

RUNNING FROM GOD: JONAH'S RESISTANCE
Jonah 1:1-16
January 14, 2007 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

Tonight we begin a series of four messages in the book of Jonah. Jonah is the fifth of the Minor Prophets, though there was nothing minor about any of these men or their messages. A prophet was called by God and given a specific message. That message was either a pronouncement of blessing or an announcement of curse.

The book of Jonah is somewhat unique in this sense. It is almost completely historical narrative rather than prophecy. The only prophecy found in the entire book is found in 3:4, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” The rest of the book is a narrative of the events that lead up to Jonah’s proclamation and the events that follow it.

Another uniqueness to this book is that Jonah is the only prophet sent to a heathen nation with a message of repentance. It is important that we keep this in the back of our minds as we work our way through the book because many of the decisions Jonah makes are predicated on this. In this regard, Jonah serves as Israel’s foreign missionary where Hosea was Israel’s home missionary. This shows up in the truths that both men share about God: Hosea, God’s loyal love to Israel, His covenant people, and Jonah, His compassion for all people, specifically Gentiles, those that were outside the covenant.

Read chapter 1.

I. Jonah’s Attempted Flight from God (1:1-3)

Many look at the opening verses of this chapter as Jonah’s *calling* as a prophet. While it is true that we see God’s formula in calling prophets in v. 1, “**The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai,**” we should note that Jonah had already acted as a prophet previous to this occasion. In the text that we read earlier in 2 Kings 14:23-27 we find that Jonah was from the city of Gath-hepher in Galilee, a city of the tribe of Zebulun, located in a remote corner of Israel. Jonah prophesied as a messenger of mercy during the reign of Jereboam II. His prophecy on that occasion was that Jereboam II would restore Israel to her former boundaries as established during the time of Solomon, which the king did. With this in mind, we might look at the book of Jonah as his commission as a prophet, not his initial calling.

1. God’s direct command (vv. 1-2)

God is very specific in His commissioning of Jonah. We read in vv. 1-2, “**The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.’**” We are not told how Jonah received this message from the Lord. That is not important, though often in other prophetic books the method is revealed. We are also uncertain as to the time of this commission, though it was probably a time when Nineveh, and Assyrian nation, was struggling. Even though it is described by God as “**the great city**” whose history stretched back to the time of Nimrod, they would have been involved in Assyria’s struggles in resisting tribes that rested just to their north. One writer exclaims that these tribal nations had pushed the northern border of Assyria south to within less than 100 miles of Nineveh.

It was probably during this time that Jonah is commissioned to “**cry against it.**” His message, as we will see in chapter three, was a call to repentance. God had taken note of their wickedness, which they evidently flaunted in the face of God. Jonah was not to announce their sins; only that their judgment was imminent.

It is here that we would do well to try and put ourselves in Jonah's shoes. His first commission as a prophet he would have delighted in as a pleasant task. Jereboam was a wicked king. Yet through Jonah came a word of mercy and grace for the nation of Israel, the people of God. Their land would be restored to its original boundaries. This blessing came upon the people because of the Lord's compassion for them. It was not conditioned by their repentance from sin. God loved them, and in His grace He blessed them in spite of their sin.

Now comes a new word for Jonah to proclaim. We can only imagine his excitement as he hears God speak to him again. Certainly he was concerned about their sin and lack of repentance. The goodness of God that should have led them to repentance only fostered more sin, idol worship, greed and selfishness. They were really no different than Nineveh, perhaps even more wicked in that they were denying their covenant God. So when Jonah hears God on this occasion, he must have thought, “What will God do with Israel this time? What will he have me say? Will there be more blessings from God as a way of making them recognize the goodness of God? Or will I have the difficult task of a chastening message, a message of woe for their sin in hopes of driving them to repentance?”

Then Jonah hears the voice of the Lord. “Jonah, pack your bags. I want you to take the next boat to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. There you must preach against that city, for their wickedness is great.” *NINEVEH!* Jonah must have been stunned for a moment. God was not commissioning him to prophesy to his people at all, but a pagan nation. How would Jonah respond?

2. Jonah's defiant response (v. 3)

“But.” The first word of v. 3 clues us into Jonah's response. **“But”** always signifies a contrast. Before we even read the rest of the verse we are able to deduce that where God said, “Go” in v. 2 Jonah would say “No!” **“But Jonah rose up.”** Here he is obedient. God said “Arise” and Jonah arose. But he rose up in defiance. **“But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish, from the presence of the LORD.”** Jonah's choice of flight was not as important as his reason. He was attempting to remove himself from the presence of the Lord. **“So he went down to Joppa.”** Of interest here is the direction that he went, **“down to Joppa.”** Nineveh was to the north. Either Jonah's compass was broken or he is defiantly going the exact opposite direction. **“So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.”**

Jonah fled from God. But why did Jonah attempt to run from God? He certainly did not flee because he was afraid of going to a foreign country. Tarshish was even more distant than Nineveh, located in modern day Spain. He did not ignore God's commission out of fear of proclaiming His word openly. He had already done that.

Some suggest that Jonah fled because he did not want to prophesy something that might not come to pass. How foolish would he look if he prophesied the doom of Nineveh and then the Lord spared them in His mercy? But that does not seem likely given Jonah's knowledge that God was a merciful God. He would know that a pronouncement of doom left the possibility of repentance and God's showing favor to them. He had expected this of his own people. Why

would Jonah have been embarrassed if his preaching was effective enough to bring the heathen Ninevites to their knees?

However, that is in fact what was troubling Jonah. O. Palmer Robertson provides the following scenario:

Suppose he should leave his beloved land of Israel and travel to the heathen city of Nineveh. Suppose he should there preach the coming judgment of God: 'Within forty days your city shall be wiped out for its wickedness.' The Ninevites might be struck in their consciences because of the obvious truthfulness of his denunciations. They would then cry out to the Lord for mercy and forgiveness, and the Lord would show his wonderful compassion to them. He would forgive them, and embrace them in his favour. They would claim God's mercy as his sons who had returned home.¹

We will see in chapter four that this is exactly what happened. Jonah is already beginning to figure it out. He would preach, and they would repent. But why wouldn't Jonah rejoice in this? Why does he run from God?

To answer that question, you must take the logic one more step. Jonah already had preached to Israel, and they had not repented. He had not been the first prophet sent to Israel. For one hundred and fifty years, God had been sending his servants the prophets. They had denounced the idolatry of Israel in no uncertain terms. But Israel had rejected their message. For one hundred and fifty years they had persisted in their sinful ways. So now what does the mission to Nineveh mean? Could it mean that the centre of gravity for God's working in the world might shift from Israel to Assyria? If that heathen nation turns to the Lord at his preaching, what would that imply for the future relations between a repentant Assyria and an unrepentant Israel?²

Jonah feared that Israel would be cut off for their unrepentance and that God would bless these Gentiles. And that is exactly what happened. When we read Romans 11 Paul is clear that these very Israelites, the nation of Israel, who God had entered into covenant with, are cut off, and the Gentiles have been grafted into Israel, not national Israel, but spiritual Israel.

So Jonah's flight is an attempt to force the hand of God and to protect his people. He would rather see the pagan Ninevites perish than see the disobedient Israelites perish. Jonah knew that Assyria would be the natural choice of God to bring judgment on Israel. If they repented, what would stop them from becoming the tool in God's hands to wipe Israel out? Jonah knew what would happen, so he ran. If the Ninevites did not hear the message of repentance, then they would not repent and Israel might be spared, at least for the time being.

History proved Jonah right. Within twenty years after the reign of Jereboam II, the Israelites, the Northern Kingdom, is taken into captivity at the hands of the Assyrians. Given this background, was Jonah right to run? Of course not. He was attempting to play God. God had the prerogative to call the heathens to repentance because He is God. It was utter folly for Jonah to think that he could somehow stay the hand of God.

But what about you? If you profess to know Christ, God has called you to proclaim this message of repentance to the heathen. At times this comes with great sacrifice. At times it brings ridicule from our friends and family. So do you, like Jonah, ignore God's call? You might not demonstrate it as prominently as Jonah did. We run in different ways. We run in

¹ O. Palmer Robertson, *Jonah*, 11.

² *Ibid.*

silence. We simply do not proclaim the message to protect our relationships with others. We presume upon our comforts and excuse our apathy because it is inconvenient to proclaim the message. Whatever it is, it is running from God if we are not faithful in proclaiming the message wherever God has called us.

II. God's Pursuit of Jonah (1:4-16)

One thing Jonah had right – God is a merciful God. He was merciful towards Israel, he would prove merciful to the Ninevites, and he was merciful towards Jonah.

1. God sovereignly intervenes (vv. 4-6)

God does not let Jonah off the hook. He pursues him as the Hound of Heaven. In vv. 4-6 God sovereignly intervenes in the situation. First, in v. 4, **“The LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up.”** God providentially sends a great storm that would get Jonah's attention. And He did not simply send it. He **“hurled”** it. Elsewhere in Scripture this word describes what a man does with a javelin. He takes careful aim at his chosen target, and with all of his might he ‘hurls’ the javelin. That describes what God does on this occasion. He takes aim on Jonah's ship and he cannot possibly escape.

This demonstrates God's providence in pursuing Jonah. Jonah just happened to be on this ship, a ship that God allowed Jonah to board. He could have stopped Jonah from fleeing dead in his tracks, but he had a divine lesson to learn. Tarshish would not be considered a tourist trap. It was about as far as you could go in Jonah's world. And yet, when he goes to Joppa, there just happens to be a boat loading its cargo to go to Tarshish. One writer states that ships to Tarshish would be as rare as flights to Juno. But there just happens to be a ship in Joppa heading for Tarshish. Not only that, but there was room on board for this stranger, who pays the fare and boards.

And then the storm comes. And where is Jonah? V. 5, **“Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen asleep.”** Jonah was comfortable! Jonah was at peace! Perhaps he thought that God was blessing Him in providing the ship. Perhaps God had changed His mind and come to agreement with Jonah. Robertson notes, “The evidential providential goodness of God had put his mind completely at rest.”³ Jonah was right. It was God's providence, just not in the way he assumed.

Jonah could not hide from God's presence, and neither can we. He is the Creator of the universe and all that is in it and all of creation is at His disposal.

But God also intervenes with the sailors. The sailors were pagans and worshipped any number of heathen gods. Nature itself was a god to these men. There was no higher god to which they could appeal. And their conclusion is that this god of nature had somehow been offended. Thus the storm and their battle for survival. They cry out to their god and begin to throw the cargo overboard in an effort to make the ship lighter. They try to save themselves.

They were not far from the truth. They simply had the wrong god. God had been offended, offended by Jonah's defiance. Here we see a picture of the effects of sin. While Jonah's sin was a private sin, his sin had consequences for these sailors as well as for himself. They lost all of their cargo, and now their lives are threatened. Our sin works the same way. While our sin might be private, it always affects others, either directly or indirectly. There are consequences

³ Ibid., 19.

for our sin that go well beyond what we can know. There is a bit of irony here. God had offered Jonah the opportunity to pronounce blessing on the many in Nineveh, but he became a source of curse to these sailors instead. That is the effect of sin.

God then intervenes with a pagan sea captain. It is presumable that this pagan man reminded Jonah of his duty. His command is the same as God's in v. 2, "Arise!" Jonah should have been praying instead of sleeping in light of the imminent danger that they faced. So the captain yells, "Get up, call on your god, and perhaps he will deliver us." It is interesting that in the face of danger, even pagans seek divine intervention. But that is the very thing that Jonah was trying to avoid.

There is perhaps nothing worse in the life of a believer than being approached by an unbeliever and reminded of our service to the Lord. The captain's approaching Jonah was a strong rebuke from the Lord. His sin was beginning to find him out.

2. Jonah's failure to fear a sovereign God (vv. 7-10)

Jonah already knew who was to blame. But he remains silent. So the sailors cast lots, a common practice in their day, even among God's people. The difference is that they did so superstitiously. But God even blesses this, as the lot falls upon Jonah. He was the cause of the calamity. He had been found out.

Then the sailors hit him with a flurry of questions. "**Tell us, now!**" I suspect that they were a little more than agitated. They had lost everything but their lives in the storm, and they were barely clinging on to that. But even though the lot had clearly fallen on him, they appear to give him the benefit of the doubt. "**Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?**"

Jonah answers their questions in a way that must have shocked these sailors. They were trying to find out which of the deities had been offended, and he tells them it was the God of gods who knows all men's hearts. "**I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.**" Really, Jonah? Fear the Lord? Who was he trying to fool? He had already told them that he was running from God. It did not take the sailors long to figure things out. You say that you fear the Lord, but you are running from Him. And they become frightened in learning their dilemma.

Their entire calamity was because of the obstinate sin of one man who failed to fear a sovereign God. Now God was demonstrating His sovereignty in the storm as judgment for Jonah's sin. How low Jonah had sunk. Rather than glorifying the name of God before all of Nineveh, he shames the name of God in running from Him as if his God was as limited as theirs.

3. The sailors' compassion and fear of God (vv. 11-16)

Well naturally, the sailors needed a game plan. What could they do to appease God's wrath? Jonah suggests throwing him overboard. He was the source of their calamity. If they got rid of him, then the storm, which was there on his account, would subside. At this point, the thought of crying out to God in repentance for his sin never crossed Jonah's mind. In his mind, getting tossed overboard was to meet his death. There is more than a shadow of cowardice in Jonah's suggestion. This is demonstrated by the fact that he might have suggested that they sail back to Joppa if he really intended to obey God and go to Nineveh. While his heart was still as hard as ever towards the Ninevites, he shows his compassion for the sailors in suggesting a way to

release them from God's punishment. In doing so, the result would be death, which he regarded as preferable to obeying God.

However, the sailors initially rejected Jonah's advice and compassionately chose to drop him off at the nearest landfall. They fight against the storm, exerting all of their energy in an attempt to make landfall. Again, with great irony, these pagan sailors show more compassion for one man, a man who had gotten them into this mess, than Jonah had for thousands in Nineveh.

When their energies were spent, they cry out to God. That is something that Jonah was still yet to do. They requested physical deliverance and forgiveness of guilt since they anticipated that Jonah would die when they through him overboard and they did not want his blood on their hands. They understood that as atrocious as Jonah's sin was, it was not deserving of death. He had committed a crime, but not to that degree.

“So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped raging.” The immediate cessation of the storm proved to the sailors that the Lord really did control the sea. Therefore, they feared the Lord greatly. They offer sacrifices to them, presumably when they returned to shore. We must be careful that we do not read too much into this. These men were polytheistic, worshippers of many gods. While it is possible that the events describe their conversion, we cannot be sure. It could be that they simply added Jonah's God to their long list of deities. But regardless, they feared God on this occasion more than Jonah did. By their actions they at least demonstrated respect for God that Jonah had not shown.

Conclusion

- 1. You cannot run from God!**
- 2. We must be careful not to presume upon God's providences.**
- 3. Our sins, even private sins, affect others.**
- 4. God will pursue one man, even to the point of death, so that He might bless the many.**