

The Sovereign Will of God and Our Response to It

The book of Jonah has a second great theme – the sovereignty of God and the response of man. Throughout the book there is the push-pull of God's will and man's will. Jonah gives us a live action view of the sovereignty of God working interchangeably with the will of man.

This is one of the deepest mysteries of the Christian life, indeed of life itself – how does a Sovereign God rule in a world filled with humans who have their own wills? The book of Jonah doesn't supply all the answers, but it suggests quite a few, and illustrates very clearly what we know from other Scriptures. Again, doing an overview, we'll answer these questions – is God really in control? Does man have a free will? What difference do our choices make? How do you know the will of God?

Let's begin with the question:

Is God really in control?

From chapter 1 to chapter 4, the book of Jonah answers with a resounding 'yes', God is completely in control. God rules His own creation with perfect power. One of the phrases you should notice in Jonah is the phrase 'The Lord had prepared'. The word *prepared* means appointed, allotted. It is something done beforehand by someone who is planning the outcome. A host prepares the menu, the ingredients, the meal itself, planning the outcome of a good meal. A hunter prepares and baits the trap beforehand, anticipating the outcome.

What things did God prepare?

(Jonah1:17) - A great fish. He is absolutely sovereign over the biggest of animals. Later we read in Jonah 2:10 – He spoke to the fish. Try to grasp the sovereignty of God in having this large sea creature swimming exactly near the boat, where God had pushed the boat through the winds. It reminds us of the coin Peter found in the mouth of the fish. God had total control over nature to achieve such things.

Jonah 4:6 – A plant. He is sovereign over all plant life, and even the rate of growth.

Jonah 4:7 – A worm. He is sovereign over insects, and that which affects the life of those plants.

Jonah 4:8 - An east wind. He is sovereign over the weather patterns. That east wind had to come out of somewhere – out of weather patterns far away from Jonah's location, so that it would arrive and blast Jonah at the precise time. For that matter, the great wind which whipped up the sea is clearly from God (Jonah1:4), and once Jonah is thrown into the ocean, it dies down immediately.

As if sovereignty over nature isn't enough, it is clear from the book of Jonah that God is sovereign over humans. Take the sailors in chapter 1. Would these idol-worshipping Gentiles be on a hunt for God? Were they earnestly inquiring into the God of Israel? No, but God sovereignly moved into their lives – allowing one rebellious prophet to board their particular ship. Then, as Proverbs 16:33 tells us, He controls the way the lot falls, making sure they know Jonah is the cause of their problems. As they question Jonah, they realise his God must be the true God. Reluctantly, they cast him into the sea, saving their own lives – a shadowy picture of substitution. As a result of that, they take vows – an Old Testament way of saying – they made commitments to Jehovah. God sovereignly moved in their lives.

Consider also Nineveh. A wicked, proud, ungodly city, that daily provoked God's wrath with its idolatry, cruelty and abominations. Nineveh was not reading the Law of Moses and seeking hard after God, but God chose to have mercy on them and have the truth preached to them. Jonah delivers a one line sermon, and the whole city repents. He certainly isn't a passionate, dynamic preacher, anxious for the salvation of his hearers – he just announces, 'Soon Nineveh will be

overthrown.' There isn't even a call to repent. And yet the whole city repents. Perhaps the greatest revival in history! What can you call this except a sovereign work of God?

And, most of all, think of Jonah. God tells Jonah to preach in Nineveh. That was His sovereign will. Instead of going east, he heads west. Jonah reasons, 'If I am as far from Nineveh physically as I can be, God cannot make me preach to them' – like the person who fears God will send them to the mission field, so they try to bury themselves in a career, or even do what Jonah did – change locations.

He then catches a ship going to Spain, the very edge of the known world then. But is God sovereign? Though He permits Jonah's flight, and permits Jonah to board a boat, He still reels Jonah in, when it suits Him. He sends a massive storm, and the boat is going nowhere. He makes sure they all find out it is Jonah's doing.

But now see the stubbornness of Jonah. What could Jonah have done at this point?

He could have repented. Instead, he chooses an assisted suicide. If you ask to be thrown overboard in the middle of the ocean, you are saying – kill me. The sailors know that, because they say 'Do not charge us with innocent blood, LORD.' Think of the utter hardness of Jonah's heart – if God has him cornered, he will rather die than obey. In fact, he desires death a few times in chapter 4.

So he is thrown into the sea, content to drown. He thinks He has outwitted God. The modern equivalent would be jumping off a skyscraper. But if God didn't want you to die, He would send an updraft to blow you into a window, or have your clothes catch on a railing and snag you, or even have a massive bird come out of nowhere and grab you. You are immortal until God is done with you. And He will not let Jonah commit suicide. He has the fish swallow him. He has the fish vomit him on shore. Did God ultimately have his way with Jonah? Yes.

Proverbs 16:9 *A man's heart plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.*

Proverbs 19:21 *There are many plans in a man's heart, Nevertheless the LORD's counsel -- that will stand.*

Proverbs 21:1 *The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.*

But, parallel to this truth, we have Jonah disobeying God's will. Jonah clearly isn't a robot. He isn't a puppet whose strings God is pulling. He has his own will.

So we come to the second question this book answers:

What about free will?

What about the choices we get to make? Are they real? Are they free?

Now when you talk about something like free will you have to be careful to explain what you mean by that term. If you and I are both using the term 'good music' and what you mean is Michael Jackson, and what I mean is Bach, we are going to talk past each other, because we are using the same term, but meaning different things by it.

So what does free will mean?

What some people mean when they say *free will* is that all of our choices are independent, uninfluenced choices. In other words, the choices I make come from me and me alone, I am not pushed or pulled by anyone or anything; I am the first and final cause of all my own choices. I could always make whatever choice I want to make. In other words – I have absolute freedom. Now, as you look at the book of Jonah, ask yourself, was that Jonah's experience? Was Jonah's decision to go to Nineveh uninfluenced? Was Jonah's decision to preach the Gospel something that

started and ended with him? Did Jonah choose the belly of a fish as his place to reside?

The answer is 'No!' For that matter, the people of Nineveh did not wake up one day and choose to believe. Someone had to be sent to them. That was not their choice; that was God's choice. The sailors did not choose to encounter Jonah; that choice was made for them. There is no such thing as absolute, autonomous freedom when it comes to human beings. The only One who makes perfectly uninfluenced, independent choices is God. We are ultimately under the government of God. So, if by free will we mean we are at liberty to do absolutely anything at any time, then no, the Book of Jonah doesn't teach that and the Bible doesn't teach that.

Always remember when you preach the Gospel – the Gospel is a choice, but it is also a command. God commands men to repent. He does not say to people – 'Here's one of many choices – take me or leave me.' He commands men to repent and believe in Christ. He demands it. Men are obligated, they are duty-bound, to trust Christ. Now, they have a choice to obey or disobey the Gospel call, but they do not have the right to see the Gospel as optional.

On the other hand, there is another, correct, way of describing free will. If by free will we mean we can make real choices, we can and must respond to God, then that is true. Jonah heard the word of God, and was not aware of any restraint by God to do His will when he made his decision. Jonah made willing choices, with real consequences. He had as much freedom as it is possible for God's creatures to have – he could respond one way or another. When we think of the word *responsible*, we have the concept within that word. We are able to respond, 'response-abled'. If we define it this way, then free will is true. Whether or not we use the term, what is clear is that the Bible teaches that we are responsible, moral beings. We make real choices, free in the sense that they are not involuntary. And the choices we make have real effects and real consequences.

Deuteronomy 30:19 *I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live;*

Joshua 24:15 *And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."*

That brings up the third question we want to answer from the book of Jonah:

Do your choices really matter?

Someone looks at the book of Jonah and says, 'If God is sovereign, and has His way ultimately, what difference do our choices make? God got Jonah to Nineveh eventually, what difference did it make that Jonah chose to disobey?'

The whole account shows what tragic effects disobedience has on our lives. Though God's will prevailed – and it always will – Jonah lost out tremendously.

Disobedience is a downgrade. It is falling from what God would prefer for you.

Consider how the Bible hints that Jonah was going the opposite direction from God by the use of the word 'down':

'down to Joppa - v3'

'down into it', 'down to lowest parts of the ship, laid down' - v 5

[down] 'into the sea' - v15

'down into the belly of a fish' v17 -

'down into moorings of the mountains' - 2:6

He was not going upwards – a symbol of growth and closer intimacy with God, he was headed

down. He was losing. What was he losing?

For one, he was losing time. The time it took him to get to Joppa, the boat ride was time spent away from the Lord. Wasted time! The time spent in the belly of the fish was time that could have been spent serving God; instead it had to be a time of discipline. So, at the beginning of chapter 3, Jonah is exactly where he could have been in chapter 1. He just chose the long route. In fact, from Israel to Nineveh was a one month journey on foot. We don't know upon which shore the fish vomited Jonah, but it is not unlikely that he was now further away from Nineveh than he was to begin with.

Disobedience is a setback.

God has definite plans for you. And if it is His will to 'not take no for an answer', He will get you where He wants you, the long way or the short way. You can choose 'God's school of Words for Those Who Have Ears', or 'God's School of Hard Knocks'. Disobedience always means a delay. Time is precious. Your life is not something you are supposed to try to pass; try to get through in as entertaining, amusing and least uncomfortable way as possible. It is a precious gift for which you will give an account. Because with time comes opportunities. Opportunities to know God; to love Him; to serve Him; to grow, to develop, to become more useful to him, more pleasing to Him. As surely as the stewards had to give an account for 5, 2 and one talent of silver, so you will have to give an account for eighty, sixty-five, fifty-two, thirty-three, sixteen or ten years of life – whatever God gives you. Every choice you make matters. Every choice you make matters *forever*. Therefore every choice is precious. Jonah lost time.

Jonah also lost joy. What was Jonah chasing when he disobeyed God? We could say he was chasing his own happiness. He believed he would be happier doing life his way rather than God's way. But who is consistently the unhappiest person in the book of Jonah? Jonah! He is unhappy before Nineveh, in Nineveh, and outside Nineveh. All along, Jonah is losing out on the blessing of being one with God's heart and enjoying the opportunities to serve.

God used Jonah in spite of himself. Everyone whom Jonah meets gets saved! But Jonah missed the joy of co-labouring with God. He missed the pleasure of having God's heart.

When we disobey God we think we are acting in our own interests, but we are actually denying ourselves what is best. Disobeying God's will is always a downgrade, always a loss - a loss of time, a loss of opportunity, a loss of usefulness, a loss of blessedness.

Does God allow you to disobey Him? Yes. But who ultimately loses? God has a perfect will for you. But He also has a permissive will, where He allows you to make certain choices. God would have preferred Jonah to go to Nineveh the first time; with a joyful, sacrificial heart. God's providence did not allow Him to avoid that appointment, but what he did miss, he missed through his rebellion.

Galatians 6:7-8 *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. ⁸ For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.*

We can think of many others in the Bible where God's will prevailed – but they lost out due to their choices – Adam and Eve; Moses when striking the rock; Samson; Saul; David, when he sinned with Bathsheba; the evil kings of Judah and Israel; the apostasy of the whole nation of Israel before Christ and after Christ; Judas.

We need only look at our own lives and we know the bitter experience of foolish, sinful choices. Has God's ultimate will for your life still prevailed? Yes. But what do we miss out on when we choose disobedience? When we choose to go down, opportunities are wasted; time is wasted; delays

are incurred; joy is lost; usefulness is delayed.

So we have a totally sovereign God, who nevertheless grants us a certain amount of freedom, which we can use to obey Him or disobey Him. Disobeying has negative, destructive results, while obeying has constructive, joy-giving results.

That leads us to the last question on this topic which the book of Jonah helps us to understand:
How do we know the will of God?

Jonah firstly furnishes us with a number of ways not to discern God's will:

1. By doing what you feel like doing. Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. His desires were bent away from going there. So, picture Jonah saying, 'I just don't have the desire to do that right now. I don't feel led to go to Nineveh. I don't sense this is what I must do. I don't feel that Nineveh is where my strengths lie.'

How would we respond to Jonah? 'Jonah, God told you to go. You have a clear instruction. The word of God has told you what to do. To look for further impressions, whims, personal motivation or relish for the task becomes irrelevant as far as God's guidance goes. God has told you to do it; you must do it.' Sometimes people bring in their personal desires or motives as the umpire in their decision-making. 'If I don't want to do it', they reason, 'I don't have to.' But the ultimate umpire is the Word of God. If God has told you to reconcile with others, how you feel about it is irrelevant. If God has told you to work to eat, then how much desire you have to work is beside the point – it is His will that you work. 'I don't sense it is the time for me to break up with my unsaved boyfriend or girlfriend.' 'Right now I'm not really led to attend all the services of the church.' 'At the moment I don't have a great desire to serve so-and-so' in the church. Those are all wrong. When you are dealing with clear-cut applications of biblical commands and principles, you do not need any further 'confirmation'. God has spoken. He does not need to confirm it with a personal whim or impression. To act like this is to make your will equal to or superior to the revealed will of God in the Word of God.

2. Going through open doors. A lot of people go on 'open doors' as the means of direction. But you will notice that when Jonah got down to the harbour at Joppa, there was a ship going in the opposite direction from Nineveh. And so Jonah could have said, 'It's an open door. If God really wanted me to go to Nineveh, there wouldn't be a ship going the other way.' How would we reply to Jonah? 'Jonah, because a door is open does not mean you have to go through it. Because an opportunity presents itself does not mean it is God's will for you.' How often we see this in the employment world. A promotion is offered, a transfer is offered, a company 'head-hunts' you, an opportunity overseas is offered. They are open doors, yes. They are opportunities. But their presence does not mean God wants you to go through them. For Jonah to take a ship going to Tarshish, when he knew what he was supposed to be doing, was not following God's will by going through an open door; it was disobeying God's will. When you know God's will from the Word of God, when you know your priorities from the Word of God, when you know your limitations from the Word of God and your own experience, you have to weigh up opportunities next to what God has shown you thus far. When a man knowingly takes a job that is going to require 16 hour work days, six days a week, so that he can barely stand when he gets home, let alone pray, spend time with the family, and serve in the local church – he is not simply going through an open door, he is disobeying what God requires of him. When a young lady accepts a job that will mean she will be out of a church for a year, away from believers, with great strain placed on her morally – that is not simply going through an open door, it is disobeying what she already knows from the Word of God.

3. Looking for peace in your heart. You will notice that during the violent storm, Jonah is at the bottom of the boat, sound asleep. I would say that Jonah had a certain amount of peace in his heart. He was clearly not tossing and turning, agonising over his disobedient decision. If you had asked

him if he was happy, he may well have said – I have peace in my heart that this is what I need to do. All too often, a believer will tell you they are following a course of action because they have peace. But Jonah shows us that is not the primary way to discern the will of God.

Now, that being said, God **does** use circumstances; He does use the desire in your heart; He does use peace in your heart. But only to confirm what He has given you in the Scriptures. The first and primary step is always to go to the Word of God and find what it says. If nothing speaks to it directly, seek out the principles that apply. If you are unsure, get the counsel of others more experienced in the Scriptures. When the Bible does not give you concrete specifics, it will at the very least point you in the right direction. To use peace, desire or circumstances, to do the opposite of what you know from the Scriptures, is wrong.

As we have seen already, begin with a desire to please God – to submit to His will. Approach the Bible asking God for wisdom. Search and study for as much light as the Bible gives you. Get the multitude of counsel. Only when you have done the hard work of grappling with God's revealed will, can you look to subjective things like circumstances, peace and desire.

Someone once compared our lives to playing a game of chess. You and I are like beginner chess players, God is a Grand Master. There is a real action and response situation going on – white move, black move. God does things, we respond, God responds to us.

The moves you make on that chess board are like your choices in life – they are real, they are free, they have real consequences. But what you find as you play the Grand Master is that He is so skilled that He limits your moves with his incredible game. He anticipates you, figures out your game, He blocks you, checks you, leads you; lets you make blunders. You find that the moves you do make, while free and responsible, are moves which the Grand Master is allowing in His Grand Scheme of checkmating you. What is checkmate – either salvation as a vessel of honour, and future glorification; or remaining lost, and future damnation as a vessel of dishonour and wrath. Either way, the Grand Master always wins.

So, once He has you, the simplest advice you can live by is 'Fear God and keep His commandments'. You may wind up in the same place, but you'll get there without a lot of wasted time, wasted opportunity; minus a lot of hard knocks and with the joy of labouring together with God.