

Reading: Jonah 1

Theme: The AWOL Prophet.

It is so sad to read or hear of a young person who has unexpectedly run away from home, without a word, or maybe after an argument. It is sad to hear of a marriage break up as one of the couple leaves, walks out for some reason, runs away from their vows, responsibilities and all they know. There have been service men and women who have deserted their posts and went AWOL for various reasons. This evening we are looking at a runaway, a deserter who left, broke his vows and deserted his post. Jonah had been given a royal and clear commission from God (v1-2). To Jonah it wasn't a real honour, he did not delight in such and serve God, but he did a runner, deserted his calling and post. We have to realise that Jonah's running away was rebellion, disobedience, defiance of the highest order as he was going against the clear word from the Lord. I want us to note 3 things from v3:

1. The Reasons for His Running.

In this book we have an openly frank account of what would seem to so many to be the failure of Jonah as a prophet - for he ran away. Yes, his prophecy may have caused repentance to that generation, but it was not initially fulfilled and he, feeling a failure, just wanted to die. These details had to come from Jonah himself and it is amazing that he was not afraid to let the world know what a mess he had made of things, yet at the same time he shows us how great his God is. Jonah did wrong in disobeying and dishonouring God. He was defiant and determined to evade the clear will of God for his life. Jonah was a servant, an active prophet of the Lord, somewhere around the end of Elisha's time or just after. He was not a stranger to the Lord, to the great God of Israel. There must have been reasons for his running away and refusing this royal and righteous commission from the Lord.

It could be that he feared the difficulties of actually going to Nineveh - this great city, known for its barbarous treatment and cruelty. He could have feared for his life as he, a foreigner, was to go and cry against it. Perhaps he felt it was a waste of time - what could one man do to such a great city, what was the point? What good could he do in such a wicked city? It was an unusual situation. One writer (Calvin) suggests this put him off - he was a prophet of Jehovah, the God of Israel and was the first prophet known to preach outside of Israel. Some say it was the severity of the uncompromising message of judgement that caused Jonah to run away.

Yet Jonah lets us into the reason for his decision to run - 4:2. He knew God was gracious, compassionate and abounding in love. What a reason not to go!! Jonah's problem was that God would be gracious to the Ninevehites; he didn't want them to be spared for he knew what the implications would be concerning Israel's ongoing idolatry if God was merciful to Nineveh - they would be used to chastise Israel. Jonah was a man of his day and he was too narrowly nationalistically minded to think that God could spare Nineveh. It wasn't that he was afraid of death as he calmly expected it and issued instructions for such in 1:12, he had no fear of death as 4:3 & 8 show us. I think he did not have any problems with the novelty of his mission as he was probably aware that Israel should have been a light to the Gentiles and the difficulties he had to face would not have put him off.

It seems his reason for running away was his restricted, biased, unscriptural view on the matter of God's salvation - that it was for the Jews only and not for the Gentile Ninevites. His background, nationality and culture all worked on Jonah, as one writer (Calvin) wrote *"he was not a log of wood!"* At this point we need to be careful and miss the plank in our own eyes. The book of Jonah is

still read in synagogues on the Day of Atonement and at the end of its reading the whole congregation replies *"We are Jonah"*. This book is for all believers, for we can all be in danger of compromising the word of God, of disobeying God's word and being defiant against Him. We are all Jonah as Christians, as privileged recipients and hearers of the whole of God's word, yet we can so easily want to go in the opposite direction to God's way.

We are never at a standstill in our Christian lives. We are to be moving on, walking with God in His will, but can be on the run! Time always causes us to be on the move. We are either being conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ or we are being squeezed into the world's mould and unlike our Saviour. I wonder what is stopping us from doing God's will. Is it ignorance of His word? If we are Christians then that should be a shame to us! Here in God's word are His clear commands, directions and instructions for our lives, principles we can apply to every area of our lives, as well as overtures of His love. We need to know God's word and get to understand its implication for our lives. Even if we are not Christians, God's word is relevant for all people, whether we realise it or not. The first thing He would have us know is our need to go to Him for forgiveness of all our sins through the Lord Jesus. If you have been to this church before, you will know that at least, so why would you refuse to obey His word and run away from what He wants you to do?

It may be that we do not want to trust Him because of fear of friends and wanting to keep in with them, or with those around us in our families, school, or work. We may fear that we wouldn't be able to keep it up - we are correct there, for we could not, but God promises to keep us. Perhaps it may be that no one else in our family is a Christian and we do not want to be the only one, but we may not be - for we could be the first one! Perhaps we don't

like the talk of God's judgement, or hell or to own that we are afraid to meet an angry God, or may even dislike that thought. It could be that we cannot understand why or how God could ever love someone such as us, that He could offer such an amazing gift of eternal life and peace with God to us. Yet it is true and it is offered to us all this evening.

Perhaps someone listening or watching is a Christian, but you are on the run from God. It may not show outwardly, but inwardly you are on the run and are good at hiding and covering it up. We may have become discouraged with Christian things, with our church, with our living, as we see it, a restricted narrow life and we want our own way. We still attend church, sing the hymns, yet our heart may be far from God, far away from His people and we are disobeying God's word in not bringing a totally committed heart to worship, in failing to give Him the glory and honour due to Him, in failing to love our brothers and sisters in the Lord as He has commanded us. Yes, we can have our reasons, even "*high spiritual reasons*" just like Jonah, but we, like him, can disobey God's revealed word, and justify our reasons for disobedience.

2. The Aim of His Running.

If Jonah's reason for running was not to go and preach this message, then he could simply have stayed put, not moved and remained disobedient where he was at Gath Hopher in Galilee. The aim of his running away was to be excused his work. He was going AWOL, actively resigning his work and calling as a prophet. We are told twice in v3 that he was running away from the Lord (NIV), "*from the presence of the Lord*" (AV). Yet as a prophet of the Lord he would probably have known Psalm 139 as it speaks of God being everywhere in the fullness of His being at all times (*God is omnipresent*). He surely knew that he couldn't get away from God; so what was he trying to do, what is meant by

him fleeing from the presence of the Lord? It is important we see this. Jonah was not trying to run away from the Lord (NIV), but *"from the presence of the Lord"* (AV and Hebrew).

This phrase *"from the presence of the Lord"* is used in a special sense in OT. In Genesis 4:16 Cain went out from the Lord's presence - where Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel had been able to worship and serve God, but he was now no longer welcomed, no longer in the service and favour of God, he had been disowned. To stand in God's presence is often taken as equivalent of serving him, so Elijah says in the Hebrew of 1 Kings 17:1 & 18:15 that he stood before the Lord (NIV says serve). To be banished from God's presence was to be rejected as serving Him e.g. Jeremiah 23:39 - the false prophets were banished from His presence, as was Jerusalem. The Lord had already warned that the people would be cast out of the land and from His presence (2 Kings 13:23 [AV]) and when they were in captivity, there was this sense of them being away from His presence by being out of His favour and service.

For Jonah to try and go *"from the presence of the Lord"* was not a geographical matter, but **a spiritual matter**. Jonah as a Jew knew that God was omnipresent and no one could hide from Him. What Jonah aimed to do was to resign his commission and service as a prophet and would do so by getting out of the land, saying in effect *"I'm not going to serve you any longer; you want me in the East, I am going to the West and so I cannot possibly serve you."* By this action, Jonah wrote his resignation letter in big bold letters as he resigned from the service of the God of Israel and moved out of God's land and out of God's favour and service.

When we wilfully, defiantly turn away from God, we put ourselves out of the Lord's presence and service. Yes, if we are a

Christian, He still loves and cares for us, but true blessing is not ours and in love He will deal with us to bring us back to Himself, or ultimately, He can take us to be with Him if we refuse His ways of correction. We have to beware of going our own headstrong, deluded or defiant ways and we are not to go against Scripture, which shows us God's will and He will not lead us contrary to His word.

3. The Defiance of His Running.

Jonah's trying to run away from God was a tragic and defiant thing. We need to realise this as a warning, for we could so easily try to turn our backs on God and His will for us, perhaps even run away from His calling us in the gospel to be saved, or go away from a determined following of Him after we have been genuinely saved. Jonah's false ideas caused him to take a course of action that was out of keeping with his calling as a believer, as a servant and prophet of the living God. Yet it was perfectly in keeping with his character as a mortal man - with a heart, will and desires all inclined against and away from God. Jonah's prejudices blinded him to his duty and privilege of serving the Lord; to his defiant actions in a series of deliberate downward and desperate disobediences.

Jonah had made his mind to deliberately and defiantly disobey God. Most versions catch the Hebrew and say that Jonah rose up to go to Tarshish. In the Hebrew and many versions Tarshish is mentioned three times by name (NIV substitutes one with "*for that port*"!) Jonah was not just being disobedient, but he was being defiantly disobedient - for Nineveh was 500 miles overland to the north-east; Tarshish was some 1000 miles to the south-west by sea (*thought to be the southern tip of Spain down near Gibraltar*). Jonah rose up straightaway, but went to Joppa, a coastal town - not in Israel. There he would not be recognised or known as a

prophet of the Lord. He would have had time to think about his actions, his disobedience on his 60 mile walk to Joppa. He had to seek out a ship. It would seem everything was working out fine, for when he got to Joppa he found a ship going to Tarshish and he had enough money to pay the fare.

Tarshish ships were the oceangoing liners of their day and to have the money to pay the fare must have been great for Jonah. He may have felt Providence was on his side and God was in it! We need to realise that there is always a cost in disobedience – Jonah paid for a ticket he didn't fully use! He must have been so pleased with himself as everything worked out, confirmed his decision and course of action; must have felt God was wonderful to let him off His specific commands and commission, to provide him with this means of getting away! Jonah was wrong, very, very wrong! His action and escape route were going to be used to correct and humble him and would have been used to bring about his death had not the Lord God miraculously intervened.

Circumstances alone must never be used for our guidance. God's word tells us clear things and we must not say we want to do something that is against God's word and use circumstances to justify it... As we can end up actually accusing God of leading us into sin! Sadly, some people have even used that as their excuse! It does seem incredible that Jonah was going to defy God and yet it seemed God was doing nothing to stop him, or give him a sign he was wrong. Jonah went against the express command and will of God and until he obeyed, why should God lead him? If Jonah was headstrong, why should God prevent him? Incredibly God would use Jonah's disobedience to God's greater glory - not that it was or is any excuse for him or us!

This evening we may well be planning all sorts of sin in our heart, to be intent in further rejecting, or putting off our response to the gospel and things may seem fine and right for us. It may be that we are a Christian and ignoring part of God's word, an inconvenient part to us! We are not to trust in the fact that everything is ok and all our way seems to prosper. Our very prosperity could be the means God would use to correct and discipline us to bring us back to Himself or even to Himself for the first time. God's ways are not our ways. His wisdom is far greater than we could ever imagine or understand. God has told us we are all to obey Him, not to take further deliberate steps away from His revealed will. Firstly, we need to trust in the Lord Jesus as our own Saviour; to become more and more conformed to the likeness of Jesus, then we are to tell others of Him and build up His people.

Perhaps we need to examine ourselves this evening to make sure we are not running away from God in any area of our lives. If we are, then we are to return to the One who has done so much for us, perhaps even turn to Him for the first time and are to do so quickly. Then we will find He is gracious and compassionate and can use our lives in ways that will surprise us.