

## Point 1 *Responding to God*

The realization that God’s word compels some to do more than stay in Joppa and hunker down into their old job is a welcome relief to this reader. The voice of God as an activating agent is the initial point of this book and so significant to the narrative that it cannot be overlooked. Surely, “Jonah’s journey to Tarshish is initiated by the word of God.” One can readily observe the Christian culture of our society as it utilizes logic to decipher the will of God. What is wrong with this approach? Peterson writes. “He goes, an act of obedience – kind of. But HE chooses the destination: Tarshish.” (11)

Many times in my life I have responded to the voice of God, only to choose my own destination assured of my calling, unyielding in its direction. All at once assured that I am being called, yet never truly seeking God and trusting Him to send me to my assigned station for ministry. I must find my own way, a bullheaded and obstinate view that certainly places me in the driver’s seat of life and negates God’s ongoing ability to lead and direct.

Peterson encourages his reader to see that being thrown from the boat is an active response to hearing God. This is the type of tough love that provides a safety net for the times when we close our eyes and ears and hold on to our selfish desires. Jonah, no doubt, was not thankful to his shipmates for their assistance, although they were acting on God’s behalf. This caused me to reflect on those that have directed me through both positive encouragement and negative reactions which have molded the direction of my ministry and life. Were they working for God to move me in the correct direction? Should I thank them for hearing God when I was headed in the wrong direction? Certainly hearing God’s voice is not a one time event, but ongoing and at times uncomfortable.

## Point 2 *Time out: for Contemplation*

“..it is rare to find American pastors who are true contemplatives, who embrace the disciplines that nurture a continuous and ready access to the soul and God, who understand themselves as persons of prayer in a community of prayer.” (111)

Experiencing the spiritual disciplines is something that many Christians never take the time to practice because it is simply not an easy exercise. Peterson refers to the training involved as *askesis*. This term can be used for describing the training an athlete endures in the days, months and weeks prior to an athletic competition. The daily training regimen requires maturity that in and of itself serves no purpose other than to prepare the athlete for a future event. As one who has competed on this level, I can attest to the grueling and solitary nature of daily training. Training partners may not show up, you may not feel like training and there may be other more fun things to do. Hence for many the mundane act of training may only be an option if all other options are removed. This is the case with Jonah as he resides in the belly of the fish.

Jonah finally learns to really pray through this specialized “in the belly” time with God. By removing all other distractions, God gives Jonah time for reflection to gain some much needed perspective. Jonah’s *askesis* outlines the very borders of loneliness and daily grind. His practice is constituted from the total depravity of all interaction, his only companion God Himself. His memory of scripture assists Jonah as he prays to God. His faith is deepened as a man who once sought to flee God’s sight and now asks God to see him even as he sits in the belly of a fish under the sea. Can God see me even in this dark place? Yes, is the encouraging response that we receive even today. If I take the time to set myself apart for training, God will work in my heart. Even in the belly of a fish, even in my greatest despair, even in this terrible, sinful world.

### Point 3: *Let God be God*

“What I want to deal with here is the daily difficulty that we have in adjusting our job descriptions to the vocational surprises of grace.” (161)

Jonah’s message was not centered on redemption, although this was certainly the result (what a surprise to him!). Allowing God to be who He is as we faithfully serve allows us the ability to enjoy the “unpredictable plant”. This section of Peterson’s work supplies encouragement to those in pastoral ministry regarding the “messiness” of the church. To know that it is not the Pastor’s job to untangle the mess, but rather to yield the tangled mess before God. Organizing ministries, developing messages to meet needs that we believe our congregation has and resolving divisive issues are not sufficient to do God’s work. His work will happen in the hearts of His people as they respond to His call and not ours. This keeps the ego in check and was certainly an unlearned truth for Jonah.

Allowing God to lead us in ways that we had not planned to go, providing Him the freedom and reverence that He deserves as our King as He works in His church; this is the “mess” that we are called to work with daily. Our God is creative and personal, He requires us to trust in His ways. Our straight paths are crooked and His seemingly crooked and messy paths are straight and always result in the salvation and transformation of His people. We are surely responders to God’s will and not directors of it!

Through this insight from Peterson, my faith was strengthened. It is a comfort to know that God alone oversees the ministry of His church. My greatest fear in ministry has always been, “what if I am not good enough.” It is encouraging to know that I am not, but God is, and all I need to do is follow His lead and be His servant.