm?

Could it be that even though Jonah doesn't care who dies on this boat, these pagan sailors are not eager to get rid of Jonah; they seem to care about Jonah's life.

The sailors ask Jonah four questions. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you? (From most specific to most general) But Jonah's response is troubling. He doesn't even answer all of their questions. He answers one of the questions and only partially.

Verse 9: *And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*

Instead of answering their question Jonah quotes a Bible verse (Psalm 95:5). He is drawing attention to the fact that he is a Hebrew and they are not. And he claims he fears the LORD, implying that they don't.

We're starting to get a better picture of Jonah's heart as this story goes on. He doesn't like people who aren't like him. And he views himself as better than these people. But the irony is that the sailors' behavior is godlier than his. They are praying. They are not eager to take Jonah's life. Jonah thinks these pagan sailors are scum, while he *fears the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land*; it's this last statement about the sea that makes the sailors terrified.

Verse 10: *Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.*

Do you see why they're so afraid? He's trying to get away from God by running to the sea, the very sea that God made!

Verses 11-13: *Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "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." Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.*

The sailors want to know what to do with Jonah. The storm is not getting any better; as a matter of fact it's getting worse. And Jonah tells them to hurl him overboard for *he knows* the storm is his fault (after all Jonah knows everything).

But the question one must ask is why Jonah didn't just jump? Is Jonah really seeking to offer his life as sacrifice for these sailors? Since when did Jonah care anything about pagans? Or is this just one more attempt to escape from the will of God? Is this just one more step down towards death? I don't believe Jonah is offering his life as a sacrifice at all. I don't know what he was doing, but I know this: As the storm grew more tempestuous on the water so did the battle between God and Jonah.

The sailors are not eager to get rid of Jonah though. They don't take Jonah's advice; they've hurled cargo, but they're not ready to hurl Jonah just yet. Instead they continue to row. Jonah may be eager for death, but the sailors care more about Jonah than he does about them. And they also seem to fear God more than he does, for when their rowing proved futile they prayed to the LORD in desperation. Not to their own gods, but to Yahweh – the one true God.

Verse 14: *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."*

They have listened to Jonah and they believe him. They believe that if they throw him overboard the storm will cease. This puts them in a tough position though because they also believe that Jonah is innocent. They reason that they will die regardless of their decision.

If they don't throw Jonah overboard they will die because of the storm.

But if they do throw Jonah overboard they believe they will be guilty of murder and worthy of death.

And so they pray. They understand that they are dependent on the mercy of God in this situation. No matter what they do they are dead men. They realize what each of us needs to realize this morning: the grace of God is our only hope of salvation; we all deserve death and there is nothing we can do to save ourselves. The sailors put their trust in the mercy of God in their prayer. Have you put your trust in the mercy of God?

The sailors also show that they understand something that Jonah has not seen throughout the whole chapter when they say, *"For you O LORD, have done as it pleased you."* They understand that the will of the LORD will be done in spite of anything that they do or don't do! Then after pleading to the LORD for mercy they make a decision.

Verses 15-16: *So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.*

Jonah disobeyed the Word of God and chose to not participate in the will of God. But little does Jonah know that in this situation the will of God has been done in spite of his disobedience. The

very thing that Jonah hoped wouldn't happen with the pagan Ninevites has just happened with these pagan sailors. They have come to believe in the one true God and receive from him mercy. And they respond to the work of God by offering sacrifices to the LORD.

The Good News is that salvation has come to these sailors in spite of Jonah. But salvation has not yet come to the Ninevites. However, God is not done with Jonah or his mission. God hurled the wind which caused Jonah to be hurled to the sea. Next week we will see Jonah hurled out of the belly of the fish. All of this will prove to be part of God's plan to get Jonah to Nineveh where again we will see the will of God accomplished in spite of Jonah.

The Good News for us this morning is that salvation has come. We, like the sailors, deserve death because of our sin. But God sent Jesus. Jesus obeyed the call of God and came to earth. He cared deeply about lost people. His actions proved it; Jesus died in our place to pay the penalty for our sin. I don't believe Jonah was offering his life as a sacrifice for the sailors. But Jesus did offer his life as a sacrifice for you and me. The death and resurrection of Jesus are the way the mercy of God is made available to all peoples.

But that salvation has not yet reached all peoples. It has not even reached some of you this morning. But it is available to you. If you put your trust in Jesus who died in your place you will be saved from the eternal death that we all deserve.

One reason the gospel has not yet reached all peoples is that God's own people have not taken the message to all peoples. We have received grace and are thankful for it, but we haven't been completely obedient in sharing that grace with others. But...

In Matthew 24:14 it says: *"This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."*

God's work of salvation will be accomplished – His Word promises that this good news will go to all people before the end.

This Word provides an opportunity for you to participate in the will of God. But to live within the will of God one must respond obediently to the Word of God. Will you respond? God wants each of you to surrender your will and your ways and to commit your life to His will and His way.

References

- Bruckner, James K. *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text-- to Contemporary Life*. NIV application commentary. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2004.
- Tucker, W. Dennis. *Jonah: a handbook on the Hebrew text*. Baylor handbook on the Hebrew Bible series. Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2006.
- Sasson, Jack M. *Jonah*. [S.l.]: Doubleday, 1995.