

“RELUCTANT PROPHET, RELENTLESS GOD”

JONAH 1:1-4

For the next several weeks we are going to study the Book of Jonah (which is located near the end of the Old Testament). Most of us are familiar with the story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet whom God appointed to go to Nineveh - how he ran away from the Lord and was thrown into the sea and swallowed by a great fish, who spit him up on dry ground so he could get on with God's assignment for him.

But the Book of Jonah is not *primarily* about a reluctant prophet, even though there are some lessons we can learn from his life. It is about a relentless God. It's about a God who, in His grace, wants to reveal Himself to ignorant, immoral, and idolatrous people so that they might know Him and be reconciled to Him. And I want to try and keep that “big picture” perspective before you throughout our study.

Jonah was a Galilean prophet who served during the reign of Jeroboam II, king over the northern tribes of Israel from 786-746 B.C. This was about twenty-five years before they were captured and enslaved by the Assyrians. Even though Jeroboam was a wicked king, Jonah was a righteous man and a genuine prophet of Yahweh who regularly received messages from the LORD and spoke on His behalf.

Those messages typically concerned the people of Israel, the covenant people of God. And even though many of those messages were difficult to deliver, given the deplorable spiritual condition of Israel at the time, Jonah was faithful to do it, because he had a deep love for and loyalty to Israel. But one day Jonah received an altogether different kind of message from God concerning a people who were strangers to God's covenant and enemies of Israel, and it not only startled Jonah; it also produced in him a very strong reaction.

Look at **verses 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.”*

Keep in mind that Jonah was accustomed to getting his marching orders from the LORD. He was on call, 24/7, waiting for the LORD to tell him where to go and what to say, and some days the LORD spoke to him and some days He didn't.

Furthermore, as a prophet of the LORD, Jonah understood that when God spoke, He did not make suggestions. He never *asked* Jonah if he would *consider* doing such and such, or if he would *like* to go here or there, and He never *consulted* with Jonah to find out what he thought about his particular assignments. Jonah was His servant. God told him what to do and say, and he expected Jonah to do and say it.

Apparently, up until this time, Jonah was okay with this arrangement. But when God told him to go to Nineveh and preach against it because their evil had come up before him, it was a different story.

Nineveh was the capital city of the ancient Assyrian Empire, which is modern day Iraq. It was located on the east bank of the Tigris River (near present day Mosul) more than 500 miles northeast of Israel. It was the greatest, most impressive city in the world at this time, with an urban perimeter of seven and a half miles.

When Jonah received the word from the LORD to preach against Nineveh, he immediately grasped the profound implications of the call. And so, we read in **verse 3**. *But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.*

It would be perfectly logical to assume that Jonah ran away because he was afraid. The Assyrians were renowned for their violence and brutality, especially to foreigners. Furthermore, the Assyrians hated the Hebrews, and had oppressed them severely. Jonah could have surmised that since he was unknown to the people of Nineveh - since he was a despised Hebrew - he would most likely be mocked, mistreated, or even murdered.

But if we look closely at verse 3, we can plainly see that fear was *not* the reason Jonah fled. He was actually trying to run away from *the LORD*. Why? Later in the story Jonah states the reason. *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 (4:2).*

In other words, he was afraid that the Ninevites would be *receptive* to his message, that they would *repent*, and that God would be *merciful*. And that was *not* okay with Jonah. Let me explain why: The Assyrians were Israel's worst enemy and the bane of the ancient world. They were a powerful and well-developed civilization, known for their brutal and grisly treatment of their enemies. Think of the most vicious and vile people who have wielded their power in the most heartless and inhumane ways. Let's say that you were in a concentration camp in Poland during WW2, and you had watched friends and loved ones being gassed and incinerated, and then God told you to go to Berlin and preach the gospel to Hitler and the Gestapo. How would you feel about doing that?

Jonah was not interested in participating in the redemption of Ninevites. He believed they should be punished and condemned for their wickedness, not given an opportunity to repent and be saved. He believed *God* was being disloyal to His covenant people by communicating with the Ninevites. He was offended that God might be gracious toward habitual and flagrant perpetrators of heinous crimes. And he wanted nothing to do with such a God.

So, he fled from the presence of the LORD. It is, of course, impossible to run away from Yahweh, and Jonah knew it. He was undoubtedly familiar with David's psalm in which he cried out,

7 Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! 9 If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me (139:7-10).

So, I don't think there was anything wrong about Jonah's theology. This was not a head issue, but a heart issue. Jonah was angry and disappointed...with God. He was upset that God didn't hate the Ninevites like he did. So, he decided to quit his profession. The expression in verse 3 is literally "*from the presence of the LORD*," which technically means to flee from the temple or the place where the LORD typically reveals Himself (Bruckner, 54).

Jonah ran from the place where he was accustomed to hearing the word of Yahweh, hoping that if he could distance himself from the *place* where he heard God's voice maybe God would leave him alone - maybe God would stop asking him to speak on His behalf. So, he heads for Tarshish.

Why Tarshish? Because it was the furthest place that Jonah could think of from Israel or Nineveh. It was located in southern Spain, just west of Gibraltar, and was *the* westernmost place in the Mediterranean world. Yahweh was neither honored nor known in Tarshish, and it is likely that Jonah hoped that in such a place he would be able to put God out of his mind and live in peace.

But the LORD was not about to let that happen. **Verse 4**, *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.*

We'll talk more about this violent storm and what happened as a result next time. But notice who was responsible for this storm. *"The LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea."* God, who is sovereign and controls all things in this universe, was responsible for the storm. He *caused* the wind to blow so that the waves would roil and the ship would be tossed to and fro, and He did it in order to get the attention of one angry, sullen servant who had had it with him, so that he could restore him to Himself and bring him back into alignment with His will.

You say, "There must have been other prophets in Israel at this time who would have willingly and happily done God's bidding. Why not choose one of them? I mean, it's obvious that Jonah's attitudes were not conducive to effectiveness in ministry. Surely his anger and hatred would have been perceived by those who heard him preach. Why not let Jonah go to Tarshish and sulk until he came to his senses? Why not let his hatefulness and prejudice eat him up inside so that he would inevitably discover for himself how unhealthy and ungodly those attitudes really are?"

I would suggest to you that one of the reasons God did not let Jonah go to Tarshish is the same reason He wanted Jonah to preach to the Ninevites - because he is gracious and merciful. Just as He loved the Ninevites too much to let them persist in their ignorance and idolatry, so He loved Jonah too much to let him persist in his anger and hatred.

We will talk about that more next time, Lord willing. But in the time we have remaining, I would like to suggest a few principles that we can learn from these few verses.

First, *there is no one beyond the reach of God's grace*. This is one of the major themes of Scripture. The Bible says that there is no one righteous, not even one; that all of us deserve God's wrath and punishment. But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, reaches out and extends His grace, even to the most rebellious and disobedient. And people, like the Ninevites, can be targets of His grace even when they're not looking for Him; even when they have got their heels dug in and their minds made up, even while they are actively opposing Him and hostile toward Him and His people.

Such is the nature of God's grace! And if someone as wicked as the Ninevites received His grace, so can that son or daughter you've been praying for who is presently thumbing his/her nose at God. So can that spouse who doesn't want anything to do with Him, or that loved one who is living in open rebellion or willful sin. If the Ninevites can be saved, *anyone* can be saved. They were the least likely people in the world at that time to receive God's grace, but God poured it out on them because that is God's nature. *"He is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love"* (Psalm 103:8). So don't lose hope. Be patient. Put your confidence in the Lord Jesus. And pray, pray, pray.

Second, *God's calling upon our lives does not always correspond to our passions or desires*. Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh because he hated the Ninevites and wanted them to perish. But God, knowing full well that Jonah felt that way, still told him to go and speak on His behalf. Because Jonah's life and ministry were not about Jonah; they were about God. This is God's story, not Jonah's story. Yes, by God's grace Jonah (and others) get to be included in His story, but even the most important people in the world only have bit parts. And for us who belong to Jesus, even our own lives are not about us - what we like, what we want, how we feel, or even what we might do for God. World history is God's story - it's about what He wants and what He does and who He uses (or not) to accomplish *His* purposes.

In contemporary Christianity's obsession with personal fulfillment, we mistakenly think that God's call upon our lives must correspond to *our* desires and passions. "I love to study the Word so I think I'm called to be a pastor." "I love John Deere tractors so I think I'm called to be a farmer." "I love to surf so I think I'm called to a ministry in Maui or Fiji." "I'm passionate about children so I think I'm called to do children's ministry."

It *could* be that God has called you to one of these things, but not necessarily. I would challenge you to find anywhere in Scripture where God says that your calling corresponds to your passions and desires. Do you think the prophet Jeremiah liked preaching to people who ignored him and mocked him and persecuted him mercilessly? Do you think Hosea was passionate about God's command to remarry his ex-wife Gomer after she abandoned him and their children and became a prostitute? Do you think Paul relished spending all that time in prison being chained to Roman guards? Do you think Jesus enjoyed having a crown of thorns shoved onto His head, and being stripped and punched and slapped and spit at and scourged and nailed to a cross?

One's calling in this life corresponds, not to one's passions, but to God's purposes. We are His servants, and we don't write our own stories. Rather, by His grace, we get to be included in His story. And keep in mind that our desires and passions are incidental to His purposes. He does say in 1 Timothy 3 that if anyone *desires* to be an overseer, he desires a good work. But even in that passage it doesn't say that a person *has* to have the desire to be an overseer. In Acts 20 we are told that it is the Holy Spirit who makes a person an overseer in order to shepherd His flock, and He may make a person an overseer whether he wants to be an overseer or not.

Suffice it to say, some of us may not like our assignments from the Lord. We may not like the people or the culture He has called us to serve, or the place He has sent us, or the circumstances that come with the assignment. But He expects us to obey Him and to be faithful to that assignment, nonetheless.

Third, *even dedicated servants of God are capable of rebellion*. Prior to this assignment, Jonah had been a faithful, dependable prophet and servant of Yahweh. He had many good qualities and he had served well. God had used him, and up until this time Jonah probably thought that he was in sync with God's mind and heart and will. But this particular assignment proved that Jonah wasn't as *in sync* as he thought. He was certainly not a man after God's own heart in relation to the Ninevites. This incident exposed the fact that Jonah was full of hatred for the Ninevites, and that he thought it was perfectly okay to hate them. He probably felt that God should hate them, too.

But Jonah is no different and no worse than most other servants of God. We all have attitudes or perceptions or perspectives that are out of sync with God's, and we don't even know it. All of us are capable of rebellion and disobedience, and all of us are vulnerable to moral failure. The remarkable thing is that God does not give up on us but will go after us, relentlessly conforming us to His mind and heart and will so that He can continue to use us.

Next week, Lord willing, I will be talking about these next two principles because the passage expands on both of them. Let me just briefly mention them for now: Fourth, *we can run from God, but we cannot hide*. God is omnipresent and God is omniscient. He is everywhere all at once, and He knows exactly where we are and what we are doing all the time.

Fifth, *God will go to great lengths to restore His wandering servants, which is evidence of His mercy*. God did just that for Jonah. You know the story, at least the part about the fish. What you may not be as familiar with is how He used pagan sailors to get Jonah's attention,

and then went ahead and brought salvation to those sailors. That's God! Making every move count and glorifying Himself every step of the way.

As we close, allow me to make an application to our lives as Christ followers. In Jonah's day, I'm not sure there were any prophets or Hebrews that felt any different about the Assyrians than Jonah did. The Assyrians were Israel's enemy, and as such they were despised. In Jesus' day, that same attitude was pervasive, only it was directed toward Rome. Even the accomplished and distinguished students of Scripture reviled the Romans, for the same reasons as Jonah. They not only wanted Rome to go away and leave them alone; they wanted them to suffer and perish the way Jonah wanted the Assyrians to suffer and perish. And they thought God felt this way about them, too, just like Jonah.

But Jesus said to them, "*You have heard that it was said 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven*" (Matt. 5:43-45).

By the way, the command to "hate your enemy" is not in Scripture but was part of the oral law enacted by religious scholars who wanted to justify their hatred and animosity toward their enemies - especially those who oppressed and subjugated them. As time went on, nearly the entire Jewish population accepted this supplementary command as authoritative, even though it contradicted God's will.

But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus set them straight. Those who belong to God are to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them, which included their Roman oppressors. The reason for this is that God loves these enemies. And those who belong to God, those who identify with God, those who are the progeny of God will bear a family resemblance to Him. Jesus said that loving one's enemies proves that one is a son of God, for "like Father like son."

Why is that? Because loving one's enemies is the most humanly *unnatural* thing to do. In fact, I would suggest that it is humanly *impossible* to do it. Therefore, the only way to love one's enemies is to have God's nature so that one can express divine love.

Jonah was a genuine prophet of God. Jonah regularly experienced the anointing of the Spirit who gave him God's exact words to say. But Jonah had never been born again. He had not been given God's nature - a nature that would enable him and give him the capacity to love his enemies. Not even John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner, had been born again, which is why Jesus said that even though among those born of a woman no one is greater than John-the-Baptist, whoever is least in the kingdom of God is greater than him (Matt. 11:11).

All of this to say, no one who is born again *has* to be or *ought* to be like Jonah when it comes to our enemies, for when Jesus died on a cross for our sins, He destroyed the power and dominion of sin so that sin doesn't have to control us any longer - we don't *have* to sin, we don't have to hate. What's more, He causes those who put their faith in him to be born again - to become new creatures, with new capabilities, including the capability of loving our enemies.

So, one application of Jonah that we will be talking about quite a bit in the next few weeks is that as born-again, Spirit controlled followers of Christ we have the opportunity to love our enemies and show the world what our Father in heaven is like. This is as relevant a message as there is in the world today, in America today, in our local community today.

“Reluctant Prophet, Relentless God”

Jonah 1:1-4

Main Idea: God is relentlessly committed to reconciling ignorant and undeserving sinners to himself and may even use unwilling and uncooperative servants to tell them.

God’s Commissions Jonah (1-2)

To **go** to Nineveh

To **preach** against Nineveh’s sin



Jonah Disobeys God (3)

He boards a ship for Tarshish

He flees from the **presence** of God

God Pursues Jonah (4)

Principles:

1. There is no one beyond the reach of God’s _____
2. God’s calling doesn’t always correspond to our _____ or _____
3. Even _____ servants of God are capable of _____
4. We can _____ from God but we cannot _____
5. God will go to great lengths to restore His _____ servants, which is evidence of His _____