

## **Jonah: A Man on the Run**

### **Running Against God - Jonah 4:1-11**

**Introduction:** For the past three weeks, we've looked at Jonah's life on the run: Running from God, Running to God, and Running with God. Today, we come to the end of the Biblical account of this episode in Jonah's life. Just for the sake of review, let's see where Jonah is on his run with the Lord.

You will remember that God called Jonah as a prophet to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, located in what is today Northern Iraq. It was a great city but it was also a wicked city known for its immorality and violence.

During the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC the Assyrian Empire controlled most of the world, including Israel. They brutally oppressed Israel. Their King Sennacrib destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC.

When Jonah heard the call to go to Nineveh and preach, he ran away in the opposite direction. It may have been partly out of fear, but most likely, it was his hatred of the Assyrians that caused him to run. After all, the Assyrians were Gentiles, not Jews. The Assyrians had terrorized his people. Jonah didn't want them to be spared. He didn't think they deserved repentance. He wanted God to destroy them. So he ran as far away as he could go.

Jonah would have preferred to die rather than go to Nineveh. When a storm threatened to sink the ship, Jonah told the sailors to throw him overboard. After some agonizing prayer and tireless effort to make it to safety, they did it out of fear for their lives.

Then the big fish that God created came along and swallowed Jonah. God saved his life in that fish where he stayed for three days. There Jonah cried out in agony for God to save him.

Well, after three days, God caused the fish to spew Jonah out onto dry land and that's when we saw last week where God called him a second time to go to Nineveh. He went this time and delivered the Lord's message, *"Nineveh you've got 40 days to repent!"*

To Jonah's chagrin, the Ninevites did just that. They all asked for God's forgiveness, from the King, down to the lowliest slave. Now Jonah was really ticked off! He really wanted this sinful city destroyed. After all, in his mind, they were Gentiles, unclean, unlearned, and undeserving of God's mercy.

In anger and frustration Jonah stomped off into the desert to die in the sun. He said, God, *"I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending*

calamity” (**Jonah 4:2b NIV**). His attitude was, “*God, I knew you would do this, so why don’t you just kill me?*”

But then God did something that seems a little strange. When Jonah went out to pout and throw himself a little pity party in the desert heat, God caused a bush to grow to give him shade.

Now why would God do this? It would seem that God at this point would be completely fed up with Jonah’s attitude and would be ready to grant his wish and destroy Him! But He doesn’t. Instead, God stays true to His character as a “*gracious and compassionate God,*” and shows compassion on Jonah. In effect, God was saying, “*Jonah, I’m not going to let you off that easy son. Letting you die would be such a waste.*”

Do you see what happened here? God wouldn’t let him go. God wouldn’t stop loving Jonah. The same mercy He demonstrated to Nenevah, He wanted to demonstrate to Jonah...again!

What can we learn from this story of Jonah’s on and off relationship with God? Well first here is:

### **1. What We Learn About Ourselves.**

The story tells us about ourselves in two ways. Like Jonah:

#### **A. We Want God on Our Own Terms**

Have you heard the story about the faithful man who got caught in a flood? The flood waters were rising and he was praying, “*God, please get me out of this. I believe you can do it.*” About that time, a man in a jeep came out to rescue him, but the man refused and said, “*No, you go on and save yourself. God will save me!*”

Well the waters continued to rise until the man found himself on the roof. A rescue boat came by, but again he said, “*No you guys go on to someone else. God gonna save me!*”

Finally, the faithful man had to climb up to the chimney of his home to escape the rising waters. About that time a helicopter flew over to rescue him, but again he refused the help. “*You all go on*” he yelled, “*God’s gonna rescue me!*”

Well, the man eventually drowned, and he found himself at the pearly gates of heaven where St. Peter was waiting to greet him. But the man was beside himself. He was ranting and raving and pitching a holy fit. St. Peter said, “*What wrong brother? Don’t you like it here?*”

The man said, “*No it’s not that. It’s just that I’m here too early. I was faithful all my life. I just knew God would come down and rescue me from that flood. I can’t believe God let me down like that!*”

Just then God walked up from behind the gate and approached the man. He said, “*Sir, I sent you a jeep, a boat and a helicopter, what more did you want me to do?*”

You see, we're just like that man. We want God on our own terms, and can't always see, or more precisely, we refuse to see the obvious ways God is reaching out to us.

That is why a lot of folks will run from emotion to emotion, from church to church, trying to find the worship style, the right theology or the right kind of preacher who won't cramp their style. But listen, the same God will find you no matter what the style or emotion.

It's the same when it comes to church growth. Most people would say, "*Well, I want my church to grow. I want our church to reach out to our community.*" But when it comes right down to it, for a lot of folks that means, "*I want our church to attract more people just like me. I don't want 'certain' types of people in my church. And I want our preacher to do the reaching out, because I don't have time.*" You see, we tend to want things our way. We want our church to be exactly the way "we" want it to be.

And for the most part, that's the way we want our God to be. We want Him to fit in our mold – to be conformed to our image. And when that is our attitude, we are no different than Jonah who ran from God's call because Jonah would have no part of a loving and gracious God's attempt to save a foreign, sinful people. But there's another thing running against God shows us about ourselves.

### **B. We Wish God Would Just Leave Us Alone.**

You see, a lot of people come to church because they want God to make them comfortable.

The New Testament scholar Karl Barth once wrote that "*the church is not only the place where man meets God; it is often also the place where man makes his last stand against God.*"

Let's be honest, how many times do we come to church for a soothing massage rather than repentance? How many times are we looking for the church to teach us how to cope with life rather than compel us to change our world?

How often do people come to the preacher in desperation asking for his support as they struggle with whatever problem they have but when the preacher dares to point out that the problem might be them, well, he's gotten too personal? How many folks expect the Church to symphonize with them because of their circumstances but God forbid if the Church suggests that nothing will change until you do?

You expect the preacher to apply a little salve on your past and ease your conscious. But for the preacher to boldly suggest that you need to change, well, that's meddling. It's getting too personal, and you want to run and hide.

Jonah went down to the cargo hold of a ship heading West to hide from the God who was calling him to go East.

How many of us come to church to hide? How many slide down in a church pew on Sunday hoping that no one will notice how much we hurt...or how much we doubt...or how much we don't care?

Sometimes we're just like Jonah. We would really like for God to just to leave us alone. What else can we learn from Jonah's attempt to run against God?

## **2. We Learn Something About God.**

The story of Jonah also tells us two things about God: First:

### **A. God Refuses to Let You Go.**

I went through a terrible crisis during my second year of seminary. I was making all "A's." I know, that's awful. But unbeknownst to others, I was barely keeping my head above water.

I was going through a rough time. Things were not going well at my church. My relationship with the Pastor was deteriorating. I felt shunned, unappreciated, and unwanted. I was under extreme emotional pressure. Everything I tried to do to rectify the situation, only seemed to make matters worse. Every suggestion I'd make would be met with opposition. I felt alone and afraid.

Then, I came down sick and had to be hospitalized with a severe allergic reaction to penicillin. And after that, came a period of real depression. Not only for me, but Elaine even more. She began to have panic attacks, crying spells, neck problems. She couldn't even sit in church without thinking everyone was staring at her.

We thought we were losing our sanity, maybe we were. It got to where I was praying, "*God, it's either the preacher goes, or I go.*" And, I was raised, never to talk bad about the preacher.

But by the grace of God and much praying, God came on the scene. In spite of my selfish prayers, and in spite of my making a "C" in one class, and in spite of my doubts on whether I was really called to the ministry, one day, God broke through my fog and confronted me saying, "*Steve, do you have something to say with your life or not,*" to which I responded, "*Well, yes, I think so.*" "*Then let me handle things. OK?*" And within a month, a call came from another church, out of the blue, to come for an interview.

And now a guy who used to believe he couldn't be trusted with a comb in a room full of bald heads, is now the pastor of the best church in the world! I am telling you, God refuses to let you go.

Have you ever heard of the doctrine of "*prevenient grace?*" Prevenient grace describes the action God

takes to bring us into relationship even before we decide to believe. Every prayer your mother taught you, every lesson of your Sunday School teacher shared, every act of loving kindness from a stranger or a friend, was an agent of God's prevenient grace.

Since the day you were born, God has been trying to claim your life and bring you into a right relationship. And whether you know it or not, God is working on you now. You may be running from Him. You may be even running against Him God will not let you go. Secondly, we can learn this about God from Jonah's story:

### **B. God Refuses to Be Anything Less Than God.**

Jonah resisted God's call because he knew God so well. The Ninevites deserved wrath and judgment. They deserved God's punishment. Jonah wasn't afraid to tell them that. He was afraid that God would give those Gentiles a second chance and change His mind. That is what he said in vs. 2.

Jonah wanted God to justify his own prejudice and hatred, not change it, and not use it as a means of salvation.

We are so much like Jonah when we come even to church hoping that God won't notice or care about our sin. But like Jonah, we're running up against a God who doesn't change. We're running up against a God who refuses not to be God

God was not going to bless Jonah when he tried to hurt himself or others. And He won't bless you either when you try to make Him to be something He's not. I'm sorry. God doesn't work that way.

God is always moving us, disturbing us, disrupting the routine. God will not change.

Just before heavyweight champion Joe Louis was going into the ring once, reporters asked him, "*Are you worried about this fight? Aren't you worried that he will dance around you?*" Joe thought for a moment and then said, "*Well, he can run but he can't hide.*"

Ole Jonah found out that he could try to run from God, or try to run up against God, but he couldn't hide from God. Neither can we.

**Conclusion:** Jonah's story is our story in so many ways. Sometimes, we want God on our own terms. Sometimes all we want is for God to leave us alone. But I am here to tell you today that God won't let you go that easy. And God won't be anything else but God.

Don't try to fight God. Don't try to play games with Him. He's not out to ruin your life, or make it miserable. He wants to meet your needs, but He also demands obedience. You might as well give in now, while

His grace is abundant and free.