

Christian, are you running from God?

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Jonah

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Last Sunday we began a new series so please come with me to Jonah and chapter 1. "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.' But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD." Jonah was a runner and God says, "Arise, go east to Nineveh." Jonah arises and goes west to Tarshish. Why? Do you remember what we said? Jonah has done his arithmetic. Why would God warn the Ninevites of the coming judgment? There can be only one reason, a reason which is made explicit in Jonah's prayer after Nineveh's repentance, chapter 4, verse 2, "So he prayed to the LORD, and said, 'Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm.'" He says, Jonah, "I knew it. I knew that as soon as you called me to go to Nineveh to preach judgment, I knew that this is how it would end up, that you can't stop yourself, that, Lord, even when you speak of judgment, you can't stop yourself from showing mercy." Jonah has worked it out: if he goes to Nineveh, Nineveh will repent, wicked Nineveh will survive, which means the Assyrian empire will live on, and therefore how long will it be before the Assyrians again turn their attention to rebellious Israel. Of course, that's actually what happened after Jonah's time. "I don't want Nineveh to repent. I want Nineveh destroyed. I don't want Nineveh spared, I want Israel spared. I don't want to go down in history as the man who gave the enemies of Israel a second chance." So rather than see Nineveh live and Israel die, Jonah runs. He just can't bring himself to obey God's word.

"But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD." Now Jonah, of course, knows that he can't escape from the Lord in an ultimate sense, the Lord is everywhere present, but he doesn't have to stay in Israel with reminders everywhere of what he should be doing. And, of course, when he flees down to Joppa, it all seems to be working wonderfully well, doesn't it? There's a ship going exactly to where he wanted to go, to Tarshish. He's got the right money. What a happy providence. A ship to the other side of the world and it will be manned by pagan sailors who aren't going to ask any awkward

questions and, of course, once the ship sails, God is not going to fetch me back. So perhaps for the first time in many weeks, Jonah has a good night's sleep but the ship that is bound for Tarshish is actually there to bring Jonah back to God.

So we'll follow the narrative and then we'll draw the lessons, so please have Jonah 1 open in front of you and we'll take it from verse 4 to verse 17. With the ship at sea, we read verse 4, "But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up." The Hebrew, the original language, is very expressive that the Lord hurled out a great wind on the sea. Have you ever thrown a spear or a javelin? You raise your arm, don't you? You take aim and you hurl the spear. Well, that's the picture here. The Lord, as it were, takes a storm out of his storehouse, he takes aim at the ship, and then with the arm of omnipotence, he hurls the storm. God is closing in on Jonah. And the sailors have seen storms come and go, they spend their life on the sea, they know that this is no ordinary storm and they are in fear of their lives.

Verse 5, "Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten the load." But if it's madness above deck, what of below deck? Verse 5, "But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep." Can you believe it? This incredible storm going on, people throwing everything over the side and people shouting to their gods and there's Jonah sleeping like a baby. Now, Jonah is exhausted as we've said, but maybe he's asleep because perhaps for the first time in a long time his conscience at last is at rest. As far as Jonah is concerned, the storm, the storm that was in his conscience, the storm has passed. So verse 6 must've been a rude awakening, wasn't it?

"So the captain came to him, and said to him, 'What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish.'" Last Sunday, Eric Maynard was with us. He got off the plane from the States, went to Dave's house and he lay down and slept. So when Dave came into the room to wake him, Eric was completely disoriented. "Where am I? Who are you?" We've all had that feeling, haven't we? I wonder if that was how it was for Jonah? But if he's disoriented, one word brings him back to reality, "Arise." What did God say to him? "Arise." What does the captain say to him? "Arise." More than a coincidence. God is homing in.

Verse 7, the sailors, they may be superstitious pagans, but God works with the grain. They work out that this storm must be some form of divine punishment so which god? Which god is responsible for the storm? Who is to blame? Verse 7, "And they said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this trouble has come upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah." Jonah wins the lottery. God is not just targeting the ship, he's targeting Jonah. God is homing in.

Verse 8, "Then they said to him, 'Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?'" It's all very human, isn't it? Can you see it? Here is the storm battering the ship, here are these mighty waves and they're just rising like great tower

blocks over the ship, and then suddenly the ship finds itself on top of one of those waves and the depths below, and the men are staggering like drunken men on deck and they're wiping the salty spray from their eyes. And when they find out it's Jonah, they just rain the questions. This is desperate stuff. They're saying, "Please, please tell us! Who? What? How? Come on!" And Jonah answers all of their questions except one. Did you spot it?

"So he said to them, 'I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'" He goes on to tell them in verse 10 that it is this God from whom he's running. "For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them." He doesn't mean he told them when he got on the ship, it means he's telling them now. And what is their reaction, verse 10? "Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, 'Why have you done this?'" It's one thing to discover that Jonah is to blame and that it's his God and that Jonah's God is a God that is angry, it's another thing to discover that Jonah's God is the big one, is the real God, is the God over everything. You see, if you worship the god of the hills and you make him angry, then you can run to the plains, can't you? If you worship the god of the Syrians and you make him angry, well, you just go to another country. But if your God is the big one, the real one, the God of heaven, the God who made everything, where do you run? And they're saying, "Jonah, how could you? This is madness! Why have you done this?" Even pagans are astonished at Jonah's disobedience. "What were you thinking?"

Verse 11. Since Jonah's God is the God behind the storm, Jonah ought to know what to do. Things are getting desperate, aren't they? Verse 11, "Then they said to him, 'What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?' - for the sea was growing more tempestuous. And he said to them, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me.'" I'm the target, not the ship, so you can throw me overboard and you'll be safe. But they won't hear of it.

Verse 13, "Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land." Now, if they get to land and Jonah just hops off the ship and says, "I'm really sorry, lads, for all the trouble I've caused you," he gets away with it, doesn't he? And God is homing in. He's not about to let his disobedient prophet off the hook. Disobedience must be dealt with. Remember, this is Yahweh, the God who doesn't change, the God who keeps his promises, and the God who doesn't give up on his people. Jonah may be walking away but God is not about to walk away from Jonah.

"Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not," there's no exit that way, Jonah, "for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them." So now they have no alternative. Having tried to save his life and failed, they're just going to have to do what Jonah said. But if he's the Lord's servant and if his God is the God over everything and we send the servant of the Lord to certain death, may not the Lord then punish us?

Verse 14, "Therefore they cried out to the LORD and said, 'We pray, O LORD, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O

LORD, have done as it pleased You.' So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging." And then we'll have to leave the sailors until next time. And Jonah is gone. He sinks into the deep. He's drowning in the darkness. You can see him looking up, can't you, in the dying of the light as he sinks deeper and deeper into the darkness, into the chaos, into the depths. It's the end. What did he expect? He's put himself on a collision course with Yahweh. There can be only one outcome. But, of course, this is Yahweh and his first thought is not to condemn but to save.

Verse 17, "Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."

That's the narrative. Three lessons. The first is this, it's following off from last week. Christian friend, are you on the run from God? It's a word, a clear command, a call to obedience, but it's obedience where it hurts and you've said, "No. The price is too high. I can do all those other things. I don't mind doing those but I can't do this." Of course, you haven't seen that feelings follow obedience, your feelings are leading the way. Maybe it's your personal life and God is putting his finger on a relationship. Maybe it's church life and God is getting in the way of what you want to do. Maybe it's a long nursed ambition and God is upsetting the plan. Maybe it's just that it's just too close to home and you know that if you obey it's going to cause nothing but trouble, heartache, upset. A call to obedience but it's too humbling. It's too painful. It's too costly. "I just can't! I can't bring myself to do it." And you're running from the presence of the Lord on a ship to Tarshish and you know that you can't get away from God in the ultimate sense, of course you know that, but you can get away from the issue, you can avoid the reminders, you can kick obedience into the long grass and at the same time as doing that, saying with Jonah, "I fear the Lord." Maybe even he's called me to Tarshish.

So maybe on a Sunday you're the first to leave so there are no awkward questions. Maybe on a Sunday you're somewhere else. And when it comes that you listen to God's word, you're not listening because it's only Gerard and, "Well, he would say that, wouldn't he?" And are there people that you avoid? If they're over there on that side of the church, you're over that side of the church because they're going to put you on the spot and you can't look them in the eye and they're going to ask awkward questions. And maybe the elders find it hard to pin you down and you're thinking, "Well, what's it got to do with them?" And if you are put on the spot, you say with Jonah, "I fear the Lord," but actually you're doing your own thing and rather than humbling yourself under God and obeying his command, you're being proud. What do proud people do? Proud people say, "I'm entitled to do what I want to do." That's what a proud person says. "I'm entitled to do what I want to do. Nobody must stop me."

And maybe you're thinking, "Well, hopefully when I get to Tarshish away from all the reminders, away from all the things that I know I should be doing, everyone will have forgotten, God will have forgotten, and I won't have to obey." And so far it's working out. There have been some happy providences. Maybe the storm has been going on in your conscience and now there's peace. You feel the storm has passed. The struggle is gone. Well, of course, because what does God do? God gives Jonah space, doesn't he? Jonah

deliberately disobeys and God doesn't say, "You can't do that, Jonah. Not now." God gives Jonah space. He lets him disobey. He lets him go a distance. That's what God does. He says, "Well, alright, well, go." Maybe it's been fine so far but, Christian friend, maybe the storm is about to start. Actually God has put you on that ship to bring you back to himself.

So some honesty, Christian friend. I can't see into any hearts, can I? You can't see into my heart, but all our hearts are naked and bare and open before the God who sees. What is the Spirit of God saying to us this morning? Am I, Christian friend, on the run? The second lesson is this: how then will God deal with you? Well, how does he deal with Jonah? Well look, God targets Jonah, doesn't he? There's the storm. There's the captain. There's the lottery. It's all aiming in. God points the finger. He says to Jonah, "It's you."

A Christian friend of mine got caught up in gambling and betting. He was the pastor of a church. He was out of a betting office, it was this town, this street, this place, at this time, and who did he walk into? He said himself, "I walked into my worst enemy." What a coincidence. Fancy that? At that time in that place for them to just be brought together. It was his worst enemy, an enemy who wouldn't let it go, and my friend had to leave the ministry. You see, if you won't listen to God when he speaks to us in that still small voice, if you won't listen to him when he speaks to us through his word in his grace, then he will target us in other ways.

And God rebukes Jonah through unbelievers, doesn't he? Verse 6, "So the captain came to him, and said to him, 'What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish.'" God says arise, an unbeliever says arise. It's another coincidence, isn't it? Christian friends, the word we reject will come back to haunt us. If you reject obedience, that word will come back to you and you'll hear it echoing everywhere. And if you reject the counsel of the godly, well then, sometimes God says, "Well, I'll force you to listen to the counsel of the ungodly." This is extraordinary. Jonah flees from the presence of the Lord only then to be told by a pagan, by this captain, "Are you stupid? What do you mean? Wake up! Call on your Lord!" He's escaping from the presence of the Lord for a pagan to tell him to seek the presence of the Lord. So don't be surprised if an unbeliever calls you stupid because God will be behind it.

And the rebukes just go on, don't they? If Jonah's God really is God, then the men say, "Well, you know, I can understand running from this god, I can understand running from that god because they're only little gods, but when your God is the big one, the real one," they say to him, "why have you done this?" And Christians, we talk about how great and wonderful and glorious our God is, well, don't be surprised when an unbeliever says, "How then can you disobey a God like that?"

And the rebukes go on, don't they? Jonah is not bothered about saving the Ninevites but these pagans go to every effort to save Jonah. "Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land." They are desperate to save Jonah's life when he couldn't care less about the Ninevites. And Jonah's not bothered about offending God, but these pagans, they cry out

to the Lord and they say, "O Lord, don't charge us with this! We don't want to offend you! We pray, O LORD, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O LORD, have done as it pleased You." These are the men who are anxious not to offend. Christian friend, how will it feel, how will it be when all your bluster about fearing the Lord is blown to pieces when you see unconverted people showing themselves to be more righteous than you?

And God blows Jonah's cover. He forces Jonah to speak. Verse 7, "So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, 'Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country?'" The questions are just raining in on him. "And of what people are you?" And what is the question that Jonah doesn't answer? "What is your occupation?" What can he say? "I'm the man who God has called to preach his word for I am on the run." God forced him to speak but what can he say? He's the man who's trashed his witness. So, Christian friend, if you're on the run from God, God will blow your cover. Think about that. What will you say then? Ashamed of Jesus? That dear friend on whom my hopes of heaven depend? No, when I blush, be this my shame, that I no more revere his name.

And God lets Jonah feel the anguish of disobedience. It's strange, isn't it? He runs to avoid the pain of obedience only to find sorrow and shame and despair. Verse 12, these are the words of a man in despair, aren't they? "Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me." Christian friend, do we really want to run from the presence of God? To curve in ourselves? To be abandoned to the darkness and the chaos without light, without hope, without God? Do you really want all of that before your resistance to his command collapses?

So, Christian friend, are you on the run? If you're on the run, you may be sleeping peacefully now, you may be in the bottom of the ship and you may be sleeping the best sleep you've had for a long time and God will give you space; he won't jump on you, he'll give you space, he'll let you go, but he will deal with you. Strange providences. The rebuke of the ungodly. The loss of your witness. The anguish of disobedience. And do you know the irony of it all? You'll be forced to obey in the end. Chapter 3, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh." Why go through all that when in the end you'll have to do it? Remember, you're dealing with Yahweh who pursues his children until he brings them back. So to disobey, to run from the Lord, it is madness, isn't it? But then sin makes madmen of us all.

This is the final lesson, number 3: why then run from the Lord? Not just why run from the Lord when you'll be forced to obey in the end, but why run from the Lord? Not just why run from the Lord when it's the sorrow and shame and pain, but why run from the Lord? Not just because, "I don't like the consequences, I'd better therefore obey," but you're running from him. He made you, Christian friend. He meant you. You're not an accident or a mistake. He meant you. He knows you. He knows the thoughts that you

think. He has his finger on your pulse. His thoughts toward you, says the Psalmist, are more than can be numbered. We might think about him every now and again, he's thinking constantly, constantly about you. You're not a mistake. He meant you. Your life is not a mistake. God is not scribbling over your perfect plan. His will for your life, that is the perfect plan. And he who meant you knows what is best for you. He knows the things that make for your happiness and joy and laughter and song. He meant you. And if he calls you to obey, well, the will of God never leads us where the grace of God cannot keep us. He's not asking you to walk the plank of obedience so you're going to fall off the end of it. His grace is there.

So obey. And Christian friend, why run from the Lord? He didn't just make you, he saved you. He sent his Son, the Son of his love, "This is my beloved Son." He gave his Son for you and he gave him to a cross to suffer and bleed and die which must mean, Christian friend, he loves you very, very, very much to give his Son.

"Such love, weeps for the shame I know
Such love, paying the debt I owe.
Such love, stilling my restlessness
Such love, filling my emptiness
Such love, showing me holiness.
O Jesus, such love."

And Christian friend, will you go on the run from such love? He must love you very, very much to give his Son and will you run from that love? Are not the hands that lead you nail pierced hands? So obey him. Christian friend, why run from the Lord?

Interesting, isn't it, how it's described: Jonah goes down to Joppa. He goes down into the ship. He eventually goes down into the depths. When he goes from God, it's only down, down, down. And in the process he curls in on himself, doesn't he? Christian friend, have you been going down, down, down? Well, it's time to look up.

What's it really all about? Is it about you? Revelation 5, we're told at the center of everything is the Lord Jesus Christ. At the center of everything is the Lamb who had been slain. He alone is worthy. He alone is worthy to loose the seals and open the scroll. He alone is worthy to execute the plan and the purposes of God. The center of everything is the Lamb who had been slain and what do we read, verse 9? "And they sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth.'" Then verse 12, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!"

Christian friend, this is not about you, is it? This call to obedience, this obeying where it hurts, it really at the end of the day is not about you, it's about him. Worthy is the Lamb. Why run from him who alone is worthy? Worthy of living for him a thousand lifetimes? Worthy of my life, my soul, my all? Why run from him if in his presence is fullness of

joy? Worthy is the Lamb. It's about him. This is his story. Jonah has no right to hijack it as if Jonah has possession of what he can and can't do. This is God's story and if I have a walk-on part in that story then, Christian friend, don't let self-pity, don't let self-centeredness, don't let pride be that you fluff your lines and stand in a corner and curl in on yourself and say, "I won't!" It's not about what I'm entitled to do. It's all about him. Worthy is the Lamb.

So Christian friend, obey. Be unashamed of the part that he has given you. He meant you. He loved you. He has called you. This is your walk-on part in the glorious drama, the unfolding of the purposes of Jesus Christ which will all be consummated and fulfilled and met in him and he wants you to be a part of it and you to enjoy the victory of it so don't walk away. Obey. Fulfill your part. Be unashamed whatever the cost, whatever the pain, whatever the difficulty. You'll not regret it.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones tells the story of a converted man. The man left his wife and children and went off with another woman. When the money ran out, he went back to his wife but it was a trick, he just went back to his wife and pretended it was all okay again just to get her to sign the house over into his name. As soon as she had done that, he sold the house, got the money and went back to this woman. Of course, the money ran out. The money ran out, and when the money ran out, this woman left him. There's no way back from there, is there surely? Feeling miserable, feeling ashamed, he decided to commit suicide by throwing himself into the Thames. As he walked to Westminster Bridge, Big Ben struck 6:30. It was a Sunday, 6:30, Sunday. He should be by now just going into the pulpit. He thought, "I'll just hear Lloyd-Jones preach one last time before I end my life." So he hurried to Westminster Chapel. He arrived after the service began. He made his way up into the gallery. And as he came in, Lloyd-Jones was in the middle of praying and the first words our man heard were, "God hath mercy on the backslider." It was the Lord. It was tender-hearted Yahweh. And even while this man was a great way off, the Lord ran to meet him and fell on his neck and kissed him and the backslider was restored. He was healed and before a happy death in Jesus, he gave the Lord many more years of joyful service.

Christian friend, are you running? Have you arrived in the far country? The Lord Jesus says to you, doesn't he, "Just come to your senses. Come home. Return to me and I will return to you."