

JONAH 1:3-17

INTRODUCTION

After our introduction in the first sermon in this series let's get our teeth into Jonah now. God gave his word to Jonah, he was to go to the capital of Assyria and he was to preach against it because God saw the wickedness of that city. What does Jonah do?

1. JONAH RUNS FROM THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD (v 3)

Jonah shows what he thinks of God's instructions to go to Nineveh. He runs from the presence of the Lord is how it should read.

a) What was Jonah doing by running away from the Lord? – Did Jonah really believe that it was possible to escape God's presence? Did Jonah really believe that there was some part of this universe that God could not be in? Remember last time we said that one of the key verses in the book of Jonah is found in 1:9. In that verse Jonah confessed God as Creator and controller of this universe.

He is the sovereign God and as such Jonah would know that he could not escape the presence of God. In all likelihood Jonah also knew Psalm 139:7-12, he was a prophet of God he knew God's word and he knew something of the dealings of God. Therefore he knew that it is impossible to flee from God's presence. What is meant by this phrase about running from the presence of the Lord is the fact that by going to Tarshish. Jonah is resigning as God's prophet. He is saying in effect that what God is asking him to do is too much, therefore I am resigning I no longer want to be your prophet or speak your message.

Now this is what a backslidden Christian does. He basically resigns from serving God. Such a person says I no longer want to speak God's word or be associated with your people God. Of course such a person might well call himself or herself a Christian, they might not consider themselves to be backslidden, but once someone does not obey God's word and in fact runs in the opposite direction, they are in fact backsliding from the Lord and in effect saying I am resigning, I do not want to obey God in this matter.

Perhaps God has spoken to us to go in one direction, perhaps about work, or relationships or Christian commitment but we have decided against going God's way and are going in the opposite direction. In doing so you are like Jonah, running from the presence of God.

b) Why did Jonah respond like this? – There is no reason given here in chapter one, we could perhaps understand his reaction if the reason was fear. This city of Nineveh was a great city, and it was very wicked, going to preach a message of judgement would not exactly be popular. How would he be treated? If that was his reason although it would have been a wrong response to run, we at least could have some sympathy with him, because we too would be afraid in that situation.

But that does not seem to have been the reason for Jonah's refusal to go. We are not given the answer until we get to chapter 4:2 where we come to our second key verse of the book of Jonah. Here Jonah confesses that he knew that God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who delights to relent from judgement. In other words Jonah is saying God I did not go to Nineveh because I did not want you to be gracious and save the people of Nineveh.

I knew you would save them, that's why you asked me to go with a message of judgement is order that they might repent and be saved.

Jonah had real problems with the extent of God's love, grace and mercy. Those who lived in that great city of Nineveh were enemies of God's people, Jonah did not want them to be blessed by God and he knew that if he took God's message to them, then God might indeed bless them with true repentance and save them. What Jonah wanted was Nineveh blasted from the face of the earth, in his heart he was saying to God give it to them God, they deserve it.

O Jonah wanted God to bless Israel as a nation but he did not want Him to bless the pagan nations of the world.

To get a taste of how this would have been for Jonah it's like asking a Jew during World War Two to go and preach the gospel to the Nazi's. It's like asking someone who has been bereaved by an act of terrorism to go and preach the gospel to those who committed the act. It would be hard to do, and for Jonah it was too hard, that was too much, and so he resigns his position as a prophet of God. In doing so he was really resigning from the people of God.

Now before we condemn poor Jonah, do we have any problems with the extent of God's grace and love? Who are your enemies, who is it that has given you personally the most grief in your life. Perhaps it's an awkward family member, or work colleague, or a neighbour that has sought to do you harm and continues to do so. How do you feel towards them? Do you sense a desire to share the gospel with that person so that they may be saved?

Or do you simply fail to do so, even though you have a sense in your own heart that you should. But you simply want that person to have all that's coming to them. O you would never dare say that in public, or indeed privately but if we were to examine our hearts today then we might just be surprised at what we find there. Take some of the great terrorist of our own day. What would we do if God sent us to Afghanistan to Bin Laden and his entire network in order to preach the gospel to him?

How would we respond if we heard that Saddam Hussein was suddenly converted? Or how would we respond if God sent us to some of the child molesters in Britain with the gospel. Would we go gladly knowing that God is gracious and loving and delights to relent from sending judgement? Or would we go reluctantly hoping that God would not show mercy to such people or would we simple not go and run like Jonah from the presence of the Lord?

If you think that Jonah's problem is not your problem then here is a test for us all. I want you to think of one person that you consider nasty, evil or just really awkward. They have sought to humiliate you or put you down, and so you don't really like them. You don't hate them, you just don't get on and therefore you very much think the best policy is not to bother with them. Well here is the test. Start praying for them daily, start seeking to find ways to get to know them and ask God to give you an opportunity to speak to them about his or her salvation and then finally and most importantly start praying for and expecting their salvation.

Now if we have any problem with any of that process, then we simply have a problem with the extent of God's love, grace and mercy. Remember Jesus final words were to go into all the world and preach the gospel to all nations.

2. GOD'S RESPONSE TO JONAH'S ACTIONS (vs. 4-17)

What does God do when Jonah simply refuses to co-operate? Does he leave him alone, and say Jonah you have had your chance, you have chosen not to obey me therefore that's it I'm finished with you. The answer that Jonah gives us is No. God is the sovereign controller of this world and therefore he can use whatever means he chooses to get Jonah to come to his senses. God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh but Jonah goes in the opposite direction to Tarshish which was probably in southern Spain.

Jonah gets on the boat, he pays the fare, but as we will see he is going to pay more than a ship fare. Jonah gets on the ship he probably didn't feel like socialising so he immediately goes down into the sleeping quarters and spends the time there. He falls into a deep sleep, perhaps he thought that's it, I'm going as far away as possible, I'm on the ship, and I'm safe now.

But God was not going to let him run away that easily, and God will not let us run away from him easily either. God as the Creator and controller of this universe sent a violent storm, it was so serious that the ship threatened to break up. Now obviously the sailors as experienced seafarers knew how serious this storm was and so being pagans from different countries they cried unto their own gods for help and they began to lighten the ship by throwing some cargo overboard. But none of this helped the situation and so the Captain finding that there was still another passenger on board that they haven't seen since he got on, goes to Jonah's sleeping quarters and wakes him up with the word 'Arise' (v 6). Now picture the scene here is Jonah running from the Lord because God said to him 'arise and go to Nineveh' (v 2) now Jonah is awakened from his deep sleep with the same word "arise."

Poor Jonah must have thought he was having a nightmare. Jonah is told to get up and pray to his God perhaps he will be able to help. We have tried all the other gods, so Jonah perhaps your God will help.

Again put yourself in Jonah's shoes, pray, that was the last think he wanted to do, he was running from God, he did not want to come to Him. Perhaps your God will help Jonah, said the Captain, and Jonah knew exactly that God would help because he is

the Creator and controller of everything. He is gracious compassionate and loving and delights to turn from calamity (4:2)

There is no indication in the text that Jonah did pray, if he had of repented there and then I have no doubt that God would have calmed the storm but Jonah is determined to run from God, he is determined to do whatever it takes in order not to go to Nineveh.

But things don't get any better, so the sailors have come to the conclusion that some god is angry with someone on board and so they cast lots to see who it was. Again imagine the scene, Jonah knows full well that God even controls the throw of dice, and therefore he knows that the lot will fall on him. What must he be thinking as one person after another is eliminated by the throw of a dice? The Lot falls on Jonah and then he is faced with question after question about whom he is and what he has done (V 8).

It is then that we get this great confession (v 9) but there is a hollow ring to his words, for at this moment of time, worship is not on his mind. They were terrified at Jonah's response probably because they had heard of the Hebrew God before and knew how powerful he was and then come these pointed and painful words (v 10).

How can you run away from such a God, how can you do such a thing Jonah? Now the story goes on and Jonah knew that the only answer was for the sailors to throw him overboard in order to save the crew. Jonah now has to face up to his actions and for him he felt the only answer was to die. But there was another answer was there not? Would the storm have stopped if Jonah had repented and told the crew to get him to port for he is going to obey God and go to Nineveh. But I think that Jonah was even prepared to die than to see God bless Nineveh.

You know the rest of the story, Jonah is eventually thrown to his death (or so everybody thinks) and the waters immediately become calm. Now what lessons can we gather from God's response to Jonah?

3. LESSONS TO LEARN FROM JONAH'S STORY

a) **You cannot run from God.** God does not allow us to be comfortable when we disobey him and seek to run from Him. He pursues us so that we do not run from him easily. Why does God bother? Because he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love (4:2). The very thing that Jonah knew was true of God and was the reason why he ran from God is also true of God when it comes to his dealings with Jonah and with us.

A disobedient Christian is a miserable Christian, you cannot picture Jonah feeling much joy in this situation, and that is because God is gracious companionate and loving towards him. God will not let him run away or give him joy in the midst of disobedience.

Do you remember the time when you ran from God, O you didn't leave home like Jonah, but in your heart and mind you had run from God. You knew what you should

do but you refused to do it and decided to do your own thing. O your conscience was uneasy about it, but you tried to put it all out of your mind. You stopped reading the bible because you didn't want God reminding you of your disobedience; you stopped praying and your commitment to the church decreased.

But God does not let you go, He is far too loving and gracious for that and so through his providence he begins to work out the circumstances in your life so that you are faced with your sin of disobedience. Perhaps the unbelievers that we mix with remind us all the time of our rebellion. Perhaps someone asks you to pray for them, but prayer is the last thing you want to do, and so God graciously reminds us of our disobedience. Perhaps as a result of running from the Lord you are in a place that you shouldn't be and someone discovers that you are a Christian. So they ask what are you doing here? How can someone with your beliefs be in this place? At such times remember it is God being loving to us he is showing us grace in the midst of our disobedience.

b) It is possible to be so determined to disobey God that we would rather face the consequences of disobedience than repent. This is what Jonah did, he was prepared to die rather than repent and obey God. It does show the darkness of our human hearts that we would be prepared to die rather than repent. Is this not what unbelievers' do when they hear the gospel. They know that repentance leads to eternal life, but they prefer to face hell than to repent and obey God.

Well a backslidden Christian can do likewise. That in spite of God's graciousness and compassion towards them, they are prepared to face the consequences of disobedience rather than repent. They are prepared to feel miserable rather than know the joy of the Lord in obedience. They are prepared to mix in the company of unbelievers rather than turn back to God and His people. We must be prepared to see how hard and deceitful our hearts can become in order to avoid facing up to our sin and repenting and finding God's love and graciousness to us again.

Now is there anyone reading this who is running from the Lord. Perhaps an unbeliever who God has spoken to about facing up to your sin and turning in repentance to Him. But you have ignored his claim on your life, you have tried to put it out of your life, but O you feel the weight of your sin, you are not comfortable in this life because God is gracious and loving and is hunting you down so that you face up to your sin.

If that is you then don't be like Jonah, face up to it, repent from your sin and turn to God and experience his love and grace in your life.

Perhaps as a Christian you are running from God. God has spoken to you and you have deliberately disobeyed him because for whatever reason you do not want to do what God is saying to you. It might be to give up a habit that you know is wrong. It might be that God is calling you to greater commitment for Him. It could be that God wants you to speak to someone about Himself. It could a host of other things, and every time you hear God's voice you refuse to obey. In your heart and mind you have run from God, you have stopped praying or reading his word, you have stopped fellowshiping with other Christians as much as you can without losing face. But you know in your heart you are running from God.

You are miserable, O you won't admit it, but in your heart you know that you have lost the joy of the Lord. God has been striving with you, making your circumstances difficult, calling on you to repent but you are determined in your heart that you are not going to do what God says. My advice to you is stop running away from God. You can never win when you choose to fight God. Be honest with yourself, face up to your sin, turn to God, and experience his love and grace afresh.

Amen