

## A SEVERE MERCY JONAH 1:4-16

Nearly a hundred and twenty years ago Francis Thompson wrote an intriguing poem entitled "The Hound of Heaven." In it he describes his persistent flight from God—a God whom he perceived to be a terrifying Being; a God he was convinced was a Stalker who wanted to capture him, smother him, and consign him to a life of misery.

Thompson describes himself as a restless vagabond, searching in every nook and cranny of creation for something that might satisfy his craving for peace and freedom. But in his vain pursuit, he keeps hearing footsteps - steady, deliberate, and unrelenting. It is God. And no matter how fast he runs or how many maneuvers he makes he cannot elude Him. Yet he dares not stop or even slow down lest this dreadful Hound pounce on him and carry him into captivity.

That is what it's like for a lot of people who don't really know God or are not walking in fellowship with Him. For them, God is a Prison Warden or a Bounty Hunter or, worse yet, a Monster that is angrily pursuing them, and the only way to prevent Him from pouncing is to run and try to hide.

Some try to escape God by ignoring Him or avoiding Him, cluttering their lives with diversions and distractions in order to keep their distance or drown out the sound of His footsteps. Others retreat into their own deluded perceptions of reality, ignoring things that are obvious, and even denying God's existence.

But they are deceiving themselves, for it is impossible to escape from God. Yet the real tragedy is that many of these people never realize that this "Hound of heaven" is *not* who they think He is. He is *not* a menacing Monster - He is a merciful Savior who wants to give the very peace and freedom and joy we all so desperately want.

We are studying the book of Jonah - the story about a reluctant prophet whom God told to go to the city of Nineveh, yet who ran away from the Lord and deliberately went in the opposite direction.

But I told you last time that the Book of Jonah is not *primarily* about a reluctant prophet, it's about a relentless God - a God who, in His grace, wants to reveal Himself to ignorant, arrogant, idolatrous people so that they might know Him and be reconciled to Him. It is also about a God who never let's go of those who are His own. Last time we studied verses 1-4 of chapter 1. Let me read them again to establish the context before we move on.

**Verse 1.** *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."*

Remember, Jonah was accustomed to getting his marching orders from the LORD each day. His job was to listen for God to tell him where to go, what to do, and what to say, and then obey. Up until this time, Jonah was okay with that arrangement. But when God told him to go to Nineveh and preach against it, it was not okay.

Nineveh was the capital city of the ancient Assyrian Empire, the greatest city in the world at this time. But Nineveh was also Israel's worst enemy. They were cruel, oppressive, and violent in their dealings with Israel. When Jonah received the call to preach against Nineveh, he immediately grasped the profound implications of the call. And so, we read in **verse 3.** *<sup>3</sup> 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.*

I told you that Jonah didn't run away because he was afraid that the Ninevites would harm him. He ran away because he hated the Ninevites and was afraid God would be gracious to them. Later in the story Jonah says, *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 suspected the Ninevites would be receptive to his message; that they would repent, that God would be merciful, and that they would be saved. And that was *not* okay with Jonah. Jonah was not interested in participating in the redemption of the Ninevites. He believed they should be punished and condemned, and so in protest he ran.

But the Hound of Heaven wouldn't let him get far. **Verses 4-5a.** *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. 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.*

Storms on the Mediterranean Sea were frequent and shipwrecks not uncommon. Any experienced sailor would have been accustomed to rough seas, so for these mariners to have this kind of panicked reaction demonstrates just how fierce this storm was. In response, they did the only things they knew how to do. They prayed to their gods, and they lightened the ship by throwing the cargo overboard.

Incidentally, these sailors were Philistines, who at one time had been Israel's greatest enemy. They worshiped many gods, and they took this opportunity to pray to as many of them as they thought had bearing on this situation—the god of the sea, the god of the sky, the god of commerce, the god of rain, the god of wind, the god of thunder and lightning. So desperate were they that they *would* have prayed to Yahweh, the God of Israel, had they known Him. And yet the only one on board this ship who knew Yahweh—the one, *true* God—wasn't praying at all. **Verse 5b.** *But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.*

While pagan sailors are panicking, Yahweh's servant is sleeping...soundly. The kind of sleep in which he is dead to the world, oblivious to the storm and the danger at hand.

I suppose it's possible to conclude that Jonah was exhausted after his hasty travel from the hill country of Galilee to the coast. I'm inclined to think, however, that his slumber was the result of the intense turmoil in his soul. Think about it: he had just become completely disillusioned with God; his theology had disintegrated, and he was spiritually disoriented and emotionally distraught. He had just gone AWOL from Yahweh and was enroute to a self-enforced exile to the uttermost part of the earth.

Jonah was depressed—so depressed that he tried to numb the pain by going to sleep. He went below the deck where he could get away from everyone, be by himself, and escape reality.

I would suggest to you that Jonah's behavior, as strange, as irrational, as inappropriate as it seems, is not at all uncommon. It is actually a fairly typical coping mechanism for those who are experiencing a severe crisis or trauma.

Does anyone remember what story dominated the news in 1994 and 95? The O.J. Simpson murder trial. Does anyone know what story dominated the news in Africa was at that time? The O.J. Simpson murder trial...even though, simultaneously, there was *genocide* going on in the African country of Rwanda.

I read a book by a journalist living in Rwanda during the genocide who described a hotel in the capital city of Kigali, where many of the upper class had taken refuge. And every day these people would congregate in the lobby and together they would watch Larry King

on CNN—which was exclusive coverage of the OJ Simpson ordeal. And they were glued to the screen. And after the program they would sit around the lobby discussing and debating Simpson’s guilt or innocence.

Meanwhile, literally just outside the door of the hotel, people were hacking each other to death with machetes and men and women and children were lying dead on the sidewalks and in the streets.

How could that happen? How could these people be so focused on something that was completely irrelevant to them and so trivial in comparison to the atrocities going on all around them? It’s a coping mechanism. In order to numb the pain, you escape into a fantasy world where you don’t have to think about the harsh realities of your present conditions and circumstances—where you can become *detached* from reality.

That happens all the time. I would suggest that many people do it every single day, and don’t even *know* they’re doing it. Some do it, like Jonah, by sleeping; some with drugs and alcohol; some with sports, some with romance, some with work, some with shopping, some with projects, some with busyness, some with entertainment or social media. There are countless things that can keep us in a bubble and insulate us from reality.

As I said, Jonah’s choice to escape into Lala land is not uncommon for someone who is depressed, even though that choice put himself and others in harm’s way. When the captain of the ship became aware that Jonah was not on deck praying like the others or lending a hand, he went below and found him. **Verse 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.’”*

The captain was incredulous when he found Jonah asleep and rebuked him sharply. But it seems that Jonah was unfazed by being called out, for he says nothing in response to the captain’s plea for him to call upon his god.

**Verse 7.** *“And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.’” So, they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.* These pagan sailors had jumped to a conclusion. They concluded that this storm must be the result of divine *anger* toward the wrongdoing of one of the men on board.

The casting of lots to determine a decision or, in this case, to find a culprit, was common in Israel and other countries in the ancient Near East. Typically, it was done by putting marked stones in a container, each man then drew a stone, and the one that drew the stone with a particular marking was “it.” It would be like us drawing straws.

God sometimes sanctioned this mode of decision making. He allowed Joshua to cast lots to determine the guilt of Achan. After Jesus’ ascension into heaven, He allowed the eleven disciples to cast lots to determine who Judas’ replacement would be. In *this* situation God expressed His sovereignty by causing the lot to “fall” on Jonah, and the sailors immediately (and rightly) concluded that Jonah was to blame for the storm.

**Verse 8.** *“Then they said to him, ‘Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?’”*

These five rapid-fire questions reveal the urgency and the energy of their efforts to find a solution. That’s because, though guilt had already been assigned, the storm was still raging and time was running out. So, Jonah replied in **verse 9**, *“I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”*

Though temporarily estranged from God, Jonah responded to the sailors’ questions by confidently stating his nationality and the name of His God, *Yahweh*, the God of heaven and

the One who made the sea and the land, suggesting that as Creator of the world, he controls nature, including the weather.

**Verse 10.** *<sup>10</sup> Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.*

"What is this you have you done?" is the equivalent of "Why did you bring this trouble on us?" They recognized that Jonah's sin deserved a severe penalty, and that God's fierce anger was being manifest in this terrifying storm. But they were terrified because they realized that Jonah's wrongdoing affected them. They were essentially asking him why he put *them* at risk.

**Verse 11.** *<sup>11</sup> Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.* Convinced that Jonah's God did, in fact, control the sea, they appealed to Jonah for a resolution to their worsening dilemma. They sensed that since he was responsible for the storm, they needed to do something to him. Perhaps they thought Jonah knew of some ritual or remedy that would appease Yahweh's wrath.

But Jonah replied, **verse 12.** *<sup>12</sup> He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you."* Before you conclude that Jonah was being selfless or noble by asking the sailors to pick him up and throw him overboard, realize that it would have been easier for Jonah to climb up on the rail and jump himself without getting them involved. But it makes me wonder: Why didn't Jonah stop and pray to Yahweh before asking them to throw him overboard? Why didn't he confess his sin, repent, and then ask God to abate the storm? Why did Jonah immediately jump to the conclusion that his own death was the only solution? Did he think that his repentance would not bring forgiveness? Was he still so perturbed by the call to go to Nineveh that he preferred death to going there? I don't know.

What seems apparent is that he did *not* repent before being thrown into the sea. In other words, he was willing to face death without making peace with Yahweh. Either he was so depressed that he was incapable of making rational decisions, or he was incredibly stubborn and foolish.

**Verses 13-14.** *<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. <sup>14</sup> Therefore they called out to the LORD, "O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you."*

The sailors were reluctant to do what Jonah asked for fear they would Yahweh would hold *them* responsible for killing his prophet. This contrasts sharply with Jonah's lack of compassion for the Ninevites or for them. So, they tried again to row back to land, but to no avail. In fact, the storm intensified. Finally, resigned by the futility of their efforts and convinced they were fighting against Jonah's God, they gave up. **Verses 15-16.** *<sup>15</sup> So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. <sup>16</sup> Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.*

This demonstrated to them the reality and power of Yahweh, the God of Israel. They stood there in awe of Him, for He had done what their gods could not do. The sudden calm was an answer to their prayers, but it also confirmed that the storm *had* resulted from Jonah's disobedience and that an innocent life had *not* been taken when they threw him overboard. Utterly amazed, they offered a sacrifice in praise to Yahweh and promised to continue their devotion to Him.

We'll find out next time what happened to Jonah (as if you didn't know). But let me stop here and identify a few principles as we close our study this morning. If I could distill the main idea of this passage into one concise statement it would go something like this: *God may resort to trauma and terror to get our attention so that we can be reconciled to Him.* This is a common theme in Scripture going all the way back to the Garden of Eden. Think about the plagues in Egypt. Think about the death of David's illegitimate son with Bathsheba. Think about the early church being scattered through persecution. Think about the earthquake in Philippi where Paul and Silas were jailed, and what happened to the jailer and his family.

I have thought long and hard about some of the traumas and tragedies that are going on in our world today. Hurricanes, floods, fires, famines, heatwaves, ice storms, pandemics, wars, recessions. Are these just natural phenomena, or have they been sent by God to get our attention so that we can be reconciled to Him? I do not know. But I would not be surprised if some of them are.

In this particular story, God not only got Jonah's attention, He got the attention of the Philistine sailors who also got to experience His salvation. God used this traumatic circumstance to bring them to Himself, which means that terrible storm was the best thing that ever happened to them, for, as a result, these sailors became worshipers of the one, true, God.

Here is a second principle: *Innocent* people suffer the consequences of one person's *sin*. This is also a common theme in Scripture. Don't ever be fooled into thinking that your sin only harms you. Don't ever be fooled into thinking that as long as you sin in private it doesn't hurt anyone but you. Your sin is like an angry hornet's nest—the people who are close to you get stung badly, sometimes over and over, and it hurts terribly.

But there is something else. *God's discipline can be severe, but it is motivated by His mercy.* It is mercy, not anger or displeasure, that is the main theme of this chapter. I can say that *confidently* because we know what happened to Jonah when he was thrown into the sea. God saved him—God gave him an opportunity to repent and be reconciled to Him. But God not only got Jonah's attention, He got the attention of the Philistine sailors who also got to experience His salvation. It's possible that these sailors would have never known about Yahweh had it not been for the severity of that storm.

Furthermore, God could have let Jonah go to Tarshish and live the rest of his life wallowing in guilt and misery. But He didn't because He loved Jonah too much to let him go. And He went after him because His pursuit of Jonah was Jonah's *only* hope of being reconciled to Him. The storm, the exposure of his guilt in front of the ship's captain and crew, was actually God's severe mercy for Jonah. It was the very thing that delivered him from preoccupation with himself; it was the thing that kept him from continuing down a path of destruction.

That is precisely what happened to Francis Thompson. After becoming utterly exhausted in his flight from God, he finally surrendered. And as he turned around to face the Hound of Heaven, he discovered an outstretched arm and a gentle voice saying, "Come, I am He whom thou seekest." The freedom and peace he thought God wanted to rob him of were the very things God wanted to give him all along.

There is nothing which brings greater security and satisfaction than knowing you are in the protective custody of Almighty God. For if you have embraced the Lord Jesus Christ, He loves you with a love that knows no bounds. He will never turn His back on you and never leave you or forsake you.

However, if you turn your back on Him be assured that He *will* pursue you, and He

may resort to drastic measures to get your attention. You mean too much to Him for Him to let you get away.

I would be remiss if, after studying this passage, I didn't ask the question: Are any of *you* running from God? Have you turned your back on Him and wandered down a path in which you are doing your best to ignore Him, hide from Him, and distance yourself from Him?

For your sake, for the sake of those who are close to you, stop. Turn around and face Him. Walk toward Him with a humble and contrite heart and flee into His outstretched arms, where you will find rest for your soul.

### A Severe Mercy Jonah 1:4-16

Main Idea: *God, in His mercy, may resort to trauma and terror to get our attention so that we can be reconciled to Him*

God Pursues Jonah (4-17)

The violent storm (4)

The terrified crew (5a)

The sin of one affects many



Pagan spiritual intuition

The selfish prophet (5b)

Deliberately negligent (denial)

Dangerously inconsiderate

The desperate captain (6)

The truth comes out (7-9)

Jonah gets the short straw (7)

Jonah gets interrogated (8)

Jonah gets real (9)

Finding a solution (10-14)

The puzzled mariners (10-11)

A resigned prophet (12)

The last resort (13-14)

The sailors' salvation (15-16)

Principles:

1. God may resort to trauma and tragedy to get our attention so that we can be reconciled to Him
2. Innocent people suffer the consequences of our sin
3. God's discipline can be severe but it is motivated by his mercy