

A Study of the Book of Jonah

Sermon # 1

"Attempting To Run From God."

Jonah 1:1-3

Have you ever just wanted to run away? We all probably have that feeling once in a while. We just want to get away. Sometimes it is even that way in the ministry. It is so hard trying to please so many people and such a strain feeling responsible for so many lives. Sometimes even the preacher can think that it might be better for everyone to let someone else try for a while. To just quit and as I have been told so many times "get an honest job." *Do you know what preacher's day dream about?* They dream of having a job that is 9 to 5, five days a week. The point is that we all have fantasies of escaping at times.

The man we are going to be studying about tonight and for the next few Sunday evenings had just such a desire to run away, his name was Jonah. Tonight we are going to tag along and watch Jonah "Attempting to Run Away From God."

Of all the supernatural occurrences recorded in the Bible perhaps none has received as much ridicule and scorn as the story of Jonah. To liberal scholars and skeptics, the account of "*Jonah and the whale*" is fit only for children and not for serious thinkers.

In fact this reminds me of a story I heard about the little girl in elementary school who was in class one day studying about the ocean when the teacher told the class, "I don't want any of you to ever be afraid of going into the sea because there is no sea creatures that can swallow you whole". So this little girl raised her hand and said, "I learned in church that a great fish swallowed Jonah whole". And the teacher scoffed at that and said, "that's impossible that could never happen". And the little girl said, "When I get to heaven I'll ask Jonah myself and find out if it was true". To which the teacher replied, "what if Jonah didn't go to heaven?" The little girl said, "then you can ask him".

But the facts are that only three verses deal with the fish and the other forty five verses tell the real story of Jonah. It is story of someone very much like our selves. It is the story of struggles, calling, disobedience, problems and prayer. Most of all is a story about second chances.

There are three basic ways of inter-pretng the book of Jonah. First, we can view it as an allegory. An allegory is a long story with a hidden meaning, every character or event standing for some other character or event.

The second method of interpreting the book of Jonah is to see it as a parable. A story which has one main point, Jonah as a parable would be the deliverance of Israel.

The third method of interpreting the book of Jonah is to view it as a historically accurate portrayal of real events. The main reason to believe that the story of Jonah is historically accurate is that Jesus accepted it as such. When unbelieving scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign to prove that what he said was true, Jesus replied in Matt 12:39-40, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a

sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. (40) "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." Jesus used the story of Jonah as a historical illustration of his own literal resurrection. If therefore, we are going to reject the historical accuracy of Jonah we have to question the integrity of Jesus.

Before going on with the story of Jonah I just want to make the point that the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament Bible never calls the animal that swallowed Jonah a "whale" is simply called a "great fish"

First, God Still Speaks Inviting Us to Join Him in His Work. (v. 1a)

"Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai (a-mi't-tai),"

I don't know how the Lord chose to speak to Jonah. He may have spoken to him audibly as he did to Adam and Abraham. He could have spoken to him in a vision as he did to Ezekiel. He could have spoken to him in a dream as he did Joseph. He may have simply left an impression on his heart as he often does with us today. We don't know HOW God chose to speak to Jonah but we DO know He Did! The point that I want us to see is that God still speaks to us today and his call is just as personal.

God Still Speaks Inviting Us to Join Him in His Work.

Secondly, God Still Speaks To Us But Sometimes We Don't Like What Tells Us To Do! (v. 2)

"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me."

The Living Bible paraphrases the last part of verse two to read, "*the wickedness of Nineveh was such that it ... smelled to high heaven.*"

God called Jonah to take a message of judgment to Nineveh. Nineveh was an up-and-coming world power in Jonah's day, the most important city in Assyria. Within 50 years, Nineveh would become the capital of the vast Assyrian empire.

Nineveh was a great city of the ancient world. Nineveh was located on the Tigris River in what is now Iraq. Nineveh had a population of upwards of 600,000. Its streets were twenty miles long and its walls were one hundred feet tall and wide enough for three chariots to be driven abreast across the top of them. This is the last place on earth that Jonah thought God would send him; why would God send Jonah to preach to his enemies?

Nineveh was not a nice place, in fact it had a reputation of being nasty and cruel. It was the Assyrian policy to never keep their prisoners of war alive. They gloated over their victims and enjoyed every atrocity. They would hold down their victims and cut out their tongues, they would skin their victims alive. They built pyramids of human skulls outside every conquered city. Their cruelty was known throughout the world. These were definitely not nice people and to put it frankly, Jonah hated them as revealed in 4:2!

The point is that Sometimes, God tells us to do things that we don't want to do. And we feel like turning around and running in the opposite direction. Perhaps there is a guy at work you've known for a long time. And you've heard about the problems he's been having in his marriage. And God has laid it upon your heart to talk to this man about these things. And you're thinking, *"Lord, I absolutely positively don't want to do this! First of all, who am I to tell anyone how to live their life? It's none of my business. Number two: I feel like I'm walking into a hornet's nest! The man will get defensive. He'll brush me off. It's a waste of my time. What's wrong with just praying for the man?"*

Teenagers perhaps there's a girl at school who's a little rough around the edges. All she talks about is boys, boys, boys. And God's been putting it on your heart to tell her about Jesus. But you're thinking, *"Lord, what do I have in common with a girl like this? She's not interested in religion. She's just going to drag me down spiritually. Her life is a mess and I don't want that garbage in my life."*

Or perhaps there's a guy you work with who doesn't have many friends. You see him every day. And God wants YOU to be his friend. But you're not on board with this idea. You're thinking, *"Lord, there's a reason why he doesn't have any friends. He's a foul mouthed redneck! All he cares about is country music, women, dirty jokes, and getting drunk, not necessarily in that order."* You are thinking, *"Lord, I can't relate to this guy and what is more, I don't want to relate to this guy! I don't like this guy. Send someone else!"*

Most Christians come into contact with the lost world in at least three areas, in their neighborhoods, at work and in their leisure activities. When we read that Jonah was commissioned by God to go to Nineveh, it ought to remind us of our commission to take the gospel to those around us.

We are like Jonah in that we defy God when He guides us in directions that we don't want to go.

God Still Speaks To Us But Sometimes We Don't Like What Tells Us To Do!

Third, *Going Away From God Is Always Going In The Wrong Direction.* (v. 3a)

"But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD."

Verse three begins with two of the saddest words in the whole book, "but Jonah." Instead of being thankful and setting out to serve God, Jonah decided to run.

The person that attempts to "flee the presence of the Lord" is one that is refusing to serve God in the task that he or she knows that God has called them to do.

We need to understand that Jonah made a conscious decision not to heed the call of God. Nineveh is to the East. Tarshish is to the West. Tarshish is believed by some archaeologist to be located in what is now southern Spain. If this is correct, Jonah set sail for a destination 2,000 miles in the opposite direction from God's command.

Because God has given us a free will we can tell God No. Back in 1980 at the age of 28 I surrendered to do what God had called me to do at age 16. Now I know that "surrendered to the ministry" may not be an accurate assessment for everyone, but it is for me. I "surrendered" it is not

what I wanted, but it was what God called me to do. I fought it, I tried to do other things, but you will only find peace when you are in the will of God.

The Psalmist reminds us (139:7-10), "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? (8) If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. (9) If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, (10) Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me."

But I really don't think that Jonah really thought he could get away from God, I understand it as Jonah saying, "I quit! I don't want to be a prophet any more!"

But Going Away From God Is Always Going In The Wrong Direction

Fourth, *When We Are Running From God, Satan Is Always Happy To Provide the Transportation.* (v. 3b)

"... He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish..."

The Bible says that he went down to Joppa. He found a ship and he bought a ticket. This was a calculated decision.

This may surprise you but, anytime we fall away from the Lord it is always calculated. We make plans to do wrong and then we follow through on our plans. Jonah knew where God had called him and decided he was going his own way.

The Bible says Jonah, "found a ship." Sometimes we justify our actions by saying, "But I found an open door." It is a dangerous thing to try to justify our actions simply because things seem to fall into place. Some people seem to think that a course of action is alright because they found a ship.

"The truth is, anytime we want to run away from God, one thing is certain. We will find a ship to Tarshish, and the devil will make sure that it is sailing on time. Satan always sees that transportation is provided for those who are running from the will of God." [O. S. Hawkins. *Jonah: Meeting the God of the Second Chance.* (Neptune, NJ.; Lozeaux Bro., 1990) p. 31]

We need to be aware that Satan will do anything to help you be disobedient to the will of God!

When We Are Running From God, Satan Is Always Happy To Provide the Transportation.

Fifth, *Running Away From God Is Always A Downward Spiral.* (v. 3c)

"... so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD."

Although some may try to argue the point, any path that leads you away from God is downhill. Sometimes people who are doing what they know is wrong try to justify it by saying, they are improving their lives, but it is downhill nevertheless. Once we step on the pathway of disobedience, the road keeps spiraling downward. Note Jonah's ongoing downward digression. It is characterized in the New King

James Version by the words, *down, down, down*. He went down to Joppa (v. 3a). He went down into the ship (v. 3b). He went down in sleep (v. 5).

Sometimes someone will leave serving the Lord for a life of sin and seek to justify it by saying, *“But look how happy I am! Things are going great!”* Ultimately they will find out that although their ship was ready and sailed on time, if they are headed for Tarshish when God has called them to Nineveh they sailing into a storm.

Dr. Donald Barnhouse puts it this way, “When you run away from the Lord you never get where you are going, and you always pay your own fare. But when you go the Lord’s way you always get where you are going, and He pays the fare.” [As quoted by James Montgomery Boice. *The Minor Prophets: An Expository Commentary- Vol 1. – Jonah - “The Prophet Who Ran Away”* Chap 30. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) p. 216]

Conclusion

God Still Speaks Inviting Us to Join Him in His Work.

God Still Speaks To Us But Sometimes We Don’t Like What Tells Us To Do!

Going Away From God Is Always Going In The Wrong Direction

When We Are Running From God, Satan Is Away Happy To Provide the Transportation.

Running Away From God Is Always A Downward Spiral.