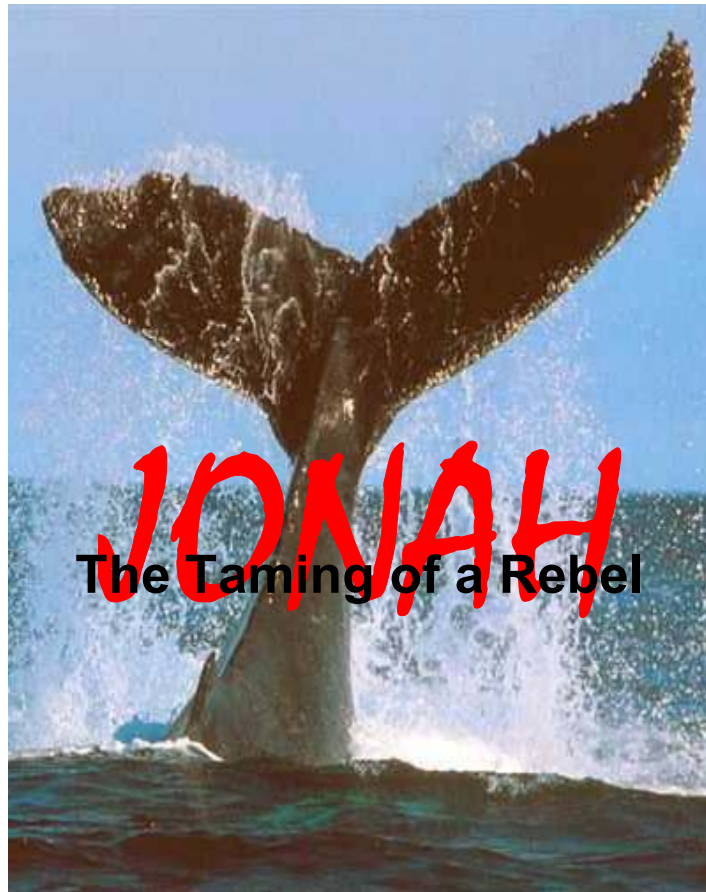


*The Covenant Pulpit*



**When the Devil Provides a Boat**  
**Jonah 1:3-10**

**Dr. Robert Petterson**

**Covenant Presbyterian Church**

6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108

(239) 597-3464

[www.covenantnaples.com](http://www.covenantnaples.com)

The plastic surgeon's wife had just finished an advanced cooking course. So she held an elegant dinner party at her posh South Miami home to show off her gourmet skills.

According to a Miami newspaper, she put her newfound skills to the ultimate test by serving cleverly disguised dog food to her unsuspecting guests. It was placed on delicate little crackers with a wedge of imported cheese, bacon chips, an olive, and a sliver of pimento on top.

I guess you could call her creation hors d'oeuvres *a la Alpo*.

After serving these miserable morsels, she grinned as her guests gobbled them up. Her hors d'oeuvres *a la Alpo* were the hit of the party. Several folks asked for her recipe. In a moment of culinary triumph she told her stunned guests that she had fed them dog food. A guy, who had gorged himself on the doggie d'oeuvres, ran to the bathroom. I'm surprised no one got down on all fours and bit her on the leg.

This story reminds me of how the devil cleverly serves up deception on shiny platters, decorating it with tasty persuasion and impressive appearance. Deception goes down best when it is delectable.

Satan is shrewd. If you want to make a counterfeit dollar bill, you don't use orange construction paper, cut it into the shape of a triangle, put Batman's picture in the center and stamp a "4" on each corner. That would deceive no one. For deception to work, it has to look like the real thing.

Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. He can feed you dog food and make you think you're eating caviar. He deceived a third of the angels of heaven into rebelling against God. He tricked Adam and Eve by decorating the forbidden fruit and serving it up as the dream meal of the ages. The Father of Lies has worked his culinary magic on billions of gullible gluttons who have gobbled up his dog food deceptions to their last bitter crumbs.

The devil is even caught in his own web of deceit. In 2 Timothy 2:13, St. Paul reveals the folly of deceivers: "...deceiving others, they are themselves deceived." Deceiving others leads to self-deception. Sir Walter Scott wrote, "O what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." The Master of Deception even believes his own lie that, by dogged determination and deceit, he can somehow defeat God.

No one gobbled up the dog food of deception with more gusto than Jonah. His name was *Jonah son of Amittai*, which in the Hebrew means "Jonah son of

the Truth Teller.” He was God’s prophet. He had lived his life telling the truth to others. But that didn’t keep him from lying to himself. The curtain no sooner rises and we are faced with the great issue of this biblical drama.

“The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’”

Yet verse three says, “But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.” Tarshish was a Phoenician seaport city on the coast of what is modern-day Spain. In the world of his day, Jonah couldn’t have gone any farther in the opposite direction from Nineveh than Tarshish. This is in-your-face, industrial strength disobedience. If you know the God of the Bible (and Jonah knew him intimately), you don’t dare try this kind of disobedience without first fortifying yourself with a stiff shot of deception.

Last week we discovered why Jonah ran in the opposite direction. He hates the Assyrians for the horrific holocausts they have unleashed against his people. And he knows that if he goes up to the capital city of Assyria and preaches God’s judgment against their wickedness, they might actually repent. And then his gracious God will forgive the Ninevites, and relent from nuking them with fire-and-brimstone. To Jonah, letting the Assyrians off the hook would be monstrously unfair.

This is Jonah’s first deception: he thinks that his idea of how the world ought to be managed is superior to God’s. His second deception is that he can shake his fist in God’s face and get away with it. The third is that he can run away and not get caught. The fourth is that he can hide from God and not be found. The fifth is that he can thwart the plans of God. All of these deceptions are captured in verse three:

“But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.”

Jonah gobbles down a whole plateful of the devil’s deception the day he heads for Tarshish. Verse three says, “...he found a ship bound for that port...” The Enemy of our Soul is so deceptively clever. The story of Jonah teaches us a profound principle:

**When you run from God, the devil  
will provide the transportation.**

In 2 Corinthians 2:11 St. Paul writes, "In order that Satan might not outwit us, we are not ignorant of his schemes." We must be able to sniff out dog food masquerading as gourmet truth. One of the devil's favorite tricks is to deceive us into running away from God and then providing a ship to make us think that we can get away with it. Sometimes we even think that the waiting ship is a sign that God is blessing our disobedience.

I remember a young man who I mentored in my first church. He felt called to the pastorate. He decided to enroll in a seminary that denied the cardinal doctrines of Scripture. Many of its professors scorned the deity of Christ, the necessity of the Cross, and the authority of the Scripture. Our elders begged him not to go to that seminary, lest his faith be bankrupted. One day he came into my office waving his letter of acceptance to that seminary, together with a full scholarship. He smiled triumphantly and said, "This scholarship is proof that God is blessing my decision." I opened up the book of Jonah and replied, "Your scholarship only proves that when you run from God, the devil will provide the transportation."

Are there any Jonahs in the house today? Perhaps you know what God's will is for your life. But, like Jonah, you have other ideas. So you are running in the opposite direction. You are even getting away with it because the devil has provided your transportation. Will you obey God, or will you deceive yourself that the boat will get you to Tarshish? Let me give five reasons why this is dog food masquerading as hors d'oeuvres:

### **1. The *opposite* direction is taken with deliberation.**

We deceive ourselves by saying that we just stumbled off the straight and narrow. We fell into an adulterous affair. We just didn't have any choice when it came to the divorce. Circumstances beyond our control forced us to take unbiblical actions. Or we just couldn't take the pressure anymore.

My favorite "I'm-not-responsible-for-my-actions" excuse is in the book of Exodus. Moses has come down from Mt. Sinai furiously angry. In his absence his brother, Aaron, caved into the pressure of rebellious Jews and crafted a golden calf. The people of God degenerated into the grossest kinds of debauchery in front of that idol. Moses confronts his brother. But Aaron whines that the people forced him to make the golden calf. In Exodus 30:24 he says, "I just threw the gold into the fire and out came this calf." That's got to be the lamest excuse in history. A golden calf didn't just leap out of the fire. Aaron deliberately took the gold, melted it in the fire and then carefully molded an idol, etching its features, and crafting its features.

Jonah didn't just lose his way. Look at verse three. He makes a series of seven deliberate choices: "Jonah ran away...headed for Tarshish...went down to Joppa...found a ship...paid the fare...went aboard...sailed for Tarshish." Tarshish was more than 2,000 miles in the opposite direction from Nineveh. No one ever *falls* into disobedience or *stumbles* into sin. To think that way is one of Satan's clever deceptions. The truth is: taking the opposite direction is the conscious decision of a rebel. The road to hell is paved with a lifetime of conscious and deliberate decisions.

## **2. The *opposite* direction is paved with rationalizations.**

Satan is the master of twisting or rationalizing God's word. Right from the beginning, when Eve told him that God forbade the eating of the forbidden fruit, the Serpent replied, "Did God *really* say...?" He still does that: "Did God really say that the only biblical grounds for divorce is adultery or abandonment?" "Did God really say that homosexuality is wrong for today?" "Did God really say that a human life begins at conception?" We live in an age when almost everything is up for grabs. We can rationalize almost anything as okay as long as it seems right in our eyes.

The Son of the Truth Teller took the opposite direction because he rationalized and reshaped the truth of God. He knew that his God was the sovereign ruler of the Universe, yet he figured that he could disobey him with impunity. He knew that his God was everywhere at all times, yet he reasoned that he could run away from him. He knew that his God was all-knowing and all-seeing, and yet he thought that he could hide from him.

It wasn't that Jonah was ignorant of the truth. He says to the pagan sailors in verse nine, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who makes the sea and the land." You have to wonder: If Jonah knew that his God was the Master of the sea, how could he think that he could take a ship at sea to get away from him? This is the God who can bring a hurricane in an instant. He can break up a ship until in panic its sailors throw Jonah overboard. He is the God who can bring a great fish to swallow him whole. And he can induce that fish to get indigestion and vomit the prophet out on the seashore, right by the road to Nineveh.

We know truth. We just don't want to submit to it sometimes. So we rationalize and twist it to fit our needs at the moment. Often, in our stress, we let our emotions do the thinking for us. Verse three says, "...he found a ship..." The Hebrew language has the sense that he stumbled upon it. I think the devil was one step ahead and had it waiting for Jonah. Sometimes

we just go with the flow of circumstances. The ship is there, so we take it. Verse three also says, "...he ran..." Notice it doesn't say, "...he stopped to think it through..." or "...he stopped to pray about it..." or "...he stopped to seek some godly counsel..." It's so easy to let our feelings guide our feet, and the circumstances dictate our decisions. When we twist the truth, our paths become crooked. Watch out for those rationalizations that take you in the opposite direction.

### **3. The *opposite* direction always goes downward.**

When you read about Jonah the fugitive in verses 3-10 one thing leaps off the pages of these Scriptures: his journey is a progressive spiral downward. Look how often the word *down* is used. Verse three: "...we went *down* to Joppa..." Once he was on the ship bound for Tarshish a great storm battered the ship. Verses 4&5 describe the life-and-death struggle for survival. Yet we read in verse six, "But Jonah went *down* below deck where he lay *down* and fell into a deep sleep." In verse seven an enraged captain shakes Jonah awake. He can't believe that this Hebrew passenger is asleep while everyone else is frantically working to save the floundering ship. Do you see how far *down* this prophet has fallen? These pagan sailors are fighting to save their lives and he could care less! How can a child of God sink any lower than to sleep while nonbelievers are facing death and an eternity separated from God?

But Jonah still hasn't gone all the way down. He knows that his rebellion is the reason for this storm. So he begs the pagan sailors to throw him overboard to appease God's anger. So in verse 15 he goes *down* into the raging seas. In verse 17 he is swallowed whole by a great fish and he goes *down* into its belly. In Jonah 2:2 he prays about how he has even gone *down* into the *depths* of the grave." Jonah 2:6 later says about that time in the belly of the fish, "But you brought me up from the pit, O Lord my God." The Hebrew word for *pit* is often used to describe hell itself. Jonah started by going *down* to Joppa and ended by going *down* to death and hell itself.

Disobedience is always a downward journey. When he ran from his father's house, the prodigal son didn't guess that he would end up fighting swine for garbage in the pig pen. The great deception of sin is in its allure. We sometimes think that running will get us out of a barren marriage, or some pressure cooker situation, or a ministry that's going nowhere, or spare us from having to do something that is right-but-painful. We think that running in the opposite direction from God will take us upward and onward. Such a deception is just more dog food posing as gourmet truth.

#### 4. The *opposite* direction is destructive.

The wisest man who ever lived wrote in Proverbs 3:12, "Whom the Lord loves he disciplines." Jesus says in Revelation 3:19, "Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline." Sometimes his discipline is severe. But thank God that he loves rebellious prophets so much that he won't let us get away with our disobedience. When we head downward, God will do whatever is necessary to take us upward. Whenever God disciplines me, I want to remember the promise of Hebrews 12:11:

"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful; later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

Thank God for his discipline that won't let us get away with disobedience. Jonah was better for the storm and the three day stay in the belly of the great fish. It got him back on the right road. But it would have been better if he had never put himself in a place where he forced the hand of God.

God's discipline leaves scars and pains that may last a lifetime. Hebrews 10:21 says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God." God's discipline is a dangerous thing. Have you ever been in a violent storm at sea? I have been in gale force winds in the Bering Sea in a small fishing boat. It is the most terrifying thing in the world--unless, of course, you fall into the raging sea and are swallowed whole by a great whale shark. It is a dangerous and miserable thing to spend three days in the belly of that monstrous fish. It's like living in a tuna fish can, only in a burning hot stomach with what has been eaten before you, and covered with the burning acids of the fish's digestive system. Disobedience only takes a few moments, but its consequences can last a lifetime.

Not only that, our disobedience ruins the lives of those around us. The storm was aimed at Jonah. But verse 4 says "...the ship threatened to break up..." His disobedience almost destroyed someone else's property. Verse 5 continues, "All the sailors were afraid." Jonah's disobedience almost cost the lives of all of his shipmates. There is no such thing as a private sin. Our sins always affect those whom we touch. A father commits adultery and he destroys his wife and children. A pastor engages in some secret sin, and his church suffers from his loss of spiritual vitality. No one can watch pornography in private without it corrupting his own life and, in some way, those who depend on that person's integrity. What the President does in the privacy of the Oval Office does ultimately affect the public good. None of us

are islands unto ourselves. When Jonah got on that ship in disobedience to God, he risked the lives of everyone else on that boat.

### 5. The *opposite* direction is a circular road.

Jonah started out running as far away in the opposite direction as he could from Nineveh. Tarshish on the coast of Spain is about 2,000 miles away from where Nineveh is in the northern part of modern-day Iraq. Next week we'll look at this storm in more depth. Today it's enough to look at the aftermath of the storm. Jonah 2:10 says, "And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land." Jonah ends up right back where he began. The *opposite* direction is a circular road. Chapter three begins by repeating the words that opened chapter one:

"The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I gave you.'"

You can't run away from God. He will always get you to where he has destined you to go. You can either go the first time, or you will go a second time. Only the second time, you might go with seaweed sticking out of your ears, covered in whale vomit, and bleached white by digestive acids. You will go bearing the trauma of the storm, and nightmares of a great shark's teeth flashing at you for the rest of your life.

God is exposing the dog food of deception that masquerades as gourmet food. Even though the devil provides the transportation, don't take the ship. Don't take those deliberate steps in the wrong direction. Don't rationalize that it's going to be okay. Remember that the road to disobedience always leads downward. And it's always dangerous—for both you and others. In the end it's an exercise in futility. The road is always circular. It always leads back to where you started, only you are worse for the wear. And you will end up facing the God you ran from in the first place.

So take the road to Nineveh. You may not like it right now. But in the end, you will be blessed if you obey our gracious and compassionate God.