

Today we begin a new sermon series and a study of the Old Testament book of Jonah. While I am affectionately calling it Fish Tales, there's a lot more to it. It's far more than the story we know and love about Jonah being swallowed by a "whale" and then spewed up on land 3 days later. In this short 4-week series we will look at how Jonah runs from God, Prays to God when he gets in a tight spot. Then he warns as God told him to, but in a minimalistic way. And finally, when God forgives those who should not be forgiven, he pouts. The book of Jonah ends with a question that is left unanswered, because it is left for us to answer.

But first how about a little bit of the backstory behind this book? Jonah is located in the Old Testament. It is the 5th of the 12 minor prophets of the Christian cannon. It sits between Obadiah and Micah. The book of Jonah begins with the words, "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai. This very Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25. There he is called a prophet in the Norther Kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II. (Psst. He was an evil king!)

This next part is for all of you literary fanatics out there. I hope like me you find these next bits of information very cool. Jonah is divided into 2 parts, each with 3 identical themes. In each part there's a command, there's a prayer, and there is a scene about salvation of some sort. The phrase "Jonah set out" is used in each part. In the first part it's Jonah setting out to run away from God. In the second part it's Jonah going to obey what God originally told him to do. Both scenes feature foreigners and cast them in a positive light. The ship captain and sailors ended with a belief in God. The king of Nineveh asks the entire city to turn to God.

While the book is about Jonah, son of Amittai, scholars agree that he did not write this, but they don't know who did either. As we would expect, the names here have meaning. Jonah means dove and Amittai means truth. So his name means dove, son of truth. Makes me think of peace. I'll parse out more interesting facts throughout this series, but now don't you just want to dive into chapter one?

Most of us know what it feels like to avoid something God is putting in front of us. Maybe it is a conversation we do not want to have, forgiveness we do not want to extend, obedience that feels so very costly, or compassion toward someone we would rather keep at a distance.

Jonah 1 opens with a prophet who hears a clear word from God and immediately goes in the opposite direction. He's not confused about God's call. He simply does not want to obey it. Jonah's story is not just about a man swallowed by a great fish. Before the fish appears, Jonah 1 confronts us with a deeper question: what do we do when God's mercy moves us toward people we do not want to love? Repeat. The chapter shows us a running prophet, a pursuing God, frightened sailors, a raging sea, and a surprising rescue. Above all, it shows that God is sovereign over storms, servants, strangers, and salvation.

Jonah 1 begins with God's word: "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it." A trip to Nineveh wasn't a comfortable assignment. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire. It represented violence, arrogance, and opposition to God's people. Jonah did not struggle because God was unclear. He struggled because God was asking him to carry a message of warning that could open a door to mercy. Mercy to a most hated enemy of Israel.

God's call often exposes what is happening beneath the surface of our hearts. Jonah's refusal reveals that a person can know the truth and still resist God's direction. Repeat. He knew God spoke. He knew God ruled. He knew God was merciful. But the last thing he wanted was for God's mercy to reach Nineveh.

Church Family, Jonah is not just a character in the ancient world; that Jonah mindset can be found alive and well today. Sure we may celebrate grace when it reaches us, but then we hesitate when God wants to send it to someone we dislike, fear, or resent. The call of Jonah 1 asks us whether we want God's will only when it confirms our preferences, or whether we are willing to obey even when mercy stretches us.

Jonah rises, but not to obey. He goes down to Joppa, down into a ship, and later down into the sea. The movement of the chapter is more than geography; it is theology. Disobedience always

promises freedom but instead carries us downward. Jonah wants distance from God's assignment, but every step away from obedience is a step into deeper trouble.

Jonah pays the fare to Tarshish, but the true cost of rebellion is always greater than the price of the ticket. Sin works hard to look manageable. It drives us to feel it should be private. Presents itself as personal, even reasonable. But Jonah's decision eventually endangers everyone on the ship. One person's disobedience can bring consequences into the lives of others.

Where are you trying to sail away from God? Is there an area you've renamed to things like caution instead of disobedience, discernment instead of bitterness, or wisdom instead of fear? Jonah reminds us that running from God does not lead to peace. It leads to a restless heart and a troubled sea. But it also eventually leads to the mercy of being stopped. But don't expect that stop to be painless.

Back to Jonah where the Lord hurls a great wind upon the sea. This storm is not random. It is not outside God's control. The same God who called Jonah now commands the wind. The storm is severe, but it is also merciful, because God is not willing to let Jonah continue sleeping through his rebellion.

Now picture this irony for a moment: pagan sailors are praying while God's prophet is sleeping. Men who do not know the God of Heaven are more spiritually alert than the man who claims to serve our God. Jonah is asleep in the lowest part of the ship, physically resting while spiritually resisting. Repeat. Church family, this is a dangerous place to be. When we allow ourselves to descend into a state of numbness, then we don't have to feel the weight of our disobedience.

The captain's words are striking: "What are you doing sound asleep? Get up; call on your god!" Here we have a Gentile sailor calling a Hebrew prophet back to prayer. God can and will use anything, a storm, a stranger, an interruption, or a crisis to awaken what has grown dull in us. The storm is not proof that God abandoned Jonah. It is proof that God pursues him.

When the sailors cast lots, the truth comes to light. Jonah is the cause of the storm. He identifies himself: "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry

land.” His theology is accurate. He confesses that God made the very sea he is trying to use as an escape route. His life is contradicting his words.

This is one of the sobering realities of Jonah 1: anyone can say true things about God while refusing to surrender to God. Orthodoxy can exist without obedience. But our stated belief then becomes a contradiction to our lived reality. Jonah knows the Lord is Creator, sovereign and merciful, but he is acting as though he can flee beyond God’s reach. Resist God’s command. And he’s just plain angry at a mercy that would dare to tell him to go to a place like Nineveh.

And how do the sailors respond to Jonah’s God? First with increasing reverence and by the end of this chapter they will offer sacrifices and make vows to the Lord God. Do you see what God did there? God used a disobedient prophet to reveal Himself to people on the ship. Here’s the irony. Jonah is running from a mission to a Gentile nation, and yet God saves the Gentiles around him anyway.

Jonah tells the sailors to throw him into the sea. The sailors don’t want to do this. They row hard to reach dry land. They show more concern for Jonah’s life than Jonah has shown for Nineveh or even theirs. But the sea grows more violent, and eventually they cry out to the Lord for mercy and cast Jonah overboard. The storm immediately stops. The sailors fear the Lord exceedingly.

Then comes one of the most well-known phrases in this book: “The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah.” This fish is not sent out of judgment; it is there for a rescue. Jonah is sinking, (disobedience really drawing him downward) but God appoints a means of preservation. God’s mercy is severe enough to stop him and kind enough to save him.

Church family when you read Jonah do you by chance hearing the echo of Jesus, who will speak of “the sign of Jonah.” Jonah is cast into the depths because of his own disobedience; Jesus goes into death because of our sin. Jonah spends three days in the whale. Jesus spends three days in the tomb. Jonah reluctantly points beyond himself to One far greater: the obedient

Son who does not run from the Father's will, enters the storm of judgment, and rises to bring mercy not only to Israel but to all the nations.

So where does this leave us? First, listen when God speaks. Jonah's problem was not lack of information it was a lack of submission. A clear word from God deserves a faithful, obedient response.

Second, pay attention to where you are running. We don't have to board a ship to Tarshish to avoid God. We do that well enough through busyness, excuses, bitterness, distractions, or spiritual sleep. Ask and the Lord will show you your escape places.

Third, your storm might be an invitation to return. Not that every hardship is a result of personal disobedience, but God does use hardships to draw us nearer to Himself. If God is shaking something, perhaps He's actually waking something.

Fourth, don't let your preferences limit God's mercy. Jonah wanted grace for himself but judgment for Nineveh. The gospel teaches us to rejoice that God saves sinners, including those we would not choose.

Jonah 1 ends with Jonah in the belly of the fish, but the story does not end there. God's word will stand. God's mercy is still moving. God's servant is being pursued. Pagans witnessed the power of God. And the mission to Nineveh is not over.

God pursues runners. Pursues those asleep in ships, those trembling in storms, those sinking beneath waves, and those living in great cities. Have you been running? Don't run faster, stop and turn around. The God who commands the storm also appoints the rescue. The God who exposes sin also extends mercy. And in today's Fish tale, the God who called Jonah calls us to trust and obey.

Lord, thank You for being merciful enough to pursue us when we run. Show us where we are resisting Your word, awaken us where we have grown spiritually asleep, and teach us to rejoice in Your mercy wherever You choose to send it. Give us obedient hearts, compassionate spirits, and renewed trust in Jesus Christ, the greater Jonah, who entered judgment to bring us salvation. Amen.