

An exposition of

THE BOOK OF JONAH

***Out of the Belly of a Great Fish,
Into the Heart of a Great God.***

By Jim D. Gables

THE AUTHOR'S INDEBTEDNESS

In addition to my own thoughts on the book, I wish to acknowledge the helps that I have gleaned from the following authors:

J. Sidlow Baxter - *Explore The Book*
John Calvin - *Commentary on Jonah*
John Gill - *Commentary on Jonah*
Matthew Henry - *Commentary on Jonah*
Hugh Martin - *The Prophet Jonah*
James Orr - *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
E. B. Pusey - *Minor Prophets.*

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Chapter Two

JONAH'S COMMISSION

Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise and go to Ninevah, that great city and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me." Jonah 1:1-2

Jonah's Commission from God was a very brief and simple commission. ***"The word of the Lord came to Jonah saying, 'Arise.'"*** In other words, immediately ***"go to Ninevah and cry out against it."*** Then the reason is given, ***"for their wickedness has come up before me."*** Let us examine two aspects of this commission. First, the commission is rooted and grounded in God's sovereignty, and secondly, it is a display of God's righteousness.

First, this commission is a sovereign command or the Word of the Lord not to be questioned or dealt with in a [lighthearted] manner. The king is speaking, and the servant must obey the commands of the king. God's command is a brief, precise, non-negotiable imperative. However, there are no explanations accompanying it. He gives no details or predictions of what the outcome will be. It is a very sudden and abrupt summons to duty. Look at how the prophet Daniel describes the sovereign God who issues a command:

"All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; and He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Daniel 4:35).

The person who has the command issued to him is expected to obey. God's sovereignty holds us all morally responsible before Him. It is not the degree of our ability or inability, it is the command of God that holds us morally accountable before God. If God wasn't absolutely sovereign, then we would not be absolutely responsible for our conduct.

In this commission, Jonah was not given a vision like Isaiah's vision when he was called to be a prophet of God. Let us see how God approached Isaiah in Isaiah 6:1-12.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.

Look at the effect of this vision:

So I said, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And He touched my mouth with it and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged." Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I! Send me." And He said, "Go, and tell this people, keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed." Then I said, "Lord, how long?" And he answered, "Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant, the houses are without a man, the land is utterly desolate, the Lord has removed men far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land."

Usually, before a prophet is placed in a new and difficult position he is given a special visitation and preparation from God. Isaiah's commission was very difficult because the outcome would lead to a hardening rather than the conversion of the people. Before Isaiah was led to say, "***Here am I, send me,***" he was given a vision of the Lord high and lifted up in glory upon His throne. As a result, Isaiah was deeply humbled when he saw his own shortcomings. It was then that God restored peace to his soul by purifying his sin with the live coal from off the altar. Then, with a sense of the joy of free and full forgiveness, Isaiah was prepared to preach any message or perform any mission to people anywhere.

Jonah received no such vision to prepare him for his task. Furthermore, he had no

private conference with the Lord like Jeremiah did when God commissioned Jeremiah as His prophet in Jeremiah 1:4-10.

Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; and before you were born, I sanctified you, I ordained you a prophet to the nations." Then said I, "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak; for I am a youth." But the Lord said to me; "Do not say I am a youth; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces; for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." Then the Lord put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said unto me, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant."

Jeremiah's commission is accompanied by two brief visions of an almond rod that was budding and a boiling pot. In these visions God explained to Jeremiah the certainty of His purpose and revealed that the outcome would not be thwarted, but would blossom. Also, Jeremiah is given another advantage. He was exposed to a personal, intimate, private conversation with God in which the Lord related to him as a father rather than that of a king as he did to Isaiah. This was designed to remove Jeremiah's fear in facing the difficult task that lay ahead of him. Isaiah had a glorious vision given to him before he was sent forth to preach. Jeremiah was given a vision and called into a private conference wherein God assured him of His presence and guidance as he obeyed God's purpose and plan for his life. Jonah was given no such vision or had no such conference with God. Instead, Jonah only received a brief, imperative command to ***"Arise, go to Nineveh, cry against it."*** There is neither a vision to illustrate the command nor an explanation by word of mouth. It is simply, "do it." Sometimes God expects implicit, unquestionable submission on the part of His people. He may give no explanation, but just a command to do it. A little child may question an unexplained command from his father by "why, why?" The father answers, "because I am the father and you are the child." There are times in which God expects implicit obedience from us with no questions asked. This was a definite trial to Jonah's faith. Likewise, this experience of Jonah's in his commission or his call is not uncommon to the lot of God's people. The life of a believer is a life of obedience and discipline to duty. There are times when God comes to us as our king and opens doors that only His omnipotent power can do. There are other times when as our

Father, He expresses His love for us and reveals His nearness to us. Those are marvelous times, but there are also times when He sovereignly deals with us in a way that calls for us to respond with immediate submission, without question and without explanation. As an absolute Sovereign, He has an absolute right to demand this kind of obedience. We have a perfect illustration of this in the life of the patriarch Job. Job ultimately cursed the day of his birth and wished that he had never been born. From the very outset to the end of his life of suffering, God neither forewarned him of what was about to happen nor did He ever give Job one word of explanation about the meaning of the entire episode. He did not tell him in advance what was going to happen to him, and after it was over, we have no evidence in scripture that He ever explained the meaning to him. Likewise, we may experience circumstances of physical and emotional despair in our lives. We may not experience the loving arms of God as our Father, or we may not have the power of God as our King, but we will be dealing directly with an absolute Sovereign God who says "bow, submit and obey."

The only explanation that Job ever received from God was (and I paraphrase it like this), "I am God, trust me, submit. I do not have to give a reason for my actions." Job later acknowledged that he had come to see God in a new dimension and understood God better than he understood Him before. In Job 42:5 he said, "***I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye sees You.***" He was now seeing God, not as a King or as a Father, but as a Sovereign. Have you ever been brought to a point in your life where you have been shut up unto God's sovereignty? Have you asked "why?" and there is no answer? It is times like this when you just have to hear the words from God, "I am God, you are the creature - trust and submit."

Again, God sometimes may touch the very core of your most sensitive feelings. You may feel that your heart is being torn out of you, like the time when God said to Abraham, "***Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.***" (Genesis 22:2). Is that just a Bible story to you, or do you sense the reality of that command? If the death of your son

commanded by God in the form of a sacrifice would not tear your heart out, I do not know what would. What is our refuge or the source of our strength in such an hour? It can only be the very character of our God who says, **"Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God, I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."** (Isaiah 41:10). We sing the song, *"Be not dismayed what e're betide, God will take care of you."* God in His sovereignty may shut you up unto a painful, physical situation, and He seems at times to be pulling your very heart out emotionally. When you pray, there is no answer. The preacher cannot help, and you can find no answer in the Bible. The prayer meeting does not give any relief, so where do you go? You must go to the very character of the God who is sovereign and who says, **"Be not dismayed, for I am your God."** Sometimes we find comfort from God as a Father or from God as a King, but have you ever reached the stage in your life where you, with Job, receive a higher understanding of God whereby you can take consolation in His sovereignty, and though He even slays you, yet you can trust Him? If you have not reached that point yet, be aware there may be something on the horizon to bring that about in your life.

Let us now look at the second aspect of Jonah's commission. It is not only a sovereign commission, but it is a righteous commission. This thing that God told Jonah to do was not only a sovereign thing, but it was a right thing. This is seen in the words, **"for their wickedness is come up before me."** God's explanation as to why He is going to destroy the city of Ninevah is that they are a wicked city. They are guilty and deserve to be destroyed. It is not only a sovereign command; it is a righteous command. He is going to demonstrate that His plan was not made haphazardly or arbitrarily. Ninevah's wickedness had been building for centuries, and the time had come that God must deal with it.

The command God gave to Jonah has its foundation in perfect rectitude or righteousness. We are now going to deal with an issue that is important, but yet it involves some thought. While the command to Jonah was sovereign, it was not an arbitrary sovereignty. What is meant by the word arbitrary? Arbitrary is defined by Webster's original dictionary as, *"depending on will or discretion; not governed by any fixed rule."* In other words, an arbitrary decision is brought about by a person's own

will without the consideration of any rules. Now in contrast to the word "arbitrary," I have used the word "rectitude." We do not use that word much in our vocabulary today unless you are in a court of law. That word is defined by Webster as, "*righteousness, a principle or practice, exact conformity to truth or to the rules prescribed for moral conduct.*" The question we are raising here is whether God can and does act in any way that is contrary to His own moral nature or Being? Could God lie if He wanted to or willed to? There is an answer to that in Titus 1:2, **"In hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began."** The Bible says He cannot lie. God cannot will to tell a lie. He cannot do that which is contrary to His nature or Being. Perhaps, it could be expressed in another way that has been discussed among Bible teachers. Is something morally right because God commands it, or does He command it because it is morally right? We have two views here. There are those who hold that something is morally right because God commands it, and they say it is necessary to hold to that in order for God to maintain His sovereignty. That is, God is above His own moral laws. He is not governed by anything outside of Himself or within Himself. He is entirely independent of all moral considerations. It comes down to the concept - "might makes right," or, in other words, something is right because God says it is. On the other hand, those who hold that God commands something because it is morally right, say that this is necessary in order for God to maintain His moral Being in righteousness and holiness. That is, if God lied, He would cease to be a moral Being of righteousness and holiness. Which of these is true? There are great Bible teachers who hold to both sides of the issue. Those who wish to exalt God's sovereignty say that God's will cannot be governed by any laws outside of Himself, and those who desire to exalt God's moral Being reply that God's standards of moral conduct are an expression of His very Being and are never viewed as being outside of Himself. That is, if God is a moral Being and He lays down moral laws such as "thou shall not" or "thou shall do this," that is not a law outside of Himself, but is an expression of His very moral character. This position asserts that it is improper to drive a wedge between the will of God and His very nature. My own view on the matter is that those who wish to ascribe absolute free will to God in an effort to exalt the sovereignty of God and then ascribe God free will in a manner disconnected from His moral character, make the same mistake of those

who seek to defend the theory of the free will of man.

At this point it becomes necessary to give a brief explanation of the theory of the free will of man. It is the most popular view that is taught in today's religious world. This position acknowledges that man's nature is sinful and fallen, but it maintains that man's will is independent of and sovereign over his nature. It is believed that at any time the sinner can supposedly do that which may be contrary to his nature by an act of the will. His will is independent of his mind, his heart and his desires; therefore, at any time and all the time man has absolute free will. He is sovereign and independent of his very being. On the contrary, the teachers of sovereign grace are very quick to point out that man's will is not an independent part of his nature, but it is governed by his nature. Our will may desire to eat steak because our taste buds (nature) determine that. Our tastes are determined by our nature, not vice versa. But the same sovereign grace teachers who will refuse the idea of man's free will being independent of his nature, will turn right around and make a fatal mistake by ascribing that God is independent of His own nature and that something is made right by the very might of God willing it to be so. Inconsistency is everywhere. In summary, God's will is not independent of His nature anymore than your will is independent of your nature. If your nature is holy you will choose that which is holy. If your nature is sinful and depraved, you will choose that which is unholy and sinful. God is absolutely holy and His will is an expression of His holy character. It is not, "might makes right." God commands something because it IS right and His moral character has determined that it is such. I am making that issue because I have to deal not only with error in the Arminian camp, but I also have to deal with error in the hyper-Calvinist camp as well, those who say God is governed by nothing but His will. I do not believe that is taught in the Word of God, but must the issue be left in the realm of philosophical speculation or is it addressed in the special revelation of God found in the Bible? I am happy to say there is something in the Bible that addresses this issue.

Let us look at the historical account of God's announcement of His intention to destroy the cities of the plain, Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham's nephew Lot was living in one of those cities. When God revealed to Abraham of His intention, Abraham begins to

intercede on behalf of the cities asking God not to destroy them. Look at the conversation in Genesis 18:16:-25:

Then the men rose from there and looked toward Sodom, and Abraham went with them to send them on the way. And the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?" And the Lord said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, [Compare that with our text in Jonah.] The cry is come up before me. I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to Me, and if not, I will know." Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom; but Abraham still stood before the Lord. [That is, he begins to intercede.] And Abraham came near and said, "Would you also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city, would you also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked; so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

In essence, Abraham is saying, "Lord, you are out of character. It is not your character to act this way." Then he asked the same question that we have been discussing: ***"Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"*** There is an answer to this question that is not just founded in philosophical speculation but in biblical revelation. The question is, does God's command of something make it right or does God command something because it is right? Look on in Genesis 18:

So the Lord said, "If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes." Then Abraham answered and said, "Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: Suppose there were five less than the fifty righteous; would You destroy all of the city for lack of five?" So He said, "If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy it." And he spoke to Him yet again and said, "Suppose

there should be forty found there?" So He said, "I will not do it for the sake of forth." Then he said, "Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak; Suppose thirty should be found there?" So He said, "I will not do it if I find thirty there." And he said, "Indeed now, I have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord: Suppose twenty should be found there?" So He said, "I will not destroy it for the sake of twenty." Then he said, "Let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but once more: Suppose ten should be found there?" And He said, "I will not destroy it for the sake of ten."

Now look at the last verse: ***"So the Lord went His way, as soon as He had finished communing with Abraham."*** God did not get angry. He called it communing together. This event is similar to the way God is dealing with the city of Nineveh in our present study. Upon hearing about God's intended purpose to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and out of a concern for the safety of his nephew, Lot, Abraham raises the question in verse 25, ***"Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"*** This question is the same as that which we have been discussing in Jonah. In II Chronicles 20:7: Abraham is called the friend of God. A friend is someone with whom you are intimately acquainted. Abraham raised his question to God, his friend, and God said "Abraham is my friend." God had made Himself known and revealed to Abraham what He was like. Abraham then raised the question, "But Lord, it is not like You to do what you are going to do to Sodom and Gomorrah. It is not like You to punish the innocent along with the guilty. You are out of character here." How does God respond to His friend's question? Does He say, "Now Abraham, if it is My will to destroy some innocent people along with some guilty people, that is my right and none of your business. Now don't insult my sovereignty anymore." Is that how God replies to Abraham? On the contrary, God listens in patience and condescension as Abraham pleads his case for sparing Sodom and Gomorrah. Why is God so patient and not offended with his friend? It is because Abraham is pleading the very character of God that had been revealed to him. In fact, God so enjoyed the whole conversation that He describes it as a ***"communing with Abraham."*** Now observe how God condescends in speaking after the manner of men in what is called an anthropomorphism. He vindicates his purpose in destroying the cities. We read, ***"And***

the Lord said, 'because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grave, I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come unto Me; and if not, I will know.'" (Genesis 18:20,21). Now, God knows all things and does not need to investigate anything, so God did not have to leave heaven and go down to earth to see how sinful the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were. That is not the God of the Bible. However, He is speaking in language as if He is that way. Why does God condescend to speak to us in such human language? He does so in order to express his righteous justice in an emphatic fashion, and He clothes Himself as if He were an earthly magistrate or judge who will not pronounce a verdict on hearsay evidence alone, but will personally investigate the case to satisfy Himself before He pronounces sentence. It is a case of judicial procedure for the judge to become satisfied of the guilt before he proceeds to execute his purpose. What is God teaching us in this Genesis passage? God is not submitting His actions for the approval of man based upon human standards of right or wrong. We cannot argue with God based upon our standards of right and wrong. God is vindicating His actions before his intimate friend Abraham by affirming that whatever He does, it will always be consistent with His moral character. Similar language is used in Genesis chapter 6 regarding the flood of Noah, in Genesis chapter 11 with the tower of Babel, and in several other passages of scripture. In this particular instance, God has very carefully explained to Abraham that whatever action He takes, it will always be consistent with the revelation of his moral character. Therefore, it is not that "might makes right," but God commands something because it is right. It is just not his despotic command that makes it right. Do you understand the difference? The eighteenth chapter of Genesis establishes God's condescension to Abraham to make sure He gets this understanding of His actions across to His intimate people. Do you consider yourself one of God's intimate friends who desires to know and understand the character of God? The character of the God of the Bible is that the Judge of the earth will always do right. Therefore, when you are hurting and aching, and your fallen humanity begins to question God's character, you need to remember the Judge of the earth is doing right. If you are living in pain in a fallen world, remember that is the characteristic of living under the curse. It is part of it. When you think you can bear no more physical or

psychological pain, just be thankful you are not in hell. God has spared you from that. The God of the earth will do right.

Finally, what lessons can we learn from Jonah's commission? Jonah's commission to evangelize the Ninevites was established on a twofold basis: (1) the sovereign command of God, and (2) the sinful guilt of men.

The sovereign command of God is the basis of evangelism. Why should we share the message of God with others -- because God commands it. I am forever being asked the question, "If you believe in election and predestination, why do you preach?" My answer is, "I preach because the sovereignty of God commands it." Jesus said to **"go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."** (Mark 16:15). That is a sovereign command, and I cannot argue with it. I am not to try to rationalize that these people cannot hear and cannot understand. I am to preach anyway because God commands it. Likewise, you are to share the gospel with your neighbors even when they show no interest because God tells you to. That is the reason. Now if you find yourself being critical of Jonah getting out of the will of God, ask yourself this question, "Am I being obedient to the commanded sovereign will of God in evangelizing and sharing the truth with others, or am I running from God like Jonah and thumbing my nose at God's sovereign command to share Christ with my fellow men?" Are we being faithful in obeying the command of God, or are we trying to hide behind the doctrine of God's sovereign election? Jonah was responsible to preach because God commanded him to do so. As Christians, you and I are responsible to confront men and women, boys and girls with the sovereign character of the God of the Bible. That is the first lesson that we can learn.

The second lesson is that Jonah's responsibility to evangelize the Ninevites was established on the basis of the sinful guilt of men. God said, **"Their wickedness has come up before me."** Men ought to be confronted with the truth of God because they are guilty. They are sinful and they ought to be told that. They ought to be confronted with the fact that they do not love God with all their heart, mind and soul and their neighbor as themselves. I must be able to tell my friends and neighbors that

they are guilty rebellious sinners. That is the basis for evangelism. There are no innocent people out here. They are all guilty. God's word tells us they are all on the way to hell. If you do not believe this truth, you are denying the Christian faith, the Bible, the church, and the testimony of Jesus Christ. You cannot call yourself a Christian and deny that men are lost and on their way to hell. **"Jesus said, 'I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.'"** (Matthew 9:13) He came to call all these people around us, our loved ones and our children. If they are not sinners, then you might be set free from your responsibility to tell them where they stand before a holy God. But they are guilty and God declares it. He has investigated the whole case as he speaks on human terms. **"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** (Romans 3:23) The scriptures declare, **"There is none who does good, no not one."** (Romans 3:12) The sinful guilt of man is the basis of evangelism. The sovereign command of God and the sinful guilt of man make us accountable to God to evangelize. There is a segment of the reformed camp that believes we are only responsible to preach the gospel to the elect because only they are going to be saved. They say we can know who the elect are because they are the only ones who are "sensible to their sin and are showing an interest in the gospel." Is that what Jonah was told to do? Did God tell Jonah to go to Nineveh, but before he preaches, he should make sure he has a bunch of interested ones. If the rest of them are not interested don't you deal with them; they are not elect, let them alone. Is that what Jonah was told to do? No, Jonah, you go and preach repent, repent, repent. Tell them that the city has forty days yet to live. We do not just seek out qualified sinners, but are responsible to preach the message of the gospel to all sinners. And since my God tells me that everybody is a sinner, then everybody is a candidate for me to talk to. That is the lesson we need to learn from Jonah's commission. It is a sovereign commission, but it is a right commission, rooted in the moral character of God as holy and rooted in the sinful character of men who are wicked. Evangelize, evangelize, evangelize. Jonah, go to Nineveh, arise, put away that which you are presently assigned to do and go do the task that I have assigned you. All of us are Jonahs in representing God in this fallen world.