The Disobedience of Jonah

Jonah 1:1-3, Rev. Donghyeok Kim

Background and Common Misconceptions of the Book of Jonah

The Book of Jonah is perhaps one of the most beloved books of the Prophets. I still vividly remember hearing the story of Jonah from my church teachers as a child. Most people are familiar with the journey of this prophet. However, for a long time—until I entered university—I held a common misconception: that Jonah disobeyed and fled to Tarshish simply because he was afraid of dying in Nineveh.

In this sense, it is incredibly important and meaningful for us to reopen the Book of Jonah and earnestly examine its contents. Despite being a very short text, Jonah unfolds differently from the other eleven Minor Prophets. It is not only easy to read but also contains a profound message deep enough to move our hearts.

Disobedience, Flight, and Divine Intervention

The plot of Jonah is quite simple. Upon hearing God's call, Jonah disobeys and boards a ship for Tarshish instead of Nineveh. The ship encounters a great storm, and Jonah, identified as the cause, is thrown into the sea. A great fish swallows him, and from its belly, Jonah offers a prayer of repentance. The fish then vomits him onto a beach near Nineveh. Jonah goes to the city, proclaims God's judgment, and climbs a hill to watch for its destruction. However, when the people of Nineveh repent, God relents from the disaster. This makes Jonah very angry. The story concludes with God using a leafy plant (Kikayon) to teach Jonah a lesson.

How does Jonah’s disobedience relate to us today? We must consider what this event from about 2,800 years ago has to do with our modern lives. To do this, I ask you to open your hearts and anticipate this time with a prayerful spirit, seeking to understand the word of the Almighty God—who speaks with power yet never forgets His loving-kindness.

The Word of God Entering Our Lives

Finally, the word of Yahweh came to Jonah. The word of God enters our lives in various ways. Some experience a specific verse leaping off the page while reading the Bible, feeling as though it was written just for them. This means a message intended

for many becomes personally applied. For example, if someone filled with anger reads Ephesians 4—*"In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry"*—and applies it to their situation, that becomes God's direct word to them at that moment. Others hear God's voice through praise or a memorized verse during prayer. We must realize that God's word approaches us in diverse forms.

Meditating on how God spoke to Jonah, I thought: "Jonah must have heard God's voice directly!" I say this because such an idea could never have originated from Jonah himself. He likely never had a single thought about loving Nineveh. He saw it only as a corrupt city opposing God, not a place to be restored by His word. How startled Jonah must have been to hear such a direct command from Yahweh! He might have been stunned into silence.

Avoiding the Mission and Heading for Tarshish

"Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

Jonah was likely used to prophesying against the wickedness of the Northern Kingdom; he saw that as his mission. But suddenly, Nineveh? Nineveh was not his "territory." It wasn't his responsibility. He probably couldn't care less whether that city was filled with sin or not. A pastor doesn't feel responsible for every single place and situation. I feel an immense responsibility when my own congregation struggles spiritually, but I don't feel that same weight for members of other churches. Jonah likely felt the same: "Why Nineveh all of a sudden? What does Nineveh have to do with me?"

But upon reflection, he realized there was a divine plan. He knew that if he preached there, they would repent, and the merciful God would surely forgive them. Reaching that conclusion, Jonah couldn't stay. He decided to get up and go to Tarshish instead of Nineveh.

Tarshish is known to be a port city in Spain. If Nineveh is in modern-day northern Iraq and Tarshish is in Spain, he was heading in the exact opposite direction. This was Jonah's "declarative action" of actively defying God's will. He went down to Joppa, a very ancient port city (now the southern end of Tel Aviv). To go to Nineveh, he should have taken a land route, but Jonah chose the sea. This was a deliberate act of rebellion. The Bible records that Jonah tried to "flee from the presence of the Lord." Unlike Elisha, who wanted a double portion of Elijah's spirit, Jonah wanted to run away from God. Therefore, we should understand Tarshish not just as a geographical location, but as "a place where God is not."

The Trap of "Successful" Disobedience

Don't we also sometimes wish God wasn't there? When do we usually feel that way? Usually, when we are committing a sin or when we don't want to obey His commands. Those who want to sin freely or live exactly as they please often avoid church. They don't want to hear messages telling them to live according to God's will. Such people can understand Jonah perfectly. Jonah hated what God told him to do. He hated it so much that he preferred to go somewhere without God—or even die—rather than preach in Nineveh.

So he went down to Joppa. And what happened? As if it had been prepared, he found a ship bound for Tarshish. In modern times, this is no big deal; we check flight schedules online. But in ancient times, there were no clocks or fixed calendars. If you wanted to go to Tarshish, you went to the docks and asked around. You might wait months for a ship.

I had a similar experience during my backpacking trip through Israel. I crossed the border at a place called Bet She'an to enter Jordan. From there, I had to take a bus to get to Amman. I got on the bus and sat down. I waited ten minutes, then twenty minutes, but the driver showed no sign of starting the engine.

I had an appointment to meet a missionary in Amman, so I was getting anxious. Eventually, I went up to the driver and asked, 'When are we leaving?'

The driver’s answer was simple: 'We leave when the bus is full.'

At that moment, I experienced quite a bit of culture shock. In Korea, buses depart according to a fixed schedule, but in Jordan, they depart only when all the seats are taken.

This is exactly what Jonah might have expected as he headed down to Joppa. He needed to get to Tarshish, and he likely hoped to find a ship quickly. If not, he might have had to wait at the port for months, with no way of knowing when a ship would arrive. But as we see in the text, Jonah happened to be 'lucky' enough to find a ship bound for Tarshish the very moment he arrived in Joppa."

What did Jonah expect as he headed to Joppa? He likely hoped to find a ship quickly to avoid waiting indefinitely. As the text shows, Jonah was "lucky" enough to find a ship immediately. Does this short detail not speak volumes? When we try to disobey God, how smoothly everything often goes! Don't you feel like the whole universe helps you when you're about to sin? If God actively blocked us every time we tried to disobey, we would be forced into obedience. Yet, disobedience often feels effortless. Jonah's "luck" was actually a trap. I once heard of a pastor who skipped church to play golf. He hit a hole-in-one, but realized it was a punishment because he could never tell anyone about it. Sometimes, the "help" we get while sinning is the scariest thing of all.

Jonah’s Hatred and the Cruelty of Assyria

Why did Jonah hate preaching to Nineveh so much? He wasn't just a regular believer; he was a prophet who risked his life for God’s word. To understand his refusal, we must know the historical background. Nineveh was the capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Assyria was the superpower of the Ancient Near East for 2,000 years, known for its extreme cruelty in war. They were pioneers in the brutal execution of captives.

We know that the world becomes desensitized to evil. In the past, a simple kiss on a TV show was scandalous; now, audiences barely react to much more. When I first read about Assyrian atrocities, they didn't seem "that bad" because later empires became even more graphic. This proves how wicked the world has become. In Jonah’s time, Assyria was not a respected empire; it was an empire people wished would vanish. Their cruelty and corruption were seen as an affront to God. Jonah believed they deserved the fire of judgment.

The Disease of Nationalism and Spiritual Pride

The primary reason for Jonah’s disobedience was "Israeli Nationalism." He believed that while the Northern Kingdom needed to repent, other nations—especially Nineveh—should remain under God's terrifying judgment. Jonah was trapped within the walls of "me, my house, my country, and my people," rejecting the broader love of God. He felt God’s mercy should be reserved for Israel alone. He refused to be the instrument of grace for his enemies.

This nationalism eventually turned into "Exclusivism"—the idea that *only* they were God's chosen. Being chosen is a great grace, as Zephaniah 3:17 says, but it can easily lead to spiritual pride. This pride arrives when the focus shifts from "God saved a sinner like me" to "I have a special privilege." Such people use their status to feel superior to others.

Spiritual pride limits the Gospel. It makes us think only we deserve salvation while others are unworthy. "I remember when I first experienced the grace of the Holy Spirit; it was a very difficult and intense journey for me. Because of that, I secretly felt that I was 'qualified' to receive such special grace—after all, I grew up in a Christian family and had spent my entire life in the church.

However, my heart sank when I saw someone who had only recently started coming to church receiving that same grace so easily. I found myself thinking, 'That person hasn't been here long enough to deserve that kind of grace yet... how are they receiving it already?'

Looking back at my spiritual state at that time, I realize I was filled with spiritual pride and a sense of 'entitlement' as a chosen person. This kind of pride creates a situation

where we measure others with a millimeter-precise ruler while being incredibly generous toward ourselves."

Spiritual pride makes us judge others with a millimeter-precise ruler while being infinitely lenient toward ourselves.

Understanding the Father's Heart

Spiritual pride is one of the most dangerous spiritual diseases for Christians. We must maintain a balanced state: too much "privilege" leads to pride, but rejecting God's grace leads to spiritual poverty. Through Jonah, we must understand the heart of the Father.

Ultimately, Jonah's disobedience was the fruit of spiritual pride. Those filled with the Spirit have confidence in Christ, but also the humility to lower themselves. If you are currently disobeying God's word, the act itself is a problem, but the deep-rooted spiritual pride in your heart is much more dangerous. Pride tempts us to judge God instead of thanking Him. If there is such pride in our hearts today, let us repent with tears and come humbly before the living God. Let us dwell in His infinite love and become humble once more.

Pastoral column

The Irony of Autonomous Driving

After much deliberation over my long-distance commute, I decided to subscribe to the autonomous driving service. When I first bought my electric vehicle, the self-driving feature was underwhelming, to say the least. At roundabouts, the car would freeze, unsure of what to do, and it was plagued by repetitive, jerky movements of sudden acceleration and abrupt braking. Since it would slam on the brakes even in situations where a human driver wouldn't need to stop, I felt much safer driving the car myself. Consequently, for a long time, I was a vocal critic of Tesla's autonomous driving technology.

Then one day, I received an email about a software update along with a three-month free trial. After trying it a few times, I realized it was an entirely different world. The frequent abrupt braking that used to occur was gone. It now navigated roundabouts with remarkable intuition. While it still lacks the human finesse of overtaking or yielding to other cars, it seems to drive better than most drivers—myself included. So, to soothe my mind and body, exhausted from the long commute, I started my subscription.

Even now, if it rains heavily or the environment becomes challenging, I forcibly take back control of the wheel. However, when I am drained after a long day's work, I simply turn on the autonomous driving feature without a second thought. It then takes me all the way home on its own. Since I'm not in a situation where I can completely take my mind off the road, the burden of the long commute still exists, but there is a massive difference in fatigue between using autonomous driving and not using it.

At a recent consumer electronics show in Las Vegas, a wide array of humanoid robots made their debut. A robot developed by a Korean company showed such high technical maturity that it looked ready for immediate deployment on a factory floor. It feels like only yesterday that I listened until my ears were sore to a PhD in robotics explaining how difficult it was just to make a robot climb stairs; now, we live in a world where robots can perform backflips.

The question is whether we are ready for such rapidly evolving technology. Technological advancement has made people's lives more comfortable. In the past, laundry was back-breaking labor that involved mixing lye, repeated scrubbing and pounding, rinsing in running water, twisting to wring it out, and finally shaking it out to dry in the sun. In the modern era, you simply sort the laundry, put it in the machine with some detergent, and it does the work for you. Put it in the dryer, and you're done. Now, we even have machines that fold the laundry for us.

Yet, the exhaustion of homemakers has not lessened at all. Instead, they have become busier and more frantic. Thanks to cars, a distance that used to take days to walk can now be traveled back and forth in a single day. However, there is no leisure in our time. We are always busy or about to be busy. Rest is dwindling, and life is becoming increasingly harsh. Why is that? Why is our life still so tight, even though machines evolve rapidly to help us in various parts of our lives?

Is it because as the world turns faster, we find it more overwhelming to keep up with that speed? In the past, people accepted that cooking, laundry, and cleaning would consume an entire day, but now, we have found even more things that must be done on top of those tasks.

Will the emergence of robots truly allow us to live without labor? Will we live more leisurely lives? Or will it become a world where we simply cannot survive unless we move even faster than we do now? Even today, inside my running car, I am busy. I have to watch sermon videos, listen to the news, and keep up with current affairs. While the autonomous driving feature takes over a large portion of the driving, I feel as though I am moving even more frantically inside the car. It is truly ironic.