

Message #2

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Jonah

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THE PRODIGAL PROPHET

JONAH 1:1-3

I.

When I was a teenager, my father would occasionally ask me to watch his office while he went out to do an errand. He had an insurance agency with one partner and a part-time secretary. There were times when my father was alone at the office and needed to go out for some reason. Since I was the oldest son, he would have me come down and watch the office.

My dad showed me how to write out a receipt for people who came in to pay insurance bills. That was not too difficult. When people came in for that reason, I could handle it without any difficulty. But others would come in with insurance questions, and I did not have a clue about how to answer them. So all that I could do was take down their messages and phone numbers. I felt inadequate for the job. I did not like having to deal with people who had questions and problems that I could not answer. I did not especially care for my mission very much, and I was always relieved to see my dad return to the office.

Have you ever found yourself in a position where you were feeling inadequate for the mission at hand, or where you felt like you were just the wrong person for the job? Perhaps it was a new job or a new responsibility at church. Maybe it was as a parent dealing with a difficult child, or as a husband or a wife dealing with a mate.

Perhaps you have discovered a verse or a Biblical principle that would seem to demand a change in your behavior. Not only do you feel unable to make the change, but you don't really want to. You are pretty content with the status quo. If you can identify with any of these feelings and situations, then you can relate to the prophet Jonah.

When we look at the story of Jonah, we might reasonably wonder if there was not someone better qualified to do the job to which he was assigned. As far as we know, he did not have any particular ties to the Assyrians. I do not get the impression that he even had them included on his prayer list. Would not there have been someone who was at least more interested in doing the job that God wanted done?

Last week we looked at the historical setting of the story about this Old Testament prophet. (PROJECTOR ON--- JONAH 04) We saw that Jonah was called by God sometime in the late 800s BC to bring a message of warning to Nineveh, the chief city of the Assyrian Empire, which was located along the Tigris River in what we know as Iraq, just across the river from what is today Mosul.

Jonah was from the northern kingdom of Israel, which was to the south and west of Assyria. (DIVIDED KINGDOM) About 150 years earlier Israel had been divided into the northern kingdom, which was still called Israel, and the southern kingdom, which was called Judah. We saw last time that the northern kingdom by this time had become morally and spiritually corrupt. All of its kings are labeled by the Bible as being evil. Because of Israel's apostasy God was raising up the Assyrians to judge and discipline His people for their waywardness. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The primary question that we considered last time was: Why did God call Jonah to go and preach in Nineveh? What was God's interest in the Assyrians and in the residents of its chief city? I suggested that there were at least two factors. First, God has a concern for lost people everywhere. He has compassion even for nasty people.

Second, God has a concern for His own people, even when they are deserving of discipline. I pointed out that the Assyrians were notable in ancient history for their extreme brutality toward enemies. As a result of the spiritual transformation that would occur in the chief city of Assyria, a generation of Assyrians would be produced who were much less cruel than generations of Assyrians who lived earlier and later. So when the Assyrians did begin to make incursions into Israel a couple of decades later, they were much less violent and cruel than they were at other times in their history. The Israelites were deserving of judgment and discipline. But because of the spiritual change that happened in Nineveh years earlier, the judgment on God's people was softened. This was the compassion of a loving God. We looked at evidence from history and archaeology that supports that conclusion.

The question that we are going to consider today is this: Why did Jonah resist God's call to go to Nineveh? What was going on with him that he so clearly and directly disobeyed God's command? What we find may have implications for our own responsiveness, or resistance, to the Lord's claims upon our own lives.

II.

First, we are going to consider JONAH'S BACKGROUND, AND OUR FITNESS FOR SERVICE. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. JONAH'S BACKGROUND, AND...) The Book of Jonah itself does not give us a lot of background information about this minor prophet. We are told that he was the son of Amittai. But the Bible does not tell us anything about who Amittai was. The name "Jonah" means "dove," but we do not know what significance that name had to his parents. The most remembered Biblical story involving a dove is the

incident where Noah sent out a dove from the ark, which eventually indicated that the water had subsided from the flood. The dove served as a kind of messenger, but we do not know if that had any intended connection with Noah's name.

There is one other reference to Jonah in the Old Testament. We looked at that briefly last week. We will review it again now. He appears in 2 Kings #14. That is one chapter after the end of the life of the prophet Elisha is mentioned. In v. 23 of 2 Kings 14 we are told that Jeroboam II came to the throne of the northern kingdom of Israel. According to my reckoning that was in 823 BC. We are told that Jeroboam ruled in Israel for 41 years.

The text in that passage confirms that Jeroboam was an evil king. (2 KINGS 14:25) Verse 25 adds, "**He [Jeroboam] restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah [Dead Sea], according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.**"

There are two tidbits of information here. First, we find out that Jonah was from Gath-hepher (GATH-HEPHER), which was just a few miles to the northeast of Nazareth. It was a small town out in the sticks. Its name appears nowhere else in the Bible. It would seem that there was nothing too special about Jonah's roots. (PROJECTOR OFF)

I did point out last week that Elijah and Elisha had established groups of prophets in several towns in Israel. Jonah could have been trained in one of them. He could well have been exposed to the leadership and ministry of Elisha, who was closer in age to Jonah than Elijah.

We also learn that Jonah had prophesied correctly that the borders of Israel would be expanded. Previous to this the boundaries of Israel had been shrinking because of the assaults of neighboring nations. But then at some point Jonah announced that God was going to help Israel win back some of its territory. That prophecy came true.

Probably Jonah had less pleasant things to say about the moral and spiritual conditions of his society. But the prophetic message that he made and which is recorded in 2 Kings 14 is a happy one. It was a pleasant kind of message to deliver. It would be a bit like announcing that Kim Jung-un was going to be overthrown in a coup. Most people would be happy to hear that and see it come true. No doubt Jonah's prophecy was well received by his fellow countrymen, and its fulfillment increased his esteem in Israel. Probably it had a positive impact upon his own confidence.

We don't know how this prophecy and its fulfillment fit in chronologically with Jonah's mission to Nineveh. My guess is that the prophecy and at least part of its fulfillment happened before Jonah was told to go to Nineveh. Usually the Lord allows His servants to experience some measure of success before He calls them to tougher missions, and the trip to Nineveh was a more difficult job.

We don't know that Jonah had ever been out of the kingdom of Israel. We don't know that he had any direct contact with any Assyrians. The mission from God was certain to involve a stretch of his faith. Such it is with some of the tasks that we are assigned by the Lord. We do not always feel adequate for the task.

III.

So let's consider JONAH'S CALL, AND OUR RELUCTANCE TO GO TO NINEVEH. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. JONAH'S CALL, AND...) Look again at our text in Jonah #1 vv. 1-3, which is p. 774 in the black Bibles under the chairs. We read, "**Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.' But Jonah rose 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, away from the presence of the Lord.**"

Last week we considered reasons why God may have wanted someone to go to Nineveh and preach. There are other questions about Jonah's mission that are more difficult to answer. The text does not tell us just how the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Was it by an angel? Was it in a dream? A text message?

We also might wonder why God chose Jonah to be the messenger in this situation. There were other prophets around. Jonah did not want the job. He will prove to be the prodigal prophet. In fact, he was the only prophet in the Old Testament record who refused to go on the mission assigned to him by the Lord. But God wanted Jonah to do the job.

Sometimes it is difficult to understand why a sovereign God gives us the responsibilities that are before us. Why am I the one who has this unique child to raise? Why am I the one who has a son with Chronic Lyme Disease? Why am I the only Christian in my class, or in my office? Why is it that I have this difficult mate to deal with? My job at work sometimes seems overwhelming. How is it that God has allowed me to be in this position?

Jonah may not have understood why he was picked to go to Nineveh. His responsibility, however, was clear. The Lord did not ask for a volunteer. He called upon Jonah to do the job. It's just that Jonah didn't

want to go. He was supposed to go to Nineveh. Instead he headed out in the opposite direction. In v. 2 he was told to arise and go. In v. 3 we are told that Jonah arose and fled.

Why did he do that? Why did he flee? Was it **fear**? Some people don't respond to God's call because of fear. We are afraid to entrust our lives to a God whom we don't know very well. It can be a scary thing to give up control of our life to someone outside of ourselves. It can be a fearful thing even for Christians who sense that the Lord is leading us in some new direction. If an angel somehow appeared to us after church this morning and said that God wanted us to go to Africa as a missionary, most of us would experience a certain fear about doing that.

Jesus told His followers to preach the gospel to all the nations. All of us who are Christians are supposed to be witnesses to the people around us. For some of us it is a difficult thing to raise the issue of spiritual things with our family or our neighbors or our coworkers. We have a certain amount of fear. We are afraid of what people will think about us.

Jonah may have had some fear. Yet he was willing to leave home and head in a different direction to a faraway land. We will also find out later that he was willing to be tossed into the sea in order to save the crew of his ship. So I don't think that fear was his primary motive in refusing to go to Nineveh.

Was it **racism**? Was Jonah so prejudiced against the Gentiles that he didn't want to see them have the opportunity to turn to God? Was his only concern the revival of Israel? Did he fear that the Assyrians would be more responsive to the true God than his own people? It is possible that Jonah had some racial prejudice, or at least some jealousy for his own people.

Was it **pride** that kept Jonah from going to Nineveh? After the massive spiritual awakening came to Nineveh, Jonah complained to God that he knew that the Lord would relent from judgment when the Assyrians turned from their sins. The message that Jonah would be given to preach was "**Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.**" Maybe he was afraid that somehow he would look bad when Nineveh was not overthrown?

Pride can certainly keep us from obedience to God and His word. We have this natural tendency to want to do things our way. We have this natural reluctance to acknowledge the error of our ways.

Was it **aversion to a cruel enemy**? Jonah knew about the reputation of the Assyrians. Some years later the prophet Nahum would bring a prediction of judgment upon the city of Nineveh. In #3 v. 1 (NAHUM 3:1) he would say, "**Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder--- no end to the prey!**" The

Assyrians were the ISIS or the North Koreans of our day. For Jonah it could have been a little bit like a Jew going to Nazi Germany before World War II and proclaiming the Word of God to them.

Fear, racism, pride, aversion to a cruel enemy all could have had some role in Jonah's disobedience. (PROJECTOR OFF) But there was something more at work in Jonah's decision to reject the call of God. In #4 v. 2, after Jonah preaches in Nineveh and the city repents and God withholds judgment, Jonah prays to the Lord and says, **"O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster."**

Jonah is saying that he knew that if he went to Nineveh and preached the message, the people would turn from their sin and God would withhold judgment from them. What is the problem with that? Well, Jonah also knew that God had prophesied judgment upon his own country of Israel, and the Israelites were not showing any signs of repentance, although they had been given a lot more opportunities to turn to the Lord than Assyria had been given. At the same time the Lord was declaring through his prophets that Assyria was going to be the instrument of God's judgment on Israel.

But now Jonah knows that God is fed up with the terrible wickedness of the Assyrians, and they are in danger of judgment also. Nineveh may be wiped out. If Nineveh is wiped out, Assyria is not going to be in shape to hurt Israel any time soon. Judgment on his fellow Israelites will have to be delayed. Israel will have more time to repent. Perhaps that judgment would also serve as an effective warning to his fellow countrymen. Jeroboam had come into office in Israel with the campaign slogan "Make Israel great again!" Jonah would rather be used by God to see that happen in his own country.

If Jonah does go to Nineveh and calls upon the Assyrians to repent, he somehow knows that the repentance will happen and God will withhold judgment. The Assyrians will be in a good position to punish the Israelites. Judgment will come sooner rather than later, especially given the fact that there will be a massive turning of the Assyrians to God while Jonah's own people remain mired in their sins and deserving of judgment. Jonah rejects God's call because he thinks that his own people will be better off if he doesn't go to Nineveh. Jonah doesn't want the job. He doesn't like the mission.

We don't always like the missions that we are given. Being a pastor was not an interest that I had as a young person. I went to college intending to be a lawyer. I got involved in a Christian group and became more interested in studying the Bible and sharing the gospel. Even when I sensed the leading of the Holy Spirit to go to seminary, I had no intention of being a pastor. The pastors that I knew earlier in my life were not people that I wanted to be like. They were not interested in sports. They seemed too religious, too boring.

In seminary my intention was to end up as a teacher, perhaps a professor. But then I was required to do a summer internship in a church. I discovered that I loved working with youth and preaching. I did it a second summer. When I finished seminary, I decided that I needed to get more experience in working in a church. Eventually I became a pastor. It has not been boring.

You may have Ninevehs in your life to which the Lord is directing you. It may be a place of service in the church. It may be a place of service in the community. It may be a direction from the Lord to share the gospel with some one or some ones at work. Your Nineveh may be a neighbor. Jesus clearly commanded His followers to love their neighbors.

Sometimes our neighbors can be tough to love. Maxi was the lady across the street from us. She was a tough old German lady who had been a widow for as long as we had known her. She was from a Catholic background, and she did not trust the Baptist pastor across the street. I prayed for her and looked for opportunities to strike up a conversation. She had lots of strong opinions. She thought that religious people should not be so dependent upon a church. She was an independent woman. Maxi did not have a lot of friends. She had broken off relationships with several people.

Her health began to decline. She began to let me into her life. At one point she gave me the code for her garage so that I could take out the recyclables each week. Another time she called the house and my wife came over and called the ambulance for her. I visited her in the hospital on a couple of occasions. Eventually I got to share the gospel with Maxi. She read a Christian book that I gave her. At a certain point I became an intermediary for her with her lawyer and her doctor and her relatives back in Germany. In the end I did the funeral service for this tough old Catholic lady who grew up in Nazi Germany.

Maybe you have a Nineveh lady like Maxi in your neighborhood. Maybe your Nineveh is a person who has hurt you, who needs forgiveness. Maybe you don't want to go there, but maybe that is the place where the Lord is directing you.

IV.

We come then to JONAH'S FLIGHT, AND OUR NEED TO OBEY GOD. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. JONAH'S FLIGHT, AND...) **"But Jonah rose 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, away from the presence of the Lord."**

(JONAH 02) Jonah was from Gath-hepher in the northern part of Israel near the Sea of Galilee. It could be that he hung out in the capital of Samaria in the center of the country, since he was involved in

bringing a prophetic message to the king who resided there. We do know that Joppa was on the Mediterranean Sea on the edge of territory that was controlled by the Philistines. We don't know who controlled Joppa at this time.

(JONAH 01) The location of ancient Tarshish is uncertain. Most scholars think that it was in southwestern Spain. Why did Jonah want to go to Tarshish? We don't know. Perhaps because it was on the other side of the civilized world. It was in the opposite direction from Nineveh.

Did Jonah really think that he could get away from God? Did he think that Tarshish was somehow outside of God's realm of control? I don't think that Jonah really thought that. I suspect that he had read and studied the Psalms of David. I suspect that he had enough theological training as a prophet of God to know that the Lord God of Israel was omnipresent and omnipotent.

The term "in the presence of someone" often referred in that culture to a position of service. For example, in 2 Samuel #16 v. 19 (2 SAMUEL 16:19) the royal advisor Hushai says to King David's son Absalom, "**Besides, whom should I serve? Should I not serve in the presence of his son? As I have served in your father's presence, so I will be in your presence.**" Thus to be in the king's presence was to be in a position of service to him.

It seems to me that Jonah is taking an early retirement. He is resigning from duty. He is quitting his job as a prophet of God. He has had enough. By going far away God is more likely to leave him alone. It will be tougher to get him back to Nineveh. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Ever since the Garden of Eden we human beings have been trying to get away from God. After Adam and Eve sinned, they heard the Lord walking in the Garden. Genesis tells us that they hid from His presence. Today we may be more sophisticated. We have developed systems of thought to justify our flight from God. We have the theory of evolution to explain the world and life around us apart from the need for a creator God. We have developed the philosophy of humanism, which teaches that it is possible to have a successful pattern of life apart from belief in God. We have developed the philosophy of postmodernism which denies that absolute truth exists at all. In the end it is all disobedience to God.

Jonah, I suspect, justified his flight from God by rationalizing that it was better for his own people. If he left the scene and refused God's call to go to Nineveh, then perhaps God would have to punish the Assyrians, and Israel would be spared the judgment of God for a long time to come. He convinced himself that it was better for his own people if he disobeyed God and left the scene. At least he did not want to have any part of it. God could get someone else. But it was disobedience.

When Jonah went down to the seaport of Joppa, he discovered that a ship was leaving shortly for Tarshish, which was just the place that he wanted to go. It was a long ways away. I suspect that it was not very often that ships left from Joppa for Tarshish. I wonder if Jonah thought that this was providential that he should have such good fortune.

I imagine that Jonah went to whomever was in charge of the ship to find out if they had room for another passenger. They did. He inquired about the fare. He had enough to cover that. So he shelled out the cash, or maybe used his Visa card, and he was all set. When we disobey God, we may find things in our circumstances that we wrongly interpret as signs that we are doing the right thing. But when we turn away from God and His Word, there is often a boat standing ready to take us to Tarshish.

In reality Jonah was following a course of action that was taking him down morally and spiritually. The terminology of our text, whether intentional or not, is certainly ironic. Jonah went down to Joppa. Jonah went down into the ship. It was truly a downward path.

The flight from God and God's will is always a downward path. I had a sister-in-law years ago who decided that family life was just too difficult. She left my brother with two small children and left town. She found someone in another city who was willing to take her in. There was also a job that she found rather quickly. I wonder if she interpreted these circumstances as being providential. She got more depressed, however, and ended up in a psyche ward. There she took up a relationship with another patient, who was also not very stable. One night he got angry and held my sister-in-law hostage. In the ensuing standoff with police he shot her dead. Her downward path ended in destruction.

Johnny Cash became a Christian when he was twelve. Early in life it was clear that he had talent as a singer. He determined that God wanted him to be a Christian singer. He started off well, but along the way he encountered temptations that diverted him to a downward path. He chose to follow a path away from obedience to God that led him into alcohol, drugs and sex. By 1967 he later said, "**...there was nothing left of me... I had drifted so far away from God and every stabilizing force in my life that I felt there was no hope.**" He decided to crawl into a cave on the Tennessee River, get lost, and die.

There he had a Jonah-like experience. He later wrote, "**The absolute lack of light was appropriate. My separation from Him, the deepest and most ravaging of the various kinds of loneliness I'd felt over the years, seemed finally complete. I thought I'd left Him, but He hadn't left me. I felt something very powerful start to happen to me, a sensation of utter peace, clarity, and sobriety.... Then my mind started focusing on God. He didn't speak to me... but... I became conscious of a very clear simple idea: I was not in charge of my own destiny. I was not in charge of my own death.**" (*Cash: The Autobiography*, p. 184) Thus Johnny Cash made his way back to his own Nineveh, and finished his course. Fleeing from God is never a good thing to do. But when things seem beyond hope, there is still a way back.

God is more interested in revealing His will to us than we are in knowing it. What we are primarily responsible for is contained right in this book. Too often we are not doing a good job with what we know about God's will. So when opportunities come along that we should take advantage of, we are not tuned in to the leading of God's Spirit. The opportunities around us are endless. We need God's wisdom to know which opportunities should be our priority. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is making clear to you what your Nineveh is today. Don't resist Him. Don't run to Tarshish. Do the right thing. Go to Nineveh.