

## BUT THE LORD

Jonah 1:3-4

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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 on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. 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. (JON. 1:3-4).

**A** visit to the grocery store will usually offer tantalizing updates on the lives of the stars. We gain this information from the covers of the tabloids that are invariably posted along the check-out counters. I find these covers fascinating, with their tales of broken relationships, drug addictions, and ruined lives. I do not mean that I enjoy these magazines or that I find the covers entertaining. But the lives of the stars reveal a regular pattern to the life of sin from which we can learn. Time and again, an apparently innocent beauty is lured onto the path of stardom. Before long her way of dressing changes to emphasize the sensual. Wealth and fame brings sinful attractions, including access to the nightclub scene and recreational drugs. Before too long, the tabloids reveal tidbits of sexual relationships, and, increasingly today, the stars rapidly fall in and out of marriage and even parenthood. The marriages do not last, the children become sources of conflict, and the pressures of sex, drugs, and public infatuation invariably lead to a break-down. While still young, the starlets begin to look old and used, their lives wrecked and their souls scarred. Soon they are replaced by younger, fresher versions of those bound for the same fate.

One lesson of the tabloids is that every train has a destination. Young men and women crave for stardom, insisting that it will be different in their case. But once on the train, they find themselves stopping at all

the regular stations, and soon they are dumped into the despair and destruction that is always the last stop.

The Book of Jonah tells a similar story, though the prophet hardly counts as a star by today's definitions. In his case, Jonah boards a ship that has a fixed destination. The first verses of Jonah tell of his resolve to run from the Lord and from the Lord's calling. Jonah's flight leads somewhere, as sin always does. And as he takes passage aboard a ship bound for Tarshish, he provides an important lesson in folly that can provide us wisdom for serving the Lord.

## JONAH'S FOLLY

In our last study, we considered the reasons for Jonah's flight from God, primary of which was his unwillingness to preach God's grace to the hated Ninevites. But we should also consider the flight itself, of which Jonah provides considerable detail.

The first thing we find is how easy the path of sin appeared, at least at first. God called Jonah to go north to Nineveh, but instead the prophet ran south to Joppa. Instead of going up to serve the Lord, he went down to serve his own rebellion. And what did he find upon his arrival in Joppa, but "a ship going to Tarshish" (Jon. 1:3). We can only imagine how this encouraged Jonah in his rebellious course. He would have been mulling over his bitter reasons for fleeing God, and his conscience would likely have been wrestling with his decision. He may well have reasoned that if his course was wrong, then God would place obstacles in his path. But the opposite was the case in Joppa. There, waiting for Jonah's flight to the west, was a ship bound for a port as far from Nineveh as Jonah could have wished. The location of Tarshish is not precisely known, but scholars generally agree that it would have been on the west coast of modern-day Spain. "Ah," Jonah must have reflected, "providence has placed just the ship I need right in port as I have arrived."

Sin often works this way, though in his deceived state Jonah did not realize it. William Banks writes, "When a person decides to run from the Lord, Satan always provides complete transportation facilities."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Banks, *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 20.

Jonah's narrative shows how quickly our rebellious steps can lead us away from God. Verse three is terse in its progression of verbs, one leading simply to the other, without apparent space for reflection: Jonah rose, he went, he found, he paid the fare. How often sin works this way; once we have given ourselves permission to disobey God, the sinful world is likely to arrange for rapid progress. Jonah may have rationalized his disobedience by claiming God had "opened a door" for his flight to Tarshish. His folly reminds us that circumstances alone do not prove God's blessing; the confirmation we always need is that of the Word of God.

Jonah's situation reminds me of David's freefall into his grossest sin, the seduction of Bathsheba. Chapter after chapter of the Bible relates David's long progress in faith, but in three stunningly brief verses he falls. 2 Samuel 11:2-4 tells us that David saw the beautiful woman, he sent a messenger, she came, and he lay with her. David was neglecting his duty, remaining in Jerusalem while the army was off to war. And as soon as he took his eye off his duty, it rested on the bathing beauty. Before a second thought was given he had indulged in a sin that in certain respects he would never put behind him.

Jonah's flight was similar. All is action, with no deliberation or prayer. As David was in the grips of his lust, Jonah was gripped by resentment. Having given over his heart, his legs worked just as quickly as David's hands entered into sin. And more quickly than anyone could imagine, Jonah was aboard a ship to the end of the world, hoping to put miles between himself and God. Once aboard, even if Jonah began to think about what he was doing, it was too late: the ship had set sail. Sin always takes us farther than we imagined we would go, faster than we ever intended.

There is an important lesson for us in this. If we have been toying with a sin and find that opportunity presents itself, we should see not the hand of good fortune but of Satan. It is not difficult, after all, for the devil to arrange opportunities for sin. Perhaps you have allowed yourself to indulge in thoughts of a sexual affair; you should not then be surprised when an opportunity for adultery presents itself. This should raise your suspicions and lead you to repentance. Perhaps you have cheated on your taxes and not been caught or indulged in pornography and no one has found out. This should alarm you as to

what further sins you might be led to commit, and quickly bring you onto your knees before the Lord.

Jonah also shows us that once we have resolved to sin against God, any of us can engage in the most surprising behavior. Jonah's foolish rebellion against the Lord involved him in the most irrational behavior. We remember that out of his hatred for the Gentiles, he sought to escape the presence of the Lord and even the presence of the Lord's people, lest he be forced to prophecy in Nineveh. But look at the company he ends up keeping: pagan, Gentile sailors whose ways were surely opposed to the Lord and his people. Moreover, he pays his own way, handing over what would surely have been a considerable amount of money, and commits himself to a large expenditure of time, since the voyage would likely take a year. Furthermore, he willingly accepts the very great dangers that sea travel involved in those days. Leslie Allen reminds us that the Hebrews were not a sea-going people. He writes, "That Jonah was prepared to entrust himself to an ocean-going boat rather than face up to God's call must have struck the hearers as proof positive of his mad determination."<sup>2</sup>

The same thing happens to Christians when they tread the path of sin. Sin is expensive and leads us into unwholesome company. It entails risks and dangers that a Christian ought not to desire, and often it simply makes us into fools. Sin is never good, but there is at least something reasonable about an unbelieving sinner engaging in the expense, time, risk and company that sin involves. But a Christian? Christians may sin, but they seldom sin well, and their surprising behavior in sin is yet another warning of their need to repent.

The same can be said of the church. It is fine for worldly institutions to engage in cheap marketing or petty entertainments. But the Church of Jesus Christ? Forty years ago, William Banks lamented, "Many of our churches have become obsessed with the physical and the temporal, and the materialistic spirit has been nourished and fed at the expense of the cause of missions."<sup>3</sup> How much worse things are now!

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<sup>2</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 205.

<sup>3</sup> Banks, *Jonah: The Reluctant Prophet*, 20-21.

And how surprising such behavior is of the bride and body of Christ, his Church, but into which sin and worldliness have led us.

Lastly, we observe the baneful effects of Jonah's foolish flight from God. Verse 3 says that he fled "from the presence of the LORD," and that he boarded the ship "to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD."

We are tempted to think that Jonah foolishly believed that by putting physical distance between himself and Israel he was escaping God's actual presence. But given that Jonah was a prophet of the Lord, it is hard to believe that he knew so little about God as to think him limited by space. After all, he would have known the psalm which asks, "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?" (Ps. 139:7).

It is more likely that Jonah was seeking to separate himself from the Word of God and its appeal to his conscience. Douglas Stuart suggests, "Jonah hopes to avoid further revelatory contact with Israel's God by going someplace where there are no Israelites."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, there is evidence that the expression "away from the presence of the LORD," signifies someone who has refused the service that God has given. Gordon Keddie writes, "The person who chooses to flee from the presence of God, therefore, is refusing to serve God in the task he knows that the Lord has given him to do."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Jonah believes that God will simply forget him, sending some other prophet on the undesired mission to Nineveh.

Both of these objectives – fleeing from God's people and from God's service – produce the most lamentable results. It is said that either God will keep us from sin, or sin will keep us from God. How many Christians have suffered from their sin-imposed absence from church and the preaching of God's Word, the very instrument which speaks God's grace for repentance and forgiveness! And how many Christians have made their lives unfruitful, turning their backs on useful ministry because of sin, and denying themselves "the blessing which is attached to happy obedience."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 452.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Preacher on the Run: The Message of Jonah* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1986), 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

## SEVERE MERCY

The record of Jonah's flight involves two "but's" that structure the account. The first is "but Jonah," which tells of the prophet's unwillingness to heed God's sovereign call. God called Jonah to Nineveh, "but Jonah rose to flee" (Jon. 1:3). However, rebellious man never gets the last word, so verse 4 gives another "but": "But the LORD." Jonah resigned his office as a prophet, but the Lord did not accept his resignation. Jonah fled from God's presence, taking a ship to far-off Tarshish, but the Lord did not let him go. Jonah went down into the ship's hold to sleep away his troubles (Jon. 1:5), "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" (Jon. 1:4).

The British poet Francis Thompson wrote a piece that well describes Jonah's situation, titled, "The Hound of Heaven."<sup>7</sup> This epic poem tells of God's undaunted pursuit of the man who flees him:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways.

Those words might well have been penned by Jonah. Yet, as the poem recounts, it is not possible for those who belong to God successfully to flee from him.

Still with unhurrying chase, And unperturbed pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
Came on the following Feet.

For Jonah, this must have been a rude awakening. We can imagine him in his sailing vessel, having pulled out from the harbor. He had made it! There would be no preaching to the hated Ninevites. But God had other plans; he was not going to let Jonah go so easily. For a tempest arose on the sea, as John Calvin explains: "not by chance, but by the certain purpose of God, so that being overtaken on the sea, [Jonah] acknowledged that he had been deceived when he thought that he could flee away from God's presence by passing over the sea."<sup>8</sup> For it is the Lord, writes Jeremiah, "who gives the sun for light

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<sup>7</sup> *Modern British Poetry*, ed. Louis Untermeyer, 1950, 86-90.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 3:33.

by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar” (Jer. 31:35).

The storm that Jonah experienced is a classic instance of divine chastisement. The Bible plainly states that God’s wayward children can expect their Father’s chastening hand. Hebrews 12:6 says: “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.” For this reason alone, Jonah could not expect to get away from God, any more than any child of God can expect to prosper in sin. Billy K. Smith writes: “Jonah thought he could just walk away from a divine assignment. But the Lord was to make Jonah’s voyage into a ‘teachable moment.’”<sup>9</sup>

God’s chastisement is a certainty for every one of those who belong to him, just as God’s final judgment is certain for all those who do not. It does not always come immediately. Hugh Martin writes: “The Lord can afford to wait. You may trespass against Him, and pass on apparently unpunished, the Lord apparently uncognizant. But the path along which you pass has the punishment lining both sides of it, and looming dark at some fixed point further on.”<sup>10</sup>

Jonah 1:4 makes it clear that this was a divine act of chastisement on Jonah. It says “the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea.” In other words, God targeted Jonah’s ship with precision accuracy. We talk of “smart bombs” and guided missiles today, but they are nothing compared to God’s chastisement! The word for “hurled” is used elsewhere of a javelin. O. Palmer Robertson explains, “He takes careful aim at the chosen target, and with all his strength he ‘hurls’ his chosen weapon.”<sup>11</sup>

God has a chosen weapon to employ in the case of every rebellious Christian. As he showed in Jonah’s case, God has the precise way of halting our sinful path. It may be a crushing job setback. It may be a deadly illness. It may be a sickening of the soul. It is common, for instance, for Christians to feel a plague in their conscience when rationalizing some plan to avoid doing God’s will. Thus a genuine Christian will never succeed in fleeing from God; at a certain point of

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<sup>9</sup> Billy K. Smith and Frank S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 229.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Martin, *A Commentary on Jonah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1870, reprint 1958), 87-88.

<sup>11</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *Jonah: A Study in Compassion* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 18.

his own choosing, God is certain to step in, and when he does he will act with precise accuracy. In Jonah's case, God sent a storm of such savagery that even the experienced sailors were driven to despair. God's clear purpose with this storm was to stop Jonah's westward journey dead in its tracks. The tempest was so mighty "that the ship threatened to break up" (Jon. 1:4). Peter Williams comments: "God will not be mocked, not even by his own. There is always a price to pay for running from his demands, for that is how he disciplines and chastens us."<sup>12</sup>

God was not motivated by wrath towards Jonah, but instead by mercy. It was an instance of God's severe mercy, to save his own from their sinful folly. Such chastisement inevitably displays God's fearful might, but it also reveals God's grace in halting a ruinous rebellion.

To be sure, God was sending a clear message to Jonah. The message was that his commands cannot be lightly rejected nor successfully evaded. This is a message all of us should heed, lest we should refuse a Nineveh to which God sends us, be it a struggling church, a difficult mercy ministry, or a relationship we would prefer to avoid. God does not intend for his sovereign plans to be disrupted, and he often displays his sovereign rule through chastening events like Jonah's storm.

God intended this as a teaching event for Jonah. Williams summarizes, "He pursues us because he loves us and desires to draw us back to himself."<sup>13</sup> This shows that it is in the pursuing grace of God that every child of God finds true security. "God sometimes allows us to think that we can hide from him and evade his demands in order to teach us how much we need him, and how much he loves us. For he never gives up on us and will pursue us until we are drawn back to himself."<sup>14</sup> This was the message of the poem "The Hound of Heaven." The poem begins with the child of God's foolish words of flight. But they end with God's message of pursuing grace:

All which I took from thee I did but take, not for thy harms,  
But just that though might'st seek it in my arms.  
All which thy child's mistake

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Williams, *Jonah – Running from God* (Epsom, Surrey, UK: Day One, 2003), 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:  
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!<sup>15</sup>

## LINING UP WITH GOD'S WILL

The idea is widely held that Christians may lose the blessings that might have been theirs, unless they remain constantly “in the center of God’s will.” That might be true, were it not for the pursuing grace of God. This is one way in which Christians are different from the media stars whose ruined lives keep tabloid sales going. The man or woman who has turned in faith to Jesus Christ has become a child of the God of grace. By his mercy, God stops our trains prior to their destination, just as he stopped Jonah’s ship and redirected him on a path of blessing.

Jonah is not the story of a man who was blessed by remaining in God’s will, but rather of a man who was mightily used of God despite his unbelief and sin, because of God’s sovereign grace in his life. Jonah’s message is not even that we must avoid all folly and rebellion, though we should, but rather that when we have strayed we should respond to the grace of God that calls us to repentance and new obedience.

The story is told of three fifty-foot posts lined up at the small port of the island of Inagua in the Bahamas. A visitor puzzled over the purpose of the posts, since they were placed on land. The answer was that the channel was too shallow for larger sailing boats. The posts were placed so that a ship’s captain could align the posts so that from his perspective they were in a straight line, appearing as only one post. Lined up this way, the captain knew that he was in the narrow deep channel that will safely lead him to the dock.<sup>16</sup>

God’s Word plays a similar role in our lives. The question facing each of us is whether we are willing to obey God’s will as it is made known to us. Perhaps we have gone astray, but by God’s intervening grace he has made known to us our need to repent and return to him. Are we willing to turn to God’s Word for new direction? Are we

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<sup>15</sup> *Modern British Poetry*, 90.

<sup>16</sup> Cited from Trent C. Butler, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 277-278.

willing to come to God, confessing our sins and seeking power for new obedience? Our unwillingness will never overrule God's sovereign plans, but by turning anew to the way of the Lord, responding either to gentle nudges in our hearts or to chastening storms in our circumstances, we can find anew the path – the way of the Lord – that is marked by his blessing.