

Chapter Three

JONAH'S FLIGHT

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. Jonah 1:3

We have learned that Jonah's commission from God to go to Nineveh was an absolute sovereign command flowing from the will of God, thereby establishing Jonah's moral responsibility before God. We also learned that it was a righteous command, rooted in the moral character of God and not a mere expression of arbitrary sovereignty. Nineveh was guilty of sin and deserved the punishment of a holy God. Also, from the last chapter we learned two basic reasons why the unsaved should be evangelized. (1) the sovereign and righteous character of God establishes it and (2) the sinful and disobedient character of man demands it. God commands us to go and man needs to hear about his moral accountability before God.

Now we come to the flight of Jonah in his disobedience to the command of God. First we will look at the meaning of Jonah's flight and his disobedience. We read in the word that Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish. It is important to consider the location of Tarshish in the passage. It can be established from Genesis 10:1-5 that the City of Tarshish was named after one of Noah's grandsons, a son of Jaban who was a son of Japheth. It was a merchant city in Spain noted for its wealth. Psalm 72:10 and Jeremiah 10:9 tell us that Tarshish supplied Judea with silver. It is important to know the location of Tarshish because Nineveh was inland on the east of Jerusalem or Palestine. Tarshish was due west, across the Mediterranean Sea, a very long distance from Palestine. It took many days to sail across what was originally known as the Great Sea and later named the Mediterranean Sea. When Jonah decided to flee, his intended destination was in the opposite direction of where God told him to go.

The next part of our text says that he fled "***from the presence of the Lord and went down to Joppa.***" The location of Joppa is south of the province of Zebulun in Israel and was a well-known seaport of Israel. The cedars of Lebanon used in the building of the first and second temples in Jerusalem were brought through this seaport of Joppa. (II Chronicles 2:16 and Ezra 3:7). It is important to correctly understand the meaning of Jonah's flight from the presence of the Lord. In his flight, Jonah goes down from the mountainous country of Zebulun to the coast of Palestine to Joppa and there he boards a ship and sets sail directly west toward Tarshish. But what does the statement mean that he flees from the presence of the Lord? As a Hebrew prophet, Jonah knew that he could not escape the presence of God, so the passage does not mean that Jonah actually believed he was going somewhere God was not. Jonah knew that God was not a tribal God, but was the omnipresent God of heaven and earth. Look

in chapter 1 verse 9, **"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.'"** Also, Jonah would have been familiar with the Psalms of David. Look at David's prayer in Psalm 139.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; you understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O Lord, You know it altogether. You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall fall on me: even the night shall be light about me. Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, but the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You.

What a great description of the God of Jonah. Since Jonah was a Hebrew prophet, he knew who this God was. Therefore the text certainly does not mean that Jonah believed he could go to some geographical distance and get away from the presence of God. There is a lesson here in passing. We are either a professing atheist or a practical atheist if we live and act as if God does not see us or care what we are doing.

Now we shall examine this phrase, **"the presence of the Lord."** First, in Genesis 4:16 we read, **"Then Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden."** Cain had killed his brother Abel over a religious dispute. Cain refused to worship God in God's commanded revealed way. God had evidently prescribed the method and the place where He would receive worship when Cain and Abel brought their offerings. He put his represented presence in that activity of worship. By leaving the place of authoritative worship, Cain was renouncing himself as a representative of Jehovah worship. That is, when he went out from the presence of God, he abandoned the worship of Jehovah and went into the land of Nod and established a whole civilization at that location. In the book of Jeremiah 23:39, God says, **"Therefore behold, I, even I, will utterly forget you and forsake you, and the city that I gave you and your fathers, and will cast you out of My presence."** In this text, God is foretelling the future activity of Judah in Babylon, and He is rebuking the false prophets in Judah for refusing to preach this unpopular message to the people of Judah. He asked this question in verse 18 of that same chapter. **"For who has stood in the counsel of the Lord, and has perceived and heard His word?"** The holy land and the holy place of the temple were clearly designated as the approved place where **"the presence of the Lord"** could be found. To be banished from the holy land was equivalent to being banished from the presence of the Lord. That is, to be cast out of the land, taken into captivity was equivalent to being cast out of the presence of the Lord because

that land, that place, that city, that temple was where God had put His presence.

Let's examine another passage in Luke 1:19, **"And the angel answered and said to him, 'I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.'"** The angel Gabriel comes to deliver a message from God to Zacharias regarding the birth of his son, John the Baptist. He assures Zacharias that he, Gabriel, is an official representative of God. He does this by equating the term, **"who stands in the presence of God,"** with being an authorized spokesman for God. To stand in the presence of God is to officially represent God as a spokesman. Also in Psalm 103:20-21, we read these words, **"Bless the LORD you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word, heeding the voice of His word. Bless ye the LORD, all you his hosts, you ministers of His, who do His pleasure."** When these verses are connected with Gabriel's statement in Luke 1:19, we arrive at the concept that angels, as moral creatures of God, stand in his presence representing Him, listening for the voice of God to instruct them into their moral duties that they may go forth and act as representatives of God toward others. When we bring all of these texts together, we come up with this interpretive summary. God assigned Jonah to the role of a prophet to the Hebrew people. While serving in that capacity, he was then reassigned by God to the post of a foreign missionary to Ninevah, the Gentile capital of the Assyrian Empire. Instead of obeying the word of the Lord, Jonah runs from his duty and seeks to re-establish his residence in the far distant city of Tarshish in Spain. In fleeing from the presence of the Lord, he is officially turning in his resignation as an appointed prophet to Israel and was going to seek a new life elsewhere. Look at Jonah 1:8-10:

Then said they 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?" 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." Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said to him, "Why have you done this?" For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

The sailors asked him to tell them who he was, where he lived, and what he did for a living. These are the usual questions we ask strangers. Paraphrasing Jonah's response, he said, "I used to be a prophet but I am no longer a prophet. I have resigned that office and I am going elsewhere." So fleeing from the presence of the Lord meant that Jonah was refusing to stand as an appointed representative of God to deliver the message that God had commanded him. Instead he was resigning from that appointed post and was fleeing into another geographical location.

Now let us look at Jonah's flight as it progresses to the step that he takes to fulfill his

act of rebellious self-will. Notice in the text these words, "**arose to flee, . . . went down to Joppa, . . . found a ship, . . . paid the fare, . . . went down into it.**" (1:3). Notice his determined will and resolution to achieve his purpose. Read these words continuously, rose up to flee, went to Joppa, found a ship, paid the fare, went down into it. These words are like relentless, consecutive, fast falling waves on the seashore, one after another. Step after step, the disobedient prophet moves to accomplish his goal. Each step follows quickly after the first without any remorse or repentance, and it seems to indicate that Jonah did so without reflecting on the ramifications of his actions. In fact, it even seems that the providence of God is friendly to him and places no obstacles in his path. We need to learn a lesson here that we should beware of embarking upon a determined course of action to disobey the known will of God. We should not think that because everything seems to be going our way in our flight from the will of God, He must be in agreement with our actions. God could have shut the door on Jonah's escape very quickly. However, every door was opening, and Jonah could have interpreted that God must be helping him. We can never reason like that. We should beware of ever taking that first step of rebellion because the second step may be easier and then it may seem like we are getting by with this sin. Jonah's action shows where the path may lead when an evil heart of unbelief gives way to depart from the living God.

In his commentary on Jonah, Hugh Martin has these sobering, penetrating words,

Ah, beware of disobedience like these, stroke upon stroke. You think you may gain your end but the Lord has you in his hand and never more so than precisely when you think you have succeeded. You may resolve to disobey, you may rise up and flee, you may find your way to Joppa, you may find the ship ready there, you may find the mariners make no objection to your company and you are ready to receive the fare. You may crown all and think the day is gained when you go down into the ship. How successful has your scheme been? Not a single step in it has misgiven. The whole project thrives. Jonah is gone down into the sides of the ship and after the weary conflict in his spirit and the weary flight to Joppa, he is quiet at last and fast asleep. You think it is all right now and your plan is safe and your project sure. The last move has been all that you could wish it to be. Yes, but that last move is the move into the very prison in which God now holds you under lock and key. And will hold you until he either casts you out for execution or brings you to repentance. (Hugh Martin, *The Prophet Jonah*).

Jonah thinks he has accomplished his purpose. God is preparing a great fish, and that fish is making its move right toward the ship. Don't ever think that when you set out to disobey the known will of God and you start taking steps to achieve it, that you are getting by with it. Just when you think you are enjoying the greatest liberty of feeling self-satisfaction in doing your own will and not God's will, it is then, as Mr. Martin says, God has you under lock

and key, and He may allow you to stay in that condition until He brings you to execution at the Judgment Day, or else He brings you to repentance here in this life. You better hope if you get out of the will of God, He brings you to repentance in this life because He allows the reprobate to go right on to Tarshish. It is far better to end up in a whale's belly than to be allowed to go your own way alone.

Now let us look at Jonah's motive for fleeing. There are three common views that are held by Bible teachers as to why Jonah fled. I recognize the greatness of many men who have set these views forth, however, I will set forth my disagreement with all three of these views. The first explanation given by Bible teachers as to why Jonah fled to Tarshish is that he was fearful of dying if he went to Nineveh. I believe by looking at verse 12 in the first chapter, this can be refuted. **"And he said unto 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.'"** This passage reveals that Jonah was ready to die and was not afraid to die. I do not believe the idea that Jonah fled from the Lord because he was afraid to die in Nineveh stands true with the text. Also, in Chapter 4, verse 3 we read, **"Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."** Here is another indication in which Jonah was willing to die. Also, in verse 8, **"And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'"** This is not the description of a man who is afraid to die. On three different occasions he expresses his willingness to die.

The second explanation as to why Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh is based on the idea of racial bigotry. That is that Jonah was prejudiced against the Gentiles and did not want any dealings with anybody but his own nationality. Again, I believe that can be refuted by also looking at verse 12 in chapter 1. Notice to the Gentile sailors whose lives were endangered, Jonah says, **"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."** Jonah is showing compassion for the heathen sailors to the extent that he is willing to die in order that they might be spared from the wrath of the storm. From this passage, it does not seem you can establish that Jonah was a racial bigot who did not want anything to do with the heathen.

The third popular view is based on Jonah's selfish pride for his own reputation as a Hebrew prophet. This view states that Jonah thought he was being demoted from preaching to the elect chosen people of God and was being sent to a bunch of guilty, sinful Gentiles. Some Bible teachers believe he wanted to protect his reputation as a Hebrew prophet and that

was the reason he did not want to be associated with the Gentiles in Nineveh. However, I would have you to note in Jonah 1:10 that he confessed to the heathen sailors that he was a wayward Hebrew prophet, but now he was taking up residence elsewhere. If Jonah was interested in protecting his reputation, he would not have confessed to the sailors that he was a wayward prophet.

Now there is a very common view held by a number of Christians that Jonah was a narrow-minded Jew who was unwilling to carry a merciful warning to a Gentile people. Dr. A.T. Pierson in his writings states this:

His national prejudice construed God's election of Israel as a rejection of all others. His religious intolerance was mixed with no mercy for the heathen. His legal spirit inclined more to vengeance than to grace. His disloyal temper made him willful and wayward.

Dr. Pierson doesn't have much praise for our character Jonah.

The late Dr. Kito goes so far as to say this,

One cannot love this Jonah or think well of him. We seem unable to recognize in him those signs of grace which we expect to see adorning the commissioned servant of God.

These two leading Bible teachers have nothing but negative views about Jonah. One says that he was just a religious bigot given to fits of rage and the other one says we see no signs of grace in him. My response to these statements and many others that I have not included is because Jonah is surely one of the most misunderstood personalities in the Bible. If Jonah was such a person as just described by these two Bible teachers, then he does not need to be corrected here and there on a few points. On the contrary, this would make him unfit for the prophetic office and for spiritual leadership. It is true that on rare occasions God can and sometimes does use strange instruments, but it is rather unbelievable that God would sustain a man like Jonah in the prophetic office if he was of such a moral makeup as most Bible teachers describe him to be. However, we do not have to accept these Bible teachers' explanations as to why Jonah fled. Look in Jonah 3:10 and 4:2 for Jonah's own testimony as to why he fled from his appointed responsibility after Nineveh had repented:

Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He

did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. 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 (or because) I know that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, One who relents from doing harm."

Jonah is giving us his own personal testimony as to why he fled, and the reason was very simple. Jonah did not want God to spare Nineveh. To paraphrase Jonah's statement, he said, "When I was in my country and you told me to go and preach to Nineveh, was this not the reason why I fled? Because I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God and it would be just like you to spare those Ninevites if they repented." Jonah simply did not want God to spare Nineveh, and he was prepared to leave his native country and even to give his life rather than have Nineveh spared. What was there about Nineveh that so disturbed Jonah? There are two awesome facts concerning Assyria and its wicked capital of Nineveh that Jonah was familiar with. We need to understand these facts in order to understand Jonah's motive. The first fact that Jonah knew about the Ninevites or the Assyrians was their notorious brutality to their captured victims. The very mention of the Assyrians would make the surrounding nations shutter with terror of ever falling prey to the Assyrian armies. Without a doubt, the Assyrians were the German Nazis of those days. The inscriptions that have been found on the Assyrian monuments by archaeologists reveal how they delighted to inflict the most hideous, torturous cruelty on those whom they captured. That is, we have the clear records of archeology, of the monuments, and of the writings of what the Assyrians participated in those days. One Professor Sase says:

The barbarities which followed the capture of a town would be almost incredible were they not a subject of boast in which the inscriptions which record them. That is the record. Pyramids of human heads marked the path of the conqueror. Boys and girls were burned alive or reserved for a worse fate. Men were impaled, flayed alive, blinded, deprived of their hands and feet, of their ears and noses, while the women and children were carried into slavery. The captured city plundered, reduced to ashes and the trees in the neighborhood cut down.

According to their own documents, the Assyrians' favorite method of torture was the skinning alive of their victims. They would stretch out their skin and attach it to city walls to leave behind long lasting impressions of Assyrian vengeance. Every man in Israel knew these things, and Jonah most certainly did, because he lived in a bordering town next to Assyria and may have even witnessed Assyrian savagery in frontier raids into Palestine. Also, the prophet

Nahum, one of the other minor prophets who followed about a hundred years after Jonah and the repentance of Nineveh, recorded that Nineveh had resorted back to its wicked ways. He best expresses the mind of the Hebrew prophets regarding Nineveh when he says,

The lion (referring to Nineveh) ***tore in pieces enough for his cubs, killed for his lionesses, filled his caves with prey, and his dens with flesh. . . Woe to the bloody city! It is all full of lies and robbery. Its victim never departs; . . . There is a multitude of slain, a great number of bodies; countless corpses -- They stumble over the corpses -- because of the multitude of harlotries of the seductive harlot, the mistress of sorceries, who sells nations through her harlotries, and families through her sorceries.*** (Nahum 2:12; 3:1-4).

In other words, Nahum, is saying that dealing with Nineveh is like going into a lion's den. Again Nahum quotes: ***"All who hear news of you*** (that means the news of Nineveh's destruction) ***will clap their hands over you, for upon whom has not your wickedness passed continually?"*** (Nahum 3:19).

Nahum lived after Jonah and prophesied of Nineveh's destruction. The very thought of Nineveh's destruction brought great delight to Nahum's mind, and when you read that prophecy you will not find that Nahum had one ounce of pity for Nineveh. He had lived for many years watching the horrible atrocities the Ninevites had been committing against the surrounding nations. Nahum felt the same way as Jonah did about Nineveh. He wanted to see Nineveh judged for its sins. Imagine how you would feel if you had been a Jew during World War II and many members of your family were put into the gas chambers by Hitler's armies? Would you welcome a call from God to become a missionary to Germany? Can you not begin to see what Jonah is up against? God had threatened to use Assyria, a rising world empire, to destroy his own rebellious people, Israel. Not only was Jonah aware of the notorious brutality of the Assyrians, but he was also aware that Assyria was going to overthrow Israel and take his people into Assyrian captivity. The Hebrew prophets had been made aware of what Assyria was to do to Israel. Amos, a contemporary of Jonah, said, ***"Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless he reveals His secret to His servants the prophets."*** (Amos 3:7). In other words, whatever God is about to do, He will reveal it to the prophets and He had revealed to these prophets what He planned to do to Nineveh. Twenty or thirty years before the very event, Isaiah foretold how Assyria would capture Israel. (Isaiah 7:17). Hosea, another contemporary prophet with Jonah, foretold the very same thing in Hosea 9:3; 10:6-7 and 11:5 and Amos had done likewise.

Now we come to Jonah's confusing dilemma. Who was going to be destroyed? Israel or Nineveh? As we have seen, Jonah knew that God had threatened to destroy his own rebellious people and use Nineveh to do so. How surprised he must have been when he heard

that now Nineveh's cup was filled to the brim and God was going to destroy it in just forty days. Jonah reasoned that if God destroys Nineveh in just forty days, Israel would not be taken into captivity. Try to imagine what Jonah was thinking. Remember that Jonah was not only a prophet, he was also a human being with like passions just like you and I have. He was a man of Israel and an ardent patriot who loved his country and loved his people. He knew that God had threatened to destroy his own country if they did not repent and that he was going to use Nineveh, the Assyrian capital to do it. Now Jonah hears that God plans to destroy Nineveh in just forty days. If Nineveh perishes, then Israel will be saved. However, there is one thing that brings fear to Jonah's heart. He knew that Jehovah was a gracious and merciful God. He also knew that if Nineveh repented and cried out to Him, it would be just like God to spare Nineveh, and instead Israel would perish. How can Jonah be assured that Nineveh would not be spared? There was only one way. He would not give Nineveh a warning and after forty days, they would be through. God had said their cup has come up; it was full and He was ready to judge. Jonah believed that if he did not preach God's message, Nineveh would be left to reap the deserved wrath of God upon her own wickedness. Now Jonah must make a choice. He knew that if he disobeyed this God of heaven and earth, he would expose himself to God's judgment. So Jonah was willing to sacrifice himself so that Israel might be saved. For if either Nineveh or Israel is to be spared, let it be Israel and not Nineveh.

There was a greater than Jonah by the name of Moses. God came to Moses one day and said, "I am so upset with this whole nation of Israel that I am going to wipe out the whole bunch." Moses began to intercede for his people and said, "O God forgive their sin. But if not, blot my name out instead." Also, a man in the New Testament named Paul said that he could wish himself to be accursed that his own people, Israel, might be saved. (Romans 9:3) Can you see the motivation behind Jonah's decision? I believe it can be established that Jonah loved his country. We are not told whether Jonah was married or had children or grandchildren, but he probably knew other people who did. He had been told that Nineveh was coming to punish his own flesh and blood. Jonah was willing to expose himself to God's judgment in order that Israel might be saved.

What do we conclude from the rationale of Jonah? We must never allow our human rationalization to replace our duty to obey God's command. Jonah could reason all of this out in his mind, but he had a clear-cut command from God to go. No matter how important the cause seems to be, we cannot excuse ourselves from performing obedience to the revealed will of God. Even flesh and blood must be forsaken. Jesus said, "**If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.**" (Luke 14:26). Flesh and blood, human

reputation, and even our life must not supersede a clear command of God.

How can we apply this to our own evangelization, for I have good reason to suspect there are more than one Jonah reading this book. I have found myself all through this book as I, like Jonah, have been given a command by our Lord Jesus Christ to **"go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."** (Mark 16:15). We do not have to go across the sea to be a foreign missionary; there are many homeless persons in every city in this country. How do you react to those people? What if God called you to take over the operation of a downtown mission to the homeless and you must deal with groups of drunks day and night to feed them and clothe them? Would you be willing to leave your comfortable home in the suburbs to go down there to live among these people? Excuses and reasons why we cannot do that begin to flood our minds. We may have too many health problems, or it may jeopardize our income or cost too much money. It is so easy to think of many rationalizations that keep us from taking the message of a sovereign God to a needy people who need to hear the message. It is not our duty to determine who the elect of God are. Many authors and ministers believe and teach that we are to determine who God has purposed to save. Then they believe that the gospel should only be preached to these "elect" people. God has not revealed to us who is elect and who is not. We must not try to qualify sinners into certain groups, seeking sinners and non-seeking ones. God has commissioned us to go and preach to everyone that if they do not repent today, they are going to perish. That message is to be preached to all men whether they are interested or not. Everyone needs to hear that there is a God who is sovereign, who has a right to command them and that they are rebels against His commands. All men need to hear that message, and we must not try to classify men into groups of small sinners and large sinners. We, like Jonah, have a tendency to pick and choose who we want to preach to. Do you find a little of Jonah within your own heart? We must confront all men with their duty to repent and turn to God or else they will perish. What are some rationalizations and excuses that modern day Jonahs use for not talking to this or that person. Here are just a few:

"Oh, I might mess it up so it would be better if I just keep my mouth shut."

"Well, they are not of my race. They would think I was trying to be a white superior over their dark colored skin and they would think I would be trying to put them into slavery so I am not going to talk to a black colored person."

"I don't know if I will talk to this race over here or that rich person."

"Boy, that would be humiliating to go and talk to that banker."

On and on we rationalize, and like Jonah, we are on our way to Tarshish. God will wait with

patience, but if we do not repent individually and as a church, there is a “great fish” waiting. Like Jonah, our commission from God is to **“Arise, go to Nineveh (all the world) and preach the preaching that I bid thee.”** Are you running from the Lord regarding your commission to witness, and are you on your way to Tarshish? If you are a Christian, God will not allow you to arrive in Tarshish, but will bring you to repentance and correct you. If you are a non-Christian He will let you go on that way and deal with you at the judgment.