

## **Not Just Another Big Fish Story: Jonah 1 – “Running From God”**

*But Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the Lord. He went down to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to escape from the Lord by sailing to Tarshish. Jonah 1:3*

Peter did such a good job dissecting a brilliant message from the familiar OT story of David and Goliath last week; I thought I'd try the same. So for the next 4 weeks I want to talk about Jonah - Running from God, Jonah - Running to God, Jonah - Running for God, and Jonah – trying to run God; and I promise you this will not be just another big fish story!

Many of us could share our own stories of our own adventures of Running from God, couldn't we...or am I the only one? Ok, some of us have at one time or another not wanted to do what God had clearly told us to do...or am I the only one? Alright then; sometimes when God reveals His will for us...we just plain don't want to do it...or at least I don't want to do it. Occasionally then, a few of us, are tempted to reject God's call and shirk our responsibility to be obedient...well, at least I have been! The message of Jonah is about defiant disobedience, and at least some of us are familiar with that! Right? Before we begin, let's read the first chapter. You might want to bring your Bibles the next few weeks. (pg \_\_\_\_\_ in the pew Bible) (read chapter one)

Jonah is a great story that has to do with way more than a great fish. Many people get hung up on the miracle of a man surviving for 3 days in the belly of a whale. Though interesting, it's not the most important part of this story. The fact that Jonah, a great and successful prophet of God, made a decision to run from God after being called by God for a specific task is what will occupy our time over the next weeks. Let me set some background first.

As mentioned Jonah was an admired prophet of God, which is saying something since he came from a city in the despised country of Samaria. That intermingled land of Jews and Gentiles produced at least some good faithful folks, and Jonah was one of the best. God used him during the reign of King Jeroboam to prophesy about the restoration of Israel and the reestablishment of her original borders; which came to pass in his lifetime. He was a respected prophet in Israel. So why would the call to go preach in Nineveh cause such a violent decision to defiantly disobey?

Well, let's consider point number one:

### **1. DEFIANT DISOBEDIENCE HAS MANY SOURCES**

Part of the reason Jonah may have rejected this call from God was because Nineveh was the capital city of the country of Assyria...one of the main culprits in creating the whole land of Samaria! It was the brutal and barbarian attacks of Assyria that carried off the northern part of Israel into captivity, and left Assyrian folks to intermingle and intermarry with the remnant Jews that caused part of the hatred between good Jews, and god-defiling Samaritan gentiles. The Assyrians were notorious for their brutality in war, for raping women and children, for skinning people alive, for eating babies, and for the invention of one of the cruelest forms of punishment not known prior: crucifixion. Rome perfected it some years later but the Assyrians invented and made it famous. An interesting aside...do you know where Nineveh is today; across the river Euphrates from the modern Iraqi city of Mosul. Some things don't change much through the years, huh?

It is likely that Jonah may have grown up witnessing the destruction of his beloved city and country at the hands of these Assyrians, he may have even seen his own family brutalized and raped, and killed; escaping only because of the hand of God or his wily young boyhood skills. To go and preach to Nineveh was more than he could stomach...so off he went...in the opposite direction.

On the surface we might want to give Jonah a pass considering what we've now learned of these god-less Assyrians; but we better be careful. Another source of his defiant disobedience had a larger, longer, more nationally and systemic origin. You see, the whole of Israel wanted nothing to do, not only with the Assyrians, but with any Gentiles. We might call this source prejudice. They had become quite proficient and accomplished at justifying their blatant and defiant disobedience of God's command for them to be His mouth-piece to reach and win a lost and dying world. They have grown comfortable enjoying God's blessing, but were missing the other half of the covenant... that God would use them to bless the whole world. They had forsaken the rest to preserve what they thought was the best...THEMSELVES! God now called Jonah, one of Israel's notorious prophets, to preach to Nineveh.

And it was a message you'd think Jonah would relish: *"Announce my judgment against Nineveh because I have seen how wicked its people are!"* Any good prophet or preacher worth his salt would love to declare that message to a group of people he/she hates...wouldn't they...or am I the only one?

Maybe Jonah was just tired, weary, empty...needed a sabbatical. Maybe he was not as confident as we think he should be. Maybe he was hurt by some act of God, or action of another human being. Maybe life was not playing out for him the way he had it scripted, and he wanted nothing further to do with God and God's calling. Does any of that sound like any of you? It unfortunately describes me quite to a "t". When I'm exhausted, I get bothered by another phone call; when my tank is empty; I'm put off by another request. When I'm trying to concentrate and get distracted by a hundred different butterflies – I get quite irritable and down right defiant – and disobedience is a short drive from there! I don't know your source of defiance or disobedience; but God has called all of us to do some things for Him.

Maybe not go to Bagdad, but maybe to Ft. Yates...and we'd just as soon not go. Maybe God is asking you to give more...and you'd just as soon give less. Maybe God is challenging you to enter new places in the realm of your past, or to explore new places in your future...and you'd just as soon stay right where you are. I don't know how or where God is calling...but He is calling. Let's move on.

## **2. DEFIANT DISOBEDIENCE AFFECTS MANY PEOPLE**

So off Jonah runs to Joppa to catch a boat to Tarshish. This may have been the same small town where the Apostle Paul was born, not that far north from Israel, or it may have been a small coastal city on the western edge of...Spain! Doesn't matter where, it matters what he was trying to do. His attempts to run from God were far fetched. Where can any of us go to get away from God? The Psalmist enlightens us:

*I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence! If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the grave, you are there. If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, even there your hand will guide me. Ps. 139:7-8*

Apparently Jonah skipped school the day they covered that Psalm in class!

He ends up on a boat, and God stirs the seas, the crew fight hard to make it to land, they throw the ballast off, they row hard, they pray to their myriad gods for help, finally in a last superstitious attempt to lay blame, they draw straws to see whose fault it is...and guess who gets the short straw? Yup, good old Jonah. His selfish decision to try and run from God, has now jeopardized the lives and livelihood of a bunch of innocent shipmates.

So in an act of willful self-sacrifice he offers and then orders them to throw him overboard. They reluctantly agree; only to find the sea instantly calm. They are so moved by God's immediate and compassionate action that they offer sacrifices to God and make vows to honor God with the rest of their lives. What an interesting and obedient contrast to what we see from a disobedient and now drowning prophet!

He was unwilling to go to Nineveh to deliver a one line sermon, but he was willing to be killed in order to save some smelly ship hands. I don't get it. What I want you to see is that Jonah's actions affected some other people, and so do ours.

When we live in defiant disobedience other people are affected. Sometimes our pouting and self-pity have an adverse affect on our friends and family. Sometimes our actions affect only ourselves, but most often that is not the case. Most times our willful disobedience creates an attitude that rubs off on others. Many times when we are mad at God or running from God, there are innocent victims who get hurt along the way. I know that my own attempts (and successes) to be disobedient have injured my wife, my kids, my extended family and some of my friends, and you; my church. Whenever I disobey God, I'm being less than what I've been created to be, and when that happens, others inevitably get hurt. So be careful to recognize that your willful, defiant, disobedience is not only about you...does not only affect you...it may be having an impact on someone else.

### **3. DEFIANT DISOBEDIENCE PROVES ULTIMATELY INEFFECTIVE**

We see it even in the lives of these just mentioned sailors. In the midst of the crisis created by Jonah's defiant decision to run from God; their lives are tossed to the point of desperation. They are praying to superstitious and unknown gods; until the point Jonah is cast overboard and immediately, at the calming of the sea; they recognize and acknowledge and begin to praise and worship God with sacrifices – how did they know to do that. They even make vows to obey God, all because Jonah made a vow to disobey...God. You see our disobedience is really futile.

God is going to have God's way, whether we like it or not; whether we acknowledge Him or not; whether we accept it or not, God's will is going to be accomplished in your life, in my life. You can run but you can't hide! It might just take a different turn or two to see it happen. Thus was the case for Jonah.

No mention is made why he can't swim in a now calm sea...or maybe it wasn't calm where he was. Many scholars and preachers have commented that the problem Jonah had was not with Nineveh, was not even with God; the problem Jonah had was with Jonah. His undiluted prejudice and unwillingness to move out of his comfort zone into a potential danger zone left him in a whirlwind hurricane. The only safe place God could find to keep him alive was in the belly of a giant fish!

The Book of Jonah is unique because it is not about prophecies as other prophetic books are, it is about the prophet. We are given deep insight into the struggles of a man of God, a deeply spiritual man with a very successful ministry, who could not come to terms with the suffering and trauma from past atrocities in his life. He became a man given to anger, defiance, disobedience, and eventually suicidal tendencies. I thought I was done with healing for damaged emotions, but I guess not.

If you are here today, playing your religious role, or fulfilling your religious duty; but deep in your heart you know you are running from God...stop it! You may not get swallowed by a giant fish; you might get something worse! God loves you. God has a plan for your life. God has a calling for you to fulfill. It may be large or small, but if it scares you into some state of running away...stop it!

Francis Thompson wrote a masterful and long poem called The Hound of Heaven. I leave you with these selected words from the first stanza of that poem. It fits with Jonah, and if you consider it deeply...you may find it fits with you...I know it does me.

I fled Him down the nights and down the days  
I fled Him down the arches of the years  
I fled Him down the labyrinthine way  
of my own mind, and in the midst of tears.  
I hid from him, and under running laughter.  
From those strong feet that followed, followed after,  
with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace,  
deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
They beat, and a Voice beat,

More instant than the feet:  
“All things betray thee who betrayest me.”

I pleaded, outlaw--wise by many a hearted casement,  
curtained red, trellised with inter-twining charities,  
For though I knew His love who followed,  
Yet was I sore adread, lest having Him,  
I should have nought beside.

That is the point when running from God. “All things betray the one who betrays God.” And though we know the love of the One who follows, we live in dread that having Him, we will have nothing else. Is that not enough? God is the hound of Heaven who won't let Jonah go...and us either.

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From The Hound of Heaven by Francis Thompson