

Salvation Belongs to the Lord: Runaway

Jonah 1:1-16

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Now if you would, take your copies of God's holy Word in your hands and turn to the prophecy of Jonah, Jonah chapter 1. You'll find that on page 774 in the church Bibles. Jonah chapter 1. Before we read the Word of God together let's pray.

The grass withers and the flowers fade but the Word of the Lord endures forever. We believe it. We pray that the Christ who speaks in it would come in the ministry of the Holy Spirit to address our own hearts and lives as we read Your holy and sacred and authoritative and sufficient Word. Deal with us by Your grace, arrest us in our waywardness, and bring us home like prodigals to the Father. Have mercy on us. Teach us to walk in new obedience. Show us Your faithfulness even to wayward and rebellious children of Yours, unwilling to let us go, grace whose grip can never be broken. And as You show us these things, would You melt our hearts in love and adoration and praise towards You anew, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Jonah chapter 1. We are reading from the first verse through verse 16. This is the Word of Almighty God:

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.' 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.

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. 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. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. 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.'

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. 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?' And he said to them, 'I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' 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.

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. 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.' 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. 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.' So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken to us in His holy and inerrant Word.

Tonight we are beginning a new sermon series looking at the book of Jonah. No doubt you are familiar with the story. Jonah is a prophet of the Lord. He is a preacher. He is ministering the Word of God among the people of the northern kingdom of Israel under the reign of Jeroboam II, sometime around the 8th century BC. And in that capacity he is sent, verse 2, to "Nineveh, that great city" of the Assyrian Empire. And Jonah refuses to go. And really the rest of the story unfolds in the wake of his stubborn unwillingness to submit himself to the Word of God and the call of God in his life. It is a tale of Jonah's slowly learned lessons and of God's extraordinary, persistent, sovereign grace. And it is a profound challenge to all of us to care for the salvation of the world, to care for those who are not like ourselves, to care for the lost wherever we may find them.

Tonight as we've read together we'll be considering the opening sixteen verses of the first chapter and I want to notice with you three large themes in chapter 1. First, the consequences of disobedience; the consequences of disobedience. Here's what happens in a person whose life is characterized for a season by backsliding. The consequences of disobedience. Then secondly, there's the pursuit of the Lord. For all Jonah's backsliding, one of the extraordinary features

of chapter 1 is the unrelenting persistence of God Himself who pursues Jonah in His grace and will not let him go. The pursuit of the Lord. And then thirdly, there's the surrender of sacrifice. The Lord finally corners Jonah and gets his attention and Jonah surrenders himself. And in that moment particularly, we get to see a glimpse of the Gospel of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. The consequences of disobedience, the pursuit of the Lord, the surrender of sacrifice.

I. The Consequences of Disobedience

Let's think first of all about the consequences of disobedience. Please bear with me as my voice dries up. I hope it lasts all the way to the end. Maybe you're hoping that it doesn't, but pray for me! First of all, the consequences of disobedience. Verse 1 - "The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.'" That's the commission laid upon the prophet - he is to go and preach to the Ninevites. He is a man of proven track record in ministry, of previous usefulness in public ministry. King Jeroboam, though he was an evil king in the northern kingdom of Israel, did enlarge the borders of the territory of the northern kingdom, he ensured peace for a season, and all of that was according to the Word of the Lord that had come through the ministry of Jonah the prophet - 2 Kings 14 and verse 25. So this is a man used to speaking the truth to power, a man who has preached the Word of God even to a wayward and wicked king like Jeroboam.

An Unwilling Prophet and an Unlikely Repentance

But this is one international mission trip, a trip to Nineveh, this is one preaching assignment that the prophet Jonah is not at all ready for. And so verse 3, "Jonah arose to flee." He rose to flee. There were other prophets who, like Jonah, were sent to speak oracles of judgment over the nations surrounding Israel and Judah. Jonah's commission here is hardly unique in that respect so one wonders, "What is Jonah's problem?" He would not be the last prophet sent with a hard word of judgment on the nations. There are two features, actually, of Jonah's commission that set it apart. Take a look at it with me. First of all notice that Jonah is to go to Nineveh in person. Unlike other prophets who would stand in the streets of Jerusalem perhaps and speak an oracle for the benefit of God's people against the nations, Jonah is sent to the nations with that very same word of judgment. And then secondly, the word that is translated here, "Arise, arise and go to Nineveh," involves more than a simple call to get up and get going. It carries a note of urgency and immediacy. You see the captain of the ship in the midst of the storm shaking Jonah awake and saying, "Arise! Call on your god!" There's an urgent and immediate task at hand. So Jonah is to go himself to Nineveh and he is to go right away without delay.

And as we'll see when we come to chapter 4 and verse 2 Jonah deduces from all

of this - the immediacy of it, he's being sent in person, it is an unusual commission for an Old Testament prophet - Jonah deduces from all of this God's intention in sending him to Nineveh was not simply to announce judgment but was to effect by preaching judgment on rebellion and sin to effect the repentance, the salvation, the deliverance from judgment of the wicked Ninevites. This, Jonah says, is why he fled. Nineveh was a vast city located about six hundred miles northeast of Israel near the modern city of Mosul where you may have seen in the news recently it is alleged that the site of Jonah's tomb was destroyed by ISIS fighters. The city of Mosul is located very close to the ancient city of Nineveh. It was probably at that point the largest urban center of the rapacious and violent Assyrian Empire, calculated to have taken about three days to journey around. And this is an empire, by the way, that would soon emerge yet again to threaten and oppress the entire region. So Jonah is being asked here to go to the enemy. He's being asked to go to the enemy, an overwhelming army of the enemy, with a message that is really designed to bring to them mercy or to bring them to repentance as the recipients of mercy.

Meanwhile, "King Jeroboam did evil in the sight of the Lord," 2 Kings 14 and verse 24. How unthinkable for Jonah, do you see, that the wicked Ninevites might repent at his preaching when God's own covenant people Israel are wandering headlong into open apostasy against the rule of God and Jonah had been preaching to them for so long. Indeed should Nineveh repent and be preserved might they not become, in God's purposes, the very instrument that will be used to bring judgment on Israel. And so Jonah just cannot conceive of preaching to Nineveh while Israel is backsliding. He will not do it; he simply won't go. And so he flees.

The Anatomy of Backsliding

And I want you to notice very carefully with me that there is a cascade of consequences that follow that fateful decision. Here, we might say, is the anatomy of backsliding. The text itself emphasizes the sad trajectory of Jonah's life in this opening chapter. Notice how it repeats the same Hebrew verb over and over to describe Jonah's actions. "Jonah went down to Joppa," and literally "he went down into the ship," verse 3, and he then "went down into the inner part of the ship and fell asleep," verse 5. Down and down and down he goes. Here is a man spiraling downward from faithfulness and usefulness into bitterness and self-deception, the self-deception of an unwilling and disobedient heart. And look at what happens. First, Jonah directly, bluntly, disobeys the Word of the Lord. He's told to travel to Nineveh to make the journey to the northeast six hundred miles. Instead he sets out to go where? Verse 3 - "to flee to Tarshish" - probably modern Spain; in entirely the opposite direction, the ends of the known world; as far from Nineveh as Jonah knows he can possibly go. Why would he do that? Why would he flee like that? What could be more futile? Surely this prophet knows! What could be more futile than running from God? Doesn't he know Psalm 139? "Where shall I go from your spirit? Where shall I flee from your

presence? If I ascend into heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, in the realm of the dead, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me and the light about me be night, even the darkness is not dark to you, the night is bright as the day; for darkness is as light with you.'" There is nothing more futile than running away from God. There is nowhere you can go where He does not see you. And surely Jonah knows that God is everywhere, that God's eyes are always upon him?

And yet isn't this exactly actually what we all tend to do when we begin a pattern of direct, willful disobedience? This is what we've been doing since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the garden. You remember how they hid themselves from the presence of the Lord. It was irrational; they couldn't be hidden. And neither can we and neither could Jonah. There is no hiding from God. Jonah knew better, we know better, but guilt has a way of driving us to illogical avoidance. Like Adam, maybe like some of us tonight, Jonah is hiding; he's hiding.

Accommodated Providence and "Justified" Sin

And then look at how Jonah belittles God as he accommodates his sin. He attempts to "flee from the presence of God," we're told. It's a phrase repeated twice in verse 3 and a third time in verse 10. This really is at the heart of Jonah's problem. Jonah wants out from under the gaze of God. He wants to be free from the sting of living *coram deo*, "before the face of God," of knowing that God always sees him. You know in the course of pastoral ministry I have met people who have abandoned the faith and walked away from the Christian Gospel, sometimes suddenly, apparently dramatically, making a hairpin turn almost and going in the other direction. One day it seems that they profess to trust and love the Lord Jesus Christ and believe His Gospel and then all of a sudden the next they reject it and walk away. It's stunning to watch. But almost invariably, behind the seemingly sudden theological shift there has been festering a long ethical and moral decline. The theological change, the rejection of the ideas, the adjustment of truth commitments and convictions was made to accommodate moral and spiritual choices that they preferred. If we prefer sin, if we opt for sin, we cannot retain belief in the God who's there, not as He really is. Something's got to give. If we are to have our rebellion we must make the mighty sovereign God smaller somehow to make room for our sin. Whenever you see someone jettison Biblical doctrine, the real issue very often isn't really theological or intellectual; it is moral. They have opted to rebel in their moral and ethical lives and the contrast, the clash between the direction their life is taking and the convictions they say they believe is too much for them to bear. They love their sin and so they reconfigure their doctrine of God to make room for it. And that is exactly what we see Jonah doing here. He is making God small. He is trying to flee from the presence of the Lord.

And then look at the text. Armed with a scaled back doctrine of God, one wonders how he interprets the providences that surround his flight here. He went down to Joppa and lo and behold there just happened to be a ship going to the very place he has determined he wants to go - heading to Tarshish. A few inquiries immediately revealed that whatever the fare was for the long, dangerous journey, wouldn't you know it, Jonah has just enough to get him there. Everything seems to line up nicely all of a sudden. Was he tempted, perhaps, to read these turns of providence as favorable signs? Did he perhaps fool himself by them into thinking that he had misinterpreted or misheard the instructions of God in the first place? That he really wasn't required to go to Nineveh any more than he was required to go to Tarshish? He was a free agent, and having rejected the possibility of Nineveh, wasn't God's providence now indicating and affirming his choices as correct? "All the doors are open! All the stars align! All the signs seem to agree! Tarshish it is," Jonah says.

How easy it is to make providence say what we want to hear. When we jettison the revealed Word of God as the source and foundation for all our guidance, when we jettison the revealed Word of God in holy Scripture it is never safe to follow our own interpretations of providence instead. It is not signs you need; it is Scripture you need. Too many good Christians have ruined themselves by finding in convenient providences confirming proofs of misguided decisions. They concluded their sin really wasn't so sinful after all. "God is on my side! Look at the signs!" What Jonah didn't understand was that these were indeed kind providences from the hand of God, though not at all in the way he expects. God is lining things up in His providence only to set Jonah up to learn some hard lessons. God is going to pursue Jonah as we will see to bring him back. Sometimes God will allow the providences surrounding our sin to make our sin easy. Sometimes He will allow it. He'll hand us over for a season to our own wayward hearts, not to indulge us, not to affirm our disobedience, never to justify our actions, but sometimes to bring us to the end of ourselves, to show us the emptiness and the utter bankruptcy of the choices we are making, to make our hearts ache like the prodigal in the pig sty who came to himself, to make our hearts ache and long for home, to be at the Father's table once again.

Charles Spurgeon tells the story of a boy that he went to school with who would often explode in fits of rage and start throwing things. "What struck me forcibly," said Spurgeon, "was not that he got angry nor that he threw something when he got angry, but that whenever he was angry there was always something at hand to throw." Isn't that true? Beware of saying, "No," to God. Beware. When you set your heart on sin, very often you will find precisely the means to carry out your disobedience. Beware of saying, "No," to God.

A Seared Conscience

So Jonah gets on board the ship and soon a great storm picks up. The seamen

are doing all they can to save the ship but where's Jonah? Is he helping bail the water? Is he throwing cargo overboard? Is he rowing with all of his might? Verse 5 - he is asleep; sound asleep, below deck. Here is a quiet conscience if ever you saw one. It is not the quiet of a clean conscience. It is the silence of a seared and battered and broken conscience; a conscience that no longer protests. Here, I think, for me at least, is the most alarming part of Jonah's story, the most terrifying warning in this part of Scripture. When we persist in disobedience the voice of our consciences, which at first protested loudly and called us to change course and come back, grow quieter and quieter and quieter until in the end they are silent and we are abandoned to our rebellion.

A Marred Witness

And then finally notice what happens as a result of all of that to Jonah's witness. When at last the lot falls to Jonah and he can't hide anymore, he's cornered, he confesses, verse 9, "I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land." But notice now the sailors react to him. They recognize that the deadly storm now threatening to tear the vessel apart is all Jonah's fault. "You fear the Lord, really? We're in this mess because of you! Your words and your life do not match!" So they ask what to do with him to escape destruction and Jonah tells them, "Hurl me into the sea." Look at the text. They don't listen, do they, at least not at first. Maybe they don't believe him; who could blame them? Certainly they don't want his blood on their hands. They seem to be kinder, more concerned to do the right thing than Jonah ever was. So that at this point in the story don't we find ourselves rather admiring these pagan sailors who row as hard as they can for shore? And don't we find ourselves frankly disdaining the now pathetic spectacle of this backslidden prophet? He's lost all credibility, hasn't he? He's lost all credibility. The sailors don't take him seriously. We find it hard to respect him very much as readers. You will belittle God and make room for your sin. You will justify your actions and misread providence. Your conscience, increasingly seared and battered by your disobedience, will be quelled and silenced, no longer alarming and protesting until whatever witness you might have left is ruined and in tatters and utterly incredible. There is a solemn, I think, frightening warning here for us as Christians. As we watch the consequences of disobedience unfold in Jonah's life, beware backsliding. Beware and turn back.

II. The Pursuit of the Lord

There is another side to the story, however, one that poor Jonah could not yet see. We get to see it from our vantage point as readers. It is here for our great comfort and assurance. Alongside the consequences of disobedience there is, in the second place, the pursuit of the Lord. The pursuit of the Lord. As we said earlier, the providential alignment of circumstances that allow Jonah to set sail for Tarshish were indeed part of God's kindness to him. He perhaps found in them

assurances that he'd done nothing wrong, but God intended them to set up a terrifying ordeal designed in the end to restore and retrieve Jonah from the oblivion of disobedience into which he had plunged himself. And so once the boat is in the deep Mediterranean waters, God's shock treatment plan begins in earnest. Verse 4 - "The Lord hurled a great wind." He takes careful aim at poor Jonah and unleashes a mighty tempest on this little boat. Sometimes, you know, cancer requires radical surgery. There may be some of you here this evening who can testify to that with firsthand experience. Sometimes it requires radical surgery. And sometimes sin requires hard providences so wake us up and bring us back to God. God Himself throws a storm at this boat. Nothing the sailors could do could possibly hope to save the vessel if God determines to sink it. Jonah isn't listening yet, is he? God is hurling storms at this boat. The wind and the waves are howling. Everywhere around is the loudspeaker saying, "Come back to Me! Stop your flight and return!" And he's still not listening. In fact he's asleep in the cabin.

And when the captain roughly shakes him awake look at the captain's choice of words. This is stunning. Jonah must have heard in his rebuke, the captain's rebuke, an echo of the original commission by which God sent him to Nineveh. The same verbs are used here in verse 6 as are used in verse 2. God told Jonah, remember, to arise and cry out our call out against Nineveh. Now the captain in the middle of the storm shakes him awake and says, "Arise, and cry out" this time "to your god!" God is pursuing Jonah, even putting echoes of His own word on the lips of pagans as He seeks to bring Jonah back. And Jonah still isn't listening and things are now desperate as the storm reaches its crescendo. The ship is tearing itself apart. And so, verse 7, the pagans do what pagans do best - they resort to their own superstitions as they try to divine the reason for the storm. They cast lots. They did not know Proverbs 16:3 of course, "The lot is cast into the lap but its every decision is from the Lord." They're practicing divination. But even in their superstition the sovereignty of God overrules and so the lot falls on Jonah. Jonah is cornered. He's caught red-handed. There is no escape. He's been outed by the sovereign hand of Almighty God Himself and he cannot run any longer. And so now at last he confesses his identity and he owns his sin, doesn't he, verses 9 and 10? And he offers himself as their only hope of rescue, verse 12.

A Word of Warning

It was a painful intervention by God, wouldn't you say - shocking, hard. The wounded conscience of the prophet that had become calloused and insensitive is torn apart, torn open, exposed by the God who pursues His children. But reopening those wounds, as painful as they no doubt were, was the only way for Jonah to find real healing, real restoration. Facing his sin is the only way back. He needed to stop running and so God cornered him in a spot where there was nowhere else to run to. Maybe tonight you can relate to poor Jonah. God has been exposing a pattern of rebellion in your heart. You've been saying, "No," to

God for too long. Perhaps your conscience has fallen asleep. Maybe you've even tried to justify your sin to yourself if not to everyone else. Perhaps you've remade God in your own image as someone who will endorse your choices and never ask too much of you. And now your witness has been shattered. And maybe tonight God has been pursuing you as you've fled from Him. Maybe He's been pursuing you, reopening some of the wounds, and asking you to face your sin and come home. Maybe He has brought into your life sore trials, hard providences, working to awaken you to your real need for Him. It must have become obvious by the end that Jonah was way out of his depth as the storm and the waves overwhelmed the ship and even the sailors are mouthing the very word of God. God was trying to get Jonah to see he can't make it on his own, to flee back to Him. And maybe He's calling you to do the same. Maybe it's time you started to listen. Are you listening? God is calling you back.

A Word of Comfort

There is a word of comfort here as well as warning. It is simply the message that God doesn't let His children go. Isn't that reassuring? Jonah is pretty wayward here, isn't he? And God is absolutely relentless in His pursuit of him. Not easy, not comfortable, but He will not let him go. Grace's grip cannot be broken in Jonah's life. God will never let you go, believer in Jesus. Never. Never. You cannot sin your way out of the grip of His grace. You may wander far but He will pursue you if you are His. Perhaps coming back will require hard providences but He will bring you home. He will not let you go. Isn't that what Paul means? Isn't Jonah's experience really writing out in narrative what Paul teaches us didactically in Romans 8 and verse 39 that "nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord"? He means God is going to chase you whenever you try to run and that is good news, not bad news. The God who loves you will not let you run. He will always, always hold you safe. This is Hebrews 12:7. God is disciplining Jonah, treating him as His son, seeking to train him in righteousness that he may bear the peaceable fruit of righteousness having been trained by his Father's discipline. And perhaps you're in the midst of discipline. Will you learn the lesson and begin to live in new dependence upon God?

III. The Surrender of Sacrifice

And then very briefly, the last thing to see - the consequences of disobedience, the pursuit of the Lord, then there's the surrender of sacrifice. The sailors are about to die, the ship is going down, there are no choices left. Jonah's told them what they must do; they've tried everything they can to save his life and so now at last in desperation they take the prophet at his word and hurl him into the storm. And they do so crying out to God not to hold his death against them. The sea is instantly a millpond; it is flat, calm. The beginnings at least of Jonah's repentance have led him to offer himself here in the maelstrom of God's rebuke

as a substitute by whose sacrifice these sailors might be delivered. He proposes to die that they might not. He's cast overboard, the sea is calm, the pagan sailors, they've cried to the Lord now - notice they worship and fear Him. Actually the language of their prayer in verse 14 is designed to give the reader a clue to the condition of their hearts. They say of God, "You, O Lord, have done as it pleased You." That is language that is used only three other times in the Old Testament Scriptures - Isaiah 46:5-10, Psalm 115:3-4, Psalm 135. In all three places, God who does whatever He pleases is contrasted with pagan idols who are shown to be empty, futile, worthless things. When Jonah made himself a scapegoat the sailors come to fear the Lord and the language they use is a clue to the reader that their fear of the Lord is not simply adding Jehovah to the pantheon of their own paganism; they turn to trust in Jonah's God.

A Summons to Christ

Isn't that a wonderful irony? Jonah is running away so as not to see pagan's delivered from judgment and no matter his best efforts to the contrary God still saves sinners by this man! Salvation belongs to the Lord, which really is the heart of the message of the book of Jonah. God saves by whichever means - whomever, whenever He chooses. These sailors have turned from idols, they've been converted, and how is it that they are saved? By the substitution of Jonah. He's the scapegoat. He's thrown into the storm of God's wrath and they are delivered. What a picture of the Gospel it is. Isn't that precisely what the greater than Jonah, the Lord Jesus, has done for us? Hurling into the storm of God's wrath that backsliders and sinners and wayward sons and daughters and rank outsiders deserve so that we might be delivered and not destroyed. He took the blame. He was plunged into the judgment so that we might know mercy. There is a way back for you, do you see? There is a way back. It is like these sailors to cry to God for mercy and then take Jesus Christ to be your substitute. He can still the storm. He can bring you back. He can restore you. Maybe the hound of heaven has been pursuing you; He's been on your trail. Maybe God has been chasing you down and calling you home. Tonight is the time to start listening. Will you pray with me?

Our Father, forgive us for our backsliding, for our hearts that are prone to wander and to leave the God we love. We surrender. We want to be like Jonah and we want to surrender now to You. Have mercy on us. Help us to hear You as You call to us to come back and help all of us, every one of us, to flee again to our greater than Jonah who was thrown into the storm of God's wrath that we might be delivered. Visit us in Your grace and bring us back in Jesus' name. Amen.

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