

Jonah Part #1 - "Running from the God of Grace"

Text: Jonah 1:1-3

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on September 24, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Jonah 1.
- The book of Jonah is *not* about a big fish. The fish only gets 3 verses. The book of Jonah is *not* primarily about Nineveh. Nineveh is only mentioned 9 times. It is *not* even about Jonah who is mentioned 18 times. The book is about God. God is mentioned 38 times. More precisely it is about the grace of God.
 - Jonah gives us a clear picture of what sin is and what grace is. Sin is running from God. Grace is God's pursuit of us in order to stop our self-destructive behaviour. To really get this we need two images in our minds.
- First, think of a fugitive. A fugitive is someone who has broken the law and is on the run.
 - The Bible says all people are fugitives from God. We have all broken his law. We are all running from Him. Non-Christian runs from God by refusing to come to Jesus for salvation. Christians also run from God. Jonah was a mature believer and a leader. In 1 Kings 14:25 we read that Jonah was a successful prophet under the reign of King Jeroboam II.
 - But like us, there were parts of his heart that still ran from God. Christianity says that the first step toward true freedom and happiness is admitting that you run from God.
- But Jonah does not picture a God who, like a U.S. Marshall, is primarily seeking to bring you to justice. That is why we need a second image – an image of a lifeguard.
 - Like a U.S. Marshall, a lifeguard also chases people down. But a lifeguard pursues in order to rescue. Even then, a drowning person will resist the lifeguard who is trying to rescue them. But the lifeguard uses special methods and techniques to rescue the very person who would fight back.
 - This is the God of grace. Out of love for you, God will chase you down in order to rescue them. He pursued Nineveh. He pursued Jonah. And he will pursue you. His techniques for rescuing us are often strange. He sends storms. He uses tragedies. He uses fish. He loves us too much to let us keep running.
- What we will see today are two things we must do in response to this God of grace who pursues a world of fugitives. The first has to do with the nations and the second has to do directly with us.

WE MUST PREACH GOD'S GRACE TO THE FUGITIVE NATIONS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** First, since the God of grace pursues those who run from Him, we must preach His grace to the fugitive nations.
 - **READ 1-2** - *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,*
² *"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."*
 - Where was Nineveh? **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Here is a map. You can see that it is about 800km northeast of Israel. To go to Nineveh meant to cross ethnic and cultural boundaries. In verses 1-2 it is Nineveh that is running from God. This is a city of fugitives. But God is pursuing Nineveh.
- Notice that God refers to Nineveh in two ways. First God says it is a "great city."
 - A few years ago I visited the British Museum. There was an entire section on Nineveh. One plaque read the following: *"Nineveh...was always one of the most important Assyrian cities...[King] Sennacharib chose Nineveh as his new capital city, and set about transforming it into a worthy centre of the civilized world. The walls were over ten*

kilometres long, with huge ditches in front of them. Water for the parks and orchards was brought in canals as much as eighty kilometers from the Zagros mountains. There was a nature reserve, with exotic plants and animals. Within the city the most impressive structure was the South-West Palace, the ‘Incomparable Palace’ as Sennacherib called it.”

- So like Victoria, Nineveh was a cultured, civilized, urban centre that valued nature and beauty.
- But secondly God says this great city was morally corrupt. **READ 2** – *for their evil has come up before me.*
 - So for instance, when they conquered a city they would take the men, women, and children, skin them alive, and spread their skins over the city walls. They would tear off people’s lips and hands. They would bury people in the sand, pull out their tongues and drive a stake through them so that they would die of thirst. And then every night they would gather people into the town square and make them do karaoke to Justin Bieber songs.
 - In the ancient world Nineveh was synonymous with evil, like we might refer to Hitler. So God sending Jonah to Nineveh is like sending a Jew into the heart of Berlin during WWII to preach to the Nazis.
- Although God gives all people life, all people have run away from him. All people and all nations are fugitives from God. We disregard and disobey God’s good laws, which are given to make human life flourish. We make up our own rules. We live for ourselves.
 - We read that God will not tolerate our fugitive ways forever. Jonah is to tell the people of Nineveh that God is about to bring judgement on them. Look at chapter 3:4. **READ 3:4b** - *Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!*
- Now someone says, *“It is exactly all this talk of God bringing judgement that I cannot stand. I believe in a God of love, not wrath.”* Listen carefully to me: a God of love and goodness, by very definition, must get angry with all that is not loving or good.
 - A God who does get angry when men gang rape a woman in India is not a loving God. A God who sits back in tolerance when children are sold into the sex-trade is not a loving God. By very definition, a good and loving God must also be a God of judgement or else He is not good.
 - Here is the problem though: the Bible says we are all fugitives who have broken God’s law. We are all under the judgement of God.
- But the good news of the Bible is that this same God is a God of grace. Oh yes, he will bring justice and punishment but this is the last resort. All the way up until the 11th hour and the 59th minute, God pursues not to punish but to bless.
 - God’s compassionate pursuit of Nineveh begins with the first verse. Even though their wickedness has reached the tipping point, God still wants to give them one last chance to escape. And so God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh to warn them. God is pursuing Nineveh.
- But Jonah only wants this evil city to burn. It is God’s over the top grace that makes Jonah run. This is clear in chapter 4:2 when Jonah prays and says, **READ 4:2** – *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 knew Jeremiah 18:7 where the God of grace says, *“If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.”*

- This is the heart of God. Look at the last sentence of the book. **READ 4:11** - *should not I pity Nineveh, that great city?* This is the God of grace. He pursues those who run from Him. God's ultimate pursuit of the fugitive nations is seen in Jesus Christ. God did not leave us to the judgement that we deserve for our sins. No, He acted. The word of the Lord came not to Jonah - the Word of the Lord came from heaven to earth. Jesus, the Word of God, became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us.
 - In sending Jesus, God was saying, *“Despite the world’s fugitive ways, I have loved the world. I have loved it by giving my one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.”*
 - With his blood Jesus purchased men and women for God *“from every tribe and language and people and nation.”* You see, Christianity is emphatically not a western religion. Christianity embraces all cultures and ethnic groups. God is pursuing Tutsis in Rwanda, Serbs in Bosnia, the Achang in China, and the Balda in India.
- God wants the fugitive nations to hear of his grace. Like he appointed Jonah to speak to Nineveh, God appoints us to speak to the nations. We are to tell them that *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* But how can they call on Jesus to save them unless someone tells them about Jesus?
 - Since the God of grace pursues those who run from Him, we must preach His grace to the fugitive nations.

HAVING GOD'S HEART FOR THOSE WHO ARE RUNNING FROM HIM

- In light of this, let me ask you three questions: **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** First, do you have God's heart for those who are running from him?
 - Jonah was a leader of God's people. Like any Christian, Jonah knew God's grace. But he had not yet developed God's heart of grace for people who live in flagrant disobedience to God.
 - This Jonah syndrome is still with us. I see it in Christians all the time. As our nation moves further away from Christian values, many Christians react by saying, *“Fine, if culture wants to abandon God – if they want to get rid of prayer from school, take Christ out of Christmas, and embrace every form of sexual sin, then let them burn.”*
- And so Christians retreat from culture. They flee from the city because it is too evil. They create little fortresses to protect themselves. They create an “us versus them” mentality - always battling culture and viewing them as enemies.
 - But friends this is not the message of the gospel. The message of the gospel is that despite our flagrant disobedience God has loved the world.
 - Our heart toward culture is to be one of compassion that seeks its blessing, not its destruction. Do you have the heart of God toward those who sin most flagrantly against him?

TELLING FUGITIVES ABOUT THE GOD OF GRACE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** Second, are you seeking ways to tell fugitives around you about the God of grace?
 - It is not just that God had good feelings toward Nineveh. No, He acted to pursue them. God did not just love this world. No, he acted to pursue us. He sent Jesus. Jesus, the holy Son of God came down in the wickedness of the world. Jesus was always blessing those who did not believe.

- Like Jesus we are called, not to retreat from the world, but to enter it and to bless it. One thing we don't ever want in this church is that you are so filled with church activities that you don't have time to bless the world around you. Be intentional. Get to know people. Join a sports league. Go out for coffee. Whatever interests you have, find non-Christians with the same.
 - How can you be intentional in seeking to bless non-Christians? How can you step out with courage to share about the God of grace?

TELLING THE FUGITIVE NATIONS ABOUT THE GOD OF GRACE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** Third, are you involved in telling the fugitive nations about the God of grace?
 - There are many people groups who have never heard of Jesus, the God of grace. We are commanded to take His message to the ends of the earth. One way you can do this is to partner with our church in giving and prayer as we send missionaries all over the world. When you give toward the church a certain percentage of every dollar goes to taking the message of the God of grace to the ends of the earth.
 - So that is the first response we are to have. Since the God of grace pursues those who run from Him, we must preach His grace to the fugitive nations. Now, I said there are two responses to this God of grace. We have seen the first. Let's turn now to the second.

WE MUST PREACH TO OURSELVES THE FUTILITY OF BEING A FUGITIVE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** Second, since the God of grace pursues those who run from Him, we must preach to ourselves the futility of being a fugitive.
 - It is not just Nineveh that runs from God. Jonah, this mature and successful Christian leader, also runs from God. The same God of grace who pursues the city of Nineveh also pursues this one man named Jonah.
 - Here we see a clear picture of what sin is. Sin is running from God.
- So how do we stop running? Part of the answer is to unmask sin – to show how ridiculous and futile it is to run from God. In verse 3 I see three things we need to preach to ourselves. These three things will help us to see that for our own good we need to stop running from God.

RUNNING FROM GOD ALWAYS LEADS AWAY FROM TRUE JOY

- **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** First, preach to yourself that running from God always leads away from true joy.
 - Look at verse 3. **READ 3a** – *But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.* There is a great irony here. In verse 1 God says “**Arise, go to Nineveh**” but verse 3 says, “**But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish.**”
 - Where is Tarshish? Here is our map again. **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** You will notice that it is in Spain. This is as far from Nineveh as he could get. It's like being told to drive to Calgary and but you take a plane to Beijing.
- The author of Jonah is taking pains to show how futile this is. Notice in verse 3 that he is fleeing to Tarish in order to flee “**from the presence of the LORD.**” Psalm 16:11 says that “**you will fill me with joy in your presence.**” To flee from God's presence is to flee your own joy.
 - Now Jonah knew his Bible. He knew that you cannot flee the presence of God. He knew Psalm 139, which says, “**Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me.**”

- Why did Jonah think he could escape God’s presence? Listen, when you are running from God in disobedience you don’t think straight.
- We see this loss of joy with another word picture. Jonah is to *arise* and go *up* to Nineveh. But instead verse 3 says he *arises* and goes “down” to Joppa, “down” into the hold of the ship, is thrown over board and *down* into the sea, and finally he goes *down* into the belly of the fish.
 - In the Bible this word “down” is also a euphemism for death. One commentator writes, “*The suggestion is that each step away from the presence of the Lord is one step closer to ‘going down’ to death.*”
- Listen now. Some of you are living in direct disobedience to God. You know his commands. But you are running from God. Maybe it is an addiction. Maybe a relationship you should not be in. Maybe a lifestyle choice that is not right. Maybe doing things with your eyes or hands that should not be done. Maybe you are running from your church, from your job, or from your family.
 - What is your Tarshish? In Isaiah it says that “*we all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.*” That is to say we all have our own particular ways we run from God. My way of running is different than yours. One of the most important things you can learn about yourself is the particular ways that you run from God. What is your Tarshish?
 - So in order that you might not run from God, preach to yourself this truth: that running from God to your own Tarshish is only leading you away from your own joy.

RUNNING FROM GOD WILL WARP YOUR THINKING ABOUT PROVIDENCE

- **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** Second, preach to yourself that running from God will warp your thinking about God’s provision.
 - Look again at verse 3. **READ 3a** – *He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish.* He “found a ship.” This verb “found” does not mean he was searching for a ship and found one. The verb means to stumble across something by chance.
 - Jonah must have thought, “*Maybe God is OK with me not going to Nineveh. After all, if he didn’t want me to go to Tarshish, then why has he allowed there to be a ship right where and when I need it?*” He must have also felt peace about his decision to run because we read that he went below deck and fell asleep.
- Listen to me, if you want to run from God there will always be a ship to take you to your Tarshish. If you want to indulge in lust, the ship of pornography will always be there for you. If you allow greed in your heart, there will always opportunities to board ships that cheat others or steal. If you allow anger and bitterness in your heart there will always be ships that allow you to slander or gossip about others.
 - I cannot tell you how many Christians I have spoken to who justify their sin this way. A supposed Christian man says, “*I was so unhappy in life and in my marriage and then this perfect woman just showed up in my life. I believe that God provided her for my happiness.*”
- Or people justify their sin by saying they feel peace about it. But don’t you think Satan can give a certain level of peace? This is one of his greatest tactics. Isn’t that what he did with Eve? “*Oh Eve, God didn’t really mean it when He said you would die. Don’t be stressed about that.*” He gave her peace about disobeying God’s clear command.
 - Oh friends, preach this to yourself. Preach that running from God will warp your view of God’s provision. If you want to run from God there will always be a ship to take you to Tarshish. Don’t look to your own heart or to your circumstances to determine what is right. Look to God’s unchanging word.

RUNNING FROM GOD COMES AT GREAT COST

- **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** Finally, preach to yourself that running from God will come at great cost. Look one last time at verse 3. **READ 3b** – *So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.*
 - From the language that is used here, many scholars believe that Jonah paid to hire the entire ship for his use. Whatever the case, the fare would have been substantial. Jonah’s fugitive ways cost him a lot of money.
 - How much money is squandered when we run from God? How much money ends up at the bottom of a bottle? How many families have financially collapsed because running from God costs a lot of money?
- Running from God also cost Jonah a lot of time – the time that it took to get to Joppa, time on the boat, time in the fish, time in getting back to Nineveh.
 - Oh listen to the words of one old man who ran from God his whole life. He sat on the front pew of the church with tears in his eyes saying, ***“I wasted it. I wasted my life.”*** How many years of joyful service are lost when we run from God in disobedience?
- Jonah’s disobedience also came at a cost to others. While Jonah sleeps peacefully in his disobedience the sailors are suffering up on deck.
 - Our rebellion is so selfish that we often don’t care or are not even aware of how much it hurts others. How many parents lie awake in tears while their rebellious teenagers sleep peacefully? How many spouses and children have their lives shattered by an affair?
 - Donald Barnhouse says it so well: ***“When you run away from the Lord you never get to where you are going, and you always pay your own fare. On the other hand, when you go the Lord’s way you always get to where you are going, and he pays the fare.”***

CONCLUSION

- Some of you have been running from God your whole life. Will you stop running today and look to Jesus for salvation? Others of you, like Jonah, are Christians who know all the right doctrine but there are areas of your life where you are running from God. Will you stop running today and find freedom?
 - This is the good news of Jonah, namely, that the God of grace pursues fugitives in order to save us from our joy-killing, mind-warping, costly disobedience.
- Jesus, the greater prophet than Jonah, also received a word from His Father. His Father commanded him to go to the earth, to be punished in the place of the fugitive nations, so that we might be restored to our Creator. Unlike Jonah, Jesus said, ***“I have come to do your will, O God.”***
 - On the cross, Jesus was cut off from joy itself as he was forsaken of God. On the cross, Jesus paid the ultimate cost, not for his disobedience, but for ours.
- God is the God of grace. He chases after you. He is like the woman who sweeps the house to look for the one lost coin. He is like the shepherd who leaves the 99 to search for the one lost sheep. He is the Father who searches for his prodigal son.
 - And the second you begin turning back to him you see that he is running toward you, not to strike you for your foolish ways, but to embrace you, to kiss you, to put a ring on your finger, and call for a giant party for the return of his lost child.
 - Truly He is a ***“a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”*** Will you stop running today?