

"When God Calls, Which Way Do You Run?" Matthew 12:38-50  
Lent Midweek #1 2023

Jonah is a classic Bible story. Someone has pointed out that in the first chapter Jonah ran away from God. In the second chapter, he ran back to God. In the third chapter he ran with God, but in the fourth chapter he ran ahead of God. Jonah was a runner.

On June 15, 763 B.C. there was a total solar eclipse at Nineveh. Ashur – dan was king of Assyria. It was seen as a sign of warning. Shalmaneser the fourth was dead and Assyria experienced many internal political problems. Things were going from bad to worse for them. It was during this time that Jonah came to Nineveh to preach. The Lord had gone ahead of Jonah to prepare them for this message. But Jonah was not very excited about this calling.

When we take a closer look at this book of Jonah, several things emerge:

1. This is unlike any of the other books of prophecy in that it is a story not a sermon.
2. We see the negative Jewish attitude toward the gentile world.
3. We discover God's desire for all men to be saved.
4. We find that preaching God's judgments are effective for evangelism.
5. We learn that the preacher of that message may have the wrong motives, but the message still produces fruit.

We all know the story, but humor me and listen to it again. The book opens as God calls Jonah to preach against the great city of Nineveh because their wickedness has come up before God.

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Notice Jonah's actions and attitude. Is he afraid? No. Did he get the directions wrong? No. Jonah runs away from God because, as we find out later, he wants the city of Nineveh to be destroyed. He's glad that their wickedness has come up before God. He can think of nothing better than that Nineveh be burned into ashes and gone for good. Nineveh is a terrible enemy of Israel. Syria and Israel put together are no match for the Assyrians. Israel and Syria were neighbors who had to get along with each other in order to work together to deal with their mutual enemy Assyria to the East just across the Euphrates. Jonah hates the Assyrians. Now God has called him to go preach to them and he's afraid that they might just listen! So instead of going, he runs away from God.

Have you ever tried to hide from God? Any time we go against God's word we tend to hide. It's the age old problem of sin. When parents of young children don't hear anything from the kids in the next room, one of two things is going on. Either they are sleeping, or getting into trouble. It's innate that when we do something wrong we tend to want to hide. The wrong in Jonah started with an attitude. He didn't want to do what God said. So he ran to hide.

God's word is not always easy. It isn't always something we want. But, listen, if you want a life of joy and peace, do what God says. To obey is better than sacrifice. Don't think about how you can break God's word and get forgiveness later, think about Jonah. He didn't get away with it. And neither will you.

Jonah ran, but I love the way God works all things together here. Jonah heads for Tarshish on a boat, but God sees and God knows. So God sent a storm and interrupted his trip. Jonah is sleeping in what the Bible says is a deep sleep. The Hebrew word here is "radam" and it is used twice. Sleeping he was asleep. It is the way the Hebrew language

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emphasized something by repetition. Like Jesus when he would say, Truly, truly, I say unto you. In other words, Jonah was out cold. Even the storm doesn't seem to bother him. Perhaps he hasn't slept since God gave him the command to go to Nineveh. Perhaps he has been so tense and upset that he is simply exhausted. Whatever the reason, he's asleep. The storm is raging and everyone else is praying to their gods. The captain of the ship finds Jonah and wakes him up. "How can you sleep! Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will help us."

They are desperate. They cast lots to see who may be responsible. Jonah draws the short straw. The inquisition begins. Jonah tells the sailors that he is a Hebrew who worships the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the land. "What have you done?" They ask. Jonah tells them he is running away from God. They ask him what to do to calm the sea, and he tells them to throw him over and it will be calm.

Notice what these men did when Jonah said this. They tried to row back to land. What was their attitude toward Jonah? They show more concern for him than he does for Nineveh, don't they? These are probably all gentile sailors. They all have various gods to pray to. Yet these polytheists show more concern for Jonah than he does for Nineveh or himself. Try as they may, their efforts to return are futile and the storm only grows worse. Finally, they take Jonah and pray for mercy as they throw him into the sea. God calms the sea. The sailors immediately act like new converts to the Lord. Look at 1:15-16.

What might have been the end of the line for Jonah, turns out to be a beginning of his trip to Nineveh. God causes a great fish to swallow him and he is miraculously kept alive inside this fish for three days and three nights. Is this really a true story? Yes. But who ever heard of a person living inside a fish for three days? You have, just now. It's right here in this book. Hey, did God make this universe or not? Did God save

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Israel from Egypt or not? Was Jesus raised from the dead or not? Once you begin throwing out parts of the Bible as myths, it's like buttoning up your shirt wrong, you end up wrong all the way up, but you don't find out till the end! Listen, Jesus is coming back one of these days. That is going to be a miracle like you've never seen. Heaven and earth are going to pass away with a roar! Elements are going to melt in intense heat. But all who are in Christ are going to be saved and go to glory, and all who are not are going to be lost forever in hell. If God can make a universe, it's not too much for him to make it possible for Jonah to live inside a fish for a few days.

What do you do inside a fish? Jonah prayed. He slept in the boat, while the sailors prayed, but now inside this fish, he's become a praying prophet again.

What does God have to do to you and me to get us on our knees to pray? What does he have to do to get us to seek him and obey him? Do you hear what God is doing in this book? He is chasing Jonah down and making him obey. I love that. Have you ever done that with one of your kids? Do you remember your mom or dad doing that to you? What do we call it when we take action to punish disobedience and make someone obey? It's called discipline. Do you know the discipline of the Lord in your life? Hebrews tells us that God disciplines his children. Hebrews 12:5-11. In fact, God's word says that if we are his children, he will discipline us! If we do not undergo discipline, then we are not true children! Jesus says to the church of Laodicea in Rev. 3:19, "Those I love, I rebuke and discipline. (Chasten, correct, punish). Why? To get us to be earnest and repent! The church that is strong is the church that receives and practices God's discipline!

Jonah was a prophet of God. He was given a clear command of God. Instead of listening and obeying, he decided not to do God's will

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and ran. God came after him and began to bring consequences down on him. These consequences affected others too. Had Jonah not come clean, this story might have ended with Jonah and all those on the ship at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. Jonah was willing to die to save these sailors. Perhaps he understood that it was "him and them" or "him alone," and he decides that it might as well just be "him alone" that dies. Jonah didn't know that even now, the grace of God would extend to him and them too. Jonah has a lot to learn about God's heart, doesn't he?

In our Gospel for tonight, when Jesus referred to an Old Testament illustration of himself, he pointed to Jonah as an example of his own mission here on earth.

Matthew 12: 40 "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Jesus was commissioned to come here to enemy territory, just as Jonah was sent to Nineveh. Both had a proclamation, Jonah's was one of doom, Jesus came to proclaim the good news of God's favor, but the heart of each message was Repent! Like Jonah, who was willing to give up himself to save the sailors, Jesus had to give up himself in order to save us. And after three days and nights, Jesus came out of the grave, just as Jonah came out of the fish. Jesus said that Jonah's experience was a sign of his death, burial and resurrection.

Let me close today's lesson with a look at the prayer of Jonah, particularly the end of it in chapter 2:7-9. The NIV translates it: "Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs." KJV translates it: "They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy." NASB translates it: "Those who regard vain idols Forsake their

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faithfulness." What he is saying here reveals something important that is the theme of the book. NIV actually helps the most to understand the Hebrew here. What KJV and NASB call mercy and faithfulness is actually the word for God's covenant love. *Hesed*. It is the word that is best understood by the grace of God revealed in Jesus for us. In other words, Jonah is saying that those who have another god besides Jehovah God, actually reject or forfeit the love of God that could be theirs.

God loves the people of planet earth. He loves you. He has extended his grace and love to you by sacrificing Jesus in your place so that your sins could be paid for and you would not have to go to hell forever to pay for them yourself. God doesn't want you to perish, but to turn to him in repentance and be saved. Instead of running away from his word, he wants you to follow his word so that you can run with him. The end of the will of God for you is eternal life and glory in heaven forever. Do you want that? I do. And God does for you.

If you've been hiding from God, come out of your hiding place and come home where you belong today.