

## BUT JONAH

Jonah 1:1-3

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Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (JON. I:1-3).

**T**he book of Jonah is not merely the story of the interesting things that happened to this Old Testament figure. More than that, Jonah was a representative of the people of Israel in their disdain for God's grace to the nations. Ancient Israelites are not the only ones who can profit from a study of Jonah. For if we look into Jonah's mirror we will also see ourselves. Times change and situations vary. But all of God's people find themselves in Jonah's position before God, called by the Lord to serve his gospel in the world. And all too many find their feet tracing Jonah's path of rebellion, in part because they misunderstand or even resent God's grace for all the world.

### GOD'S SOVEREIGN CALL

**G**od's call for Jonah to preach in Nineveh displays his grace for all the world. But it also reveals God's sovereignty over his people.

When we think of God as sovereign, we usually think of his ultimate control over all the affairs of heaven and earth. Jesus said that not a single sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father's will. But we also mean that God exercises sovereign rule over his kingdom. Sovereigns command. Kings and Queens send forth their decrees, demanding obedience. God is no less sovereign. And just as God glorifies his grace by sending his gospel to the far corners of the

world, he also glorifies his sovereignty by exercising his rule over his creatures.

The Book of Jonah begins, like many other Bible books, by affirming its message as God's Word. "The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Ammitai" (Jon. 1:1). When we read statements like this we should be reminded of what we are handling when it comes to Holy Scripture. These are not the inspired thoughts of spiritual men, but the very Word of God revealed through human agents. The apostle Peter described the process of inspiration by saying, "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). But it is not just that in the Bible we have teaching from God himself, important an insight as that is. More than that, the Bible contains God's sovereign word for his creatures. Just as the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the word of the Lord comes to us as we read the Bible. The right way to approach Holy Scripture is humbly, spiritually prostrate before our Sovereign, ready to learn and do all that he commands.

As the Bible records it, God's sovereign call to Jonah was brief, direct, and imperative. It did not come with an explanation. Many people today consent to obey God's Word only when it makes sense to them. But the sovereign God does not accept such an arrangement. God's call to Jonah was sudden, just as military commanders often receive sudden instructions based on concerns known only to their superiors. We, too, may have a sudden command from God's Word made known to us, and our duty to God is to obey immediately and submissively. As Isaiah replied when God first made his will known to him, we likewise should respond: "Here am I! Send me" (Isa. 6:8).

Not only was God's command to Jonah sovereign and sudden, it was also a difficult command. Nineveh was a great distance away, in the heart of a violent empire. Nineveh was among the largest cities in the ancient world, which is why God refers to it as "that great city Nineveh." Chapter 3 tells us "Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth" (Jon. 3:3). It was also distant, about six hundred miles northeast of Israel, near present-day Mosul in Iraq. And God was sending Jonah alone, commanding him to pronounce a message of doom: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon. 3:4). Imagine receiving such a calling! Imagine

the difficulties that would go through the mind and the obstacles to any kind of success?

But God has and exercises the right to give the most difficult of missions to his people. God called Abraham to leave his father's land and journey to a distant land. God told Moses to stand before Pharaoh and cry, "Let my people go!" (Ex. 5:1). Moses replied the way that we do: "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else" (Ex. 4:13). But God angrily rejected this counsel; it was his will for Moses to be the one. God once directed the prophet Isaiah to walk naked and barefoot for three years as he preached judgment against Egypt and Cush (Isa. 20:2-3). God directed a teenage girl named Mary to have the Son of the Most High carried in her virgin womb, threatening his reputation and her betrothal.

Why does God give such difficult commands? For his own sovereign purposes! But also for the purpose of his grace. One thing we might notice is that when God gives the most difficult commands he intends for the most marvelous acts of deliverance and salvation. Abraham was sent to Canaan to become the father of the people of faith (Gal. 3:7). Moses was sent to Egypt to lead the exodus. Mary bore a virgin child to deliver the Messiah to the world. Whenever we find that God has called us to a task that seems far more difficult than we think we can handle, our hope ought to be kindled that God intends to do something wonderful and great.

Of course, the most difficult of all commands was given by God the Father to God the Son. The Lord Jesus Christ submitted to the Father's will with joy, even when it meant a cruel death on a Roman cross. Jesus knew the prophecy that said of him, "It was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin" (Isa. 53:10). But Jesus replied, "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book" (Heb. 10:7). Why did Jesus obey such a command as to die on the cross? He obeyed because he knew and trusted God the Father, just as we have every reason to do. He knew that God is faithful and that all his purposes are holy and good. Jesus loved the Father and delighted to do his will and display his glory. This, too, should be our attitude. And Jesus also knew that God's purposes – however severe – are purposes of glory and grace. After Isaiah foretold the cross, he

added, “He shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand” (Isa. 53:10). So Jesus knew that beyond the cross they waited a resurrection crown of glory. Our crosses are similar in this respect: through obedience to difficult callings from God we can expect God’s provision of power and God’s reward of eternal glory.

Lastly, God’s call to Jonah was righteous. “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me” (Jon. 1:2). The incredible evil of Nineveh was known to the Lord. So it was right for him to send a representative and to declare his displeasure against the city. Jonah may not have liked the idea of going to Nineveh, but as a prophet of the Most High it was right for him to be sent there with this message of warning. Moreover, it was righteous of God to give that wicked city an opportunity to repent. They were his own creatures and, whether they knew it or not, God was sovereign king as well. What could be more righteous than for the sovereign Lord to send his prophet to cry out against Nineveh?

The character of this command to Jonah – its sovereign, sudden, difficult, and righteous character – will be repeated in our own lives. Should we complain? Should we rebel? Should we drag our feet and kick against the goad? Not if it is God who has given the command. He has the right and he has earned the trust to be taken at his bare word. Christians who know the Lord and understand his ways will therefore receive the Word of the Lord in humble, submissive, and joyful obedience.

## JONAH’S FLIGHT

**T**hat, however, is not what Jonah did. God told Jonah to arise, and he arose all right. But he did not go to Nineveh. Instead, he went in precisely the opposite direction.

We can see this in two ways. First, “Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord” (Jon. 1:3). There are debates regarding the location of Tarshish, but it seems to have been west in the Mediterranean Sea, through the Strait of Gibraltar, and somewhere on the western coast of modern-day Spain. The point is that it was in precisely the opposite direction from Nineveh. We can

imagine Jonah receiving God's command, getting up, but turning left instead of right and going as fast as he can away from the place to which he was ordered. His purpose was to flee "from the presence of the Lord." Tarshish seemed perfect for this, one of those far-off places where the name of the Lord was unheard of. Tarshish was one of the places mentioned in Isaiah "that have not heard my fame or seen my glory" (Isa. 66:19). Douglas Stuart gives a good explanation: "Jonah, the ardent nationalist, therefore, attempted to flee to a place where no fellow believers would be found, hoping that this would help insure that God's word would not come to him again. If he stayed in Israel, he could expect to hear more from Yahweh, but if he left, he might hear nothing further."<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, Jonah sought a ship in the port of Joppa: "He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish" (Jon. 1:3). Joppa was not an Israelite port, so there Jonah could be away from inquiring questions and troublesome inquiries. He could consort, he thought, with unbelievers about his plans to flee from God without being troubled. In this respect, he is just like Christians who determine on a sinful course and therefore avoid other Christians and stop coming to church. They justify what they are doing and make excuses for their choices. If asked, they would deny the sinfulness of what they desire. But, like Jonah, the fact that they avoid godly company demonstrates the true state of their hearts.

Jonah's flight from God was extremely sinful. We can say three things about Jonah's sin, beginning with the fact that he was sinning against his profession of faith. Jonah was a professed Israelite, a worshiper of Yahweh, the One true and Most High God. He makes this profession while on the boat to Tarshish. "Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" they asked him. Jonah replied, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jon. 1:9). His actions made a mockery of these words and compounded his sin.

The same is true of Christians who flagrantly disobey God's Word. It is one thing for professed atheists and other unbelievers to walk in sin. But when a Christian chooses sin it is far worse. Our profession

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Stuart, 450.

of faith demands a life yielded to God. John Calvin comments, “All flee away from the presence of God, who do not willingly obey his commandments.”<sup>2</sup>

One of the great problems today is that many people profess to be Christians – surveys show that almost a majority of Americans claim to be born again – but few follow up that profession with genuinely Christian lives. But it is practical godliness that validates a profession of faith. Had Jonah never repented, had he gone off to spend the rest of his days in Tarshish, we would be justified in concluding that his profession of faith was false and that he did not believe in the Lord. The same is true for multitudes today who say the “sinner’s prayer” or walk down the aisle at a revival but never show the fruit of a changed life.

Secondly, Jonah was sinning against his privileges. He was, after all, a prophet of the Lord. He benefited from a personal knowledge of God and direct revelation from heaven. All Israelites lived in God’s presence in a way. They dwelt in the land of God and had access to God in his temple. But a prophet especially enjoyed this privilege. One might speak similarly of children raised in Christian homes and Christians provided with sound teaching of the Bible. The Word of God brings God’s presence to us, and through our privilege of prayer we have access to the throne of grace. How great are our sins, especially the kind of open rebellion shown here by Jonah, in the light of these privileges. Privilege breeds obligation and compounds the sin of Christians who choose to disobey.

Thirdly, Jonah was sinning against reason. He thought he could “flee from the presence of the Lord.” But his own profession of faith revealed how impossible this is. Unlike the pagans, Jonah knew that he did not serve a local or otherwise limited God: “I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land,” he said (Jon. 1:9). This being the case, there was no place where he could flee from God’s presence. Psalm 139 serves as a commentary on his folly:

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Jonah*, 31.

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.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you (Ps. 139:7-12).

I have known professing Christian men to leave their wives for other women, yet they assure their friends: "This is for the best. God understands that I need to feel more love. And things will work out fine for our children." But this is a great delusion. They are fleeing from God's clearly revealed will in the Bible. By gaining a new wife and a new circle of friends, and perhaps a more "tolerant" church where people won't judge, they will not be escaping God. There is no place where God is not found, and no path we can follow to escape either his presence or his hand of judgment.

The Bible's commentary on Jonah's actions is clear. God told Jonah to arise, but instead he went "down" to Joppa. It is always a movement downward when we rebel against God's commands. No doubt, Jonah would have explained that he was avoiding narrow, legalistic Israelites, but in fact it was the presence of God that he was trying to escape. One of the major lessons of his story is that one can flee one's home, Christian fellowship, and the church, but one can never flee God. Jonah's flight therefore was riddled with folly right from the start.

Let us learn the lesson from Jonah. Our profession of faith demands a life that is yielded to God in obedience. Our privileges carry a responsibility, so that our sin is compounded according to the measure of the grace and knowledge we have received. And our sin is always unreasonable. Sin always denies something about God. Sin either denies God as Provider, or Father, or Savior, or Judge. Sin denies God's attributes of goodness, power, holiness and love. And sin always leads in the direction that Jonah went: down. God told him to arise, but in the bitterness of his heart he descended, "down to Joppa... down into the inner part of the ship" (Jon. 1:3, 5), and finally down into the depths of the sea. Ultimately, sin will drag us down

into the eternal depths of hell, away from the presence of God's mercy and grace – though not of his wrath – forever.

## REASONS FOR JONAH'S FLIGHT

**H**ow do we explain Jonah's course of action? How can we account for this mad flight of folly by a prophet of the Lord?

Perhaps Jonah was afraid? After all, Nineveh was not only a great city, it was also a wicked and violent city. The Bible clearly represents it as such. Nahum prophesied against Nineveh: "Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder – no end to the prey!... Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end – they stumble over the bodies!" (Nah. 3:1-3). Billy K. Smith writes:

Archaeology confirms the biblical witness to the wickedness of the Assyrians. They were well known in the ancient world for brutality and cruelty. Ashurbanipal, the grandson of Sennacherib, was accustomed to tearing of the lips and hands of his victims. Tiglath-Pileser flayed victims alive and made great piles of their skulls. Jonah's reluctance to travel to Nineveh may have been due to its infamous violence.<sup>3</sup>

Many of us sin out of fear. We fear to stand against the world. We fear persecution or worldly failure. We fear what other people will think or do. Therefore, we foolishly sin as a way of protecting ourselves. But this probably does not explain Jonah's behavior, since there is not a word in the book to indicate that he fled from God because of fear for himself. The only thing Jonah feared was that Nineveh might actually repent and be spared from the wrath of God they deserved.

Perhaps, then, Jonah was alarmed at the difficulties of what God commanded. Did God really intend for Jonah to go alone into the heart of the most evil city in the world, and there to cry out a message of condemnation against it? It was not reasonable and it was not fair. Hugh Martin explains what must surely have occurred to Jonah: "To be despised and simply laughed at, as a fanatic and fool, must have appeared to him inevitable, if indeed his fate should not be worse."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Billy K. Smith, 225.

<sup>4</sup> Hugh Martin, 40.

The only course of action was to take matters into his own hands and out of God's hands. Christians sin this way frequently, refusing God's commands simply because they do not like them or do not think they will work out well. But going to Tarshish was not without difficulty either, so this does not seem to be Jonah's true reason.

Why, then, did Jonah rebel against God's command? The best explanation seems to be that Jonah had developed such a deep hatred for Nineveh that he was not willing to obey God's command to go there and preach. HE simply did not like God's command. Jonah believed in the power of God and he acknowledged God's grace for sinners. This is precisely why he refused to preach God's message to these people. The Ninevites were the enemies of his people, so, as James Boice puts it, "Jonah would be damned (literally) before he would see God's blessing shed on these enemies." To understand Jonah's situation, Boice asks us to imagine "the word of the Lord coming to a Jew who lived in New York during World War II, telling him to go to Berlin to preach to Nazi Germany." We should not be surprised if such a Jew went west to San Francisco instead, in order to board a boat headed to Hong Kong, just as Jonah fled for Tarshish.<sup>5</sup>

## TENDING THE HEART

Solomon wrote words that well address Jonah's predicament: "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Prov. 4:23). Jonah was likely a man of outstanding character and outward godliness, but he failed to tend to the affairs of his heart. There was bitterness there. There was anger. There was hatred and resentment. All of it was directed towards Nineveh, and with good reason. But none of it did Nineveh any harm – only Jonah. The same is true of Christians who refuse to forgive injuries done to them. They cultivate bitterness and resentment with careful attention, like a gardener tending a favored tree. But the only harm is done to themselves.

There are women whose husband betrayed them, and out of bitterness towards one man they render themselves incapable of love with any other. There are children whose parents abused them, and out of

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<sup>5</sup> Boice, *Jonah*, ?

devotion to their pain they refuse to trust anyone ever again, even God. But bitterness is an acid that destroys only its own container. The good news is that when Jesus set us free from sin, he included the sins of others against us. Forgiveness and grace are gifts of God not only for us but to us. The words of the apostle Paul – “forgive as God has forgiven you” (Col. 3:13) – are gospel, not law! Indeed, if we realize how much mercy we have received in being forgiven through the cross of Jesus Christ, we will offer our forgiveness to others as an offering of praise to the throne of God’s grace.

Jonah sinned out of the bitterness of his heart. So let me conclude with advice on how we might tend our hearts and protect ourselves from foolish flights like Jonah’s.

First, Jonah proves to us the value of Christian fellowship. Sin had deceived him, as it often will deceive us. His sin produced its own justification and rationalization, and Jonah was fully persuaded. This is why the writer of Hebrew exhorts us: “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:12-13).

One of God’s remedies against sin’s deceit is Christian fellowship. Instead of going to Joppa, Jonah should have gone to the meeting place of the other prophets. He should have explained how he felt about God’s command, and likely their help would have changed his mind.

This is also one of the ways that regular attendance in public worship helps preserve us against sinful folly. The writer of Psalm 73 struggled with resentment with the happy wicked people he knew. “As for me,” he writes, “my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Ps. 73:2-3). What restored him? “I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end” (Ps. 73:17). The same is true for us. In the worship at church, our minds are reminded of the realities of heaven and hell, about the justice of God’s economy, and about the grace for sinners like us who have been saved.

One last thing that would have greatly helped Jonah was prayer. Not once in his flight is he seen talking to God. Not once does he present his complaint directly to God, the way that Jeremiah did and was helped. Hugh Martin comments that when Jonah's feelings were starting to master him, "What would have been the remedy? Intercourse with God concerning them; a full statement in secret to his Father who is in secret, and who would in that case have rewarded him openly with a triumphant victory over the very evils of his own unbelieving heart."<sup>6</sup>

Do we realize the importance of tending our hearts? Then let Jonah warn us. If this prophet could flee from God's sovereign and righteous command, of what are we capable? Let us make every use of the resources God has given us: his mighty Word, the blessing of Christian fellowship and counsel, regular attendance with God's people in worship, and the wonderful resource that is ours in prayer. Many a ship-wrecked life would have been spared by such a course of action. Will this happen to you? It can. The Book of Jonah was written not to condemn Jonah but to warn us. His folly need not be ours if we recognize the ease with which our hearts can fall into sin and humbly attend upon God's precious means of grace.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin, 42.