

## My Will or God's Will?

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus famously prayed *Father, not my will but thine be done*. Over the years, I've heard more than one person repeat those words. However, I've come to understand it's one thing to aspire to that level of devotion and surrender to God in the abstract and another thing to face it in real life. The truth is we often find ourselves in situations where the surrender of our will to God's will is incredibly difficult. The specific reasons may differ, but I imagine there are areas in each of our lives where, at some point, we find our faith, our obedience, and our surrender to God's will is painfully tested.

What difficult things has God asked of you? In a little book on Jonah titled *Man Overboard*, Sinclair Ferguson comments on the commission God gave Jonah in **Jonah 1:1**, *"We might wonder whether God was deliberately shining the spotlight of his word into an area of Jonah's life that had never been put to the test before, exposing a nerve, and then touching it to discover what response there might be. God's word has a way of doing that kind of thing."* That happens with Jonah and us. It's part of what makes the book so helpful if we're willing to recognize at least something of our own willfulness in this wayward prophet. ***What Jonah teaches us from the very beginning is that it is foolish to run away from even the most demanding assignment from God. When God calls us to do something, the only way to go forward is to trust and obey.***

Look at **Jonah 1:1-2**: *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup>"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." At the very beginning of the story, Jonah tells us,*

### **I. SOMETIMES YOUR FAITH IN GOD WILL BE SERIOUSLY TESTED BY GOD.**

***Sometimes God tests us directly.*** **Romans 8** says, In this present time, we wait for the day when God will make all things new. Until then, we often experience hardship and heartache. Sometimes, our faith is tested by the things God allows as he providentially governs a broken world. But what happens in many places in Scripture is a bit different in that sometimes God very directly brings a specific test into our lives.

The Word of the Lord comes, and with it, there comes an assignment, a command, and we just want to say “no” to God.

***Sometimes, our problem is not that we don't understand but rather that we do.*** I know sometimes we're not sure what God wants us to do in a situation. That's not the case here, and it's often not the case with us. Sometimes God's word is clear but it seems too hard, and maybe makes no sense to us. If you find yourself in a situation like that today, you've got to understand this is not some unusual thing. It happens all through Scripture. Faith gets tested by God himself.

*And think about it: every test, to be a test, and to accomplish the purpose of a test, whether to deepen faith, demonstrate faith, or glorify God, has to challenge us, or else it's just not a test. So,*

**A. No matter what you've done or experienced in the past, new challenges can test you in new ways.**

This same Jonah, son of Ammitai is mentioned in **2 Kings 14:25**. Jonah was a prophet. God used Jonah during the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel to prophesy that God was going to care for his people and restore the borders of their country even though they had been sinful toward God and did not deserve his care. Just as God said, those promises were fulfilled. So, Jonah knew God was real, and his word was true, but now, God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, and he runs away from God and his calling. Why are we told this? **1 Corinthians 10:11-12**, speaking about the Old Testament believers and their stories, gives one reason! *Now, these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.* <sup>12</sup> *Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.* It is good to remember that new seasons and situations bring new tests.

*And it is important to know and remember this:*

**B. The reality of the love of God is not contradicted by the severity of the tests of God.**

**Jonah 1:2** says, “*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.*” The Bible says we are all sinners, but when the Bible says there is a particular place and people where the wickedness has come up before God like a stink, you know that's not a place you would normally want to go. Nineveh was well known as a powerful city center that was a historic enemy of

Israel. The Assyrians boasted of how they tortured their enemies. They celebrated their barbarity in their culture and artwork!

Imagine you're a pastor in Ukraine, and God calls you to go to Red Square and preach repentance because God is displeased with Vladimir Putin, his abuse of power, his war of aggression, and all the Russians who support him. Your assignment is to herald God's judgment. What God commanded Jonah to do was, on the face of it, undeniably difficult and kind of crazy. But that's the point sometimes God's assignments will be like that or seem like that to us all.

Last week, we looked at the theme of the book of Jonah as being a revelation of the steadfast love of God. That's the consensus of scholarly study of the book of Jonah. And precisely because that is at the heart of its message, it's important for us to see that the nature of the love of God is very different than what modern people might think.

***God's love is not an unconditional affirmation of what we want.***

There's a highly influential stream of thinking in our culture today that only recognizes love as that which is affirming of who we are, what we want, and how we feel. I read a study some time ago that talked about how students going for higher education in previous generations wanted the institutions of higher education to shape them into the kind of men and women that they hoped to become. But in recent surveys, the students don't want to be shaped. They want to be affirmed.

There's a sense in which we can say God loves without conditions because God is love, but in this context, maybe a better way to describe the love of God is God's love as *contra conditional* - contra conditional - he loves you as you are, but his love will not simply affirm you as you are. He wants to shape all of us so that we become, in the New Testament language, *conformed to the image of his son Jesus Christ*, which means conformed to God's plan for human flourishing.

Whenever what God calls you to do or become or how God calls you to respond creates within you a crisis because of an inner conflict. You are called to surrender to God's will, not because he is less loving and your arms are too short to box with God but because he, who is love, is also all-knowing and holy and good, and we have to trust and obey.

Parents who love their children want to teach their children to obey them, especially when they're very young because they don't have the

wisdom that they need to navigate well. They don't know the issues at stake, the dangers they might face, and it can't all be explained to them to their satisfaction.

There are so many stories in the Bible where people are called to do things that don't seem to make sense to them in the moment but prove to be part of God's larger plan and wisdom. Part of what we're called to demonstrate in this great spiritual battle that's playing out in human history and in our lives is that there are people who, by the grace of God, will trust him and obey him! If you and I only do that when it's easy or at least it's not *too hard*, when it makes perfect sense to us, when it's what we want also, then that's not really obedience and faith at all. There is an entire chapter in the Bible, **Hebrews 11**, that tells us it is precisely when we're asked to do things that are hard, that require faith, that faith shines most brightly, and obedience brings God the greatest glory and our relationship with God deepens and matures.

## **II. WHEN GOD TESTS OUR FAITH, THE IMPURITIES OF OUR HEARTS ARE REVEALED. IT IS GOOD FOR US TO FACE THEM.**

### **A. What we choose to do is far more revealing than what we claim we believe.**

There is artistry in Jonah. In this opening chapter, the author uses what is called a chiasmus. A chiasmus is a literary pattern based on the Greek letter chi, which looks like an X. Here's how it works in **Jonah chapter 1**: First, you have the introduction to the story in the beginning of the chapter (**verses 1-3**), then the build-up of the danger and the storm (**verses 4-8**), then at the center of the chapter Jonah speaks for the first time (**verse 9**), after that there is the action taken to quiet the storm (**verses 10-15**) and then a conclusion (**verse 16**). The point of this structure is to have everything lead up to and then flow from this first statement that Jonah makes. What does Jonah say? **Verse 9** *And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*

Scholars say that when Jonah's description of himself as a worshipper of the LORD is placed at the center of the story in the midst of the storm caused by his own sinful flight from God, we are supposed to notice the irony of his words compared to his actions and get the message. Saying the right things about God is good. Having the right response to God is far better. People who know who God is, who claim to belong to God, and who have truly experienced His grace are still

vulnerable to the temptation to resist his will. What God wants is for the inner and outer life to match, for our words and our actions to align.

**B. When the will of God confronts us with a test of faith, that test calls us to a deeper surrender to God.**

Think about it: there is no evidence Jonah was running to Tarshish to engage in open and reckless sinful indulgence. He just didn't want to trust and obey when it was hard. One of the particular lessons of Jonah is that a religious person can be blind to their own deep spiritual issues. ***The book of Jonah is in part about getting us, who are God's people, to face how much we also need to practice repentance over our stubborn willfulness.***

Throughout the book, you see the non-believers looking as good or better than the believers. Did you notice, as we read chapter one, how much more likable in some ways the sailors are to Jonah? They are presented in the story as pagans. They are not worshippers of the one true God. Their possessions, their ship and its cargo, and their very lives are at risk because of Jonah. When Jonah finally comes clean with them, they are polite. They ask him in **verse 11**, *What should we do to make the sea quiet down for us?* In **verse 12**, he says: *"Pick me up and hurl me into the sea."* Even at this point, Jonah isn't repenting. He could have simply repented and said to the Lord I'm so sorry. I'm willing to go. That would have been sufficient. Or, he could have jumped overboard. But he's so tied up in his own self-will that he'd rather make these other people do something that will weigh on their conscience than for him to surrender to the will of God.

And they don't want to do it. He says *hurl me into the sea*. **Verse 13** says: *They did not do that. Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.* They've already thrown all their cargo overboard, and they are willing to risk everything to save Jonah. He is the one who claims to know God, but he doesn't volunteer any information in the storm. He doesn't take up an oar or offer any help. They look pretty good. Jonah looks terrible in comparison. It's only when they are convinced that there is no other option that they throw Jonah into the sea and the hands of God. And then they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and worshipped him. Jonah had answers the

sailors didn't have. He knew what the sailors didn't know about God. But he wasn't a better or more worthy human being. Maybe he was too focused on the sins of others and too blind to and indifferent about his own willful pride.

***In Scripture the Holy Spirit often challenges God's people to not only discern correctly the sins and the culture but to also search deeply to uncover the sins in our own hearts.*** This week I read an interesting comparison between the message of Jonah and the first two chapters of the epistle to the Romans. In **Romans 1**, there is a detailed critique of the Pagan culture of the ancient world. In this context he condemns as sin many things Christians today in churches like ours also *rightly* identify as sinful: sexual immorality and specifically homosexuality is clearly identified as sinful and he highlights the fact that the culture not only indulges these sins but approves of those who practice these things. **Romans 1** ends with a crescendo of condemnation for sinful disorders of the ancient world. Then something important happens in **Romans 2** right when the religious people, who are a lot like Jonah, might be feeling that they're being vindicated he turns to them and confronts them with their sins. He says *you who pass judgment on someone else are condemning yourself because you who pass judgment do the same things.*

Now, it's easy, and it could be fatal to misunderstand the point he's not saying, so none of it matters. It's all the same. That's not the conclusion. His whole line of teaching leads to **Romans 3:9-10**, *What then? Are we Jews any better off? Not at all! For we have already charged that all, both Jews (like Jonah, who were outwardly moral and religious but too often blind to their own sins) and Greeks (like the Ninevites, who didn't even see sin as sin) are under sin as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one.* The conclusion is not to ignore open sin or call it by some other softer name. The conclusion is to heighten our awareness that we are all in need of a Savior! **Romans 3:23** says, *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* <sup>24</sup> *and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.* Later in the book of Romans, in a tremendously important verse, **Romans 12:1** says, *I urge you therefore by the mercies of God that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*

## CONCLUSION

God doesn't want you to live at peace in a spiritual Nineveh, and He doesn't want you to run from tough assignments to some Tarshish of your own creation. He wants you to trust and obey and stay close to Him and share his mission in this world and his purpose for your life. You can trust him because, as **Jonah 4:2** says, He is... *a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love....*

The same grace, compassion, and abounding love that sent Jonah to Nineveh sent Jesus to earth for you and me. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus clearly saw what God was calling him to do for your redemption and for mine. He agonized, but he said, *Father, not my will, but thine be done*. Our own sins are such an offense to God's goodness and justice that Jesus had to die on the cross, a perfect, holy sacrifice, to pay for our sins so that we could escape God's judgment and be saved through faith in Him. Be sure your faith is in him today. Come to him just the way you are. Trust him as your Savior and believe in his love in all things – even the hard things.

In a sermon on Jonah, Tim Keller recounted an old fairy tale about a wicked witch in the middle of the forest who had a magical but evil bed. Whenever a stranger came, she would invite him to sleep in this bed. It was the most comfortable bed you could imagine, but if you fell asleep in it when you woke up in the morning, while you would be completely alert and awake inside, your body would be turned into stone. The witch had a garden filled with these nightmare statues. There was a servant girl who understood what was happening, and a young man came to the house. He was offered the comfort of the bed, but she had compassion on him, so she got in the room and put all kinds of thorns and sticks and stones into the mattress that would make it impossible for him to get comfortable. Of course, he had a miserable night. You know how it is when you have a terrible night, you wake up in the morning and you're angry. You can hardly imagine how you're going to get through a whole day of work sleep-deprived. Well, he was like that. He got all grumpy and complained to her what a terrible place this was. As he left, *she thought the misery you know now bothers you because you can't compare it to the misery your comfort would have brought you. You don't understand those were thorns and stones and sticks of love that I placed there to save you from worse*. When the God of steadfast love gives us tough assignments to obey or to endure, we can trust there is a purpose even if we do not understand it. In the

assignment God gives, in the storm he brings into Jonah's life, in the strange fishy deliverance he prepares, there are loving intentions in everything God is doing. It's the same with you and me. Believe it.

**Amen.**

### **A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ**

God of grace and mercy, abounding in steadfast love, I confess today my need for saving grace. I have sometimes been immersed in wickedness like that of Nineveh and I have sometimes been self-willed like the wayward Prophet Jonah. I need a Savior and I know and admit it. And I am thankful that I have Savior in Jesus Christ who died and rose again for my redemption and reconciliation to you. I trust in him alone for my salvation and thank you for him. Amen.

### **A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal**

Heavenly Father deliver me from the shallowness that can clearly confess wonderful truths with my lips while withholding whole-hearted trust in and surrender to you as my Lord and Savior. When your assignments seem too much for me, too hard, hard to fulfill and hard to understand, help me to trust the love that you've so clearly revealed in the cross of Christ and the promised ultimate victory of your good purposes so clearly demonstrated in his resurrection. Amen