

God Pursues a Fugitive Prophet

Jonah 1:4-6; Isaiah 40:28-31

July 24, 2011

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When God's children rebel against the revealed will of God (in doctrine or life) and in so doing flee from the presence of the Lord, though our most gracious God may open the doors of providence to us for a time so that we find some degree of success even in our rebellion (as we learned from the previous sermon was the case with Jonah), the God of the Covenant of Grace will pursue us (not in angry vindictive justice, but in loving yet firm discipline) to draw us back into that sweet communion and loving obedience from which we have fled like a fugitive on the run. Dear ones, although there is never a reasonable or justified excuse that we can ever offer for our rebellion against the revealed will of God (in doctrine or life), yet it is in the midst of that very rebellion (wherein we seek to suppress the light of God's will) that God reveals Himself to be a most loving Father who will not let His children continue indefinitely in their stubborn rebellion against His revelation of truth and righteousness. He will chasten His children severely (if necessary) for His glory and for their own good, just as He did with Jonah.

How we as loving Christian parents could wish that we were able to pursue our children who rebel and turn their backs upon the right ways of the Lord with such a power that cannot be resisted; but as mere human beings, we come face to face in such situations that we are but dust, and must learn over and over again that we must cast ourselves upon the mercy and might of God to work within our children in the day of His power both to will and to do His good pleasure. We must look to the promises of God in Christ Jesus. We at times want to change our husband or wife, our children or parents, our co-worker or boss. To some degree, we are all cursed with a Messiah complex in believing we can save and rescue loved ones and friends, or in wanting a share in God's glory of changing people's lives. And so we take matters into our own hands, using the arm of flesh to move people and to force change in their lives. And it usually does not work, but usually makes things worse. Dear ones, that is a power and glory that uniquely belongs to Christ. Although we can never approve of the error and sin of others in doctrine and life, and even at times must sadly withdraw our fellowship from loved ones who persist in their rebellion against the Lord, we must learn to trust God who changes lives (not us). It is God who moves the hearts of people to walk in His doctrine, in His worship, in His government, and in His good commandments. Our duty is to love them, pray for them, testify to them of their sin and need of Christ, and to live an uncompromising life of truth and righteousness before them. It is the duty of the Church to censure them where error or sin are impenitently pursued. It is God's part to change lives by His grace and power in His own time—to take that which is ugly and to make it beautiful in His own time. The duty is ours; the consequences are God's.

Let us look this Lord's Day into the revelation of God as to the means that God used to pursue His prophet and draw him back into communion with his Savior. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) God Sends a Great Wind to Pursue His Fugitive Prophet (Jonah 1:4-5); (2) God Sends a Heathen Sea Captain to Rebuke His Fugitive Prophet (Jonah 1:6).

I. God Sends a Great Wind to Pursue His Fugitive Prophet (Jonah 1:4-5).

A. When a Jonah is on the lam and is a fugitive fleeing the revealed will of God, the Lord pursues and always get His man/woman. Although the Lord may not resort to the same means that He did with Jonah, nevertheless He will pursue, and will draw His own unto Himself in faith and godly sorrow. As you look back over your life, dear ones, you can no doubt see what means (painful means at times) the Lord has graciously

used to pursue and capture you by His grace in order to glorify Himself in making of you a trophy of His amazing grace.

B. In Jonah's case, we read that the Lord "sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken" (Jonah 1:4).

1. This was not a freak storm of "mother nature", but "a great wind" and "a mighty tempest" **SENT** by the sovereign Lord God Himself. Here we are taught that nature is not an impersonal law unto itself, but rather nature (all of nature) is under the direct control and administration of the Triune God of nature who rules and directs nature to accomplish all of His most holy and most wise purposes. It is God who sends not only the mighty tempest upon Jonah, but who sends all hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, droughts, heat waves, fires, and famines into this world (and whatever else comes into your life and mine). The sinful, puny mind of man would rather limit the almighty power of God in sending such amazing demonstrations of strength for His own holy and wise reasons, than bow before such a sovereign God who does whatever He pleases in heaven, in the seas, and on the earth. Foolish man would rather bring the omnipotent God down to the level of impotent man, than give the Lord of all creation the glory that is due unto Him. God's inspired Word declares that God "sent" a great wind into the sea (which reminds me of the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 107:23-31). The Hebrew verb translated "sent" literally means "hurled" or "cast forth" and is the same Hebrew verb used in Jonah 1:5, "and CAST forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea." Dear ones, if we (like those experienced sailors) would fear for our lives and shake in our boots at such a great demonstration of power in the sea which apparently was so quickly cast upon the sea that even the heathens that manned the ship saw something supernatural in what occurred, shall we not take the Most High God seriously and fear Him with the utmost awe and wonder who hurled this great storm upon the sea? Shall we not bow the knee in worship to such a great God, acknowledging our sin and desperate need of Him who sends such storms, but who also rides upon the clouds to the aid and help of His people (Deuteronomy 33:26)? I submit that there is no greater indication of the depravity of man than when man robs God of His supreme glory in controlling nature and all events that fall upon the earth (in your life and mine), and rather seeks to form a god in his own image who is ever so sympathetic (and wants to help) but cannot do so because He is as weak as you and me. What a distortion and perversion of the God of the Bible who is most loving, compassionate, and merciful; but who also is most holy, just, and almighty. Dear ones, we never have to downplay one attribute of God to accommodate the sensibilities of fallen man!

2. When God **SENT** this great wind and great storm into the sea, they were sent (according God's Word) in pursuit of one fugitive prophet, Jonah. And yet how many others were likewise brought under the severities of these mighty demonstrations of power? Certainly those in the same ship suffered under the storm sent by God to pursue Jonah. And since the ship that Jonah was on was a commercial or trading vessel and no doubt sailed along a commercial route, is it not likely that other ships were likewise on the same commercial route and were likewise brought under the mighty hand of God in that storm? Did many others innocently suffer the devastation of this storm due to Jonah's sin?

a. On the one hand, it was the stated purpose of God to pursue and retrieve a fugitive prophet who had rebelled against the revealed will of God. God was going after Jonah in particular by means of the winds and the waves that he sent upon the Mediterranean Sea at that time. Jonah was being chastened by the Lord for his sin in refusing to obey the revealed will of God. Dear ones, if we flee, God will pursue.

b. But on the other hand, none on the ship with Jonah nor any in other ships upon the sea that were violently tossed to and fro by the devastating storm were free of sin and rebellion against the God who has revealed Himself in nature and in their own conscience. Even if the sailors/passengers had never heard a prophet of God or read a line from the Holy Scripture, they were all accountable to God for the light which the Lord has given to every person that enters this world (John 1:9; Romans 1:18-20). Dear ones,

no man, woman, or child is guiltless before the righteous tribunal of the Most Holy God. The sin of Adam has corrupted all of Adam's posterity by ordinary generation so that all stand condemned and are without excuse before the Lord (Psalm 51:5; Romans 3:23). Thus, God is perfectly just in sending a great wind and a great tempest not only upon Jonah, but upon any other human being for his/her own sin committed against the Lord God (even though they were not guilty of Jonah's specific and particular sin). If all men, women, and children by nature deserve the everlasting wrath of God for their sin in Adam and their own personal transgression of God's Law, then God is likewise just in sending His temporal wrath upon all sinners in history as well. The fact that God restrains and tempers His just wrath against sinners in history and blesses sinners with families, food, shelter, and clothing is an indication of God's mercy to us who are all undeserving of the least blessing from God. And such delays of God's holy wrath ought not to make us comfortable in our sin or to lead us to think that God approves of our sin. To the contrary, such delays of God's holy wrath ought to cause us to realize that the goodness and longsuffering of God lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4). Thus, dear ones, God is not unjust to include many others in the great wind and great tempest that He sent in a very particular way upon His fugitive prophet, Jonah.

c. But this true account of Jonah also reveals that our sin has tentacles that reach out and draw others around us into the pain and heartache of that sin. We may choose to sin, but we cannot choose to exempt either ourselves or our loved ones from the dreaded grief and sorrow of that sin. Therefore, let us ever weigh the effects that our sin will have on those we love as a powerful incentive to flee the sin rather than to embrace the sin.

C. Notice also the effect that the great wind and great storm sent by the Lord had upon the sailors.

1. The sailors are so filled with fear that they cry out to their gods and immediately begin to cast overboard whatever is unnecessary in order to keep the ship afloat ("Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them" Jonah 1:5a).

2. These were not gentle souls unaccustomed to danger on the high seas, but rather rough, daring sailors, well-seasoned and molded by perilous storms wherein their lives had likely been in danger many times. But perhaps it was the suddenness and the force of this storm that came upon them (as out of nowhere) which led them to such fear and trepidation to cry out to their own individual gods.

3. It is a common phenomenon among people in general to cry out to God (or to a god of their own imagination) when that which they fear most suddenly threatens them (whether the sudden threat of their own death or the sudden threat of the death of a spouse or of a child). There may be the occasional exception to this, but how many times have you cried out or have you heard others cry out in the face of a sudden tragedy or at the threat of imminent danger, "Oh, my God!" When people in general feel especially vulnerable, desperate, and helpless, to whom do they cry out? They cry out instinctively (even if they are not religious at all) to one whom they know (in some sense) is far greater than themselves, to one whom they know (in some sense) is powerful enough to rescue them. But why do people in general do so? Because God has imprinted such knowledge (to some degree) upon the very fabric of man's conscience (so that man is not completely ignorant of God). And although man has through sin perverted and corrupted that knowledge of the one true living God, even the most ardent atheists have the same Divine imprint upon their conscience. And they seek to suppress that knowledge by denying that God exists. But erase that knowledge the atheist cannot do, no matter how hard he might try (according to Romans 2:14-15). It is a knowledge sufficient to make all men accountable before God, but not a knowledge sufficient to save any man. A knowledge sufficient to save comes only by the revelation of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ which is received by faith alone.

4. Dear ones, the heathen, the non-Christian, the agnostic, and the atheist may cry out to a god (who is a perversion of the Triune God of the Bible) when surprised with the imminent threat of tragedy,

but dear ones, we cry out to our heavenly Father, through the mediation of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit who is the One true living God revealed in Scripture, in whom our enlightened consciences rejoice and delight. He is not a stranger to the cries of those who have cast themselves upon the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, and He is not One to whom we pray only when facing danger. He is our life, our breath, our health, our salvation, and our reconciled God through the finished work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Thus, when we cry out to God for help in the face of danger, it is not because of some mere vague and instinctual notion of a god, but it is because of explicit revelation of the Triune God who has drawn us unto Himself in love, redeemed us in love, and invited and even commanded us as His beloved children to come to Him with all of our cares and needs (Philippians 4:19). But, sadly, how little do we avail ourselves of this rich treasure of prayer until we find ourselves in some perceived danger? Dear ones, prayer ought to be to the Christian what breathing is to the natural man: we cannot survive and live without it.

D. But what is especially surprising from our text this Lord's Day is the condition in which we find Jonah as the great wind and great storm sent by God hit the ship with such sudden force and unabated fury.

1. Jonah rather than lending a hand to help the crew in jettisoning all unnecessary items, falls asleep it would appear in utter exhaustion ("but Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep" Jonah 1:5b). I do not believe he fell asleep due to apathy or indifference, but rather due to complete exhaustion.

2. What caused Jonah's utter exhaustion? I do not believe it was because Jonah did not care at all about the revealed will of God that he was exhausted, but because he did care about the revealed will of God, and was so overcome by the inner turmoil and hand of God that weighed so heavily upon him that he seemed to pass out from such a battle with the Lord God. I submit this sleep of Jonah was caused by his rebellion and fleeing from God. The sorrow and grief that grips the soul of a true Christian who rebels against the revealed will of God (whether in doctrine or life) when God enlightens his/her conscience to understand how he/she has offended not only the God of holiness and justice, but the God of love and mercy is so overwhelming that it drives the Christian to the point of wearied exhaustion.

a. Consider the exhaustion of Elijah after seeing the mighty hand of the Lord in the contest with the prophets of Baal and in sending rain upon the land after a three year drought, and yet Elijah was overwhelmed with fear at the threat of Jezebel against his life (in 1 Kings 19:1-5). His fear drove Elijah to utter exhaustion.

b. Or consider the exhaustion of the apostles who were overcome with sorrow at hearing that Christ was soon to be put to death (Luke 22:45). Peter, who had promised in pride to go with Christ even to death, was so overcome with grief that he couldn't stay awake to watch and pray with Jesus, as Jesus faced the wrath of God for sinners.

c. That is what such inner conflict with sin will do to a Christian at times. It will literally wear him/her out to such an extent that there is little or no strength left to run, to resist, and to rebel against God. It is exhausting. It is numbing. It leads to inactivity, depression, and no motivation to do anything. Most of us likely know that experience to some degree in our lives. It's awful. But, dear ones, that is precisely where rebellion against the revealed will of God will lead us. At the same time, I do not want to imply that sin or such inner conflict with the Lord is always the cause of depression and such exhaustion. Physiological problems can certainly lead to such consequences as well. Are you unmotivated to perform your calling or to be active in pursuing truth and righteousness? Are you overcome with sleep and simply do not desire to put your hand to the plow to be active in what is necessary? Perhaps you ought to consider whether you have become exhausted in fleeing from the revealed will of God in doctrine or in life. Contrast that with the blessedness of the sleep and rest that is graciously granted to those who resist not the Lord and flee not as fugitives from the revealed will of God (Proverbs 3:21-24).

II. God Sends a Heathen Sea Captain to Rebuke His Fugitive Prophet (Jonah 1:6).

A. God not only sent the wind and the waves to pursue His fugitive prophet, Jonah, but also shamefully sent a heathen sea captain to rebuke him (“So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper” Jonah 1:6). Talk about a disgraceful moment in the life of one of God’s true prophets, here it is. Can you imagine the shame you would feel to be reproved by that foul-mouthed, fornicating co-worker who finds you cheating on your time card, or hears you gossiping about the boss and spreading division among the employees? I suppose that we as Christians would be tempted to discount or minimize such a rebuke from that kind of a person because we would be tempted to focus on the sins of the foul-mouth, fornicating co-worker rather than focusing on our own rebellion against the revealed will of God. We would likely choose to focus on the manner in which the rebuke was delivered (whether delivered in a mocking manner, in a proud manner, in a scornful manner, or in an angry manner), rather than acknowledging that the rebuke was justly deserved (even if it came from our greatest adversary at work). Humiliating as it may be, such a rebuke should be received with all sobriety and purpose to seek the forgiveness of God and man, to make restitution, and to endeavor new obedience. For it is God Himself that is rebuking us through such an ungodly heathen in order to humble us under His almighty hand. Dear ones, if we continue in a state of rebellion against the Lord, the Lord will use unusual means at times to get our attention (whether the rebuke comes from a child, a stranger, or the chief of sinners). We by nature would prefer rather to justify ourselves than by grace to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God (1 Corinthians 11:31, “If thou wilt judge thyself, thou shalt not be judged [by the Lord]”). If God’s providential hand in ordering events in our life does not lead us to repentance, and if the rebuke of an ungodly stranger does not lead us to repentance, then God will graciously bring a more severe rebuke (as He did with Jonah wherein he was eventually cast into the sea). Dear ones, we will never win that battle with the Lord and against His revealed will (in doctrine or life). Jonah could not, nor can we. God will win. Let’s stop fleeing, stop fighting, and stop sleeping from exhaustion in such a battle with the Lord of glory.

B. But carefully note what the shipmaster calls Jonah to do: “call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not” (Jonah 1:6). That which a prophet of God should have been first to realize, he has to be reminded and challenged to do by the idolatrous, polytheistic shipmaster. Jonah who had been likely trained in the school of the prophets, and had received revelation directly from the Lord Himself has to be challenged to avail himself of the blessed means of grace: prayer. But that is just another consequence of rebellion against the revealed will of God: we ignore and resist the means of grace. Jonah was fleeing from the revealed will of God; he knew that the storm and the sea captain were messengers sent by God to pursue him and to bring him to the throne of grace. And yet Jonah was not finished with his rebellion—not yet. What a slap in the face and painful reprimand from the Lord. Although the heathen ship master only had some faint inbred notion through the Light of Nature that there was a god and that he might come to the rescue of those who called upon him, we know, dear ones, from Scripture that we have a certain hope and a confident expectation that the Lord Jesus Christ will come to the aid of all those who cast themselves upon His mercy as they acknowledge their sin and desperate need of His pardon. Dear ones, will you not heed the invitation of the Lord today, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Will you who are weary from fleeing as a fugitive from the Lord God not cast yourself upon the mercy of God in Christ Jesus who gives certain hope to all who are weary in Isaiah 40:28-31?