

THE RUNAWAY PROPHET & THE PURSUING GOD - PART 1:

"JONAH AND THE PAGAN SAILORS"

JONAH 1:1-16

Personal Introduction

Good morning everyone. I'm Jeff - one of the pastors here at HMCC of Jakarta. And it's my privilege to preach the Word of God for us today!

—

Sermon Series Introduction

Today, we'll be taking a short break from our sermon series on the book of Matthew. And we'll be starting a new sermon series on the book of Jonah called "The Runaway Prophet & The Pursuing God."

—

Introduction

Now, I'm assuming that not everyone here is into running, and that's okay. But in another sense, I think we're all runners. Whether we realize it or not, every one of us are always running from something toward something:

- Usually, we run from what we don't want toward what we do want.

So I wonder - What are you running from? And what are you running toward?

- Maybe we're running from insecurity toward security.
- From failure toward success.
- From loneliness toward belonging.

And running toward those things aren't necessarily wrong. But none of those things are meant to define the Christian life.

- For Christians, the defining movement is this: we run from sin and we run toward God.

And we know that. And we want that.

So then why don't we always do it?

- How come sometimes we do the exact opposite and run away from God and run toward sin instead?

Why is there often a gap between what we want to do and what we actually do?

This is what we'll be exploring more of today...

—

Scripture Introduction

Please turn your Bibles to Jonah 1:1-16.

What's unique about the book of Jonah is that it's not like the other prophetic books. The focus is not on the prophecies made by a prophet, but rather it's a story about a prophet.

And it's actually quite a well known story. And you may know that it involves some kind of big fish.

But I want to help re-orient our view here - The focus of Jonah is not about a big fish, but rather a big God. And the theme that we'll see throughout the book is that this God lovingly pursues after those who've strayed away from Him.

Look down to your Bibles - You'll see that Jonah is a short book with only 4 chapters.

- In chapter 1 - God pursues Jonah and the pagan sailors.
- In chapter 2 - God pursues Jonah in the belly of the fish.
- In chapter 3 - God pursues Jonah and the pagan Ninevites.
- In chapter 4 - God pursues Jonah (yet again) outside the city of Nineveh.

Today, we'll be taking a look at chapter 1, verses 1-16. And the title of this sermon is simply, "Jonah and the Pagan Sailors."

We'll take a look at this passage in 3 parts...

Overview

- I. We run (vv. 1-3)
- II. God pursues (v. 4)
- III. We respond (vv. 5-16)

We'll be reading the passage along the way...

I. We run (vv. 1-3)

Let's begin by reading verses 1-2...

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

So the Lord spoke to the prophet Jonah, and then He commissioned him to go from Israel to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire. To orient us geographically, Nineveh is in present-day Iraq; about 800 km from Israel. And God calls it a “great city.”

- So think of cities like Jakarta, Tokyo, New York, or London - great in size, population, power, and influence.
- These are cities we tend to admire.
 - But here we see that the Lord looks deeper than influence and reputation; He looks into the heart of the city.
 - And while Nineveh is great, God declares that it is also “evil.”

Historically, Nineveh was infamous for brutality and terror.

- Just imagine - when they conquered cities, they didn’t just defeat their enemies; they humiliated them.
 - Corpses were piled up as warnings.
 - Leaders were skinned alive.
 - Women were sexually abused.
 - Children were enslaved.
 - And communities and families were scattered to prevent rebellion.

Nineveh was very far from God’s standard of righteousness.

And yet God calls His prophet Jonah to go and warn them because judgment is coming.

<pause>

Now let’s read **verse 3...**

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.

Here’s the twist! Jonah rose, but then instead of going to Nineveh, he fled to Tarshish.

- Tarshish was completely in the opposite direction, across the Mediterranean Sea.
- So imagine - Jonah was supposed to go Northeast by land, but instead he’s going West by sea, as far away from Nineveh as possible!
 - This is like being called to go from Jakarta to Medan, but instead you go the opposite direction, cross the Pacific Ocean, and then go to California.
 - Jonah wasn’t confused, he was intentionally running away.

So what was he running away from?

Look again to verse 3 - The reason is repeated two times here for emphasis - Jonah was fleeing from the presence of the Lord.

This is the opposite of what a prophet is meant to do - A prophet is supposed to stand in the presence of the Lord, receive His message, and then pass it on to others. But Jonah is running away from God's presence because he doesn't want to deliver God's message.

And why not?

We're not told immediately, but look ahead to Jonah 4:2 - Jonah later admits why he ran away...

- He knew that the Lord is a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.
- Jonah feared that if he warned Nineveh, they might repent. And God might forgive them.
- He doesn't want that! In Jonah's eyes, the Ninevites are evil and what they deserve is not mercy but judgment and destruction. And so to ensure their destruction, Jonah planned to go as far away from Nineveh as possible.
 - His logic is this: If there's no message, then no repentance. If no repentance, then destruction.
 - So Jonah ran.

But what's interesting here is that this is completely different to how Jonah acted in 2 Kings 14. Please turn your Bibles to **2 Kings 14:25**.

- This is the account of Jeroboam II, king of Israel.
- I'll read it for us...
 - "He [that is Jeroboam II] restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the Word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which He spoke by His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher."
 - So here, Jonah - the same Jonah, the son of Amittai - delivers God's message to King Jeroboam II. And he announces the restoration (or expansion) of Israel's borders. And Jonah obeys.

So what's going on here? Why is Jonah obeying God in 2 Kings 14, but not in Jonah 1?

- The command is essentially the same: Jonah is to deliver the word of the Lord.
- But here's the difference: One message is aligned with Jonah's desires. The other did not.
 - Jonah wanted Israel's prosperity - he has no problem delivering a message about Israel's expansion.
 - But Jonah didn't want mercy for Nineveh - so he had a problem delivering that message.

So Jonah 1 reveals what was really going on in his heart - Jonah obeyed God only when obedience served his own desires.

- So if we only had 2 Kings 14, we'd assume Jonah was an obedient prophet.
- But Jonah 1 reveals that when he was obeying God in 2 Kings 14, he wasn't obeying God for God, but he was actually obeying God for himself.

So then, church, how about us?

Knowing our members, I think we all want to obey God. The question here is not whether or not we want to obey God, but it's more nuanced than that. The question is really: Why do I obey God? - Do I want to obey God for God? Or do I want to obey God for myself?

- The real test comes when God's Word calls us to do something that conflicts with what we want. That's when our hearts are exposed.
 - Have we truly been obeying God for His sake?
 - Or have we actually been obeying God for our own sake?
 - And it just so happens that - all this time - His desire and my desire have been lining up?

Well, two contexts that can really expose our hearts here are: marriage and church...

- Because in these two contexts, the Bible asks us to do things that are supernatural, and just wouldn't make sense if not for God.

Let's think about marriage first.

- We really have to start by asking ourselves: what is marriage really for?
 - The world teaches us that marriage is primarily about me - to make me happy, to help me fulfill my best self, and to meet my desire for affection and pleasure (me, me, me).
 - And if it stops serving me, then it's time to separate and run in the opposite direction...
 - But that's not what God's Word teaches ...
- Ephesians 5 reveals to us that God's purpose for our marriage is for a husband and a wife to portray the wonderful relationship between Christ and his bride, the church.
 - So that when others look into our marriage, they can have a better understanding of how Jesus sacrificially loves his church, and how his church faithfully submits to Jesus.
- So husbands and wives, how can we tell if we've been obeying God for God or for ourselves?
 - I believe it'll be in the midst of difficulties in our marriage - Because that's when our marriage is tested - Is it really about Christ and his church or has it actually been all about me?
 - So let's ask ourselves: In what ways have I made my marriage about me? And what would it look like for my marriage to showcase Christ and his church during this time?
 - That'd be a good discussion to have with one another.

And now, let's look at the church.

- Again, we really have to ask ourselves: what is church really for?

- The world has taught us to be consumers - so church is about meeting my needs (It's about a community that meets my preferences and benefits me) (Again - me, me, me).
 - And if it stops serving me, then I just run in the opposite direction.
- Again, that's not what the Bible teaches.
- Ephesians 3 reveals to us that God's purpose for the church is that through the church, God's manifold wisdom will be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.
 - That even the angels in Heaven would look down at a local church and be amazed because of God's power at work.
 - Because how can it be that people who have little to gain from one another (and who are so different from each other) are united in Christ as one family and loving one another so deeply?
 - That's something that the world cannot comprehend.
- So, church, how can we tell if we've been obeying God for God or for ourselves?
 - I believe it'll be in the midst of difficulties in our church or difficulties in the relationships we have in church, then we'll be tested to see if it's all been for God, or if it was actually for ourselves as well...
 - So let's ask ourselves: How have I made church about me? (and this is something I need to ask myself as well). What would it look like for our church to showcase God's manifold wisdom during this time?
 - That'd also be a good discussion to have with one another.

Brothers and sisters, we must be wary that our sinful tendency is to run from God's Word when His desire and our desires don't match up (just like Jonah).

So first, we run. And second...

II. God pursues (v. 4)

Let's read verse 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.

As we read this, I don't think most of us are surprised - Did Jonah really think he was able to escape from the Lord's presence just by going out to the sea?

As a prophet, Jonah would've known **Psalm 139:7-10**, which says this:

"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.”

We're reminded here that God is Spirit. He is ever-present. And not only that, but He is also all-powerful. The wind, the sea, and the ship are all within His control and they obey His very commands.

So how foolish was it for Jonah to try and run away from the presence of the Lord?

<pause>

As we're reminded of this truth, some of us may be thinking, “Oh no! There's nothing that we can do to escape His presence!”

Which really is bad news if we're trying to run farther and farther away from God.

But in a sense this is also good news and is so comforting to us because it means that we can never stray too far away from God that He cannot reach us... we're always within His reach.

<pause>

And, brothers and sisters, let's not miss just how amazing it is that God would even pursue after people in the first place, let alone those who've strayed away from Him.

- It would've been perfectly acceptable if God chose to strike Jonah dead right there on the spot.
- But instead He chooses to pursue after Jonah.

So a question we need to ask ourselves is: Why would God do that?

- Well, it's because of all the things Jonah already knows about God which he'd later share in Jonah 4:2 - For the Lord is a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

God could've punished Jonah for his disobedience, but instead He chooses to pursue after Him with love and mercy.

- Because when God pursues after us, it's actually not to harm us, but to help us for our own good - to bring us back to Him and to help us grow even closer to Him.

<pause>

Now, imagine with me that you're walking home at night. And suddenly you hear someone screaming behind you. “Hey! Hey!” You turn around and you see someone chasing after you. What do you do? You run! Because you don't know this person, he may be a thief; he may be a serial killer. And so you keep running! Right when you thought you got away, you hear, “Hey! Hey!” So you run even faster!

You run as fast as you can until suddenly, this guy finally catches up and then grabs you by the hand! And he says, “Hey, here’s your wallet... You dropped it back there and I wanted to return it to you. I kept calling for you, but you didn’t respond. So I kept pursuing after you and I finally had to grab your hand to get your attention.”

It was a wild experience, but aren’t you glad that he pursued after you? Because the pursuit ended up helping you, not harming you.

<pause>

In the same way, God pursues us not to harm us but to help us.

So how may God be pursuing recently to bring you closer to Himself?

- What’s interesting about verse 4 is that it shows us that sometimes the way God pursues after us is through the hurling of a violent storm (it’s not always through a gentle whisper).
 - Sometimes He has to grab us by the hand and shake us a bit to get our attention.
 - So brothers and sisters, are you in the middle of a violent storm right now?
 - Perhaps a great wind is shaking your marriage, relationships, career, or finances?
- Amidst this storm, we may be tempted to think that God is far away or not even with us.
- But what if God is not only with us, but He’s using the storm to pursue after us and to bring us closer to Him?
 - To help us to surrender our fleshly desires; that our worldview would be more and more aligned with His; that we may be shaped more in the image of His Son, Jesus; that we’d grow in our reliance on Him; that we’d obey Him for Him and not for ourselves.
 - That it’d be beneficial for our lives; not harmful... How would that change how you view your current storm?

At this time, we may be tempted to pray, “Lord, please take this storm away!” But I encourage you to pray a bolder prayer, “Lord, let your will be done. Use this storm to bring me closer to you, that you’d be glorified!”

When the Lord pursues after us, He’s doing so because He wants us to respond to Him.

So first, we run. Second, God pursues. And third...

III. We respond (vv. 5-16)

We’ll now look at verses 5-16. And as we walk through this section, it’ll be helpful if you keep in mind that this section is built on contrast.

On one hand, we see Jonah's response to the Lord's pursuit.
On the other hand, we see the pagan sailors' response.

And this contrast pushes us to ask ourselves: How will I respond to the Lord's pursuit? (More like Jonah? Or more like these sailors?)

And what we'll find is that the answer may not be what we expect.

<pause>

Let's read **verses 5-6**

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. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. 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 sailors are understandably afraid. They've most likely faced storms before, but nothing like this.

- And during Jonah's time, ships were mainly merchant ships used for trading and delivering cargo (this was how they'd make money). The last thing you'd want to do is to throw cargo overboard and lose your source of income.
- So imagine how desperate they must've been to have to do that...

And in the midst of this chaos, each sailor is praying to their respective gods. Person A is praying to god A... person B is praying to god B... And so on...

- So these sailors were pagans (they don't believe in the one true God, but they believe in a pantheon of gods). Not great but at least their response is to call out to their false gods for help.

Then it's as if the camera zooms in on Jonah (OK, now how about the prophet who knows the one true God). Let's see... What is he doing? And he's... sleeping...

- He knows the one true God, but he's not calling out to Him...
- As the reader, we're meant to do a facepalm in disbelief... Oh my goodness... What is Jonah doing?

And then ironically, it's the captain of the pagan sailors who had to wake him up and then tell him to pray to God (and then there's no record of him even praying here).

What's shocking here is that Jonah is in open rebellion against God, and yet he seems completely unbothered, and he's able to sleep like a baby.

- This should be like a wake up call for us.
 - Just because we feel at peace about something doesn't necessarily mean that we're doing the right thing.
 - In our sinfulness, we can grow numb. We can become so used to disobedience that it no longer troubles us.
 - So if we continue in the same sin and the weight of that sin begins to feel lighter rather than heavier, then that should really concern us.
 - Because that's the opposite of spiritual growth.
 - Spiritual growth means that we take sin more seriously, not less.

<pause>

So then amidst this violent storm, it's not just "all hands on deck," it seems to be "all gods on deck!"

Now let's read **verses 7-10**

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.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?" ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ 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.

So up to this point, we see these pagan sailors acting exactly as we'd expect pagans to act.

- They've been praying to their gods and then they're casting lots to find out which one of them has angered one of their gods (so a modern-day example of this would be like flipping a coin).
- Their understanding here is completely pagan, but God still chose to work sovereignly through the casting of their lots and pointed them to Jonah.

And then the camera zooms in again to Jonah - And he answers the sailors' questions, "I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord." And he tells them about his God. And the sailors were completely shocked - *"Wait! You mean to tell me that your God is the God of Heaven who made the sea and the dry land, and you decided to run away from Him by going to the sea?! And on our ship?! What is this that you have done?!"*

So even these pagans were able to see that Jonah's response was inconsistent - what he's doing doesn't match with what he's saying.

Brothers and sisters, we need to be wary here because our city is predominantly Non-Christian. So I wonder - If a Non-Christian was to observe your life, would they be shocked to learn that you're a Christian?

Imagine a Non-Christian friend observing...

- How we interact with others.
- How we speak about other people.
- What we watch on our devices.
- How we use our money.
- How we interact with our spouse and kids...
 - Would they say, "That doesn't make sense..."
 - Or would they say, "Ahh... That makes sense now..."
 - And hopefully that points them to greater curiosity in our God...

<pause>

But for these pagan sailors, they're shocked to hear about Jonah's rebellion against His God...

Let's read **verses 11-13**

¹¹ 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. ¹² 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." ¹³ 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.

So Jonah told them to just throw him overboard, so that the storm would calm down.

But was this really the most appropriate response from Jonah?

- He could've said, "Turn back the ship! I have to go to Nineveh!"
- Or he could've said, "Friends, I have sinned against the one true God! Let's ask Him now for His mercy!"

But instead, he responds by saying, "just throw me overboard" - To be clear this is not Jonah trying to sacrificially love these sailors by giving up his life. He's not trying to save them, but - at this point - he just doesn't really care anymore and he rather dies instead of having to deliver God's message (we also see this in chapter 4, verse 3 - Jonah prefers to die than to have these Ninevites be saved by God).

So ironically, God's prophet doesn't really care about the life of others or his own life. But it's the pagan sailors who care about Jonah's life and they're rowing as hard as they can to go back to dry land (so they don't have to throw Jonah overboard). But then they're just not able to...

<pause>

Finally, let's read **verses 14-16**

¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah

and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

So notice how these sailors responded...

- They prayed to the Lord...
 - Now, look down to your Bibles - notice how the word LORD is in all capital letters.
 - When you see that (capital L-O-R-D), that means that the word used in the original language is YHWH - which is God's covenantal name with the Israelites.
 - So the sailors are no longer praying to multiple gods, they're praying to the one true God, "O LORD (O YHWH)"
 - They prayed for God's mercy.
 - And they prayed for God's favor - That God would not hold them responsible for Jonah's death because they acknowledge that the Lord is the one who has sent this storm according to His good purposes.

And then they threw Jonah overboard, and the storm immediately calmed down.

- Look at verse 16 - Their response was that they feared the Lord exceedingly. And then they made sacrifices to the Lord, and made their vows to Him.
- And so these pagan sailors responded with repentance.
 - They turned away from their false gods and turned toward the one true God.

We know that they're truly repentant because the book of Jonah is intentionally structured as a parallel of two halves.

- Chapters 1 & 3 both consist of repentant pagans.
- And chapters 2 & 4 both consist of Jonah's prayers.

It's meant to lead us to ask ourselves - How will I respond to the Lord's pursuit?

- Will I respond with indifference (like Jonah here)?
- Or will I respond in repentance (like these sailors)?

The word repentance literally means to turn around - So will we respond to God's pursuit by turning around and running from sin and running toward God?

That's the question we're left with...

Conclusion

As we conclude, I want to help us see that God's pursuit here points to a greater pursuit that comes later in the New Testament.

As amazing as God's pursuit was through this supernatural storm, that pursuit would climax in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh - And so amazingly, God Himself pursued after His people by coming down from Heaven to Earth.

And whereas Jonah offered to give up his life selfishly for his sake, Jesus gave up his life selflessly for our sake.

And now, anyone who responds to him in repentance and faith, will not be punished in Hell but will receive forgiveness and eternal life in Heaven.

So if you're here today and you've not yet put your faith in Christ, then know that Jesus is pursuing after you. I hope that you'd respond - not with indifference - but in repentance.

And if you've already put your faith in Christ - Brothers and sisters, how will we respond to Christ's ongoing pursuit of us in sanctification?

- May we never say, "I'd rather die than serve God."
- But may we say, "I'd rather serve the God who died for me."

<pause>

Let's pray...
