

A Prophet On The Run

Jonah 1:3

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God does not hide or cover the sins and weaknesses of His most eminent prophets and apostles in the pages of Holy Writ (whether it is the sin of Abraham in following the arm of flesh through Hagar rather than following the promise of God through Sarah; or the sin of Jacob in lying and deceiving his father, Isaac, in order to obtain the birthright; or the sin of Gideon in making an ephod of gold by which to worship God toward the end of his life; or the sin of David in committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband murdered; or the sin of Solomon in falling into idolatry by means of the hundreds of wives and concubines he sinfully took unto himself; or the sin of Peter in denying the Lord; or as we shall see today, the sin of Jonah in rejecting the call of God and fleeing from presence of God). Even the greatest of God's servants in Scripture were men of frailty who fell into sin, and knew the chastisement of their heavenly Father. How thankful I am everyday that God has revealed the sins of His prophets and apostles, for I too see the weakness of my flesh when I fall into sin. I, too, need to be reminded and encouraged that it was not the greatness of the prophets of God and apostles of Jesus Christ that caused them to do great exploits in promoting the Cause of Christ, but was rather the greatness and graciousness of the Lord who even demonstrates His almighty power and mercy in using such weak vessels in order to show beyond a shadow of a doubt that salvation is of the Lord (from beginning to end).

This Lord's Day, let us each one take hope that as God used imperfect servants who cast themselves upon the Covenant of Grace, that He will likewise use us who cast ourselves upon that same Covenant of Grace

wherein Christ has fulfilled all righteousness for us and has fully accomplished redemption for us who trust in Him alone for our eternal salvation. In fact, the Lord delights to take the weak who know and confess their weakness and sin so that He receives all glory for what you and I could never accomplish in our own strength: namely, true reformation in our own lives and families, in His church, and the nations of this world. It is not by our might or by our power, but by the Almighty Spirit of God that God brings salvation and reformation to this ungodly and impotent world.

The main points from our text this Lord's Day are the following: (1) Jonah Flees From The Presence of God ("And Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD" Jonah 1:3); (2) Jonah Finds The Path Of Disobedience Opened To Him ("And went down to Joppa; and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD" Jonah 1:3).

I. Jonah Flees From The Presence of God ("And Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD" Jonah 1:3).

A. In the previous sermon, we considered the call of God to Jonah to go to Nineveh and to preach against its wickedness as a call that was sovereign, a call that was righteous, and a call that was gracious. However, we did not consider the subjective reaction within Jonah to God's call. That is where the Holy Spirit would take us this Lord's Day in the text before us. How did Jonah react to the call of God to go to Nineveh? Very simply, he rejected it. He said in effect by his actions, "No, Lord, I will not go to Nineveh." Jonah's act was a deliberate act of rebellion.

1. I heard a number of years ago from a professor of mine a

very simple, easy to remember outline that he proposed for the Book of Jonah. This was the outline: (1) God said, “Go!”; (2) Jonah said, “No!”; (3) God said, “Oh?”

2. Dear ones, the same outline will be seen throughout our lives when we who profess to be the children of God say “No” to the revealed will of God for our lives. Now we may not be so outspoken as to look to heaven and shake our fists at God, saying “No” to what we know to be His revealed will in doctrine or life. We may simply try a more passive type of disobedience in tuning out the volume of God’s voice though His Word and Spirit by filling our minds with busyness and activity, in filling our minds with sports, music, work, family, tv, or computer activities. Or we as ministers may even fill our minds and lives with Bible study, prayer meetings, evangelism, all the while patting ourselves on the back that we are very active in God’s service and all the while rejecting the truth of God in doctrine or life that God has illuminated our minds to see. But the cost of following that truth is too great and risky for us all (ministers or not) at times (so we reason inwardly) in sacrificing financial security, family, friends, influence, and reputation. But we soon learn that we cannot drown out or tune out the voice of the Lord through His Word and Spirit (if we truly are His people—and praise God that He will not let us do so), for the Lord will not allow those whom He loves to simply reject His revealed and illuminated will in doctrine and life without consequence and discipline in various ways. This, dear ones, is a most blessed mercy that God does not allow His children to reject His revealed and illuminated will in doctrine and life. Consider the words of David in Psalm 32:1-5. For I could think of nothing worse than if the Spirit of God allowed me to continue in my rejection of His revealed and illuminated will without any consequence. I submit that that would be a token that I am not truly His child, but have feigned and pretended to be so (Hebrews 12:5-6). Dear ones, if our trust is in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for our eternal salvation, we will know and experience

the “Oh?” of God in that third point of the outline mentioned above if we reject His truth in doctrine or life.

B. Why did Jonah reject the revealed will of God to go to Nineveh and to preach against the wickedness of that great city?

1. Did Jonah reject the revealed will of God because he was overwhelmed at such a great task in going to the great city of Nineveh (the capital of the Assyrian empire), which was known at that time as the greatest city of the world? What could he, just one, weak, puny prophet accomplish among a city so great in glory, so numerous in population, and so fierce in military prowess? After all, ancient history records that the city of Nineveh and its surrounding suburbs, were approximately 60 miles around its perimeter (*Jonah, his Life, Character, and Mission*; Patrick Fairbairn, p. 23). Nineveh’s wall that surrounded the city was 100 feet high, and was so wide that three chariots could run side by side on the wall at the same time. The wall around the city had 1,500 security towers, each of the towers being 200 ft. high. The estimated population of the city was at least two million people in as much as it is noted in Jonah 4:11 that 120,000 children within the city were so young that they did not even know their right hand from their left hand (*Calvin’s Commentaries on Jonah*, Vol. 14, p. 22). Jonah had never seen anything quite like Nineveh, and this was the great city to which he was called by God to go. Such a task may seem a daunting task and overwhelm any man, even a prophet of God. However, that is not given as a reason within our text as to why Jonah rejected the revealed will of God to go to Nineveh. The biblical text does not indicate that Jonah had a lack of faith in believing that Nineveh was a mere grain of sand before Almighty God, and that God could do great and mighty things in Nineveh regardless of greatness of that “great city”.

2. Did Jonah reject the revealed will of God because he was afraid of the negative reaction he would receive at the hands of the

wicked city of Nineveh? After all, the Assyrians were especially noted in ancient history for their harshness and cruelty (*Unger's Bible Dictionary*, p. 101). In fact, the prophet Nahum calls Nineveh a “bloody city” (Nahum 3:1). Would Jonah and his preaching be mocked, ridiculed, or even worse, would he be taken captive, imprisoned, tortured, or put to death in a strange and foreign land? Once again, God not only called Nineveh “a great city” (Jonah 1:2), but also spoke of Nineveh’s “wickedness” which was so great that it had come before God’s holy tribunal (Jonah 1:2). In such a wicked city, anything could happen to Jonah as he preached against the ungodliness of Nineveh. However, once again, that is not given as a reason within our text as to why Jonah rejected the revealed will of God to go to Nineveh. The biblical text does not indicate that Jonah was swallowed up by fear at the prospects of Nineveh’s unwelcomed reception of himself or of his message.

3. There is really only one stated reason in the Book of Jonah as to why he rejected the revealed will of God to go to Nineveh and to preach against her wickedness, and it is found in Jonah 4:2.

a. Jonah knew that the Lord God Almighty was gracious and of great kindness to the undeserving and that those who eyed the mercy of God in Christ Jesus and turned in faith to the Lord from their sins would even have the judgment that they deserved removed from them. Jonah rejected the revealed will of God and fled from the presence of God because he knew that in preaching to the wicked city of Nineveh, God most gracious and merciful might actually deliver Nineveh from their deserved judgment. Jonah, it would seem, had a bit of the spirit of James and John (in Luke 9:51-56), who wanted to call down fire from heaven upon the village of the Samaritans because of their bitterness toward the Samaritans and the inhospitality shown them.

b. God had promised to Abraham that through his seed salvation would come to all nations (Genesis 22:18), and Jonah, as God’s prophet, would have (no doubt) known that prophecy. Furthermore,

Jonah would have known the prophecies found in the Psalms which also speak of the salvation of all nations (Psalm 22:27; Psalm 72:11). But just as this truth was not one so easily received by the apostles (as demonstrated by Peter needing a vision from heaven to convince him to go to Cornelius, in Acts 10), even though the apostles likewise had the same prophesies that foretold the salvation of all nations and were even commanded by Christ to disciple all the nations in Matthew 28:19, so Jonah found this call to go to the wicked Gentile city of Nineveh so distasteful to him that he rejected it knowing that God in His mercy may actually bless his preaching to the conversion of that city.

c. Jonah certainly had witnessed the grace and mercy of God in sparing God's covenanted people, Israel, even though Israel had proved so unfaithful to her God in pursuing her idolatry and even the false religions of the pagans around her. The Lord God of Israel had come to Israel in her wickedness and had entered into a marital covenant of grace with her to be a husband to her and for her to be a wife to Him. But rather than seeing this Covenant of Grace as an undeserved blessing unheard of and as an indescribable privilege unmatched, she trampled underfoot the covenant love and blessing of God, and went after her idols and other gods with whom she committed spiritual adultery in the very presence of her heavenly Husband. She continued to spurn the repeated call of God through His prophets (like Jonah) to return to Him in faith and repentance.

d. Yes, Jonah knew of the grace and mercy of God first hand, for he had preached many years to an unfaithful Israel, God's adulterous bride. But Jonah wore jealous and possessive glasses that perverted the grace and mercy of God for the Gentile nations of the world. "Israel was God's child and to be seated at the table. The Gentile nations were unclean dogs that had no right to sit with the children at the table. God's covenant love was for Israel, not for that great and wicked city of the Gentiles, Nineveh." Jonah wanted to see the judgment of

Nineveh, not the salvation of Nineveh. And that, dear ones, would seem from the Book of Jonah itself to be the only stated reason why he rejected the revealed will of God and fled from the presence of God.

e. Dear ones, has such a possessiveness perverted your view of the grace and mercy of God that is in Christ Jesus? Have you looked at others or treated others as if they were undeserving of the kindness of God which you have received (though you and I are every bit as undeserving as the most heinous sinner on the face of the earth)? Spiritual pride, beloved, has no place in the lives of us who call ourselves Covenanters, who know how foolish we are by nature, how prone to error we are by nature, and how given to follow the lusts of the flesh we are by nature. If we truly understand our own natural depravity and corruption, if we truly see with horror who often we offend our holy God by our daily transgressions, then we of all people must be humbled before God that He would use us to reach out to others with gospel of salvation and with the covenanted truths of reformation. If we are to boast, let us boast in Christ and in His gospel that is freely offered even to us who are the chief of sinners. Dear ones, if the mercy of God to you and me does not crush such spiritual pride and arrogance, or such jealousy and possessiveness, it only indicates that we have not yet been humbled to see the full extent of our own unworthiness and shame in light of God's rich mercy shown to us. May the Lord so humble us all, that we might not be filled with a pharisaical pride in recounting the alleged reasons in our lives why God has blessed us, but rather may we with a broken and contrite heart, beating our chest cry out to God, "I am blessed only because of the mercy of Christ shown to me a sinner."

C. One more question before moving on to our last main point. Did Jonah actually believe he could flee "from the presence of the LORD?"

1. I submit that Jonah did not deny the omnipresence of the Lord by believing that God (as to His being) was a finite, local God, confined only to the land of Israel. As to God's omnipresence, Jonah no doubt believed with David, "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" (Psalm 139:7).

2. However, there is a sense in which Israel and Judah (and particularly the temple in Jerusalem) were considered to be the footstool of God upon earth (Psalm 99:5; Psalm 132:7). This was where God's presence was particularly manifested in glory due to the fact that God had taken particular possession of the promise land as His, and had placed His temple in that promise land, and had particularly sent His ambassadors, the prophets, before His face unto Israel and unto Judah. And when the Lord threatens Israel and Judah with His severe judgment for their covenant-breaking and idolatry, He uses the phrase that He would cast them "from his presence", which is to say that the Lord would cast them out of the promise land where was manifested His presence in a unique and particular way (2 Kings 13:22-23; Jeremiah 23:39). Thus, when the text states that Jonah fled "from the presence of the LORD" (Jonah 1:3), I would submit that we are to understand that Jonah fled from Israel, where the presence of the Lord was particularly manifested (by means of the preaching of God's prophets to Israel at that time). Although "the presence of the LORD" was particularly manifested in Israel (by means of the ministry of God's prophets) and in Judah (by means of the ministry of God's prophets and God's priests), "the presence of the LORD" is no longer particularly manifested in any one nation, for the Church of Christ is universal in its reach to nations throughout the world.

3. Dear ones, when we meet to hear the faithful preaching of God's Word by Christ's minister, that is where "the presence of the LORD" is particularly revealed here upon the earth at the present time. Where the ordinances are faithfully administered, there is Christ walking

in the midst of His people (according to Revelation 1:13ff) in order to bless His ordinances to our growth in grace, and in order to reveal to us our sin and our desperate need of Him. Let us not be passive hearers of the Word as if it was merely the word of the preacher that goes forth, but rather, let us be active receivers of CHRIST HIMSELF as we engage our minds, our wills, our emotions in receiving by faith the Word of Christ to us. Do we think we would be more active and engaged in the preaching this Lord's Day if Christ Himself personally stood in front of us as the Preacher? But, dear ones, Christ does stand before us when His ambassador faithfully declares His Word to us. Are we falling asleep in the presence of the Lord? Are we daydreaming in the presence of the Lord? Are we a million miles away when the Lord is present in the faithful preaching of His Word? God help us to be those who look upon the ordinance of preaching as a feast that Christ has prepared for our hungry, needy souls. If we leave today spiritually hungry, we have no one to blame but ourselves, because Christ was here, and the table was set with a feast for us to feed upon by faith.

II. Jonah Finds The Path Of Disobedience Opened To Him (“And went down to Joppa; and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD” Jonah 1:3).

A. Once Jonah had determined in his own heart that he would reject the revealed will of God in going to Nineveh, the path of disobedience in fleeing “from the presence of the LORD” was (as it were) one open door after another. He went down to the sea port of Joppa (which is modern Jaffa); he providentially found a ship just at the right time headed for Tarshish, far away from Nineveh and Israel; he had enough money to pay the fare; and he went down into the ship (which

had sufficient room for him and was not already full of passengers). If any one of these doors just mentioned had been providentially closed by the Lord, Jonah would not have been on that ship that sailed for Tarshish. But each door was providentially open to Jonah so that he proceeded in rebellion to flee “from the presence of the LORD.”

1. Dear ones, so often Christians look at their circumstances and judge by how comfortable their life is going, how all the doors that they come to are wide open to them, that they must be walking in faithfulness to the Lord. But let us be clear that just as God opened these providential doors for Jonah in order to set him up for a very big fall so as to humble him and to get his attention, so we cannot merely judge the faithfulness of our Christian life by all the providential doors that seem to be open to us. The faithfulness of our Christian life must be judged by our faith in and obedience to the revealed will of God in Scripture. If we are walking contrary to the revealed and illuminated will of God in doctrine or life, the Lord may indeed delay that very big fall in our life in order to lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4). But as with Jonah, those providentially opened doors may lead us into the biggest storm that we ever faced, if we persist in our rebellion against Christ and His revealed will in doctrine and life. Let us always be thankful for every material blessing and enjoy every open door to blessing in this life that God bestows upon us. But dear ones, let us never fall into the trap of thinking that the mere absence of turmoil, the mere absence of trials, the mere absence of tribulation, the mere absence of physical afflictions, the mere absence of financial problems, or the mere absence of family conflict means that we are necessarily walking in faithfulness to Christ. We must daily and honestly check our doctrine and our life by the Word and Spirit in humble prayer before the Lord. And we must also remember that though God does providentially open doors of blessing to us, Scripture also bears testimony that it is through much tribulation that faithful Christians enter into the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

2. Once Jonah had determined to reject the revealed will of God to go to Nineveh, each step led him farther and farther away “from the presence of the LORD.” Dear ones, make no mistake about it, rejection of the truth is not neutral ground; it is rebellion against the Lord, whose truth it is. So often in our own lives, the first step in falling into that besetting sin is our own failure to recognize how we have either actively rejected God’s revealed will in doctrine or life by refusing to submit to what we know to be revealed in His Word, or how we have passively rejected God’s revealed will in doctrine or life by delaying our obedience and procrastinating in doing what God calls us to believe and what God calls us to change in our lives (by His grace). And even if our world does not immediately come crashing down all around us, our negligence or sinful forgetfulness to believe and do what is revealed in His Word is leading us farther and farther away “from the presence of the LORD.” Such active or passive rebellion against the revealed and illuminated will of God in doctrine or life must likewise have its disastrous effects in our communion with the Lord. For how can we expect to enjoy that sweet fellowship with the Lord in His ordinances when we are running away “from the presence of the LORD” by refusing or procrastinating to believe or to do what we know is God’s revealed will? Let us be quick, my brothers and sisters, to humbly recognize and repent (by God’s grace) for how we are to varying degrees rejecting the revealed and illuminated will of God in doctrine and life, and are fleeing “from the presence of the LORD.”

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