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IN REDEMPTION AND JUDGMENT:
GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN THE BOOK OF JONAH

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Introduction

When one discusses the book of Jonah, the singular subject which is likely to arise is that of the whale or the great fish. Terence Fretheim confirms this when he writes that, "More often than not the big fish has gotten all the attention. This is as true today as in any past generation. Ask Christians or Jews, or any person on the street for that matter, what the book of Jonah is all about. The fish will figure prominently in most replies."¹ There are likely many reasons for this phenomena, including the proclivity of many to use the title "Jonah and the Whale" when discussing the narrative of the book of Jonah, the cultural propensity for sensationalism and how the whale/fish element of the story fits that sensibility, and the vivid imagery of the fish rising out of the sea to swallow Jonah. Regardless, as Timothy Lenchak states, "Our mental habits insist that the fish has a major role in the story. Yet it is mentioned in only three of the forty-eight verses in the book."² While the fish is certainly a part of the book of Jonah, it is far from being the defining element of the narrative.

However, this raises the question, what is the crucial theme or motif in the book of Jonah? Many have suggested answers to this question. Leslie Allen wrote that, "It is the greatness of Israel's God that is the burden of the book."³ While certainly true, this seems to be entirely too wide of an answer to be useful. Alexander Maclaren lists a number of primary subjects for the book, including, "The ever-present providence of God, the possible safety of the nation even when` in captivity, and the preservation of every servant of God who turns to the

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1977), 13.

² Timothy A. Lenchak, "God in the Book of Jonah," *Bible Today* 38 (2000): 207.

³ Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 192.

Lord in his chastisement."⁴ This comes close to the primary theme which will be focused upon henceforth, the point upon which a vast number of scholars seize and which they treat as predominant, that being God's absolute authority and sovereignty over all of creation.

Donn Rojeski states simply that, "God is presented in the book as an absolute sovereign."⁵ The great expositor James Montgomery Boice argued that, "The Book of Jonah should be studied for what it teaches about God's sovereignty, the point on which the book is most informative and most profound."⁶ James Bruckner summarizes what he believes to be the scholarly consensus in the recent past when he writes, "In the last two centuries, interpreters have tended to see Jonah as a treatise on the sovereignty of God....That God is almighty is a timeless truth of Jonah."⁷ It shall be herein argued that indeed, God's sovereignty can be identified as one of the most important themes of the book of Jonah, and that through examination of this theme, one can deduce unique insights into such topics as assurance, God's love, and suffering.

Is Sovereignty a Primary Theme of the Book of Jonah?

Is God's sovereignty indeed the primary theme of the book of Jonah? Billy Smith and Frank Page believe so. They argue that even in the first few verses of the book the reader is confronted by the fact that, "The plans of a sovereign God are not so easily thwarted by the stubborn will of a puny prophet."⁸ Boice sounds a similar note, writing that, "Now we also learn that God will intervene in special ways to insure the accomplishment of His purposes."

⁴ Alexander Maclaren, *Ezekiel, Daniel, Minor Prophets, Matthew 1-8* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 183.

⁵ Donn K Rojeski, "Jonah: Deliverance and the Sovereignty of God," *Direction* 11, no. 2 (1982): 18.

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Can You Run Away from God?* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1977), 12.

⁷ James K. Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 53-54.

⁸ Billy Smith and Frank Page, *Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 229.

Interestingly, Boice links this pattern of sovereignty in chapter one, not, as one might expect, to the storm and the fish, but rather to God's reaction to Jonah's running and to his work in the mariners, showing that God's sovereignty is not seen in the book of Jonah only in the obvious places but in the nooks and crannies of the book as well.⁹ James Hardee Kennedy further argues the all-pervasive nature of sovereignty in Jonah by stating that, "The pervading theme [of Jonah] is providential control. From the beginning to the end, the book is a portrayal of providential control. Indeed, the story is developed step by step toward the climax by means of several crucial turning points... each of which introduces a separate act or scene dramatically marked by a providential work of God."¹⁰

H.A. Ironside weighs in on the side of sovereignty, and begins to discuss the specific facets thereof in Jonah when he writes, "Unquestionably the great theme of this book is the divine sovereignty. The expressions 'the Lord prepared' and 'God prepared,' frequently repeated, would manifest this"¹¹ Tova Forti permits that, "It would seem, then, that the ideas of divine providence in Creation, and of God as protector and the dispenser of life and justice for all of his creatures, are ideas that find expression... in the book of Jonah."¹² For Thomas M. Bolin, the text speaks of, "the boundless power, freedom and authority of Yahweh...[the] absolute power of Yahweh over all creation coupled with a complete license concerning any act or behavior, beyond human categories of justice or logic."¹³ Yvonne Sherwood claims that the God of Jonah is "an irresistible force and a master of strategic planning." The fourfold repetition of God as an

⁹ Boice, *Can You Run Away from God?*, 28.

¹⁰ James Hardee Kennedy, *Studies in the Book of Jonah* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1956), 74.

¹¹ H.A. Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers Inc., 1909), 196.

¹² Tova Forti, "Of Ships and Seas, and Fish and Beasts: Viewing the Concept of Universal Providence in the Book of Jonah through the Prism of Psalms," *JSOT*. 35, no. 3 (2011): 371.

¹³ Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-examined* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 147.

appointer, "emphasizes Yahweh's strategic and effortless manipulation," and that, "Cumulatively, the descriptions [of God] reinforce the image of an omnipotent, omni-controlling divine monarch."¹⁴ Janet Howe Gaines speaks of, "[t]he completeness of divine control over natural events" in the book of Jonah.¹⁵ Finally, Kenneth Craig claims that the book of Jonah expresses a, "picture of God the Creator, in complete control of plant, animal, and human life in this story."¹⁶

Alternative Views

There are, however, some alternatives to the majority view that Jonah clearly teaches God's supreme, supernatural, and intervening providence and sovereignty. While Elizabeth Achtemeier does write that, "God is the sustainer and sovereign over all of them, 'hurling' the storm, 'appointing' the fish and plant, the worm and wind,"¹⁷ she also ascribes to the idea of Jonah as parable, including a belief that the listing of Nineveh's size was a mistake by a late writer, and as such she views God's sovereignty as more literary than literal. Forti focuses on a naturalistic reading of God's power, pointing out that all of God's interventions take place through natural means, either by disrupting the cosmic order or by restoring harmony in creation.¹⁸ Hugh Martin strikes a similar chord when he writes, "Now let us observe that it is not said there *arose* a great wind; but, 'the Lord sent out a great wind.' The Lord's hand is recognised. The storm is attributed not to the elements of nature, but to the God of nature; to him who is over

¹⁴ Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 252-3

¹⁵ Janet Howe Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World: Jonah's Dilemma* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 54

¹⁶ Kenneth M. Craig Jr., *A Poetics of Jonah: Art in the Service of Ideology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993) 146

¹⁷ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I*, NIBCOT (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 256.

¹⁸ Forti, "Of Ships and Seas, and Fish and Beasts," 69.

all and 'above all.' He has established laws in nature; but they cannot administer themselves."¹⁹

Note the reference to God acting through the laws of nature and his administration thereof, rather than focusing on the seemingly supernatural execution of God's will in Jonah.

Perhaps the most detailed and developed criticism of God's sovereignty as a key element of the book of Jonah is that of Terence Fretheim. Fretheim argues that the vast, expansive, and (in his view) exaggerated view of the world and of God in the book of Jonah serves as a farce or foil, meaning to show that God's sovereignty is in fact *not* as all-encompassing as some thought it to be. He writes,

"I suggest that the purposeful and multiple exaggerations of God's power and freedom in the book of Jonah constitute a foil over against which God's character can be more clearly discerned and God's relationship to God's people—often problematic—can be more sharply delineated. Indeed, might the book of Jonah be saying in and through these exaggerations that, in spite of what readers may think (or hope for!), their God is not such a manipulative, all-controlling deity? The book is laying claim to the idea that, for all the seeming "miraculous" power of God, Israel's God is not a magician who manipulates creatures, small or large, whenever it serves the divine purposes, however minor or major. God does not actually engage in these exaggerated activities, not least because such divine activity would sharply undercut creaturely responsibility."²⁰

These assertions are extremely serious, potentially shaking the consensus of Christian scholarship previously described, as such, a detailed refutation of the idea (and, consequently, a case for God's sovereignty in Jonah) is required.

Evidence for Sovereignty

Smith and Page introduce one of the most important linguistic arguments for the sovereignty of God when, discussing נָאַת, they reject the KJV "prepared" interpretation, feeling

¹⁹ Hugh Martin, *The Prophet Jonah: His Character and Mission to Nineveh* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1866), 69.

²⁰ Terence E. Fretheim, "The Exaggerated God of Jonah," *Word World* 27 (2007): 133.

that it can lead to a sense that God created a whole new creature for this specific task. Rather they favor "ordained" or "appointed". They point out that the word is used four times in Jonah, with all of them being used to highlight God's power to do as he will for the sake of his purpose. It shows his power over the creatures of the sea in 1:17, his power over plants in 4:6, his power over animals of the ground in 4:7, and his power over the elements in 4:8.²¹ They later write that, "The word 'prepared' (נָתַן) was not used flippantly. It showed the Lord's intention to demonstrate his control, his sovereignty over creation."²²

Tova Forti takes a different tact in defending the use of sovereignty language in Jonah, arguing that it matches the use of the same sovereignty language in the wisdom literature of the scriptures. He writes that, "both Jonah and Psalm 107 present a universal God similar to the God we find in wisdom literature, and hence inspire moral and religious ruminations concerning the ultimate superiority of God's control over human initiative and expertise."²³ They conclude their argument by stating that, "the book of Jonah shapes a universalistic view of providence through the use of such motifs as cosmic dominion and divine control over the forces of nature," motifs that they see as being critical to biblical wisdom literature as well.²⁴

Leslie Allen takes an even more powerful tact, connecting the sovereignty language in Jonah to the sovereignty of God in creation. He writes that,

"Yahweh is the Creator of the world, Maker of land and sea; in Hebrew thought this implied that he was the providential controller who held the world in his grasp and manipulated its phenomena, manifesting his powerful presence via the natural world in order to achieve his purposes among men. This universal sovereignty is displayed in the

²¹ Smith and Page, *Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah*, 239.

²² Ibid., 279.

²³ Forti, "Of Ships and Seas, and Fish and Beasts," 370.

²⁴ Ibid., 373.

first two chapters, where the hurricane, the tempestuous sea, and the enormous fish are represented as but minions in the service of divine will."²⁵

Kennedy continues this same line of argumentation in asserting that, "Providential control as seen in Jonah's experiences is effectively exercised through God's sovereign and resourceful use of his creature world."²⁶ In the end Fretheim would seem to be mistaken in his analysis, and Ironside seems right in stating that, "Thus once more it transpires that rationalism is irrational, and the Scriptures in every way worthy of credence."²⁷

Where Does the Theme Surface Clearly?

Having established that the theme of God's sovereignty is a critical theme in the book of Jonah, where does this theme appear most strongly? One uniting concept is the verb **נָשַׁךְ**, which appears in four of the five clearest instances of God's in-breaking power in the book (the 5th, which will be discussed first, uses the phrase **נִיחַנְהַ דְּבָרִי**, or "Yahweh hurled"). Lenchak summarizes these five signs of sovereignty when he states that, "The book of Jonah portrays a powerful deity. Wind and wave, fish, worm, and plant are all obedient to divine commands."²⁸ Forti identifies another uniting element of these occurrences when he asks while discussing the fish/whale, "Why did the author of Jonah prefer a general name followed by the adjective 'great'? Perhaps significantly, the adjective **בָּבוֹל** is appended to other messengers of God in Jonah, such as the wind and the storm."²⁹ Finally, Colin Smith lists all of these same occasions as well when he testifies that, "The book of Jonah is peppered with testimonies to God's intricate care over every detail of life. Fish swim to God's appointed location. Plants flourish at his word. Worms eat their

²⁵ Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 192.

²⁶ Kennedy, *Studies in the Book of Jonah*, 77.

²⁷ Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, 194.

²⁸ Lenchak, "God in the Book of Jonah," 208.

²⁹ Forti, "Of Ships and Seas, and Fish and Beasts," 372.

fill at his command. Ships in the port, storms on the water, and winds in the desert all bear witness to the providence of God.³⁰ It is the details of these occurrences of God's sovereignty (the storm, the fish/whale, the vine, the worm, and the wind), and the lessons which may be ascertained therein, which will occupy the remainder of this paper.

The Storm and the Fish

In examining the passages regarding the ship and the fish, the first step is to examine the vocabulary used therein. Kennedy explains that in the storm passage, "The Hebrew verb rendered 'sent' is an inherently strong word... it is inadequately represented by the mild verb of the English translation. What is said is that Yahweh God *cast out* or *hurled forth* the tempest of mighty madness upon the sea. It is explicitly stated that the storm was not a common squall, but a 'mighty tempest.'³¹ Joyce Baldwin notes that "But the Lord" is in the emphatic position at the beginning of the sentence, and הִנֵּה, a hiphil perfect, interrupts the narrative sequence to call attention to the Lord's intervention.³²

Moving into an examination of the storm's role in the narrative flow of the book, Smith and Page bridge the gap between vocabulary and meaning when they write that, "There is nothing uncommon about a storm at sea, but we are informed that this storm had a special purpose. It was caused by a 'great wind' that God's hand hurled like a spear to stop the fleeing prophet in his tracks."³³ Douglas Stuart asserts that, "The storm dominates events. It is Yahweh's proof that he controls Jonah's fate, even outside the bounds of Canaan."³⁴ Achtemeier believes

³⁰ Colin Smith, *Jonah: Navigating a God-Centered Life* (Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications Ltd., 2012), 109.

³¹ Kennedy, *Studies in the Book of Jonah*, 20.

³² Joyce Baldwin, "Jonah," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 556.

³³ Smith and Page, *Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah*, 229.

³⁴ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 456.

that this passage is the author's way of immediately informing the readers that Jonah can neither escape nor defy God, not in any sense that violates God's sovereignty.³⁵ John Calvin himself saw the storm in similar terms, stating that, "Jonah meant that a tempest arose, not by chance, but by the certain purpose of God, so that being overtaken on the sea, he acknowledged that he had been deceived when he thought that he could flee away from God's presence."³⁶ And also, "This tempest did not arise by chance, as ungodly men are wont to say, who ascribe everything that happens to fortune. God, he says, sent a strong wind upon the sea."³⁷

An intriguing connection to this passage is brought to light by the 18th century commentator and minister Matthew Henry who writes that, "God has the winds in his treasure (Psalm 135:7), and out of these treasures God sent forth... with force and violence, a great wind into the sea. Even stormy winds fulfil his word, and are the messengers of his wrath."³⁸ Indeed, the theme of God as the Lord of the winds is not foreign to the rest of scripture, especially the Psalms. John Gill comments upon the same note that, "Winds are at the command of God, which he raises at his pleasure, and fulfill his will, and are servants of his that obey his orders."³⁹

The fish or whale, along with the storm, is a sign of God's divine providence. Baldwin states in regards to the נָסַע verb, "Here, with Yahweh as the subject, the verb stresses God's sovereign rule over events for the accomplishment of his purpose. The great fish is in exactly the right place at the right time by God's command."⁴⁰ Achtemeier pairs the storm and the fish to

³⁵ Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I*, 263.

³⁶ John Calvin, "Commentaries on the Prophet Jonah," in *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 3 - Jonah, Micah, Nahum (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005), 33.

³⁷ Ibid., 3 - Jonah, Micah, Nahum:32.

³⁸ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. IV - Isaiah to Malachi (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1712), 1280.

³⁹ John Gill, *Ezekiel to Malachi*, vol. 6, The Baptist Commentary Series (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1989), 534.

⁴⁰ Baldwin, "Jonah," 2:566.

assert that, "God is in control of all of the forces of nature. The Hebrew text says, 'but Yahweh appointed a great fish.' The fish was God's servant, and the fish's sovereign singled him out to do this task."⁴¹ This connection between the storm and the fish/whale is driven home succinctly by Allen who says that, "The Lord of the sea is the Lord also of its creatures, and his providential control extends over both."⁴²

The Vine

The next element which expresses God's sovereignty in the book of Jonah is the vine. Displaying an unusual brevity for a commentator, regarding the vine, Colin Smith states simply, "It was a miraculous gift from the Lord."⁴³ Smith and Page connect the vine back to the fish, noting that, "Both the great fish and the vine are illustrations of God's continuing sovereignty over creation and his intention to be active in the affairs of human beings through his creation."⁴⁴ Stuart too believes this to be an intended parallel, writing that, "The word 'designate' is that used of God's provision of the fish already in 2:1. Here again God has specifically acted on Jonah's behalf. The audience cannot miss the comparison."⁴⁵ Matthew Henry further expands the parallel symbolism, stating, "God had before prepared a great fish to secure Jonah from the injuries of the water, and here a great gourd to secure him from the injuries of the air."⁴⁶

Perhaps most elucidating, Calvin himself connects God's action here to his usual pattern when interacting with the physical world. He writes that, "God, we know, approaches nature, whenever he does anything beyond what nature is: this is indeed not always the case; but we

⁴¹ Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I*, 270.

⁴² Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 213.

⁴³ Smith, *Jonah: Navigating a God-Centered Life*, 106.

⁴⁴ Smith and Page, *Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah*, 277.

⁴⁵ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 505.

⁴⁶ Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, IV - Isaiah to Malachi: 1300.

generally find that God so works, as that *he exceeds the course of nature, and yet from nature he does not wholly depart.*" (Italics added.) After discussing the quails in the desert and how God used the wind to bring them he further explains, "So also in this place, God had chosen, I have no doubt, a herb, which soon ascended to a great height, and yet far surpassed the usual course of nature."⁴⁷ This is a magnificent exposition of how God usually chooses to work out his nature miracles. Having seen the fish and the vine as miracles of mercy, working for Jonah's comfort or salvation from danger, what now of the miracles of judgment in the worm and the wind?

The Worm and the Wind

Yet again God "prepared" an element of nature to be used in the education of his prophet. This time it would be a worm to eat away at the vine which he had provided and a harsh east wind to bring Jonah's discomfort and misery to its completion. Stuart is reminded of the winds of the storm in chapter one and writes that, "Again God specially designated an element of nature to affect Jonah. It was the wind once more, this time an east wind."⁴⁸ It is indeed interesting to compare this wind with the wind of the storm in chapter one. Both were called forth by the Lord to exact judgment upon his rebellious prophet. And yet, neither would lead to his demise, but rather to the gift of an opportunity for change and redemption. In the storm, to Jonah's being cast overboard, leading to the fish, the vehicle of redemption. In chapter four, it leads to God's teaching analogy and the opportunity for Jonah to view Nineveh as God did. As Matthew Henry notes, "The affliction did not come by chance, but by divine direction and appointment."⁴⁹ On the subject of the worm, Gill links the preparing of the worm and the whale together to show that God is the creator of the greatest and the least alike. Intriguingly, he thinks of this as being,

⁴⁷ Calvin, "Commentaries on the Prophet Jonah," 3 - Jonah, Micah, Nahum: 137.

⁴⁸ Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, 505.

⁴⁹ Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, IV - Isaiah to Malachi: 1300.

"contrary to the notion of Valentius, Marcion, and Apelles who introduce one creator of [insects and pests] and another of the heavens, earth, sea, and angels."⁵⁰

Application

What then is the modern Christian to learn from God's displays of sovereignty in the book of Jonah? There are three clear lessons which can be seen in the narrative and which have been attested to by commentators from of old.

The first is simply that God is sovereign and that God's sovereignty is an active one, not passive, that it is an all-encompassing sovereignty stretching to every corner of creation. Smith and Page write that, "Both the great fish and the vine are illustrations of God's continuing sovereignty over creation and his intention to be active in the affairs of human beings through his creation."⁵¹ Kennedy reflects upon the fact that, "The providential control of God as reflected here... could express itself in the very nature of the might and fury of a sweeping storm, which makes the Creator's majesty easy to perceive. But it could also make use of the scarcely noticed processes of nature, even the eating habits of a tiny, wriggling, loathsome worm."⁵²

Calvin comments beautifully upon the all-encompassing nature of God's sovereignty when he communicates that,

"We see here also, that what seemed to happen by chance was yet directed by the hidden providence of God. Should any one say, that what is here narrated does not commonly happen, but what once happened; to this I answer, that though God then designed to exhibit a wonderful example, worthy of being remembered, it is yet ever true that the gnawings even of worms are directed by the counsel of God, so that neither a herb nor a tree withers independently of his purpose."

⁵⁰ Gill, *Ezekiel to Malachi*, 6:548.

⁵¹ Smith and Page, *Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah*, 277.

⁵² Kennedy, *Studies in the Book of Jonah*, 79.

Ironside wonderfully points us back to the object of God's sovereign action, our good and his glory, when he writes that, "Throughout [all of life], however man may plan, and whatever he may attempt, it is God who is over all, and working all things in such a way as to bring glory to His own name."⁵³

The second point of application builds upon the first and it is that God's sovereignty in Jonah's life and circumstances should and does give us confidence in his sovereignty in our lives. Maclaren thinks a lesson from God's sovereignty is that if God be for us, while the storm may whistle and whip around us, we can know that the worst of it is past and that though we must struggle amidst its waves, He will take care of us. That, in fact, anything else is more possible than that He would lose us in the storm.⁵⁴ Henry reminds us of the fact that all of that which is outside of our power is in fact well under God's control when he says, "God has command of all the creature, and can make any of them serve his designs of mercy to his people... even the great whales, that are altogether from under man's government."⁵⁵ Perhaps most comforting of all is the point that Kennedy brings up when he notes that, "Providential control [in Jonah] is purposive and redemptive toward men."⁵⁶ He notes this in the stated purposes for God's interventions in Jonah. The fish is sent to swallow up Jonah, the vine is to deliver Jonah from his evil case, etc. They were directed at a specific person and for the sake of his redemption.

The third application point is one which is harder to accept. Boice brilliantly exposes this fact when he writes that, "The point at which we do have problems is when the sovereign will of

⁵³ Ironside, *Notes on the Minor Prophets*, 196.

⁵⁴ Maclaren, *Ezekiel, Daniel, Minor Prophets, Matthew 1-8*, 182.

⁵⁵ Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, IV - Isaiah to Malachi: 1286.

⁵⁶ Kennedy, *Studies in the Book of Jonah*, 79.

God comes into opposition with a contrary human will.⁵⁷ Our issues with sovereignty very rarely occur when that sovereignty is clearly working in our favor, but rather when it offends our sense of self-importance. This happens when God's sovereign will is to take away the blessings which he has given us or to punish us for disobedience. Gill notes that, "That same hand that gives mercies can take them away, and that very suddenly."⁵⁸ Fretheim, even in his skepticism towards God's sovereignty, notes the balance of that sovereignty in Jonah when he states that the elements of the natural order which are sovereignly manipulated in Jonah are, "used both as instruments of judgment (worm, wind) and of salvation (fish, plant)."⁵⁹ Henry discusses Jonah's reaction to the dual salvation/judgment nature of God's sovereign actions in stating that, He that gave took away, and Jonah ought to have blessed his name in both.⁶⁰ Smith asks the question, which did God send: the vine, the worm, or the wind? And says, "You may think that God provided the vine, and that he 'allowed' the worm and the wind. But the words of scripture could not be clearer," in stating that God provided all three. "Jonah wants us to understand that God's hand was as much in the worm and the wind as it was in the vine."⁶¹ This is indeed a valuable lesson for Christians today, who seem so often to praise the Lord for the good while rejecting the possibility that he could be growing them with the bad.

Conclusion

While the average man on the street may recognize Jonah primarily for his interaction with the whale, we have seen that sovereignty is the dominant theme of the book of Jonah. We have learned that while challenges to God's providence may arise, he remains entirely sovereign

⁵⁷ Boice, *Can You Run Away from God?*, 13.

⁵⁸ Gill, *Ezekiel to Malachi*, 6:548.

⁵⁹ Fretheim, *The Message of Jonah*, 46.

⁶⁰ Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, IV - Isaiah to Malachi: 1300.

⁶¹ Smith, *Jonah: Navigating a God-Centered Life*, 107.

through it all. We have learned that God is sovereign, that this sovereignty should give us confidence and has our redemption as one of its primary goals, and that we should praise God and acknowledge his providence in times of suffering as well as plenty. In these times of suffering, may we praise God for the reality of the words of Matthew Henry, who wrote that, "In the midst of judgment, God remembers mercy."⁶²

⁶² Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, IV - Isaiah to Malachi: 1286.