

“The God Who Is and Speaks”

A Wayward Prophet

Jonah 3:1-10

Dr. Jeff Stivason

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Jeff: Okay, let's pray. Father in heaven, thank You for this day and the time You've given. And Father, thank You so much for how You have revealed Yourself to us. Thank you for the Theophanies of old. Thank You for the prophetic word that came through the prophets. And thank You for inspiring the apostles by Your Holy Spirit. And thank You that in each instance You have given exactly what it was that You intended to give about Yourself or about an event. And thank You, Father, that You have exfoliated redemptive history. And You have captured it and inscripturated it in Your word so that we have it in our Bibles and so that we can take it up and read it. And we can read about how Christ was foreshadowed in the Old Testament, how we can see Him promised, how we can see Him typified and foreshadowed. Father, thank You for these things so that we might draw strength from the fact that You work Your redemption out for us by way of Your providential acts.

Father, this gives us great confidence as we come before You in prayer, because we know that You are a God of history, not just fond of history, but the God who superintends history. And so we know that our future is held securely in Your grasp. And so whatever the case may be, we know that we move into territory where You have already been because, Father, You have ordained what will unfold for us. Father, we thank You for this. And we don't look at the future with fear. But we look at it with confidence because we stand in the Lord Jesus Christ as we look ahead.

And so, Father, certainly we pray for our brother Bruce Bickel, asking that Your hand would be upon him. We pray, Father, for his well-being and for his continued ministry.

We pray, Father, for Tom Smith. We ask that Your hand would be upon him for good. Father, we are delighted that he belongs to You. And we are troubled by His health. And yet again we lift him up to You with confidence, knowing that not a thing that has happened to him escapes Your notice or Your grasp.

Father, we pray for Kevin's wife and think the same thoughts after her, and ask that You would cause her to be well and strengthen her by Your grace.

Father, we do pray for our brother Sig and for his wife Nancy. Father, we lift Nancy up to You and plead for her healing. We are thankful that the u t infection has subsided or is being cared for. And we thank You that the doctors are making plans for the treatment of the cancer. And we pray, Father, that that would indeed be cared for. But we pray and put our confidence not in medical doctors or in procedures. But we put our confidence in You, the One who knit the body together in the womb, the One who redeemed us from sin and the One who will glorify us in the future. And so, Father, we ask on behalf of Nancy for her wellness. We pray for Sig as well. We miss our brother and ask that You would return him soon to us. Father, we're thankful for Kirk who stands in his place and does such a good job. We ask that You would continue to bless him.

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Father, we also pray for the bishop and are thankful for his being with us last week. And we look forward to many other times with him in Your providence. And so, Father, we commit these things to You, asking Your blessing upon us as we open Your word, and asking it in Christ’s name. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen.

Jeff: All right. I’ve asked Don to turn us to Jonah chapter 3 this morning. But as he does that, I want you to think about the outline that we’re going to look at today. And this outline that we’re going to look at today doesn’t necessarily come from the text like the other outlines did. In other words, I’d say this. We’re finished looking at Jonah proper. And now today we’re going to take a look at a problem that arises within the book of Jonah. And so I want us to look at some introductory material. I want to set the stage to help you to understand why it is that we’re looking at the problem that we’re looking at. I want us then to focus on *the character of God*, because that’s the particular issue that we’re going to think about today. And then I want us to think about *the language of revelation*, which you’ll see is important for our topic today. But before we get into our time together in the Word, let’s have Don read Jonah chapter 3. Okay?

Don: Yes. *“Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.’*

“So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent. And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day’s walk. Then he cried out and said, ‘Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!’

“So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?

“Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.” This is the word of the Lord.

Brave Men: Thanks be to God.

Jeff: Okay. So I want to look at some introductory things. First of all, I want you to notice that this is the message. That’s Jonah’s message. *“Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”* And Nineveh responds and they repent. And God relents from His anger.

Now what’s the cause of the joy in Nineveh? Is it the fasting? Is it the sackcloth? I don’t think so. If anybody has done any sort of fasting at all, and if you’ve had sackcloth on you,--I don’t know how many of us have had sackcloth on us in the past; Don has it on right now apparently,-- (*Laughter*) It’s a little more information than we wanted to know,

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but thanks, Don. *(Laughter)* I don’t think it’s the fasting and the sackcloth that is the cause for joy. I think you well know that it’s something else.

Let’s take a look at this text. It says, “*God saw their deeds.*”

Transcriber’s Note: ESV.

Jeff: “*That they turned from their wicked ways. Then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.*” The joy comes from the fact that God relented and did not bring upon them the destruction that He intended to bring upon them at first.

Jeremiah 18:7-10 has a very similar thought to it. I want you to see it. “*One moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom, to uproot, to pull down or to destroy it. If that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it.*” That’s the same word that’s in our text. “I will relent.”

“*Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it. And if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I had promised to bless it.*”

And here’s the question I have for you. What does this mean for God. Nineveh turned and God relented.

Now in one sense I want to be the first to say that this is a blessing. The blessing of forgiveness is a wonderful thing. It is a great joy to realize that my life has been going down into the sewer. And I turned from it and God brings me blessing instead of stench. I want to be the first one to say that’s a huge blessing. But we have to ask the question. What does this say about God? What does it say about Him?

You may be asking the question. What do you mean by what does it say about God? What are you thinking? Well, let me throw out some questions for you. Does this mean that God’s decree is mutable? In other words, does it mean that God’s decree that He establishes in all eternity is changeable? Is that what it means? Does it mean that God knows the future or perhaps doesn’t know the future?

You know, there is a conservative evangelical scholar who is teaching today that God does not know future events. So for instance, when we find in Genesis chapter 22 that God says to Abraham, after he almost sacrifices his son Isaac, and God finds out that Abraham is willing to do it, that God says, “Stop!”, and he stops. And the text says that God says, “Now I know that you will withhold nothing from Me.” And the point is this. The scholar says that God didn’t know this until that very moment.

Do we believe that? I mean, do we believe that? Here’s a Biblical scholar who is conservative and evangelical teaching us that. And I hate to say that he is even a Reformed scholar. He’s not really Reformed or he wouldn’t say that. *(Laughter)* Yes?

Brave Man: If that’s the case then, what about the full revelation? What about the prophecies and all of those things?

Jeff: I’m really glad you’re asking that question already.

Brave Man: There you go.

Ted: We like straw men. And this can be a straw man when you look at this evangelical Reformed scholar and he puts it that way. He has less than a solid basis for

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saying that. It's this whole theology that needs worked out. And I think that these things are often more nuanced. It's easy for us to paint it as black and white. But I guess it's probably more nuanced.

Jeff: It is nuanced. But what he's really trying to deal with is how a God who is timeless and who stands apart from time as Creator can enter into time and interact with time. How is it then that He is timeless and yet in time? And that's really the question that he's dealing with. He oftentimes talks about creation as “the problem of creation is,” right? Creation is a problem for him because God is independent. He is timeless. He is many things that once He enters into creation He seems to be a part of.

And a lot of scholars have that problem. William Lane Craig has said that God was timeless. But once creation was formed, He had to become time bound. That's the only way He could interact with creation. So that's really what's at root.

Now this particular scholar says, “OI don't want to violate who God is. I want Him to remain timeless.” So what he say,--and this is your fault, Ted!—(*Laughter*), is that God adopts covenantal properties. And covenantal properties are properties that He is not, but has to adopt and represent Himself as in order to relate to creation. And in part that means that He is going to adopt covenantal properties so that He can relate to creation. He has to be ignorant about future events. Yes?

Ted: What I'm going to say is, let's not just gasp. The guy has a theology.

Jeff: The guy has a theology.

Ted: And he's trying to wrestle with a problem, a huge problem.

Jeff: Right.

Ted: And I respect him for that.

Jeff: I do too. I just disagree with him.

Ted: Yes. He happens to be wrong.

Jeff: Yes, he happens to be wrong.

Ted: But I respect him for it. He's not as swift about it.

Jeff: No, that's right. What's frustrating though, Ted, is when a guy is willing to go against a confessional document that he said he subscribes to. If God is omniscient, that means He's omniscient, right? That's all I'm saying.

Don: And then Jeff, you have the problem of Moses after the golden calf incident. “Leave me alone! I'm going to destroy this nation!”

“Lord, You can't do that.”

“Okay, I won't.”

Jeff: Yes. It's the same exact problem. It's the same problem. The question is this. Did He know that Nineveh would then repent? And that's really what we're asking. So here's the question. We can frame it like this. I want to frame it like that. So, for instance, is God waiting with bated breath to see what Nineveh would do? And here is Jonah on the other side of the spectrum, sort of waiting with bated breath to see what they would do. And God is saying to Jonah, “I want you to go into Nineveh. I want you to preach this message.” And they both sit back and wait. And it just so happens that Nineveh repents. God is glad and Jonah is sad. (*Laughter*) Right?

Brave Man: Right.

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Jeff: So is that what is happening? Well, this is a very practical problem. It’s a very practical problem because, remember the stock market crash in 2008? It was described by our President at the time as “*anxious times*.” And it was characterized by uncertainty and fear responses.

Now here is what I want to say. If God doesn’t know the future because we’re just willing to say that God doesn’t know the future,-- I mean, there are theologies that just say that I don’t want God to know the future because I want to reserve something for my free will, for instance. Some people limit God so that they can retain their free will. Or maybe it is a little more complex. And they’re trying to say, “We’ve got to work out a problem that has to do with a timeless God and a time bound creation. And how is it that God interacts and intersects?” And they say that there are covenantal properties. So they create this theology so that God can intersect and interact with His creation.

Whatever it happens to be, however nuanced it is, if God doesn’t know we are living in a very uncertain and fearful world. We cannot pray the prayer that I prayed this morning. So does God know? That’s really the question that I’m posing this morning. Does God know?

For instance, *Time* magazine reports this incident. The headlines of the past month suggest that skyrocketing food prices are threatening the stability of a growing number of governments around the world. Did God know that?

Brave Man: Yes.

Jeff: Whoever said “yes,” you’re stealing the thunder. (*Laughter*) Does God know? Can we rest in Him?

Brave Man: We can.

Jeff: Okay. You know, this is the bad thing about teaching a group like this. Everyone knows the right answer. And this is why I hesitated about whether to bring this topic to you. But I said to myself that Sig said that it’s too late to start a new series, because he never puts himself up on the website. (*Laughter*) So it comes to this. (*Laughter*) Yes, Don?

Don: To add insult to injury,--

Jeff: Oy boy, here we go.

Don: If God knows that all of these terrible things are going to happen, there are some people who say that God must not be all good. If He knows all these things are going to happen,--

Jeff: Thank you, David Hume. (*Laughter*) Right?

Don: John Stewart Mill.

Jeff: He doesn’t have the power to change it, so He must be good but not all-powerful.

Eric: I just want to say that it’s a hard spiritual walk. In our spiritual growth all of us ask this question, all of us. I know I have. And the thing you mentioned before about me wanting my way, you know, I’ve asked that question. I think it was John MacArthur who once said that God is not ever going to say, “I didn’t know that this person would choose this. So I have to rearrange everything.” If God is sovereign, that cannot be.

Jeff: Types. Well, thanks for bringing salvation into this. (*Laughter*) I won’t say anything about that right now. But I agree. And I think that unless you were sort of one

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unnaturally born into Calvinism, you didn't come into this Christian life thinking that Calvinism is true, unless if you were probably raised in a covenant home. Daniel has probably never known a time when Calvinism wasn't true. Am I right? But unlike Daniel, I myself came into the faith thinking, *Calvinism! That can't be true!* And so I had my own struggle with that.

And it's interesting. I really struggled with that when my brother died. Is this God sovereignly in control? I had a minister, a good evangelical minister, tell me that accidents happen and some accidents are just outside of God's control. And throughout life's struggle with the questions of sovereignty I ran into a minister whose son was killed in the home of a friend because they were playing with a gun that they didn't know was loaded. And the minister told me that he stopped believing that God was sovereign once that happened to his son.

And it was kind of interesting because we shared our experiences. And I said, “You know, it's interesting. When I lost my brother I started believing that God was sovereign as a result of that.” And so it's interesting. Just because something tragic happens to you doesn't lead you to believe in the sovereignty of God. Sometimes experience strips that away, or at least what you thought was there.

So this is a live question. And I think you're right; we all struggle with it and have struggled with it from time to time. And even now we struggle with why things happen the way they happen.

So I think we need to begin by thinking about *the character of God* first, as we think about this question. Who is God? Who is He in terms of His nature, in terms of His very essence?

Now I want you to know something. There is in both Protestantism and in Islamic theology what is called in liberal Protestant theology *God's actualism*. Now what that means is this. That means that God is free, because freedom is the absolute quintessential attribute of God. God is so free that God could actually change His nature if He wanted to. That would be the characteristic of Barthian Protestant liberal theology. It's called *God's actualism*.

And that would be part of Islamic theology, medieval scholastic Islamic theology. God can change His very nature if He so chooses.

Now that's not new. If you go all the way back to the medieval times, (and that should strike you that that's not new if it came out of Islamic medieval theology), but if you go all the way back to the time before Martin Luther, do you remember how Martin Luther struggled? Do you remember how he struggled? Part of his struggle comes out of this very idea that God can change His nature.

There were *nominalists* at the time. And the nominalists said that God in His raw sovereignty could change His very nature if He so chose. However, the thing that saves us is that God has covenanted and promised to be the sort of God that He is.

Now I don't know how Luther came to this. And you know how comforting it was for Luther. Luther basically said that if God is absolutely free, it doesn't matter if He covenants. God could so choose to break that covenant with us. So in one sense that covenantal leash that causes God to be the sort of God that He is isn't all that assuring for

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us. So the idea for Luther was wait a minute! If God expects this from me, and He's this kind of God, how can I ever hope to continue to think that He will remain this sort of God? That was part of his struggle.

Now there are lots of other things along with that. We get the idea that what we're talking about here in each of these three scenarios, whether it's nominalism or Barthian liberalism or Islamic theology, is that God is not constant in His nature. God can change and be different than who He is. And what we are asking is this. Who is God in His very nature? Who is He?

And I think we're asking critical questions like these. Is He omniscient? Is He prescient? Is He limited by something or even Himself?

You know, today scholars often talk, especially scholars who want to preserve freedom of the will in man. Now I believe in free will. And the Westminster Confession believes in freedom of the will. It has an entire chapter on it, chapter 9, “Of Free Will.”

Now I want to tell you something. There's an enormous difference between the freedom of the will taught in the Westminster Confession, which I think reflects the Bible's teaching, and some of the freedoms that are taught by some philosophers and theologians. I told you a little bit about that last night. But the idea is that if you hold to a freedom that requires God to give something up of Himself, then that can't be a Biblical form of freedom.

So who is God? These are some of the critical questions that we have to ask. Who is God? And it's a question that we have to ask ourselves whether it's 2008 or 2019. Okay? You have to ask yourself this question no matter what year it is. Who is God? And is He a God that we can trust? Is He a God that we can hold on to?

So if we use the Bible as a source, and Jonah as our particular context, I think that we could walk through and answer this question today.

Now I'm going to chase through this. First of all, *what does Jonah say?* Jonah says that God is Creator. This is the sailors' question, isn't it? Jonah's answer to their question, “Who is God?”, is “*I fear the LORD God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.*” This is the God who is.

Now this squares with the rest of Scripture. Psalm 95:5: “*The sea is His, for it was He who made it, and His hands formed the dry land.*” So God is the Creator God.

But not only is God the Creator God. God is the Ruler of what He creates. He is what we call sovereign.

Now you guys know this. But let me give you some passages. And let's walk through some of these passages so that you guys can go to these. Take these down. Can somebody get Psalm 115:3 and Isaiah 46:9 and 10? It's an implicit freedom. I've got a list of passages and I want us to hear them today. I don't normally do this, but I want us to hear them? Who's got Psalm 115:3? Just read it. All right. Do you have it?

Brave Man: “*Our God is in the heavens; He does all that He pleases.*”

Jeff: Okay.

“*Our God is in the heavens;
He does all that He pleases.*”

How about Isaiah 46:9 and 10? Does somebody have that?

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Brave Man:

*“Remember the former things spoken long ago.
I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no other like Me.”*

Jeff: All right. How about 2 Kings 19:25?

Brave Man: *“Hast thou not heard long ago how I have done it, and of ancient times, that I have commanded it?”*

Jeff: Keep reading.

Brave Man: *Now have I brought it to pass, that that thou shouldst make fenced cities into ruinous heaps?”*

Jeff: Yes. *“Have you not heard it long ago? I ordained it in the days of old? I planned it and now I have brought it to pass.”* And how about Isaiah 45:7?

Bob:

*“I form the light and create darkness;
I bring prosperity and create disaster.
I, the LORD, do all these things.”*

Jeff: Yes. That’s an incredible passage. How about some other ones? Ecclesiastes 3:11. Does anybody have a King James Bible?

Brave Man: That’s the one I just read. I just read it.

Jeff: Look up Isaiah 45:7 for us in our King James. Who’s got Ecclesiastes 3:11 right now? Anybody?

Brian: I have it.

Jeff: Go ahead.

Brian: *“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”*

Jeff: Yes. God has done something from the beginning to the end, whether we understand it or not. Do you have the Isaiah 45:7 passage? Read it from the King James.

Brave Man:

*“I form the light, and create darkness;
I make peace, and create evil.
I, the LORD, do all these things.”*

Jeff: The translation that we heard said, *“I create disaster.”* His said, *“I create evil.”* It’s a gripping verse, right? We’ve got to come to grips with it. How about Proverbs 16:33?

Bob: *“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”*

Jeff: All right. *“The lot”—the die—“is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”* Proverbs 21:1.

Brave Man: *“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD. He turns it wherever He will.”*

Jeff: *“The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD. And it is like a water course, and He directs it wherever He will.”* How about Ezra 6:22?

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Brave Man: *“And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It was a day of joy, for the LORD had made them joyful. He turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, to strengthen them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.”*

Jeff: Okay. So here we have Israel rejoicing because God had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to show favor to them. Any questions about any of those? Do you have any questions? I mean, those are powerful verses. Each one of those verses in some way, shape or form, drives home the idea that God is sovereign, even the Isaiah 45:7 passage. I had us read that from the King James Bible because I want you to understand something. The He brew word there is *rah*. And some people will say, “Well, that word is only used with regard to natural disasters.” It really isn’t. And secondly, don’t natural disasters kill people? I’m just saying; I’m asking, right? So the point is, what do we think of that? Go ahead.

Kirk: You know, that one verse that uses the word *evil* in it, that may not be easy for us to understand, because sometimes somebody may ask us, “How is God evil?”

Jeff: Well God is not evil, and that’s the whole point of this, right? The whole point of this is that in this passage in Isaiah 45:7 God says, *“I form the light and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I, the LORD, do all these things”*, the question that we have to ask ourselves is, how is it that God is sovereign over evil occurrences? How is it?

And perhaps we need to start off with Acts chapter 4 where it says that God superintends the death of His Son, which was a heinous occurrence, right? And how does He do this? Well, He ordains it all from the beginning to the end. But,--and I think this is a whole other class,--God does not go into the heads of men and give them evil thoughts to think, because He actually uses secondary causation. He actually uses secondary causes.

Now you say to me, “But God still has to plan to permit.” And I would say to you yes, because if he doesn’t, He’s not sovereign.

So I think there is a struggle on one side or the other. The struggle on the one side is that God doesn’t have any control over evil events. He sits up there and bites His fingernails, or that God plans and permits and brings to pass through secondary causation. Now I’ll tell you what I’m going to pick any day of the week. I’m going to pick one category over two, that God plans and permits and brings about by secondary causations even the evil acts of the world, because that’s the kind of God that gives me a great deal of comfort in anxious times, because I know that no matter what happens, it’s for God’s good ends, for His pleasure.

If you really think about it, it’s easy to go, “Yeah!” But that’s a hard pill to swallow when it’s somebody in your family who’s on the wrong end of a gun or a knife, or a wicked act from a perpetrator. You name it, right? Yes?

Kirk: I forget where it is in Scripture, but it talks about a day coming when the restraint will be removed.

Jeff: Oh wait! Don’t even go there! *(Laughter)* I rebuke you! *(Laughter)*

Kirk: But if God were not sovereign, it would be all about works, too.

Jeff: Absolutely. All right. Let’s go back to Jonah. Forget 2 Thessalonians. *(Laughter)* In the story of Jonah, think about it. Who threw the great waves on the sea?

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Brave Man: God.

Jeff: God did, and Jonah knew it. God plants the fish, right? God is sovereign in salvation. He appointed a plan to grow a plant. He appoints a worm to eat the plant. He appoints a scorching wind to burn Jonah’s head. God is providential. He superintends all of life.

What is providence? *“God’s providence is His completely holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of everything and every action.”* I want you to see three things here: *holy, wise and powerful*. God is powerful to bring these things to pass. But I also want you to know that He is wise. That’s important. He’s wiser than we are.

You know, we sit back and we coach the game, right? It’s easy for us to coach the game. What is the coach doing, right? And it’s easy for us to do that in life. What is God doing right now? You know, is He not paying attention to the things that are going on right now? Is He not thinking? Is He not watching me coach on the opposite line?

And here’s the deal. We will coach our lives if given the opportunity, rather than submit to the Lord as the One who is most wise in the game. And then we have to remember that everything that’s done is holy, is for His good purposes, His good ends. And so those three words, when it comes to the providence of God, are absolutely, vitally important.

We have to remember that the scorching wind was not only scorching for Jonah, but for other people. We have to remember that the storm that was on the sea was not just there for Jonah, but it affected the sailors. It affected people who got themselves thrown over into the sea. You know, it had an effect on other people.

But God creates and cares. Psalm 55:22:

*“Cast your cares on the LORD,
And He will sustain you.”*

Peter takes this up and says, *“Cast all of your anxieties on the Lord, for He cares for you.”* Matthew 10:28-31.

Transcriber’s Note: Matthew 10:28-31, NKJV. *“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from Your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”*

Jeff: The hairs of your head are numbered. And not a sparrow falls from the sky apart from the will of the Father.

Jonah 4.”Should I not have compassion on the things I made?” Do you get the idea that this is the kind of God we have? And God is consistent with His dealings with men. Look at Jonah 4. Jonah says, *“This is why I fled.”* Why? Remember what I said the last time? Jonah said, “You’re not faithful to who You are.” He said, “You’re not faithful to justice. You are a God who is just, and You’re not faithful to justice.” That’s what we gather from that.

But look at Malachi. Malachi accuses God not of ambivalence, but outright change. Remember this? Malachi 3:7. Israel said of God, *“Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them.”* They actually went a step further than

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Jonah. Jonah just said, “God, You stop short of who You are.” Israel said, “God, You delight in evil.”

And remember what God said? God said in Malachi 3:6, “*For I the LORD do not change.*” In other words, I do not do the very thing you’re accusing Me of doing. Scripture is very clear. God is immutable.

What do we make of our text? Well, let’s look at *the language of revelation*. I want to get to this. We have to say in some sense that there is a mystery at work here. But before we say there’s a mystery, we’ve got to do a little work to get to that point. In other words, it’s too much of a copout to say, “That’s a mystery. We’re not going to go there.” We’ve got to do some work. We’ve got to engage a little bit of the text. We’ve got to engage theology. We’ve got to work in order to get there. So let’s get there.

First of all, I want you to notice *the message of Jonah*. They were to be overthrown. Now remember that *overthrown* has a dual meaning. It was either a reflexive meaning, that they will overthrow themselves, or that it was passive, that they were being overthrown. Remember that? “In forty days you will be overthrown.” In other words, you will, through repentance, overthrow yourselves, or you will do nothing and God will overthrow you. It will be a passive fulfillment.

Now from the Ninevite perspective, they had a choice to make. Are we going to overturn ourselves through repentance? But I want you to know something. From God’s perspective the decision was already decided. But I want you to get this. *It’s for God to know the future and for us to live in the present*. In other words, God knows exactly what’s going to happen in the future. We already know that; we’ve already established that.

See, here’s the deal. We will oftentimes deal with these conundrums just in order to say, well, I don’t have to deal with the present. But the whole point is is that the present is for us to deal with. So there’s no divining that needs to be done. In other words, the Ninevites don’t need to say, “Well, let’s sit down and think.” Did they call an assembly? Did the Ninevites call an assembly and say, “Now listen. We’ve got to ask ourselves. Does God know the decision that we’re going to make before we make it?”

Well, of course He does. But did the Ninevites sit down and ask that question? Was that on their hearts and minds? Or did they say, “Hey, we need to repent, or not repent?” That’s the question at hand. That was the question at hand. They didn’t create a theological assembly and say, “Now does God know this, or does He not know what we’re going to do?” Do you see the difference?

So there’s no divining that’s needed. There’s just deciding that’s needed. The issue for Nineveh is *sin*, and how you are going to deal with it. Are you going to repent of it, or are you not?

Now let’s pause for just a second. I want you to see something. 1 Samuel chapter 15. Saul is not faithful. This is what God says. “*I regret that I have made Saul king.*” “I regret.” “I repent.” It’s the same word that’s used in Jonah 3. “I regret, I repent. I wish I hadn’t made Saul king.” The same word. There’s an apparent change.

But now look at 1 Samuel 15:29, the same chapter. God says, “*And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind, for He is not a man, that He should change His*

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mind.” In other words, in the same chapter it says that God changes, and then God says, “I don’t change.”

Now I want you to think about this for a minute. How do we understand that? First of all, the first comes in a story that’s descriptive. In other words, God is telling us through the unfolding of events how He feels about a certain situation that is coming to pass. “I repent that I made Saul king.” Why? Because this is what he has done.

But when God steps back and says, “Now let Me tell you. Let Me teach you something about Myself so that you understand this narrative,” He then says, “I am God. I do not lie or change my mind like a man.” In other words, He’s saying that you need to think of this narrative not in light of yourselves as people, but in light of who I am as God.

And once we understand that, we understand that it’s the same text. But is there a different message? The answer is no. God does not repent like a man. He doesn’t change His mind like we do.

In other words, what is God doing then? God is lipping. He’s trying to help us to understand what it is like for Him to look upon this situation and be angry with sin. In other words, He is angry with sin and so says to us something that we would understand, right? It’s accommodating language. It’s language spoken for us and into our situation so that we can grasp it. Uh-oh! God doesn’t like this! But then I read this didactic section where I read that God is not a man and does not change His mind. And therefore God is sovereign and knows the end from the beginning. But He’s communicating to me His displeasure in this situation.

Brave Man: Right.

Jeff: Okay? So it’s accommodative language.

It’s sort of like this. Let me give you this illustration. This is a good illustration. R. C. Sproul gives this illustration. He says this. When you think about good, good is used in different ways, right? Good is used in different ways. If I say that my dog is good, what do I mean?

Brave Man: He’s obedient.

Jeff: I mean that he’s obedient. He brings me my paper in the morning and he fetches my slippers. If I say that God is good, is that what I mean about God? (*Laughter*) That God brings me my paper and fetches my slippers? Obviously not, right? So we have accommodating language in our own speech And God is using accommodative language in order to help us to understand something in an accommodative way. So there are things to remember about God. Yes?

Ted: My dog is good because he fetches my slippers and brings me the paper. And in the prosperity gospel God is good because He fetches my slippers and brings me the paper. (*Laughter*) God is good all the time.

Jeff: That’s good. Does anybody have anything else? No? So I want you to see this. So basically what we’re saying is this. Let me round this out like this. If we look at the character of God from the teaching passages of Scripture and from the narratives, we understand that God knows the end from the beginning. He’s sovereign and in control. He providentially superintends all things.

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We also know that the language of Scripture helps us in two ways. First of all, it describes situations and God’s involvement in them. And it tells us, for instance, that God is displeased with this situation to the extent that He actually repents of it. But then it teaches us how we should understand God and His character in these situations, that is, that He is not like man. He doesn’t change His mind on a whim. He is sovereign and immutable in His decrees.

So let me round that out, things to remember. *God is God*. Any time you look at Scripture you have to remember who God is from those teaching, didactic portions of Scripture. You need to remember that *God governs all things*, because He is the sort of God who does govern. And *in His governing He cares for people*. Jonah again teaches us this.

We also remember this. *Along the way God uses Jonah to direct us to Christ*. And so the Old Testament foreshadows Christ. And in Christ we see the fullness of God’s care. We see God’s care in the Old Testament in different ways. But in Christ we see the fullness of His care. That’s all I have. So do you have any questions about that? Don?

Don: I think what bothers a lot of people is that we have to remember Isaiah 55:9, where God says, “*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways.*” People will say, “Why did God ordain it like that? Couldn’t He have just stopped Adam from sinning and getting us into this mess of suffering and everything like that?” Well, I thought that a former pastor of mine said it very well. He said, “God ordains what He hates”—that is, sin—“to bring about what He loves,”—salvation. And I think we have to remember that as horrible as suffering is, God entered into suffering through the Incarnation of Christ. So it’s not like He doesn’t know what it’s like.

Jeff: Yes.

Don: So we need to remember that. We wouldn’t be able to see the fullness of God’s attributes if He had done it another way.

Jeff: Let me say this to you too, though. I think we have to keep in mind that when we think about Satan pre-fall, and when we think about Adam pre-fall, we need to think about them in different categories than we do ourselves, because if there is any example of what we could call a libertarian freedom,— Now remember what a libertarian freedom is. It’s the freedom to choose to the contrary.

So put Adam in the situation in the garden. He’s got the tree in front of him. God says, “Don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Adam through Eve eats.

Now let’s rewind the tape, right? Put Adam in the same situation. And then the question is, could Adam have made the contrary choice? Could he have said, “I’m not going to eat, and neither is Eve?”

And the answer has to be yes. Not from God’s perspective; God obviously knows the end from the beginning. But from our perspective Adam did not have a sin nature that was giving him the propensity to sin. He was holy and righteous. He could have chosen to sin, or he could have chosen not to sin. So if there is any form of libertarian-style free will, it’s in Adam.

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But now with us, because there's Adam's original sin which leads to original pollution, which leads to total depravity, the pervasiveness of Adam's sin, which leads to total inability, now I can only choose what I desire most. And that's freedom.

You say, “Now wait a minute. If the Scriptures say that no one seeks after God, and that we're dead in our sins, are you saying that we will always choose opposite God?” And I would say to you, yes, because that's what I desire most. I desire self most. I desire something other than God most. So I will always choose other than God. Why? Because sin has affected me to that degree.

You say to me, “Well, does that mean that I'm as sinful as I possibly could be?” No, that's not what we're saying at all. Total inability has to do with choosing God. Total depravity has to do with the pervasiveness of sin. In other words, it affects my entire life, but not to the same degree. In other words, everybody's not a Charlie Manson. There are actually some unbelievers who are faithful to their wives, right? So it's the pervasiveness of sin, but not to the same degree. But I'll always choose what I desire most, and what I desire most is not God. And so that's how we think about the freedom aspect. Yes?

Brian: Are you talking pre-salvation or post-salvation?

Jeff: Well, I'm talking now post-fall. Somebody that's in Christ now has been effectually called, regenerated, and now he's exercising faith. So now they can choose to sin or choose not to sin.

Brian: What you're talking about with your example right there is actually talking about the same thing. I'll call this pre-justification and post-justification. I now have a choice.

Jeff: That's right. It's the fourfold state of man. Prior to the Fall, choose to sin, choose not to sin. After the Fall but before Christ, I can only sin. After Christ I can choose to sin or not sin. In glorification I can only choose the good. It's the fourfold state of man. Anybody else? Go ahead.

Bill: A week or so ago we went through the verse that says that repentance is a gift of God.

Jeff: That's right.

Bill: When we look at the story of Jonah, we see him walking through Nineveh. He comes to the king. Normally, what would the king do? He would scream, “Put this guy in the psycho ward and put him in jail.” But because repentance is a gift of God, he came repenting.

Jeff: That's right. All right, so here's the deal. I think I've decided what we're going to do for the next time and for the next several weeks. But I am open today for a short time only for requests. *(Laughter)* So if you have something that you really want to hear, we may do it, we may not. But I am open to any requests. So let's pray now and then we'll adjourn.

Father, thank You for this day and for the time You've given us to be together. Thank You, Lord, for the prophet Jonah, and for the work that You did in His life, and for the work done in the lives of the Ninevites. Lord, we pray and give You thanks for this same work of redemption as we have it in Christ now. And Lord, we pray that You will bless us today, helping us to go forth into the workplace, into our homes and into society, bringing

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forth Christ, that people might have the same reflexive response, that they might overturn themselves and turn to the living God, for we ask it in Christ’s name. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen. (*Applause*)