

Jonah: *Running from God*
Jonah 1:1-3

Have you ever found yourself running from God? In our text for this morning, Jonah hears the call of God to go to Nineveh, but he runs in the opposite direction. So, if you've ever tried to run from God, please stand and let us read, for the last time...I promise...Jonah 1:1-3: 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.”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.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) Judging God; 2) The Tarshish Temptation; and 3) The Cost of Disobedience

I. Judging God

As we observed last week, Jonah received a commissioning from God through the “word of the Lord” that came to him. The commission is clear: Jonah is to go to the expansive city of Nineveh and warn them of God’s coming wrath. Now, if you were not with us last Sunday, you need to know that Nineveh was the leading city of the Assyrian Empire, and the Assyrians were some seriously ruthless people. Assyria was the superpower of the 8th century BC, and the Assyrians had already taken several cities from Northern Israel. As Hayyim Lewis stated, “The Assyrians were the Nazi-storm troopers of the ancient world.”¹

Tim Keller observed that Jonah’s call to Nineveh would be the equivalent of a Jewish rabbi from Poland standing in the heart of Berlin in 1941 crying out against Hitler and the Nazi regime.²

So, how does Jonah respond to God’s call upon His life? We read in vs. 3, “But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.”

Now, before we go any further, note the silence of Jonah. Jonah does not voice his objection to God’s assignment. He doesn’t question God’s judgement or ask for some explanation as to why he is being sent to Nineveh. Instead, Jonah says nothing at all. We’re left to guess why he is so opposed to this assignment. That’s very unusual when we consider other commissioning stories in the Bible.

We must remember that God had called others to take on difficult assignments in the past, and these are stories that Jonah was familiar with. For example, who could forget God’s commissioning of Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3? God commissions Moses to confront Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, and command the supreme ruler to release God’s people who made up a large majority of Egypt’s slave work force. Like Jonah, Moses had every reason to be concerned about his assignment. One could argue that God’s call upon Moses was just as dangerous and extreme as God’s call upon Jonah. The difference is in how the two men respond.

¹ Quoted by Rosemary Nixon in [The Message of Jonah](#), p 63.

² Timothy Keller, [The Prodigal Prophet](#), p 14.

Moses voices his concern about God's call. He tries to make excuses as to why he is truly under-qualified for the task. He questions how this plan is ever going to work, or why Pharaoh would ever listen to him. He directly asks God to find someone else for the job; but as we know, Moses finally gives in and obediently pursues God's call. This is the kind of dialogue we would expect from Jonah. By the way, that is very much like the dialogue I had when I sensed God's call to leave our family and come to Kansas City 16 years ago to pastor this church! I could show you several pages in my journal with so many questions and reasons why I was probably not the best guy for this job. I suspect some of you have similar pages in your journal as to why I'm not the best guy for this job as well! God regularly calls His people to do hard things, to go where they have never gone before, to trust Him when the future is threatening and uncertain...and it's completely normal and acceptable to dialogue with God about our concerns and reservations. We find that kind of dialogue all throughout the scriptures.

Shockingly, however, Jonah doesn't say a word. He doesn't argue with God; he doesn't try to negotiate the assignment; he doesn't vocalize his concerns at all. He simply gets up, and heads in the opposite direction of God's will.

Tim Keller astutely diagnoses the situation when he writes:

Jonah had a problem with the job he was given. But he had a bigger problem with the One who gave it to him. Jonah concluded that because he could not see any good reasons for God's command, there couldn't be any. Jonah doubted the goodness, wisdom, and justice of God.³

We all find ourselves in these situations: when your dream job turns into a nightmare, and you are suddenly unemployed, when the person you thought was "the one" disagrees with your assessment, when the doctor says "cancer" and you find it hard to breathe. We regularly encounter situations where we cannot possibly fathom any good reason for the situation we are being called to endure. And if we can't fathom any good reasons, there must not be any. The same goes for God's call to obey. When we're young, we can't fathom any good reason why we should wait for marriage before engaging in sexual intercourse, and if we don't see any good reason, there must not be one. When we're angry, we see no good reason why we should not retaliate and seek revenge. When we're jealous, we see no good reason why we shouldn't get what we want. When we are safe and comfortable, we see no good reason why we should risk obedience that might bring us harm or discomfort.

Whenever we find ourselves judging God's character, intelligence and intent, we are in a Jonah moment. It's that moment when we secretly think to ourselves, "If there is a God, He clearly doesn't know what He's doing."

Again, Keller captures the essence of the problem:

If you want to understand your own behavior, you must understand that all sin against God is grounded in a refusal to believe that God is more dedicated to our good, and more aware of what that is, than we are. We distrust God because we assume He is not truly for us, that if we give Him complete control, we will be miserable.⁴

³ Tim Keller, [The Prodigal Prophet](#), p 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 137.

I can't think of a quote that better captures Jonah's disposition here in vs. 3, but this is not just Jonah's problem. It's a human problem.

Consider Adam and Eve in the garden. What was the actual sin that led to the Fall of humanity?

God forbid Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of one, and only one, tree: the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil.' The penalty of eating the fruit was clearly communicated: eat of that tree, and you will surely die.

However, God provided no reasons for abstaining from that fruit that was so pleasing to the eye. So, when Adam and Eve see that the fruit looks enticing, and Satan whispers that they are missing out because God is holding back their potential for true happiness, they believe the lie and directly disobey God by eating the fruit. As a result of their sin, they flee the presence of the Lord, just like Jonah.

Note that Adam and Eve didn't set out to do evil. They didn't intend to curse their family and all the earth. They simply came to the conclusion that if they were to be fully satisfied and maximize their happiness, they would need to take matters into their own hands. They did what we all tend to do: we trust God too little and trust our own best thinking too much.

I'm constantly amazed at the hubris of human beings. Although we know that we are mortals, that we are fallible, and that we are all a bit evil, we still think ourselves worthy of judging God. We read the Bible to find things that "we agree with," and we stop reading the Bible should we come across something "we disagree with." We are happy to test all the claims of God by holding up God's Word to our best thinking, rather than holding up our best thinking to be tested by the Word of God.

Such is why Adam and Eve and Jonah are all human representatives. These stories are more than isolated historical events. These stories pull back the curtain and reveal the hearts of men and women in every generation. Here's what we learn and what we all know to be true: Should our best thinking conflict with God's call, we don't even bother voicing our questions or concerns. We just up and head to Tarshish...away from the presence of the LORD.

II. The Tarshish Temptation

Vs. 3 states, "But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD."

Now, where is Tarshish? Great question. Here's the answer: no one knows for sure! The first century Jewish historian, Josephus, suggested that Tarshish was in modern day Turkey. Other scholars assume that word "Tarshish" was a derivative of the city called Tartessos in the southern tip of Spain. The truth is, we really don't know where Tarshish was.

There are, however, multiple references to Tarshish in the Bible that give us three insights into this mysterious destination. First of all, Tarshish was a distant land of riches and resources. In 1 Kings 10:21-23, at the peak of King Solomon's indulgent reign, we read:

All King Solomon's drinking vessels...were of pure gold. None were of silver; silver was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon. For the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks. Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches...

Secondly, Tarshish was equated with the lofty and the lifted up. In Isaiah 2 the prophet declares: For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low; against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up...against every high tower, and against every fortified wall; against all the ships of Tarshish, and against all the beautiful craft...

In other words, Tarshish represents the lofty aspirations of men who would seek fulfillment in the riches of God rather than God Himself.

Finally, we learn in Isaiah 66 that Tarshish represents the outer rim of the world where they know nothing of God's glory. At the very end of Isaiah, we read this prophecy:

For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory, and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory.

All three of these insights are valuable as we consider Jonah's rebellious intent.

Jonah clearly concludes that God cannot be trusted. For reasons that remain unstated until the fourth chapter, Jonah turns away from his call...his *vocatio*...his vocation from God, and he sets his heart on Tarshish. Using God's command to "get up" as the catalyst for disobedience, Jonah gets up, but this time Jonah will choose the destination. Given that God cannot be trusted, Jonah decides that now is the time to pursue HIS dream for HIS life in the exotic fantasy land of Tarshish. He wants to travel as far as possible from the presence of the LORD. He wants to be with people who have no knowledge of God's fame and glory. Jonah wants to disappear. He is fully intent on becoming a nobody.

Church, there are two equal and opposite Tarshish temptations. When we rebel against God and seek to escape His call upon our lives, we either set sail for the Tarshish of self-aggrandizement, or we flee to the Tarshish of anonymity.

Let's think about that for a moment. Some of us equate Tarshish with that new assignment that gives us the respect that we are due. People love us there; people acknowledge our worth and our prowess. We no longer have to deal with the crazy people in our families or deal with the life-sucking routing of our boring old job. For some of us, Tarshish is the ideal picture of a life that must be out there somewhere on the distant shores of LA, or New York, or Australia...or in the arms of another woman or another man...or sitting at a desk in some corner office. Tarshish is the dream of finally getting what we have earned through all of our hard work and diligence--it is a land of self-promotion where we are finally appreciated and given the honor we are due.

For others of us, Tarshish is a distant land where we can live in the safety of anonymity. It is that place where no one expects anything of us. It's a quiet cottage on an abandoned lake with nothing but our old fishing boat and our favorite dog. It's the privilege of NOT being known...by God, by people, by the church, by our family. It's the dream of becoming a nobody...it is the ultimate expression of selfishness, but we don't care. We simply want to be done and to be left alone.

I'm sure you can guess what my version of Tarshish would be. When I'm at my lowest moments...when I am tempted to flee from Nineveh-like assignments, my dream of Tarshish is the island of anonymity. No more expectations, no more eyes watching to see how I perform, no one looking to me for anything at all, no sense of obligation to care for the souls of others. No more sermons, no more YouTube videos, no more emails. Just me, my boat and my dog. And fish...of course.

Both the Tarshish of self-aggrandizement and the Tarshish of anonymity have one thing in common: both are an attempt to flee the presence of the LORD. Both are an act of rebellion against God's sovereignty and God's commission for our lives. Both are an attempt to flee from the messy, confusing, grace-dependent assignment that accompanies our relationship with a God who does not think the way we think or value those things we value. We are so tempted to hop a ship to Tarshish when we realize that God actually intends to bend our minds to think the way He thinks and to value what He values, which means we are given assignments that stretch us WAY outside of our comfort zones.

We want to flee to Tarshish when we realize that God will never leave us alone; the assignments will never end; and God has no intention of sending us to Tarshish. He has his eye set on Nineveh. To that end God leverages all the ordinary, difficult, complex, painful circumstances of our lives to accomplish His purposes IN us, and THROUGH us, for HIS glory. God calls us to radical obedience that promises to uproot our status quo and upend our preferred version of reality...that's the call to Nineveh. But like Jonah, many of us understand that call, and we simply get up and walk away. We don't trust God's judgment. We doubt that God has our best in mind. We want nothing of Nineveh...we have our hearts set on Tarshish.

Now, before we move on, I must remind you of something. Jonah was a seasoned man of God. He was a prophet for Pete's sake. We should assume that many people's lives were impacted by his faithfulness throughout the years. So, given that track record, it's possible and even likely that Jonah rationalized his disobedience on this occasion by reciting his impeccable resume and accomplishments. Sinclair Ferguson comments on the danger of assuming God's favor by our past accomplishments:

Jonah's past life reads like a rare pedigree. But when we come upon him now, despite all his past privileges and usefulness, he is a man who slips and stumbles and falls. The first lesson to learn is this solemn truth: No past privilege, nor all past privileges together; no past obedience, nor fruitfulness in service, can ever substitute for

present obedience to the Word of God. Great blessings only bring present fruitfulness when they are met with continuing obedience.⁵

I winced when I read that paragraph, but it's true. Present obedience leads to fruitfulness in our lives, in our character development, and in the impact God makes through us in the world. But none of that will count for much should we turn away from God's call and flee from His presence. There is always a terrible cost associated with disobedience, and no prior pedigree will compensate.

The Cost of Disobedience

Off the east coast of Scotland there stands a rocky island called Bass Island. The island was used as a prison to punish those who were seeking liberty to worship Christ in the days of the Scottish Covenanters. The man who purchased the island for a ridiculous amount of money for the very purpose of imprisoning Christians was a man by the name of James Maitland. Sadly, this very same James Maitland had earlier in his life been one of the commissioners who had gone to London to take part in the composing of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the most famous expression of those truths for which men would later suffer and die in Maitland's prison. Maitland, who had a stellar resume of faithfulness, turned from God and ran from the presence of the LORD. The consequences were ever so costly.⁶

Church, it is one thing to begin, another to continue, and yet another to finish the course. At any point along the way, should we blatantly disobey God's call upon our lives and flee from the presence of the LORD, the consequences will be costly...not only to us, but to countless others. We all know far too many examples of this sad truth. We'll look deeper into that principle in the weeks to come.

Let's take a moment now to think about the costliness of Jonah's decision to flee the presence of God.

Again, as we look to the narrative, we read that Jonah "...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."

The first thing I would have you notice is that instead of going east, Jonah goes west. Instead of going up, Jonah's disobedience is leading him down. He goes *down* to Joppa, and *down* into the boat, and eventually *down* into the heart of the sea, and *down* into the belly of the great fish. Disobedience does not lead to freedom; disobedience leads down...disobedience leads to death.

Note also that Jonah goes to *Joppa* to find transport to Tarshish. Joppa was a well-known port town, but it was not a port town belonging to the country of Israel. Scholars note that Joppa

⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, Man Overboard! The Story of Jonah, pp. 7-8.

⁶ Ferguson, pp. 10-11.

was a Philistine city at that time.⁷ Now, Jonah could have gone to the Jewish city of Caesarea to board a ship for Tarshish, but he chooses Joppa. Why is that important? Well, consider this observation: Jonah's decision to flee from the presence of the Lord immediately meant avoiding God's people whenever possible. From the time that Jonah rebels against God's call to go to the Gentiles in Nineveh, Jonah spends all his time with Gentiles from other countries! He goes down to the Gentile city of Joppa and hires a Gentile crew to take him to a distant Gentile land!

I've observed on many occasions how personal sin and rebellion against God often leads a person to fall away from and avoid God's people. That makes sense, right? I mean, imagine if Jonah decided to seek out a ship to Tarshish in a city full of Jews who might recognize him. "Hey Joe, where you going?" "Ummm...I'm going...fishing." "Hey Jonah, got a word of the Lord for us? You are prophet, right?" "Uh...yeah. Thus says the LORD: Go away and stop asking me questions."

Church, when Jonah flees the presence of the LORD, he's not only running away from God. He's also running away from God's people. And ultimately, Jonah is running away from himself. Think about it. Jonah's identity is rooted in his relationship to God and God's people. Jonah is a man of God. Jonah is a prophet of God. Jonah is a leader of his people. Jonah occupies a critical role in the eyes of his countrymen. When Jonah goes to Joppa it's because he doesn't want to be Jonah anymore. He is abandoning his God, his people, and his identity.

Notice that when Jonah arrives in Joppa, he discovers a boat that is loaded and ready to head to Tarshish. Now, Jonah is a man of God. He is accustomed to thinking theologically. So what can we assume he thought to himself? "Oh look, by God's providence, there is a boat to carry me away from God's presence!" I know that might sound ridiculous, but I've counseled people for over 30 years, and you would not believe how many times people justify blatant rebellion against God by pointing to something like a boat in Joppa as a sign that God wanted them to "go to Tarshish." Church, please do not point to God's providence as a means of justifying your disobedience.

Finally, notice that Jonah paid the fare. Some scholars suggest that Jonah paid for the entire boat to ensure that he would be the only passenger in addition to the crew. The cost of that fare would have been several years of income. Be that as it may, we know that our attempts to get to Tarshish will always be far more costly than we think. We'll dig deeper into that principle next Sunday.

Church, let us learn from Jonah. The place of our greatest freedom is in the presence of the Lord...not away from the presence of the Lord. The safest place for our souls is in our present obedience; disobedience is a sure path to disaster. When we are in the presence of the Lord, He pays the cost for us. When we flee the presence of the Lord, the cost is ours and ours alone. When we rest in the presence of the Lord, our identity is secure, regardless of the circumstances.

⁷ Nixon, p. 77.

When we flee the presence of the Lord, we have abandoned our Creator, our people, and our very selves.

As we close, I want to remind you that as bleak as this situation looks for Jonah as he climbs aboard the ship for Tarshish and goes down below to his place of hiding, as costly as his disobedience will be, God has not given up on Jonah...nor has God given up on you. God pursues us all with His grace, even when we flee from His presence.

Wherever you find yourself this morning, look to the One who is greater than Jonah. Let us call upon the One who took the assignment to "Nineveh" ...He is the one who bore witness to a hostile, lost people. He is the One who was tortured and murdered, though He committed no crime. He is the Lamb who was slain to take away the sins of the world, descending into the depth of our human depravity to atone for our wickedness. He is the One who rose again on the third day and conquered the power of sin and death. The pursuit of God's grace for rebellious, Tarshish-bound souls is *Jesus*. Call upon His name and be saved, amen?

For now, I encourage you to think deeply about God's call and commission upon our life. Will you trust God to be faithful in the uncomfortable, unremarkable, often painful reality of Nineveh, or will you flee from the presence of the LORD in pursuit of your favorite picture of Tarshish? This choice is constantly before us.

Will you pray with me.