

“No Substitutions, Please”

A Wayward Prophet

Jonah 1:1-17

Dr. Jeff Stivason

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Jeff: Our gracious heavenly Father, we are thankful for the many things that You do for us in life. But we are thankful most of all for the Lord Jesus, for in Him we live and move and have our being. And it's in Him that we find a revelation of Yourself. It's in Him that we find ourselves in union with the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And Father, as we come before You this morning, we come before You in Him as a Father. We thank You for the Holy Spirit who indwells us, who encourages us to pray, and prays on our behalf when we know not what to speak.

Father, as we come before You today we are mindful that it is a privilege to be in Your word. This is inspired text given by Your Spirit through the pen of the prophets and the apostles. We're thankful to open it and read it in freedom and study it unhindered. We're thankful to gather in this place and to gather together, knowing that we are like-minded, at least in so far as we gather around Your word. Father, we pray that You'll minister to each one of us by that self-same Spirit who inspired this Word. Lord, allow Your Spirit to illuminate the text for us, for each one of us comes at a different place in life needing something different, either conviction or comfort, whatever that may happen to be, and everything in between.

O Father, You know our needs full well because You knit us in our mother's womb when we were yet unborn. You numbered all of our days before one of them came to be. And throughout our lives You minister to us, providing for us what You've planned for us. So thank You.

Father, as we gather, we are especially mindful that in the days that You appointed for us there is heartbreak and there is humiliation. And so we think of the Deffenbaugh's and the Cunningham family. We ask that You will minister to them in their loss, that You'll speak to them through Your word and encourage their hearts, and our brother Kevin who struggles with his health in so many and various ways. Be with him. Lord, minister to him and encourage his heart. Lord, we're thankful for the relationships that we enjoy here and for the way in which You minister through those relationships. We're thankful for Dick and his ability to unite Kevin with an endocrinologist and we pray that that would be a fruitful relationship.

Father, bless our time together. We realize that we only have so much time to be in Your word in terms of our days. So we pray that each time we open Your word it would be fruitful, not just intellectual stimulation. But Lord, may it be that Your Spirit takes that word and brings conformity in our lives and our behavior and our thought life, that that conformity might look like Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen.

Jeff: All right. Well, I'm going to have you turn with me today to the book of Jonah. And we are going to look at the first chapter today. And we'll probably look at the first chapter for another day or two. But I'm going to read it in its entirety. So will you open

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up to the book of Jonah? I’m going to read 17 verses. And I want you to give your attention to God’s word. And know that this is indeed God’s word, His infallible, inerrant and authoritative word. Listen to it.

“Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before Me.’

“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 down into it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

“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. 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. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep.

“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.

“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?’

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.’

“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.

“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 rode hard to get back to dry land. But they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. 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.’ 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. 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.” All right.

Sig: The word of the Lord.

Men: Thanks be to God.

Jeff: All right. I have a few points for you today that I want to talk to you about. And before I say anything else, let me simply say that I think that the book of Jonah is historical. A fish actually swallowed Jonah. I don’t think this is a made-up story, a parable, or anything other than a historical account of a prophet who fled from God and

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found himself in a dire situation that Jesus uses later on in Matthew chapter 12 in order to talk about His own time in the heart of the tomb. So this is a historical story.

So I have a few points for you today. I want to talk to you about an introduction. The introduction today is going to be fairly long because I want us to think about the book of Jonah, to get us warmed up to it. Then I have three points for you that aren't necessarily going to make all that much sense until we get to them—*no substitutions, please, where are you going, and ready or not, here I come*. So why don't we think about the introduction and then we'll get to some of those points?

When you think of the book of Jonah, what comes to mind? Now I think that one of the problems with a book like Jonah is that it is a book that's familiar to us. And I think that when you have a book that's familiar to you something happens. You can all think of either books in the Scriptures or you can think of places in the Scriptures that are very familiar to you. Let me just see if some of those places are right. Give me a familiar place in the Scripture or a familiar book that everybody would know. Not just you, or what's personal to you, but that everybody would know.

Brave Man: David and Goliath.

Jeff: David and Goliath.

Brave Man: The Sermon on the Mount.

Jeff: The Sermon on the Mount.

Ted: The 23rd Psalm.

Jeff: The 23rd Psalm. Yes, all of these, everyone knows them. Or everyone thinks they know them.

Don: *“Judge not, lest you be judged.”* Oh, that's the Sermon on the Mount.

Jeff: Thanks Don, thanks. I appreciate that. *(Laughter)* All right. What comes to mind? Well, what comes to mind is that saying that familiarity breeds—

Brave Men: Contempt.

Jeff: No. Carelessness. *(Laughter)* That was a trick question. Familiarity breeds carelessness.

Brave Man: Right.

Jeff: Now you say to me, “Jeff, how do you know that? Can you prove that?” Sure I can. Insurance companies tell us that 52% of accidents happen within five miles of your home. 77% of accidents happen within 15 miles of your home. Geico can save you—*(Laughter)* Oh, that was the other message. *(Laughter)*

But the point is that the more familiar you are with the territory, the more careless you are. And I think that's true of the Scriptures. In the Scriptures the more familiar we are with the place where we are the more careless we become.

That means that we have to have a new approach. That means that we have to look at the book that's familiar in a different way.

Let me ask you this. I've asked you this before.

Transcriber's Note: Jeff shows a picture on the flat screen.

Jeff: How many see an old woman?

Sig: Well, move your hand so we can see it.

Jeff: How many see a young woman? Come on! How many see a young woman?

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Tom: I see a young woman.

Jeff: How many see an old woman?

Brave Man: Young.

Jeff: I saw that half of you register it. Yeah. There’s an old woman there and there’s a young woman there. Who can’t see either? (*Laughter*) All right. Well here’s the old woman, right? Here’s her nose and there’s her chin and her mouth. There are her eyes. And here’s the young woman. This is her chin. She’s looking that way. There are her eyes there. A different perspective.

Ted: Oh wow, it’s magic!

Jeff: It is; it’s like magic. (*Laughter*) The problem is that we get trapped in looking at a perspective. Now take this picture, for instance. This picture gives two legitimate ways to look at this woman. In one way we see an old woman and that woman is there. In another way we see that young woman and that young woman is there. But the trouble is that what we do is that we get locked into a perspective.

Now for instance, some of us get locked into this perspective. And we get locked into it because we’ve been taught to do this all the time. We look at the Scriptures and we say, “What do the Scriptures say to me?” So every time we open up the Scriptures we read the story of the Bible. Wherever we read the story of the Bible we say, “I wonder what this text is saying to me.”

Now that’s one perspective and it’s a legitimate perspective. But it is not the place to start! And too many of us start with that perspective, which is legitimate, but a perspective that should happen down the road. You see, the first perspective that you should have, the first question that you should have any time you open up the Bible, is not “What does the Bible say to me?”, or “Where am I in this biblical story?” The very first question that we ought to ask ourselves is “What does this text say?”

Transcriber’s Note: Spoken very slowly and deliberately.

Jeff: What does it say about what Jesus is doing, if it is about Jesus? What does it say about God, about what He’s doing? What does it say about Paul? What does it say about the recipients of his letter? What does it say first? And then what does it say to me?

Those are two legitimate perspectives. But oftentimes we don’t stop to first ask the question. What does the text say? Well, I want us to look at the book of Jonah and I want us to ask the question. What does the text say? What does the book of Jonah say?

Now I think that when we look at the book of Jonah from that perspective, we’re going to be instructed personally. But until we’re instructed from the book itself as to what it says, we won’t be. Until we look at the book itself, we’ll always think of what we think the book says instead of what the book actually says.

So what does the book say? Well, you can think about it like this. There’s a relatively brusque beginning to the book, isn’t there? “*Arise, go to Nineveh that great city, and cry out against it.*” “*But Jonah rose up to flee.*” It’s kind of a brusque beginning.

Let me show you something.

Ted: Brusque or abrupt?

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Jeff: Both. *(Laughter)* Let me show you something. He’s in Joppa. He’s told to go to Nineveh, which is about 550 miles away. And instead he goes to Tarshish, which is about 2500 miles away.

Don: Wow!

Jeff: This man is not wanting to go to Tarshish. Now I want you to think about that for a minute. I want you to consider this point. Why flee? Why would he want to flee? He is a prophet after all.

Do we know? This is one of those places where we think we know the book of Jonah. But let me ask you a question. He is a prophet. He flees. Why does he flee?

Brave Man: He hates the Ninevites.

Jeff: Is there any explanation in the text? That’s what I’m asking. Is there any explanation in the text?

Tom: When he’s mad at God.

Jeff: Okay. Don?

Don: At the end of the chapter.

Jeff: At the end of the chapter. Okay, chapter 4 is a potential explanation. But are we really told?

Tom: Yes.

Jeff: Where?

Tom: He’s fleeing from the presence of the Lord.

Jeff: Well, he’s fleeing from the presence of the Lord. But we’re not told why, are we?

Jim: He doesn’t tell us about the Ninevites. It doesn’t tell us much about them. It doesn’t tell us much about their history.

Jeff: It doesn’t tell us much about them. We know a lot about the Ninevites because we’ve been taught a lot about the Ninevites. But I think that when you look at chapter 4, the text is relatively silent. We get a lot of behaviors about Jonah. But we don’t get a lot of explanation about Jonah. Jonah’s mad, but we’re not told why he’s mad.

Tom: But in 4:4 God says to Jonah, *“Have you any right to be angry?”*

Jeff: Yes, but we’re still not told why Jonah is angry, are we? We know Jonah’s angry, but we’re not told why he’s angry. We’re told why he’s angry in the sense that the plant shrivels up and he’s in the hot sun.

Tom: Yes. But when God tells him what to do, he doesn’t agree with God. This is a bad town. You don’t save bad people.

Jeff: See, but you’ve imported the idea that that’s a bad town and You don’t save bad people. But the text doesn’t actually say that.

Tom: But we know it well enough.

Ted: We don’t know.

Jeff: We don’t know.

Ted: We really don’t know.

Jeff: That’s right

Tom: *(Unclear)*

Ted: But not from the text we don’t know.

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Jeff: Not from the text. And this is my point. When you look at the text, the question is not what should we think about the Ninevites? When you actually look at the text, the question of the text is this. Is it ever justifiable to flee from the Lord? That really becomes the question of this text. Is it ever justifiable to flee from the Lord for any reason?

Now we have all kinds of ideas about why Jonah fled. But most of them, if not all of them, don't come directly from the text. But the question that the text raises is a very simple one. Is it ever justifiable to flee from the Lord? That's really the question of the text.

Brave Man: Can we ever really flee from the presence of the Lord?

Jeff: No, you can't.

Ted: But we think we can.

Jeff: But we think we can. That's right.

Brave Man: But the opening sentence talks about the wickedness that he's going to encounter when he gets there.

Jeff: Yes.

Brave Man: So that probably scared him a bit.

Jeff: That could be. Don's over here.

Don: In verse 2 of chapter 4 it says, *“Ah, LORD, was this not what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled from my people to Tarshish, for I knew that You were a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness.”* So there you're given a hint as to why he left. He was afraid that the Lord would save these people and he hated them because they were so wicked. He didn't want them to be saved.

Jeff: Yes, but it tells you very little. I mean, there is no doubt in my mind that we can draw inferences from this text. But there is nowhere in this text that we're given a clear explanation as to why Jonah fled. We have hints and we have places where we can surmise and deduce. But I think the question of the text is this. Is it ever right to flee from the presence of the Lord? That's the question of the text. Is it ever legitimate to disobey a command of God? That's another way of saying it. Is it ever legitimate to disobey a command of the Lord?

Brave Man: That brings up a good point, that whenever you get into Scripture, you can say that I'm glad it's another context. So in this case we look at how it works, and that's right. But should we go by another Scripture too, or is it always good to know the background? We know what Nineveh was like. Should we not know what it was like?

Jeff: Well, I think that's a great question and I think it's a great point. But my point would be what you've just made at the beginning. And that is that if you give somebody the book of Jonah, what you don't have to do is sit down and say, “Now before you can understand the book of Jonah, you need to let me teach you about Nineveh,” because all of a sudden what you're saying is that you can't understand the Scriptures unless you understand this extra information. And what I'm saying to you is that if you give someone the book of Jonah, the message of the book of Jonah is this. Is it ever justifiable to flee from the presence of the Lord? Or to put it another way, is it ever justifiable to disobey the Lord? That is the question that you need no background information for in

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order to read this text. And that is the way that we want people to pick up Scripture and read it.

When we talk about the reason why people ask this question, “What does this text say to me?”, it’s because we’ve taught them for so long that they can’t really understand the Scriptures unless they have all this extra help. And they know that they don’t have the time, the effort, the energy and the money or whatever, to get all this extra information. So what’s the easy way out? The easy way is that I’ll just ask what it means to me. It’s a supernatural book, after all.

But instead of doing that, we short-circuit the process, because one doesn’t need the extra information in order to understand the simple message of any of these books.

You know what? Here’s what I say every once in a while to my congregation. And I don’t want to say it too often because I might work myself out of a job. *(Laughter)* But I’m supposed to teach them what they already know. *(Laughter)* Do you know what I mean? Now don’t let that get around. *(Laughter)* Right? Somebody had his hand up.

Brave Man: Good point. I’ve heard speakers and I’ve read book reviews. In order to make the point, he has some kind of story, right? There had to be some reason. But—

Jeff: I’m not saying there’s not a reason. You’re right. I’m not saying there’s not a reason. And I’m not saying there aren’t hints to that reason in the story. What I’m saying is that reason, whatever that reason is, is ancillary to the main message.

Brave Man: It’s important to know the whole background.

Jeff: Yes. But if we read the book of Jonah, get the message out of it and then say, “You know, I really like the book of Jonah and I have a little extra time and I have a little extra energy. I hear that Nahum plugs into this whole message thing,” right? So I start reading about Nahum and I read about how Nineveh was destroyed about a hundred years later. And then I can start to unpack a little more and a little more and a little more.

But again, what I’m saying is that there is a very, very articulate and a very, very, very influential New Testament study today called the New Perspective on Paul. And here’s what it simply says. I’ll tell you what it simply says. You can’t really understand what Paul’s saying unless you understand the literature of second temple Judaism. And that’s exactly the same kind of thing that we’re talking about here. You can’t understand Jonah unless you understand Nineveh and Israel’s relationship to Nineveh. And that’s the same exact thing. Whenever you put something in between somebody and the Scriptures and say that you can’t understand the Scriptures until you understand this, you make whatever that is the spectacles by which a person can understand Scripture.

And that’s not what Scripture says about itself. Scripture says that it’s perspicuous. It’s clear.

Sig: What’s the word?

Jeff: Perspicuous.

Sig: Can you spell it?

Jeff: P-e-r-s-p-i-c-u-o-u-s. Per-spic-u-ous.

Sig: Is that right? *(Laughter)*

Jeff: Perspicuous.

Don: P-e-r-s-p-i-c-u-o-u-s.

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Sig: He’s a spelling bee champion.

Jeff: There you go. *(Laughter)*

Brave Man: Move on.

Jeff: The point is that Scripture is clear. We’re able to understand it. Go ahead.

Ted: I think that’s an excellent point, because I hear often that it is said that you can’t really understand the Scriptures until you know all the background, the culture, the history, etc. I would ask the question. Where does that extra study come in? But if indeed you can only understand the Scripture with all this background information being separate from the Scripture, like this new perspective on Paul, which, by the way, is done by an evangelical scholar, N. T. Wright, interestingly enough,--

Jeff: Yes.

Ted: Then the Scripture is suspect. The Scripture doesn’t say that we need all this background information.

Jeff: That’s right.

Sig: But Jeff, wouldn’t your job also be as the pastor (with a dead mike), to teach the congregation if they haven’t taken the time to do it on their own?

Jeff: Oy, yes. Sure.

Sig: Really, in a sense, to connect the dots, to make sense out of it?

Jeff: Yes, absolutely. But if they had the time to do it, they could do it.

Sig: Right.

Jeff: I mean, there’s a sense in which 1 Timothy says that the teacher is to put his effort into these things as a lifelong effort, right? So there is a need for a teacher. But it’s not because he’s discerning secrets in the text, or sort of using extra-Biblical information to discern what people don’t know. He’s just studying the text and doing what most people won’t have the time to do, right? Yes?

Bill Stolze: I’m glad you’ve chosen Jonah because when I deal with people who are new believers, they all believe in Scripture. But you get feedback from people that say, “Oh yes. How can this Scripture be true? How does someone survive in the belly of a fish for three days?” So if you get that feedback, you use this book to justify their not believing the Scripture. So I’m glad you’ve done that.

Jeff: Yes. Go ahead.

Bill McCoy: I know you don’t mind me disagreeing with you.

Jeff: No, I don’t mind at all. *(Laughter)*

Bill: I think that the main reason to read the Scripture is to know God better.

Jeff: Yes.

Bill: It tells me about the Person of God.

Jeff: Yes. And I think that 4:2 which Don was talking about, actually you can read that in one of two ways. You can read that and infer something about the Ninevites. Or you can read that and infer something about God.

Bill: The second thing is what you brought up on the screen. What about a woman who was living in an occupied city in World War II taken over by the Nazis. She’s married and they say, “You sleep with us or we’re going to kill your family.” Does she commit adultery to save the family? Is that a reason for disobeying God?

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Jeff: Oh I see, I see. Well, I guess the question is in how you answer the question. Was she coerced?

Sig: Yes.

Jeff: If she was coerced physically, would you say that she had been raped?

Sig: Yes.

Jeff: If she has been coerced verbally, would you say that she had been raped?

Sig: Yes.

Jeff: That’s how I would answer it. So let’s move on. *(Laughter)* And so to add a little wood to the fire, I want you to think about something that we learn from Amos. Amos 3:7. *“For the LORD does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets.”*

I want you to think about this. That really becomes something of an important piece of knowledge. Why? Because when we get to Acts chapter 2, Peter says that what’s happening here with the baptism of the Spirit is the fulfillment of Joel chapter 2. And Joel chapter 2 says, that sons and daughters are going to act like prophets and dream dreams and have visions. And what is he saying? He’s not saying that all of our sons and daughters are actually going to be prophets and prophetesses. What he’s saying is that our sons and daughters in the New Covenant are going to enjoy the intimacy with God that was heretofore only enjoyed by the prophets. If you want to know who had the most intimate relationship with God, it was the prophets.

And so in the New Testament, in the New Covenant, everyone is going to enjoy that sort of intimacy.

Now if we think this way, and you believe what Amos 3:7 says, I think that Jonah likely knew why he was going to Tarshish. I think that God probably revealed it to him. He knew in a way that we don’t know. He knew in a way that no one else knew.

And if you ask me why I think that Jonah went, I’m going to say to you everything that you said earlier. I’m going to agree with you about him not wanting to go. But I’m going to ratchet it up a little bit and I’m going to say that he knew exactly what God was doing from the outset. And he said to himself any number of things. But I think he said at least this. “I know my God is doing this. But how am I ever going to explain this to the chosen people of Israel?”

So he likely knows more than anyone else why God sent him to Tarshish. And that’s why he flees, if I’m going to put my surmise on it.

Ted: Could you unravel that a bit?

Jeff: Yes. So for instance,--

Bob: But that’s a judgment call on your part.

Jeff: Sure it is.

Bob: How do you know that? You don’t know—

Jeff: Yes. That’s what I said.

Bob: But that’s not in Scripture.

Jeff: I already said that. *(Laughter)* I already said that if you ask me this is what I’m going to say. I agree with all of you in all of your judgments. But Tom, if you want me to go back to my original position, that this is what the text says, I’ll be happy to do it.

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(Laughter) But I’m going to surmise along the way if that’s okay. But I’m surmising along with you guys. I agree with you.

But what I wanted to do early on is to say to you guys that the text doesn’t tell us this stuff.

Tom: But that’s not everything. You can’t look at the text only in itself because it doesn’t mean anything more than that Jonah didn’t want to go to Tarshish.

Jeff: You have to look at the text only in itself at first.

Tom: Yes.

Jeff: I mean, the whole principle of interpretation is what do verses 1-10 say? And then what does it say in chapter 2? And then what does it say in 3? And then what does it say in light of prophetic literature? And on and on and on, concentric circles working out until you get through all of the Bible. What does it say in light of all of the Bible?

Tom: You’re right. But he flees to Joppa. What does that mean, because we don’t know how far Tarshish is from Joppa.

Jeff: 2500 miles.

Tom: But it doesn’t say that.

Brave Men: Oooh!

Tom: It doesn’t say how far it is.

Sig: But what difference does that make? He’s running—

Tom: I think it makes a big difference.

Jeff: Hold on, wait a minute. What’s your point? I mean, if you want to go back to the original thing that I said, where I was challenging you guys to actually find in the text what the reason was, when I said to you that it’s not in the text, the reason that we’re supposed to be looking at this text is to answer the question is it ever right to flee from God? But now we’re moving out from there. Are you uncomfortable moving out from there?

Tom: Well, I’m going back to the original thing about Nineveh being a place for bad guys. We know that Sennacherib was just as bad as you can get. That’s right in Kings.

Jeff: Yep.

Tom: But having an understanding of why God said what He said about Nineveh, knowing something about Nineveh in the Scripture when we get it from other Scriptures is important.

Jeff: Well that’s where we’re going.

Tom: Okay. *(Laughter)* So I think we agree.

Ted: I think this is the value of what you said. Too often we start with how it circles out.

Tom: Well, that’s true.

Ted: You’re saying, guys, focus on what you’ve got in front of you, and then work out from there. And the problem is that often you will get Bible teachers who talk in the third and fourth circle—

Jeff: That’s right.

Ted: And I think we’re so accustomed to it. We’re so accustomed to the correct answer.

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Jeff: Yes. Folks, this is the question that we have to begin with.

Tom: Okay.

Jeff: That is the question of the text. If we only had the book of Jonah, that’s the question.

Now as we continue to interpret the book of Jonah, we’re going to have to ask other questions. And those other questions are going to be answered from outside of the book. But some of them are going to be answered within the book. But we’re going to have to work our way out. But we have to ask ourselves this. What does this text actually ask me? The text actually asks me if it is ever justifiable to disobey God. Yes, Bill?

Bill Obaker: It’s really a demonstration for the period of God’s sovereignly bringing out what He desires, and ultimately His Person.

Ted: That’s down the road.

Jeff: Yes. I think that the God who asks me this is always there, right? So the God who gives this text is asking this question. But I come knowing that it’s the sovereign God who asks this question. I guess that might be the way to say it, Bill. Yes, Kirk?

Kirk: One of the things that I find really interesting is that if I start with the passage, the first seventeen verses of Jonah, and I spend time with those verses alone, and look at what I can discover from that much time, I actually begin to test what I really believe, because there’s some dynamic teaching in those verses. And just like everything else, for a few minutes I just consider what’s there first. Then it begins to blossom as I expand upward.

Jeff: Yes, for sure. Okay. So again, here’s what I’m going to say. If Amos 3:7 can be applied to Jonah, and if Jonah knew as a prophet better than anybody, even us, what he was being called to do, then misunderstanding is not the problem. Jonah did not misunderstand the message.

Now here’s my point. My point is that plugs back into this, because my point is that it is not as if Jonah said, “Arise and go! Now let me think about this. Let me get out my Hebrew lexicon. Let me look at that and see what the word *arise* means. And I’m going to need to look at some commentaries to see what the word *go* means. And maybe the word *go* doesn’t actually mean what I think it means. Maybe it’s morphed. And maybe it has this etymological origin that is of a different substance and stratum than what I think of.”

No. None of that. Is it ever justifiable to flee from the Lord? What I’m trying to say to you is that we can’t get the prophet out of it by saying, “Well maybe he misunderstood the message.” No, he had an understanding of the message. It’s not an intellectual problem. What we’re dealing with when we ask this question is an ethical problem. Is it ever justifiable to flee from the presence of the Lord? Is it ever justifiable to disobey? Yes?

Sig: Is there another dynamic going on here in our world? As men study the Bible, they hear something a teacher gives us. He tells us about Nineveh and tells about the lexicon and all this stuff. And all of a sudden we go, “Wow, this teacher is great! I want to sit at the feet of this teacher,” as opposed to “let’s read the text.”

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Jeff: Oh, I think that’s where we are today. And I think that mindset is that I need to pray. So I need to go to the Christian bookstore and buy thirty books on prayer. *(Laughter)* Right? I need to love my neighbor. So I need to go and read what it means to love my neighbor. I buy the latest book from whatever Bible teacher I love most and I’ll learn about what it means to love my neighbor. And by the time I get done reading those thirty books then I’ll know what it means to love my neighbor. But I won’t do anything about it. *(Laughter)* But I’ll know, right? *(Laughter)* And do you see that? And that’s part of the point that I’m going to drive at.

Sig: Amen.

Jeff: Amen.

Jeff: So this is not an intellectual problem. This is an easily understood question that God is asking the prophet.

Now I want to tell you something. I’m going to pick up on what Sig said. Several years ago I gave a woman a book one time on a Biblical topic. And she started reading the book and came back to me. She handed me the book and she said to me, “I’m done with it for right now.”

And I said, “What do you mean you’re done with it for right now?”

She said, “Well, I can’t read it.”

And I said, “Why can’t you read it?”

And she said, “Well, look. That is persuading me of a Biblical truth. And if I am persuaded of that I’m going to need to change something in my life. And right now I can’t change that something in my life.”

And there was a reason. She didn’t give the reason. But she said, “I’m not going to be able to think about it right now.” *(Laughter) (Unclear)*

You know, it’s funny, though, how we treat God in His authority over against, say, the IRS. *(Laughter)* You know, the IRS tells you to file your taxes in a certain way. And do you ever say, “I can’t deal with this right now because I’m not ready to change the way I file?” *(Laughter)* Do you ever do that? I don’t think you do. *(Laughter)* I think that when the IRS says that you need to fix this, you say, “Okay. Let me get that fixed and send it right back in.”

And I think that this is one of those books where we need to ask ourselves the same thing. Now some of you are going to say this to me, I know it. “Well, we’re Christians.” And I want you to know that this book is not to the unbeliever. It is to the believer.

Brave Man: Amen.

Jeff: This question as to whether it is ever justifiable to disobey God is not a question that’s being asked of the unbeliever.

Brave Man: That’s right.

Jeff: It is a question that’s being asked of Jonah, not just any son of God, but a prophet of God who enjoys intimacy with God in a way that probably no other Old Covenant person enjoyed other than the prophets. So this is a covenant story about God’s people. Oh, sorry. Yes, Matt?

Matt: So back to the question about the sovereignty of God. As you said, if you read the book—

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Jeff: Say that again, Matt. You’re breaking up.

Matt: So for the unbeliever the book of Jonah speaks about the sovereignty of God. We’re believers here. So the book of Jonah for us is about our response to God.

Jeff: Yes.

Matt: But for the unbeliever, to show the sovereignty of God is, I think, a key factor.

Jeff: Yes, absolutely. So the covenant principle is this, and we find it in 1 Peter, in the New Testament. *“Judgment begins with the household of God.”* But I think that one of the things that we have to take on board is this idea. Now again I’m not saying that he doesn’t deal with unbelievers. He does deal with unbelievers, and we’re going to see the response of unbelievers. But I want you to understand something. The response of those unbeliever, when you read it, is exactly the response that should have been offered by Jonah.

Brave Man: Amen.

Jeff: So all that the response of the unbeliever teaches us is what our response as children should have been. We’ll get to that. But that’s the point of it.

So when you look at this book in light of an unbeliever, you need to look at it in terms of that if the unbeliever does this to become part of the family, then how much more should the son have done it already?

Now having said that, let me go on. Oh, I need to say that. 1 Peter 4:17. *“For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God.”* But what you have here is this. You have the question answered. What happens when a covenant child does not obey? And the answer to that, if you look at the law, if you look at the Old Testament law, the Old Testament law’s answer to that is that if a son disobeys, the son dies.

And so the question is what should have happened to Jonah? He should have died. But what this book is teaching us is the grace of the Father, who pursues His children. And so what we find is that we find that God is pursuing His son.

And really, when you think about this story, it’s a wonderful story. What about this question. Is it ever justifiable to disobey God? And we all are sitting here saying to ourselves, “Well, the answer is definitely no. It’s never justifiable to flee from God.” But what we’re all saying to ourselves is this. “Crap! I disobey God all the time!” (*Laughter*) So no, it’s never justifiable. The Lord is condemning me. And then the answer comes in the story. The God who asks the question is the God who pursues the sinning son. And see, that’s the idea.

And how does God pursue the sinning son? By sending His own Son in the likeness of Jonah, right?

Tom: Yes.

Jeff: You see, that’s the driving force of this book. So this question is asked with all its force. But if we stay with the book, the book says that God pursues even the sinning son. Ted?

Ted: Jonah should have died in the belly of the whale. Excuse me, the fish. Jonah should have died in the belly of the fish. But he did not. We should die in hell, but we do not. And that is because God pursues Jonah into the belly of the fish and extracts him, as God extracts us from the belly of hell.

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Sig: Preach it, brother!

Ted: Do you know what? In the medieval period that was a very common theme. It’s called “The Arrow of Hell.” The Creed says that “He descended into hell.” There are images of Satan like a great monster with his mouth open. And Jesus is reaching into the mouth of the beast and yanking out the redeemed.

Jeff: Yes.

Bill McCoy: And that gets back to why I read Scripture in the first place, to get to know God.

Jeff: That’s right.

Tom: I just wanted to say that He doesn’t pursue him into the fish, as much as that He places him into the fish. That’s His design.

Jeff: Well tom, thank you for saying that, because here’s the point. In verse 17 God prepares a fish for Jonah. The fish is the grace.

Tom: Yes.

Jeff: Isn’t that interesting?

Brave Man: Three days.

Ted: But it seems like hell.

Jeff: It is hell. The image is twofold.. It’s like baptism.

Ted: Right. *(Laughter)*

Jeff: The image is twofold. I’ll tell you what. I’m not going to go into point #1. *(Laughter)* But at least we have an introduction down and our footing is squared up. Are there any last comments or questions that you have? Yes?

John: I think this is another example of God being God throughout Scripture. He didn’t change in the New Testament. He was gracious and merciful in the Old Testament. Some people have this idea that God was this angry Judge in the Old Testament and now He’s a loving Savior.

Jeff: Yes, you’re right. Thank you for that, because that’s absolutely right. And that was something that was taught in 2nd-century Rome by Marcion and rejected by the great early Fathers. But it’s still taught today. I mean, it really is. Some of the worst theology with regard to that sort of thing is taught by some of the Christian musicians today who sing about grace and mercy and those kinds of things. And if you hear them talk, I’ve heard more Christian musicians talk about the angry Father of the Old Testament and the loving Jesus of the New. Not many preachers say that. Maybe you have to infer that from them. But I’ve heard a ton of musicians say that. And you’re right. Marcionism is alive and well today. Anybody else?

Sig: When you were talking earlier about God pursuing His people, I don’t want to read into that. But what I want to clarify for myself is that a lot of the bible is God talking to His covenant people, as opposed to making it an evangelical book so you can come to know Jesus. I know that you can come to know god through the Bible. But it’s really about how we should obey God or how we should follow God. Is that the majority of the word of God. I know it’s mixed in.

Jeff: Well you know, I mean, I’m going to tell you one view of how to look at the Old Testament. And I know, for instance, that Sinclair Ferguson holds this view. He holds the

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view that the Old Testament is a word about Christ for Christ. So when Christ comes into the world, this Word is not only about Him but for Him to fulfill. So the Old Covenant is really His life sort of mapped out. “This is what You will fulfill. This is what You will do. This is what You will be.”

If you think of it that way, then all of Scripture is for Christ. And as we stand in Christ, the Scripture then becomes for us. So it sort of keeps in line with what I’ve taught you. And that is that we have to ask what the Scriptures say first of all, and then what does it say for us? So it’s another way of looking at your expression that God speaks covenantally to His people before He speaks to those outside.

You know, it’s sort of like the Sermon on the Mount. Or it’s sort of like what you do at a wedding, right? When you get two people in front of you at a wedding, you say, “I’m going to speak to the two of you, and the rest of these people are free to overhear it,” right? That’s kind of what you say, right? And the Scripture is that way.

Sig: Yes, that’s good.

Jeff: Okay? Well, let’s pray. Our heavenly Father, thank You for this day, for the time You’ve given. Bless us, Lord, as we’ve been in Your word. Help us, Lord, to realize that Your words clear and that there is a message to hear for anyone who picks it up. Help us, Father, to also realize that the questions that Your word asks us are equally clear—questions like is it every justifiable to disobey You? And Lord, sadly, the answer to that is obviously no. It’s never justifiable. But what’s sad is that we do disobey You. But thank You then for the grace. Thank You for that grace manifested in the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank You for salvation in Him. And were it not for Him, we’d be lost. So thank You, Father. And we pray these things in Jesus’ name. amen.

Brave Men: Amen. (*Applause*)