

Jonah 1: God Pursues The WaywardIntro

I have some friends in America who have a four-year-old. He is a sweet and funny child, but there are times (surprise surprise) where he is a little bit difficult. Those of you that have experienced young children will know that sometimes when you ask them to do something they will do the opposite. Ask them to go upstairs and get ready for bed and they'll go to the kitchen for a snack! And sometimes they'll even hide from you because they know they're doing wrong (my favourite hiding place as a child was under my bed or behind the sofa)! It's comical because we think, "that's clearly not what I asked you to do!" but if we're really watching carefully we can also see a similar rebellious streak in ourselves. Take Jonah. Jonah has to be dragged kicking and screaming to fulfil his calling from God. When God calls him to go to Nineveh he gets up and immediately runs as far away as he can in the opposite direction! Here you have one of the most rebellious, wayward prophets in the whole Bible. But there is much here that shows us why we also tend to avoid and disobey God as well. Even though it was written thousands of years ago we'll see that our human hearts suffer from the same problems as Jonah. And what we'll see this morning in this famous story is why pursuit is necessary, how God pursues us, and a hint at God's ultimate pursuit of us in Jesus Christ.

*Trans. So, right at the outset of Jonah we're shown why **pursuit is necessary**. We learn that pursuit is necessary because of our **wrong attitudes** about God which lead to **strategies of avoidance**.*

I. The need for pursuit (v. 1-3)**a. Wrong attitudes:**

- i. Look at Jonah's reaction to the command God gives him: "You want me to do *what*?" "You want me to go *where*?" Why does he react like that?
 1. Well, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, which at the time was considered one of the most cruel and violent. It was basically a terrorist state of the ancient world. God telling Jonah to go to Nineveh is like him telling you here this morning, "Arise, go to Pyongyang and warn them judgment is coming." It's shocking!
 2. Even more strange is God's choice of Jonah. In 2 Kings 14:25 we're told that Jonah supported the aggressive expansion of Israel's borders. **Jonah is a nationalist, and therefore Jonah's God is a nationalistic one.** This shows us that there are deep attitudes of prejudice and sin that blind us to who God really is. Jonah is happily married to a particular view of God until God shows up and spoils it. When that happens Jonah is thrown into fury and despair.
- ii. And because the mission makes no practical or theological sense to Jonah, he rejects it. The destination and the missionary don't make sense! Jonah

assumes because he can't see any good reasons for God's command, there mustn't be any.

1. Let me ask you a question: **does God know best, or do you?** Listen, Jonah was a prophet. He was steeped in the Word of God, and God spoke to him directly. His entire career was centered around God's word. But this only proves that **you can be saturated in the bible, and yet your heart can still be out of alignment with the God of the bible.**
 - a. For example Christian ministers nowadays who run from what the Bible says about sexuality because they can't have a God who doesn't affirm every individual's choices, or those who ignore what the bible says about the dangers of the love of money in order to preach health, wealth and prosperity.
 - b. More personally, I am at a time in my life where I have never been closer to the Word of God. But I often look at my life and feel shame at how little change I see. It is so easy to read the word of God and yet miss the heart of God.
- b. And these attitudes towards God lead to **strategies of avoidance:**
 - i. For those of us who would say we know God, often the problem is not that we're ignorant of what God's asking us to do. We just don't want to do it. That's why Jonah doesn't stop to have it out with God, he just runs in the other direction! He doesn't stop to ask! Our problem is not that we lack knowledge, but of courage.
 - ii. And we can see two strategies of avoidance here in Jonah 1:
 1. **Running** "from the presence of the Lord" – Look at how many times that phrase is repeated in chapter one. Now, that's ironic because the Bible teaches that God is omnipresent; he's everywhere. But I think what this is getting at is Jonah is avoiding places or people that will force him to face God. So do we. We'll find excuses to skip church, or meet with Christian friends. We compartmentalize our faith to keep God out of uncomfortable areas. Are you just going through religious motions and not truly engaging with God?
 2. **Silence** – Notice also that it's more than halfway through the first chapter until Jonah speaks. Even when he's addressed by the captain he doesn't say a word to God or man. See, when we're avoiding God our prayer life dries up, and we cease to share the good news with others around us, even when the opportunity comes knocking. I wonder, what is your prayer life like? And this ultimately leads to real **isolation**. See how often the word "down" is used in the story. Jonah is going deeper and deeper down into his isolation as he tries to run from God.

Trans. So, how's Jonah stacking up as a missionary candidate? What would you have done in God's place here? Moved on to a better employee; someone more qualified, more

*enthusiastic? There must have been plenty of other options! But God isn't looking to run a business; he's out for people's hearts. God doesn't gravitate towards the superb, he pursues the sinful. And what we see here is that God **pursues Jonah with a storm**. He's not content to let Jonah remain in his sinful attitude. Jonah runs away but God is hot on his heels with a severe mercy.*

II. **The God who pursues**(v. 5-10)

- a. **Through storms**—The storm in Jonah 1 is almost a major character! It takes up most of the action. We learn that God hurls a storm at Jonah. Don't skip over that. God hurls it. In a world full of destructive storms here is one that is used for Jonah (and the sailors') good.
 - i. Now, hear me correctly here: not every difficulty is the result of our sin. However, every difficulty can help reduce the power of sin over our hearts. Storms can wake us up to truths we would otherwise never see. Sometimes you're not aware there's a fire in the building 'til the alarm goes off! On my second-hand car in America a little light has just started to flash on the dashboard, "Maintenance required!" I wouldn't know I needed the car looked at if it wasn't flashing at me!
 1. Let me ask you, what is rocking your boat so that it threatens to break up? Is it being single year after year though you long for marriage? Rejection from a job you dearly wanted? Poor grades? Family disunity?
 2. What is your storm? Maybe you haven't sailed into it yet. But rest assured it is God calling you back to him. Maybe he's turned up the heat on an anxiety or problem you have. He's drawing you to himself again. At times he takes us by the hand, at others it's by the scruff of the neck! But it's always for our good. God is for you all the time. He's even against you for you!
 3. Let me give you an example of how God has proven this truth to me. I love being at seminary in the United States, but it's also very hard living in another culture. Ministry is also full of difficult conversations and relationships. I have seen God expose through my reactions to disappointments and problems my perfectionism, entitlement, and lack of trust in God's love. I wouldn't have seen that if not for those "storms". There are fatal flaws in our character that wouldn't be exposed if not for these storms.
- b. **Through others**—But God also seeks Jonah out through the pagan crew of the ship. Look at what the captain says: "Arise, call on your God". That's remarkably similar to what God told Jonah to do at the beginning! God sent his prophet to point the pagans to himself. Yet now it is the pagans pointing the prophet towards God.
 - i. The scene of the storm is dramatic: while it rages around the ship, and the sailors are desperately trying to lighten the load, praying to their gods, Jonah lies in the belly of the ship, silent and asleep. He is spent with exhaustion, sorrow, and grief. But God sends these people for whom Jonah could not care less to wake him up and draw him out of his state.

1. Look carefully here: where the sailors are working to save everyone on board, Jonah couldn't care less. He doesn't even pray. They are all literally in the same boat, but Jonah's private faith is doing no public good. He isn't bringing the resources of his faith to bear on the suffering of his shipmates. He's neither humbly serving them nor telling them how to get right with God.
2. But the needs, cries, and demands of the sailors reach Jonah and force him to act, to make a response. And unfortunately this is the case for many Christians around the world. The tendency is, instead of engaging with the communities around us and meeting their needs with practical deeds of love as well as the gospel message, we behave like musk-oxen. We turn inwards towards the watering hole and present our backs to the needy world outside, ignoring its cries.
 - a. I know that being a Christian in Japan is hard. Christians here are really in the minority, and the wider church is struggling. But has it caused the church to keep its faith private and silent? Let me ask you, Osaka International Church, What are the cries and demands of the city of Osaka? You know better than I do! Is it foster care, homelessness, depression, loneliness, care for the elderly, substance abuse, divorce, caring for the environment? Have you heard the cries? Where is Osaka shouting, "help us, or we'll drown!"? These are major ways that God pursues the church to drive it into action for the salvation of the world. He won't let Jonah escape from his calling to reach the Ninevites and other non-Jewish people, and he won't let the church sleep on its commission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth!

Trans. So we have seen how we need to be pursued, and some of the methods through which God pursues the wayward. But perhaps the most famous part of this story will show us just how far God was willing to go in order to pursue sinners.

III. The ultimate pursuit (v.11-16)

- a. In verse 12 Jonah tells the sailors "Throw me into the sea"
 - i. Why does he say that? Where does he get that idea from? It could be that he is so despondent that he'd rather die than go to Nineveh.
 - ii. But I think it is because Jonah is beginning to think of the welfare of those around him. Jonah begins to thaw. He is essentially saying, "You are dying for me, but I should be dying for you. I'm the one with whom God is angry. Throw me in."
- b. He is learning that all ministry requires the sacrifice of one's self for those whom we're called to reach out of love. That true love meets the needs of the beloved no matter the cost to the self. He's learning that all life-changing love is substitutionary.

- i. Isn't this encouraging? Even the wayward Jonah (and we'll see him continually waver in the book) is used by God to reach those around him. Even Jonah in all his imperfections is able to sacrifice himself for the welfare of the other men in the boat.
- ii. And we're just as imperfect and wandering, yet we have resources that Jonah didn't. See how the storm (which is an expression of God's displeasure at Jonah's disobedience) ceases raging when Jonah is thrown into it? This anticipates the ultimate death of Christ in our place. Jonah is thrown into the storm for his own sin, but Jesus would be thrown into the storm of God's anger on the cross for yours and for mine! Listen, Jonah's whole issue is that he doesn't believe God can be trusted. But a God who substitutes himself for us and suffers so that we may go free is a God you can trust. Jonah mistrusted the goodness of God, but he didn't know about the cross. What is your excuse?
- iii. Can you see now how God embodies Jonah's call? He commands Jonah to go and pursue the evil Ninevites with the gracious call to repent and believe. Jonah refuses and runs, so God pursues him with the same severe grace aimed at getting at his heart. Jonah is in need of the same call to grace that the Ninevites are. See the irony? But nobody in this story could ever have anticipated how far God was willing to go to embody the call. God would cast himself into the storm. He would be swallowed up in the storm and judgment of His own wrath on the cross. That's why Jesus refers to the "sign of Jonah". Jesus looked at us poor, drowning sinners and said, "Take me up and throw me into the storm." He dove in after you.

Conclusion

Allow me to close with this: the sailors, and to an extent Jonah, learn that when God pursues you there is no refuge *from* him. There is only refuge *in* him. You cannot flee from God (because he's everywhere), but you can flee *to* him. The cross is the ultimate proof of that. You will find no comfort fleeing from God, but you will find all the comfort you need if you go to him. Jonah hasn't learned that yet, but we can look at the cross and know we can trust him. I remember the first time I came to Japan on a mission trip. I was anxious, and not a little lonely in an unfamiliar (yet beautiful) culture. At that moment Psalm 139:7-10 became very precious to me as I discovered how God pursues us:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
 Or where shall I flee from your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
 If I make my bed in Sheol, 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.

God pursues the wayward like you and I through storms into the depths of the sea, and even into death itself in the person of Jesus. Will you stop running?