

“The Intervention of the God of Grace”

Jonah 1:3-17

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 1, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Jonah 1.
- **“The elevator to hell stops on every floor.”** So says country music star Trace Adkins as he describes his 25-year descent into alcohol addiction. He says that his alcoholism led to two failed marriages, jail time, countless car accidents, and a fight with his ex-wife who shot and almost killed him. Adkins talks about his self-destructive behaviour saying, **“I was getting to the point where I was poisoning myself [by drinking so much.]”**
 - At his worst point, his third wife Rhonda, and his four daughters, finally arranged an intervention that saved his life. Groups like Alcoholics Anonymous use this word “intervention”. It describes a moment when a group of family or friends corner the alcoholic and confront him with all the destruction and pain he is causing.
- When alcohol rules your life, people don’t think straight. They blame others. They can even deny they have a problem. The goal of an intervention is to wake the alcoholic up to the fact that they really do have a problem so that they might enter a treatment program.
 - As painful as it is, an intervention is motivated by love. Although the alcoholic may get angry and accuse the family of ambushing him, or being too cruel, the truth is that it is an ambush of love.
- In the book of Jonah we see a man whose life is spiraling out of control. We also see a loving God who stages an intervention to wake him up and rescue him. Clearly Jonah as a major problem. Even though he is a prophet of God, Jonah refuses to go and preach to Nineveh. When God commands him to arise and go up to Nineveh, Jonah *arises* and goes *down* to Joppa. His behaviour gets worse. **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** God called him to go east to Nineveh but Jonah boarded a ship and went west to Tarshish, which was the far end of the known world.
 - That Jonah is no longer thinking straight is obvious. This prophet of God, who knows that God is everywhere, tries to run away from God. Jonah even goes below deck where we read that he falls into a deep sleep - as if all is right with the world. Denial.
- But are we so different from Jonah? We too run from the clear commands of God. We justify our sin in a million different ways. We deny that it is really that serious. We deny sin is even real calling it a “mistake” instead of a “sin.” We get angry with anyone who suggests we are living wrongly. Like Adam and Eve, we blame others for our sin as if they made us do it. We hurt ourselves and our actions hurt others.
 - The book of Jonah shows us a God of grace – a God who stages interventions in our lives because he loves us.
 - This morning I want us to learn about how God intervenes by looking at three things: the *necessity* of God’s intervention, the *method* of God’s intervention, and most importantly, the *motivation* of God’s intervention.

THE NECESSITY OF GOD’S INTERVENTION IN OUR LIVES

- **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** First then let’s look at the *necessity* of God’s intervention.
 - We see two answers for why God needs to intervene in our lives. **(SHOW SLIDE 4)**
Answer #1: We need God’s intervention because there are critical areas of our hearts that resist God.

- We can see that Jonah's heart resists God. He refuses to obey God and go to Nineveh. You see Jonah hates Nineveh. And with good reason. The Jewish author Hayyim Lewis writes, *"The Assyrians were the Nazi storm-troopers of the ancient world. They were the pitiless power-crazed foe. They showed no quarter in battle, uprooting entire peoples in their fury for conquest. They extinguished the Northern Kingdom of Israel...For Jonah, Nineveh, then, was no ordinary city; it carried doom-laden, tragic memories, it stood as a symbol of evil incarnate."*¹
 - God had been patient with Nineveh's wickedness for a long time but, as a good and just God, He could only wait so long. Nineveh's wickedness had reached a tipping point. But God is a God of grace. God wants to give them one last chance to repent.
- The reason Jonah does not want to go to Nineveh is because he knows God is gracious. When Jonah finally does go to Nineveh the people do repent and God relents from destroying them. But Jonah says this over the top grace is exactly why he ran from God in the first place.
 - Look over at 4:2. **READ 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.*
- At root, Jonah's problem is self-righteousness. He thinks he is better than other people because of his race and his religion. Jonah has not truly understood grace. He thinks he deserves it while others do not. But that is not grace. It is justice.
 - This one request from God exposes his graceless heart for what it is. God sets up this whole story as an intervention in his life. Isn't that right? Nineveh is the merely backdrop to the story of God intervening in Jonah's life to teach him what true grace is. This critical part of Jonah's heart was still running from God.
 - We all have critical areas of our hearts that still resist God. Even though we know something of God's grace, our lives so often show how graceless we are. We refuse to forgive. We have outbursts of anger. We think primarily of ourselves. Like an alcoholic we minimize and deny it. But God loves us too much. He stages interventions in our lives because there are critical areas of our hearts that resist God.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** Second, we also need God's intervention in our lives because our unresolved sin gets worse over time.
 - Jonah does not just say 'no' to God. He runs from God. He tries to flee to other end of the known world. Every action Jonah takes makes things worse.
 - There is a downward progression here. Jonah goes *down* to Joppa, *down* into the hold of the ship, gets thrown into the ocean and goes *down* in the waters where he goes *down* into the belly of the fish that swallows him.
- This is what sin does. Sin does not kill us like a bullet kills. It kills like poison in a glass of orange juice. It tastes great going down. At first you don't even feel it. But it is inside you. It is slowly killing you.
 - This is why God needs to intervene. What begins as jealousy in high school turns into a distrusting paranoia that ruins all deep relationships at 40. What begins as a little dishonesty in your 20's turns into a lifetime of lies and deceit at 60. What begins as a porn addiction in your 20's ends in an affair at 50 that destroys your wife, children, and

¹ Cited in Rose-Mary Nixon, *The Message of Jonah*, 63.

extended family. What begins as a little bitterness toward your father in your 30's turns into a feud that gets so bad you even refuse to see him on his deathbed.

- You see the Bible is brutally honest about our problems even when we are not. Like an alcoholic many of us don't think we need help, much less an intervention. But the greatest sign that you need an intervention is that you don't believe you need one.

➤ But the God of grace will not let us keep poisoning ourselves. He loves us too much to let us continue in our self-destructive ways. Notice the flow here. God commands Jonah to go. Verse 4 says, ***"But Jonah"*** rises and flees to Tarshish. Now look at verse 5. ***"But the LORD."*** Oh do not pass over those words. The entire message of the Bible is summed up in the words "But the LORD." We are all running from God and destroying ourselves . . . But the Lord pursues us. This is the God of grace.

- There is an old poem by Francis Thompson entitled *The Hound of Heaven*. God, like a hound that never ceases its pursuit of the rabbit, chases after the fleeing person by his grace. Thompson writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 6) *"I fled him, down the night and down the days; I fled him, down the arches of the years; I fled him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind; and in the midst of tears."***

- Jonah could have written that. We could all write it. How often do we flee from God? But Thompson goes on to speak of the feet of God chasing after Him.

(SHOW SLIDE 7) *"Still with unhurrying chase, and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instance, came on the following Feet."*

- But Jonah ran. Ah yes, *but* the LORD intervened.

THE METHOD OF GOD'S INTERVENTION IN OUR LIVES

➤ Having seen the necessity of God's intervention let's turn now to ask, "how does God intervene in our lives?" Let's turn to the second part of the message, which I am calling **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** the *method* of God's intervention in our lives.

- God has many methods by which he pursues people who run from Him. The primary way he pursues us is by blessing our lives with His kindness. He gives us life, breath, food, clothing, laughter, and jobs. This kindness is intended to turn our hearts back to Him for as Romans 2 says, don't you realize that, ***"God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"***

- Another method is to give us what we so desperately believe will give us happiness. Once we get it we discover that that thing that we thought would make us complete, like a relationship, or wealth, or success, does not deliver. We are meant in those moments to turn back to God to find that He is the only one who satisfies.

➤ But what happens when we take his kindness for granted? What happens when we won't turn back to him even when everything else fails us? What happens when the alcoholic hits rock bottom? It is then that God stages an intervention. **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** One of God's intervention methods is to bring a storm into your life. The purpose of the storm is to wake you up to reality.

- Look at verse 4. Notice that the text says, ***"But, by chance, they happened to run into a storm."*** No. The text says, ***"But Satan hurled a great a great wind upon the sea."*** That is not what it says either. Who sends the storm? The LORD. **READ 4 - *But the LORD***

hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up.

- Many Christians have this bizarre notion that all good things come from God while all seemingly bad things are chance occurrences or come from Satan. Nothing comes to us except that it passes through his hand first.

- So we read that God hurled a wind. This word “hurled” is the same word that is used in verse 5 to describe the sailors hurling their cargo overboard. God hurls a great wind down on the sea. This is no little storm because we read in verse 5 that these seasoned sailors, these salty sea dogs, were terrified. ***READ 5a - Then the mariners were afraid.***
 - We also read that this storm was so fierce that the ship threatened to break up. The ship is personified. The language reads that, ***“the ship expected itself to break up.”***
- Ironically Jonah is asleep in the hold of the ship. As is so often the case with us, Jonah is oblivious to the chaos that his sin is causing others. It is then the captain comes down to him. Look at verse 6. ***READ 6 – So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.”***
 - Do you recognize that language? In verse 2 God told Jonah to “Arise” and go to Nineveh. And now Jonah is jolted awake with the very words God said to him, “Arise.”
 - Jonah awakens to see that God is breaking up his entire life. This is an intervention.
- Now I need to be very careful at this point. I need to say that not all storms in our lives are the result of our sin. You shouldn’t think that everything bad is God intervening because you sinned. Job is a perfect example.
 - How do you know if you’ve done something that brought this to you? It has to do with direct disobedience. I think God makes it clear. Jonah knew exactly why. I don’t discipline my kids and then say, ***“Now, go and figure out why I disciplined you.”*** No, God will make it clear to you.
- When like Jonah we continue to directly disobey the clear commands of God, He does indeed send storms into our lives. Like any intervention God’s storms are unexpected – a car accident, an illness, the loss of a job, the collapse of a relationship. Like any intervention God’s storms are often painful – we lose money, our reputation, our friends, our sense of being in control. We feel like our entire life is breaking up under the waves of God’s storm. We feel as though we will drown under it all.
 - But you see the purpose of the storm is to wake you up. It is the only way Jonah would stop running and it is the only way we will stop running. The storm exposed the ship for its inadequacy to sustain Jonah. So also the storms that God sends our way are meant to wake us up to how inadequate our attempts at self-sufficiency are.
 - Are the waves of God’s storm battering up against your life? Do you feel like your life is breaking apart? It may be that God is staging an intervention.

THE MOTIVATION BEHIND GOD’S INTERVENTION IN OUR LIVES

- Now this would be a very dangerous spot to end the sermon. At this point it may seem like God is a cruel and vindictive God who is out to get us. Is that not what we often think when a storm comes? We often react like an alcoholic in an intervention. We say, ***“I don’t need this God. This is unfair. If you really cared about me you wouldn’t let my life break apart like this.”***

- We are now ready for the most important part of the message. So let's turn in the final place to talk about **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** the *motivation* behind God's intervention in our lives.
- To put it simply, **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** God's motivation behind an intervention is His great love for you. A family that stages an intervention with an alcoholic is showing love. If Trace Adkins' family did not love him they would have just let him poison himself to death.
 - Likewise, God's storms are storms of love. Tough love? Oh yes. But tough love shows the true depth of love. Anyone can love when things are good. It takes deep love to intervene in someone's life when they don't ask for it and even respond with anger toward you.
- Notice very carefully with me that this is a loving intervention in Jonah's life. It is not an act of judgment. If God was angry and did not care about Jonah He could have just struck him dead back in Joppa. But He didn't. God wanted Jonah alive. If God wanted Jonah dead he could have let him drown. But He didn't. In the midst of the storm God provided a rescue. He sent the fish.
 - Look at verse 17. **READ 17** – *And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.* That word "appointed" means God ordained it, he purposed the fish to be there.
 - God brought the fish there to rescue Jonah from drowning.
- This is not punishment; it is discipline. Punishment is retributive. Discipline is redemptive.
 - Both are painful but their goals are completely different. Punishment is what a judge gives a criminal to pay for the crime. Discipline is what a father gives his children to enable them to mature.
 - Both have different motives. Punishment is motivated by justice. Discipline is motivated by love.
- God is like the lumberjack who was ordered to cut down an entire forest. As he began he saw two birds in a tree building a nest to lay eggs and raise their young. The lumberjack took the flat side of this axe and hit the tree, jarring the birds until they flew away. But they only flew to the next tree and began building again.
 - The lumberjack hit the tree again, causing the birds to squawk in frustration and fly away. But they only went to the next tree again. This went on and on until the lumberjack forced them out of the forest onto a rock where they finally built their nest.
 - Although we may feel that God is punishing us, his storms are storms of love. This next sentence is the key to it all. I am paraphrasing a man named J.D. Greear who says **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** The storm in your life is not there to pay you back for your sin, but to bring you back from your sin.
- You know that God is for you and not against you because of what God did for you in Jesus. God sent Jesus down into this world. Jesus voluntarily entered into the storm of God's wrath against human sin. Jesus went down into the darkness of death. He took all the punishment that we deserve. Just as Jonah was swallowed by the fish, Jesus was swallowed by death.
 - In Mt 12 Jesus says, ***"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."*** The death that you and I deserved to die, Jesus died on our behalf. But after three days Jesus exploded out of the belly of death. He killed death. Death died in the death of Christ.

- Do you see how important this is to understand? You can know with absolute certainty that God only has your best interest in mind, that he only brings storms into your life out of love, because Jesus faced the wrath of God on your behalf.
- It is so critical to recall in the storm that because of what Jesus did you are a child of God whom he is disciplining, not an enemy whom He is out to destroy.
 - This is what Hebrews 12 is all about. ***“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” ⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.***
- This reminds me of an old fairy tale about a wicked witch who lived in a forest. When strangers would come by she would offer them a bed. The bed was extremely comfortable but if you were in it when the sun came up in the morning you would turn to stone. The problem was that you would know you turned to stone. The room would become your mausoleum for all eternity.
 - One day a young man came along and the witch actually fell in love with him. When he went to bed at night the love struck witch threw thorns and sticks into his bed. He woke up well before dawn but was quite put out by having to rise so early. It was the same the next night. She threw stones and branches into his bed and again he woke before dawn and was totally exhausted.
 - He yelled at the witch, ***“You are wicked. Why can’t you just let me enjoy this bed which is so comfortable?”*** She looked at him and said, ***“The misery that you know now cannot compare to the misery that your comfort would have brought. Those were stones of love I threw in there.”***
- If a wicked witch can love enough to do this, how much more does our Father in heaven love us. His stones are stones of love.

CONCLUSION

- So do you see the lesson today then? When we run from God we become like alcoholics, justifying our sin and denying we have a problem, when in reality we are slowly poisoning ourselves.
 - But out of love God stages interventions in our lives. He sends storms not to pay us back for our sins but to bring us back from our sin. God’s storms are storms of love. They are the loving discipline of a father who cares too much about his children to allow them to continue in their self-destructive ways.
 - They are meant to show you that you are not self-sufficient. They are meant to wake you up to the fact that you are sailing in the wrong direction. They are meant to jar you before the tree of your life comes crashing down. They are meant to save you from turning to stone at the dawn of His coming.
- The only question is how will we respond to the storm? Will we get bitter at God? Will we deny we have a problem? Will we accuse him of being cruel and keep pressing on to Tarshish?
 - Or will we stop justifying ourselves, stop laying blame on others, admit our fault, and allow God’s treatment plan for us to begin?