

JONAH - RUNNING FROM GOD

A drunk husband snuck up the stairs quietly. He looked in the bathroom mirror and bandaged the bumps and bruises he'd received in a fight earlier that night. He then proceeded to climb into bed, smiling at the thought that he'd pulled one over on his wife. When morning came, he opened his eyes and there stood his wife. "You were drunk last night weren't you!" "No, honey." "Well, if you weren't, then who put all the band-aids on the bathroom mirror?"

Like this story, sometimes the evidence of the bad choices that we make in life are very apparent. Other times they are not. Today we are starting a series looking at a guy who made some bad choices in his life. We are starting a 4 week series looking at the life of Jonah. To understand the book of Jonah you must first understand it's background and context:

Jonah, we read, was the son of Amittai and was from Gath Hepher (close to Nazareth in Northern Israel). He lived during a time of relative peace in Israel. For many years the people of Aram to the North East (present day Syria - Damascus) had been fighting with Israel. During the time of Elisha there was constant war with the Arameans under 2 rulers: Hazael and Ben-Hadad. Israel was greatly reduced in size and it seemed sure that it would be destroyed.

At the end of Elisha's life Jehoash becomes king in Israel for 16 years (798-782) and the tables begin to turn. (story of Elisha and striking the arrows on the ground). Under his son Jeroboam II who reigned 30 years (783-753), Israel is able to push back the Arameans and Israel enjoys, for the first time in many years, a time of peace. The northern kingdom had not enjoyed such great material prosperity since the time of David and Solomon.

During this time Israel believed that God had delivered them and that God would destroy all the nations around it. This was not the real reason. God sent the prophets Amos and Hosea to warn the people that God would not spare them but that Israel would be destroyed.

The true reason for the peace and prosperity in Israel was that the Assyrian empire in the north was growing and Damascus was being destroyed by Shalmaneser IV in 773 BC. The Assyrians armies were brutal. Massive armies were well armed and equipped with the world's first great siege machines manipulated by engineers. Psychological terror was their most effective weapon. Corpses were impaled on stakes, severed heads were stacked in piles and captives were skinned alive. After destroying the Arameans, Israel would be next to face this great army.

The capital city of Assyria was Ninevah which was known as the "great city". It was very old - originally built by Nimrod (grandson of Noah). It is in this context that God speaks to Jonah and tells him to go and warn Ninevah that the hand of God was against them.

Jonah 1:1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: 2 "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." 3 But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD. 4 Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. 5 All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. 6 The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish."

7 Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. 8 So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" 9 He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land." 10 This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.) 11 The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?" 12 "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

Jonah is called the "disobedient prophet" and is typical of someone who is running from God. Sometimes this is called backsliding. It is one who has fallen back from a previous position, like someone on a slippery hill. This story tells us why running from God is not a good idea;

1. Running from God is FAITHLESS

God told Jonah to go East, so Jonah went West. He went in the opposite direction of God's calling. Why do you think he did that? The basic answer is that Jonah questioned God's plan. He disagreed with God's direction. He lacked faith that God knew what He was doing.

Nineveh was the capital Assyria. The Assyrians were known for their brutality and evil. To travel there was risky enough. To preach the judgment of God against them would mean certain death. And even if he wasn't killed and they did repent, Nineveh would be saved from God's wrath and Israel would still face destruction. To Jonah it seemed like a lose/lose/lose situation.

Remember when Israel was lead out of Egypt by Moses and they complained the whole way? First it was that the Egyptian army would get them, then it was no water, then it was no food, then it was that the people in the promised land were too powerful. At every turn they doubted God's plan

Has there ever been a time in your life when you questioned God's plan for your life? Perhaps you faced what seems like an unsolvable problem, a death or some other tragedy in your life that made you question God's plan for your life.

God's call is UNPREDICTABLE. God doesn't call us according to our own timetable or schedule. Has there ever been a phone call or doctors appointment or event that changed your life forever? You were going in one direction and suddenly everything changed? Life is like that. It can change in a moment.

A young fellow wanted to be a star journalist but lived in a small town (not much possibility). One day the dam upstream broke and the town was flooded. He got in a rowboat and headed out to look for a story. Found a lady sitting on her rooftop. He tied up the boat and told her what he was after. (They both watched as various items floated by). She says, "Now there's a story." "No, that's not a story." Finally a hat floats by and then does a 180 degree turn, goes upstream a ways and does another 180 degree turn, etc. The fellow says, "There's a story." "Oh no, that's not a story. "That's my husband Hayford. He said that he was going to mow the lawn come hell or high water!"

God's call is UNCOMFORTABLE. God is concerned about our character, not our comfort. God wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh. It had a reputation for being a very bad place. They were bloodthirsty, cruel idol worshippers. God does not promise that everything He asks us to do will be easy. I have seen this to be true in my own life. E.g. being called to go into missions.

God's call is INCOMPREHENSIBLE. Understanding God's will for your life is not always as clear as we would like it to be. Often when hardships come or things do not work out the way we believe they should we begin to question whether we heard God correctly. Maybe Jonah just heard God wrong? Maybe he just needed to get out of town and sort things out?

As a young man, film director Robert Flaherty spent many months in the far north looking for iron ore and cod. He found neither, but he did shoot 70,000 feet of film in his travels. Someone encouraged him to edit the film and make a documentary, which Flaherty spent weeks doing. But just as he finished, a match from his cigarette dropped among the celluloid, consuming the entire film and burning Flaherty badly. That should have just made him drop the project. Instead, his response to the disaster was a determination to return to the far north and make a film of Eskimo life "that people will never forget." He did just that, and the result was the classic 1922 film Nanook of the North.

Even though we may question God's plan for our lives, we need to have the faith and courage to say that God is good and therefore His plans for us must also be good.

A man was driving down a bumpy country road and saw a bag of cement on the side of the road. It appeared to have fallen off a delivery truck as it hit one of the bumps in the rough road. Being a person who did not like to see anything wasted, he stopped to pick up the lost bag. When he reached down to pick up the bag he discovered it was not soft and limber but had solidified into an immovable piece of cement. Often our lives are like that bag of cement. At some point in our faith journey we hit a bump in the road and we fall. Our lives harden and take on shapes that were not intended for. That bag of cement was meant to become a part of some beautiful structure but because it did not reach its place of service, it became a useless rock.

We become Spiritual road kill on the path leading to happiness and purpose. God wants to make something beautiful of your life. Don't let this purpose be thwarted by a bump in the road of life.

2. Running From God is USELESS

We learn from Jonah that we can't run from our problems and that we can't hide from God.

Jonah tried to run to the farthest place he could get a ticket. Often people think that they can run away from their problems. They have difficulties in their marriage so they decide they will just run out on their spouse and find a new one. Their church is going through a tough season so they just leave and find a new one. This does not work because often the problems we face are not a result of our surroundings but from within us – which we take wherever we go. Until we deal with ourselves, they remain. E.g. "Run to the end of the highway" – Keith Green.

*Well you can run to the end of the highway and not find what you're looking for,
Moving won't make your troubles disappear.
And you can search to the end of the highway and come back no better than before.
To find yourself you've got to start right here.*

God knows us and sees us wherever we go – whether that is in the bottom of a ship or in the belly of a whale. Sometimes people try to hide from God, but they can't. E.g. Kuwaitis going to Bahrain to drink. We CAN'T outrun God and we CAN'T hide from Him!

3. Running from God is DANGEROUS

God loves you and wants what is best for you. Saint Augustine once wrote “You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” We have within each one of us a God shaped hole that cannot be filled by anything other than a personal relationship with Him. Running from God always leads to grief.

I remember when we were thinking of going to Kuwait. Petra was just a few months old. People told us we were crazy for taking a baby into a war zone. We understood the truth that the safest place to be in the universe is right in the center of God’s will. If that is true, then the opposite is also true. The most dangerous place to be in the universe is in opposition to God’s will. What are the consequences of running from God?

a. To Ourselves

When we run from God our fellowship with Him is broken. We lose the benefit of all the positive influence He can bring to our lives through worship, Christian fellowship, reading the Bible or prayer. We cut all the positive input into our lives and replace it with negative. Running from God puts us in a struggle with Him. Like Jacob learned, you cannot wrestle with God and expect to win.

David understood this truth;

Psalms 32:3-4 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

Notice that phrase “your hand was heavy upon me.” Have you ever experienced that in your own life? e.g. In Seminary - trying to avoid dealing with an issue and God making things very uncomfortable for me. No backslider is a happy person. God will pursue you and use your conscience and circumstances to bring you to obedience.

Running from God hurts us emotionally, physically and spiritually. When the Philistines took the Ark of the Covenant, they experienced this truth;

1 Samuel 5:6-11 The LORD's hand was heavy upon the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation upon them and afflicted them with tumors. 7 When the men of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, "The ark of the god of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy upon us and upon Dagon our god." 8 So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and asked them, "What shall we do with the ark of the god of Israel?" They answered, "Have the ark of the god of Israel moved to Gath." So they moved the ark of the God of Israel. 9 But after they had moved it, the LORD's hand was against that city, throwing it into a great panic. He afflicted the people of the city, both young and old, with an outbreak of tumors. 10 So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. As the ark of God was entering Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "They have brought the ark of the god of Israel around to us to kill us and our people." 11 So they called together all the rulers of the Philistines and said, "Send the ark of the god of Israel away; let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people." For death had filled the city with panic; God's hand was very heavy upon it.

b. To Others

Running from God not only puts you in danger but also everyone around you. Jonah was not only a danger to himself but to everyone on the ship.

Backsliders can not only destroy themselves but they can destroy others along the way. Sin does not just affect us, it also hurts those around us. So many people think that their actions are only hurting them. Wrong. Just ask the children of the couple who gets a divorce. Sin hurts everyone around us. Everyone who loves us. Stay away from backsliders – they are like a lightning rod during an electrical storm!

Perhaps the saddest thing about running from God is that it grieves God. God can be grieved. It hurts Him to see His children that He bled and died for, whose sins He forgave, turning away from Him down the slippery slope of disobedience. All loving parents hate to see their children in pain and God is no different.

One morning a couple of cowboys went out on the range to bring in a wild steer from the mountains. They took along with them one of those shaggy little gray donkeys -- a burro. Now a big three-year old steer that's been running loose in the timber is a tough customer to handle. Nevertheless, these cowboys had a technique for handling this steer. They got a rope on the steer and then they tied him neck and neck, right up close, to the burro and let them go.

At first, the burro had a bad time. The steer threw him all over the place. He banged him against trees, rocks, into bushes. Time after time they both went down. But there was one great difference between the burro and the steer. The burro had an idea. He wanted to go home. And no matter how often the steer threw him every time the burro got to his feet he took a step nearer the corral. This went on and on. After about a week, the burro showed up at the corral. He had with him the tamest and sorriest-looking steer you ever saw.

Are you running away from God. You are putting yourself into a battle that you cannot win. Are you at a place with Him that you know that you are not suppose to be? Let the Spirit of God bring you back to him today.

In order to save the ship, the sailors understood that Jonah had to be sacrificed. To me this is a picture of salvation. In order for the ship to be saved - one must die. One must be sacrificed. We can try to save ourselves - we can try to row to shore - we can try with all our energy - but those efforts are futile. You cannot save yourself - in your own efforts you cannot reach the shore of salvation - it will not happen. Only God can save you. Only the sacrifice of the One can calm the sea. Only the sacrifice of One provides safety. He must die that we may live.