

The Reluctant Prophet & the Great City: The Loving Fury of God

Jonah 1:3-17

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on March 23, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ Last week we started a new series through the book of Jonah. In that message, we focused on the Christian concepts of sin and grace. We saw how the essence of sin is running away from God. It's more than just the breaking of divine law. Sin is the rejection of divine rule. It's stepping out from under God's loving rule and making a break for it.
 - ▶ But the essence of God's grace, on the other hand, is to pursue sinners. To put up a chase. To go after us no matter how far or how long we run. That's grace.
- ❖ Now the problem is that you can easily romanticize that view of grace, so when you hear that God pursues his people, you instinctively picture a forlorn lover chasing after your affection. God can easily be confused with a pathetic admirer who keeps calling you and texting you and showing up at your doorstep unexpected. You keep running but he keeps coming. Or perhaps you have a more biblical and noble picture of God's pursuit – more like Hosea and his pursuit of his unfaithful wife. How he went after her, found her broken and abandoned by lovers, brought her home, cleaned her up, and loved her still.
 - ▶ That's a beautiful and biblical image of God's pursuit of sinners, but even still that's not the image we're given in Jonah. In our story, the gracious God goes after the runaway prophet but *not* with flowers and letters and phone calls. Rather he chases Jonah down with a terrible, tempestuous storm.
 - Like it or not, here we have a God who is willing to capsize a ship full of merchants and mariners just to get to one man. It's more than chasing. It's more like he's hunting Jonah down. That's the God we see here, like it or not.
- ❖ Now I know there are people you care about who have decided "I don't like it" and they've walked away from the God of the Bible – rather they've run away. Now perhaps that's you, but for some reason you're here this morning in church. If that describes you or it describes someone you care about, then know that my goal this morning is to help you understand what I'm calling the loving fury of God – his raging pursuit of those he loves.
 - ▶ I want to equip you with the theological grid you'll need to process the next storm that God might send into your life whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Perhaps the storm's already raging. There are four things to point out: 1) The recurrent question that sidetracks. 2) The reluctant prophet who bottoms out. 3) The relentless God who chases down. 4) The revealing sacrifice that points forward.

The Recurrent Question That Sidetracks

- ❖ Now I promised last week to devote some time to address the problem of the fish. I'm talking about that recurrent question that's always raised whenever you study the book of Jonah. One that tends to sidetrack us from the main point.
 - ▶ That is: *Should we be reading this book as a story of fiction or as a book of history?* Is this story to be read as an allegory like one of Aesop's fables – where there's a lesson in the end but there's no intention to be read as literal truth?
 - Or are we dealing with an historical narrative recounting actual events? Albeit fascinating, miraculous events like a man surviving in the belly of a great fish.

- ❖ Now there those who read this book historically but try to help modern skeptics get past the miraculous aspects by downplaying them. There are some who try to document cases of people who have survived after being swallowed by whales. Most notably there is a whale captain's report in the late 19th-century of a whaler who tried to harpoon a sperm whale but ended up getting swallowed. When they eventually caught the whale and cut it open, the man was allegedly still alive.¹
 - ▶ There are other documented cases. But the details are never identical to Jonah's story and the big difference is that the survivors were clearly in no shape to immediately get up and travel hundred of miles by foot to another city. It's not the same thing. The whole point is that what happened to Jonah was miraculous. It was a God-thing.
 - There is even one "scholar" who downplays the miracle to such a degree that he completely reinterprets it. He suggests what likely happened was that Jonah recovered from his perilous ordeal in the sea by staying three days and three nights at a seaside inn called *The Fish*. Seriously. It's laughable.
- ❖ Now these days a more common way to explain away the miraculous element of this story is to argue that the form or style of writing resembles an allegory or parable. That means the author of Jonah never intended it to be read as a narrative of actual events. He never intended for you to think there was an actual fish.
 - ▶ But the book's introduction does give the impression that it should be read as historical narrative. You have a main character rooted in history. Jonah is mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, which no one argues is historical. And the opening words that recount God's call on Jonah read a lot like the prophet Elijah's call in 1 Kings 17 to "*Arise and go*" (17:8-9). And if you think about it, many of the miracles attributed to Elijah are just as incredible or more so than Jonah surviving in a fish.
- ❖ But what really weakens the argument that Jonah should be read allegorically is that no one was making it until the last century or so. The fact is that generations of scholars and theologians throughout centuries have been convinced that the author of Jonah intended to write facts and not fiction. For example, the first-century Jewish historian Josephus served the Romans and wrote a history of the Jewish people in which he included Jonah's story.
 - ▶ If you ask me who's in the best position to read an ancient piece of literature and identify the markings of either ancient allegory or ancient narrative, I'd choose the ancient scholar over the modern one. *Don't you think a man like Josephus is better suited to make that determination?*
- ❖ But there's someone even more credible than Josephus who's opinion on this we should definitely heed. His name is Jesus, and we know he read the fish as history because he compared his resurrection from the belly of the earth to Jonah's deliverance from the belly of the fish (Mt. 12:38-40). We'll be coming back to that reference. But bottom line, if Jesus reads Jonah and the fish as history, then I'll take his word for it.

¹ See T. Desmond Alexander's commentary on *Jonah* in the Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, pg. 122.

- ❖ So I think there are compelling reasons to read this book historically, but at the same time, I'd refrain from using its miraculous claims as a litmus test for orthodoxy or inerrancy – mainly because it tends to distract from the book's message. Jonah really isn't about a fish.

► G. Campbell Morgan once wrote, "*Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God.*"² Let's not make the same mistake. Let's not let the great fish sidetrack us from the greatest and most fascinating character in the story, God.

The Reluctant Prophet Who Bottoms Out

- ❖ But before we get to God, let's look at Jonah, our reluctant prophet who bottoms out. As we noted last week, Jonah is running hard. God calls him to preach a message of doom to Nineveh the capital of the Assyrian empire. The Assyrians were a nasty bunch. History tells us that in about thirty years, they would end up annihilating the northern kingdom of Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Israelite men, women, and children will brutally die at their hands.
 - And yet, for a reason Jonah can't comprehend, God was giving them one last shot. Forty days to respond favorably to his warning of destruction. Now when Jonah got the call, his instinct was to run in the exact opposite direction. He boarded a ship bound for Tarshish, which was as far away from Nineveh as any ship would take him.
- ❖ We explained last week that he didn't necessarily fear failure. It's more like he feared success. He feared the Ninevites would respond favorably and repent. He feared that God would actually relent and give them a second chance.
 - But for Jonah, these wicked, idolatrous pagans don't deserve a second chance. They don't deserve God's mercy. And he wanted no part in showing it them. So Jonah ran.
- ❖ If you look back at v3, the author describes Jonah's flight from the LORD as a downward progression. Notice the repeated emphasis on going down. Jonah goes *down* to Joppa, boards a ship and goes *down* into it. And then in v5, Jonah has goes *down* into the hold of the ship and lays *down* to take a nap.
 - *Do you see what's happening here?* Jonah keeps going down, down, down. Just like an alcoholic, he's bottoming out, he's hitting rock bottom. He's reaching the lowest point in his sin, in his rebellion. Like an alcoholic, he needs an intervention. Someone to shake him up and wake him up.
- ❖ The sea captain gives it a try in v6. He literally wakes Jonah up and asks, "*What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish.*"(v6) What's ironic is that, in contrast to a prophet, this pagan sea captain articulates a more accurate view of God and his sovereign grace. We're talking about God's prerogative to dispense his mercy as he so chooses. Perhaps he might save us. Perhaps not. He's under no obligation, but let's bank on the chance that he chooses mercy.

² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Minor Prophets: The Men and Their Message*, pg. 69)

- ▶ That concept is totally lost on Jonah. He's under the impression that God's mercy has its limits. If you're wicked and rebellious, then you've got no chance at mercy. Jonah is a strong believer in the principle of *what goes around comes around*. So for all their wickedness, these rebellious Ninevites should be getting punishment only. Mercy shouldn't be an option.
- ❖ But I think at this point Jonah has come to realize the principle applies to him as well. He realizes, "*Wait, I'm wicked and rebellious too. Look at me, I'm on the run.*" What goes around is apparently coming around in the form of a storm. I think it's safe to say that Jonah has now resigned himself to whatever punishment God is going to dish out.
 - ▶ That's probably the reason why he could sleep like a baby through a hurricane. "*Payback is coming. I might as well close my eyes and it'll all be over soon. And all you pagan sailors are wicked and rebellious like me. We're all in the same boat. So stop whining and accept your fate. I'm going back to sleep.*" Looks like the captain's intervention is not getting through.
- ❖ Now let's pause for a moment and confess how easily we fall into the same downward patterns of behavior and thinking. We start messing with sin. We get involved in relationships or activities we know are against God's will. We entertain thoughts and attitudes that we know are displeasing to him.
 - ▶ At first there seems to be no harm done. Life goes on. But that's because sin rarely kills you immediately like a bullet. It usually kills you like a drop of poison in a big, cool jug of sweet tea. You're told it's in there, but when you take a sip you don't taste poison. All you taste is sweetness.
 - So you keep drinking and drinking, and even when you come to the realization that this is actually killing you, you figure, "*Well if I'm going to die anyways then I guess it won't matter if I take another sip.*" Know what that is? That's the thought process of an addict in desperate need of intervention.
- ❖ "*If I'm going to be punished anyways for this sin, then what does it matter if I just do it a little more?*" I wouldn't be surprised if that's what Jonah's thinking. If I'm being punished for running from God, then what does it matter if I just go a little further? Good night.
- ❖ Friends, just like Jonah, we are too quick to close our ears to the advice of others who are telling us to go to God asking for mercy. We're too quick to close our eyes to the brewing storms around us – too quick to resign ourselves to punishment. We're too quick to give up on God's grace and mercy.
 - ▶ If you're convinced you've run beyond the bounds of God's mercy, if you think there's no hope for you, then there's really no incentive to stop what you're doing and attempt a return to God. You might as well enjoy your sin, enjoy your life and get the most out of it before death and punishment eventually catch up with you.

The Relentless God Who Chases Down

- ❖ But this is where you're wrong. Because there are no bounds to God's mercy. There are no limits. You can't run past its reach. We're dealing with a relentless God who loves to put up a chase – a God who will chase you down.
 - ▶ Now he has a variety of ways to do this. But the primary way God pursues us is through his kindness. He blesses us far better than we deserve with life, breath, food, clothing, friendship, relationships, school, work, etc. Like the Apostle Paul says in Romans 2, "*God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.*" (2:4)
 - Another means of pursuit is to actually grant you all that you so desperately believe will satisfy your soul and bring you happiness. Because once you get it and discover that this job or this person or this amount of money doesn't do it – that it still leaves you empty – then in those moments of disappointment you're often drawn back to God, the only One who can truly satisfy.
- ❖ But there are times when we, like fools, continue to take God's kindness for granted, and we stubbornly refuse to return and find our satisfaction in God even when everything else fails to deliver. We're like alcoholics who have hit rock bottom but still refuse to admit there's a problem. It's at this point that God will have to stage an intervention of his own.
 - ▶ And it often comes in the form of a storm. Look at v4. Notice it doesn't say, "But suddenly, by random chance, there was a great wind upon the sea." Or "But then Satan hurled a great wind upon the sea." No, it says, "*But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea.*"
 - There are many, including some Christians, who believe that all good things in life come from God while all bad things come from either random chance or the devil. But that's not what Scripture reveals. It reveals a sovereign God of heaven who holds all things in his hands. Anything that happens in this world, whether good or evil, must pass through those sovereign hands. So in the end, everything finds its origin in the will of God.
- ❖ This mighty tempest is one of those things. It says in v4 that God hurls it at Jonah's ship. It's the same word used elsewhere in Scripture for hurling a spear. Now you'd think that would be enough, but as we've already seen in vv5-6, the sea captain wakes him up but Jonah's still not spiritually awaken to recognize God behind the storm. It'll take one more intervention.
 - ▶ Look at v7. The mariners say to each other, "*Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.*" *So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.*
 - Casting lots was used by ancient people as a way to discern God's will, in this case to determine who incurred the wrath of this storm. The Israelites had a proverb, "*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.*" (Prov. 16:33) What we see here is sovereign God working through the means of lot casting to cast a giant neon arrow, if you will, over Jonah's head.

- ❖ Now there's no escaping his responsibility. Jonah can't just go quietly to the bottom of the sea and let everyone think the killer storm was some random occurrence. Now everyone on board knows it's because of Jonah.
 - ▶ And suddenly there's a flood of questions. *Who are you? Where do you come from? What's your occupation? Why is this happening?!?*

- ❖ Finally, Jonah seems to grow a conscience. He's finally pricked. So he responds to their inquisition. He say to them, "*I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.*" (v9) His claim to fear God rings pretty hollow at this point.
 - ▶ But when the sailors here that, they're terrified, exceedingly afraid. "*What is this that you have done!*" You're trying to run away by sea from the God who made the sea? Brilliant move. Now their next question is no surprise.

- ❖ Look at v11, "*What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?*" *For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.*" ¹²*He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you."*
 - ▶ So Jonah finally concedes. He realizes that this storm is from God and he's after me. It's because of me that this has come upon you. Jonah finally wakes up.

- ❖ Now we need to be clear that not every storm God sends your way is a direct result of some sin or rebellion in your life. You could be faithfully running after God and still experience a terrible storm in life. Storms aren't just for the rebellious.
 - ▶ But when God sends one with the intent to awaken you to sin and bring you back to him, you can be sure he'll make it clear. It may not be as clear as a lot being cast and falling on you. But he'll let you know.
 - Good fathers don't discipline their kids and then say, "*Okay, now you try to figure out why I disciplined you.*" Likewise, our good heavenly Father will let you know why. He'll make sure you're aware and convicted of your sin.

- ❖ But knowing the purpose doesn't lessen the pain. Like any intervention, it can get ugly. It's like he's putting you through the ringer. It feels like everything you hold dear in life is breaking apart. You feel like you're drowning under the weight of it all.
 - ▶ But remember, all of this is grace. If you're going through a storm right now, it's likely God's way of stopping you in your tracks. This was the only way get Jonah to stop running. Jonah had put so much hope in this Tarshish-bound ship to carry him away from God, but this storm quickly exposed its inadequacy.

- ❖ Likewise, the storms that God sends into our lives are intended to expose the inadequacy of all the people, positions, and pursuits that we put all our hope and attention to in order to get our minds off God. *Are there waves battering up against your life? Do you feel like your life is on the verge of breaking apart?* Perhaps God is staging an intervention.

The Revealing Sacrifice That Points Forward

- ❖ Now at this point, there's a good chance these storms still don't feel like loving fury. It just feels like fury. Like the work of a vindictive God out to get us. That's why we need to keep going and we'll get to our last observation – a revealing sacrifice that points us forward.
- ❖ So let's keep going in v13. I find it surprising that these mariners try to spare Jonah and row to dry land, when you would've thought they'd be furious and try to kill him. But rowing does no good. The storm just seems to get worse. Jonah's advice in v12 to pick him up and hurl him into the sea is starting to look like their best option.
 - ▶ Now don't get the wrong impression. This is not an act of heroic sacrifice on Jonah's part. Yes, it's a sacrifice. And yes, he believes it will spare the lives of others. Yet it's anything but heroic.
- ❖ Think about it. Jonah could've said, "*Look guys, I've been running from God, away from my assignment in Nineveh. If you want to survive this storm, then turn to boat around and head back to Joppa.*" Seems like a legitimate option.
 - ▶ Or at least he could've climbed the rail and jumped. He could throw himself overboard. Why did he have to implicate others in his death?
- ❖ That was the main concern for the mariners. In v14 they call out to God saying, ““*O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you.*”¹⁵*So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.*¹⁶*Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.*
- ❖ So Jonah gets hurled into the sea and that saves the lives of everyone on board. In a sense, this is a substitutionary death. He's laying down his life for others. But again, it's not as heroic as it sounds. Jonah basically resigned himself to death. In a sense, he wanted it.
 - ▶ So it's not a heroic sacrifice, but it's a sacrifice nonetheless. And the moment Jonah hits the sea, the storm's rage is satisfied. It's propitiated. And so is God and his rage.
- ❖ Now as Jonah went under the waves, I'm sure he expected to die. But suddenly he's rescued from death. Look at v17. “¹⁷*And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.*”
 - ▶ I realize that by including this great fish, the reader is being asked to believe in the unbelievable. For modern readers we just assume that the unbelievable is a man surviving inside a fish for three days and three nights.
 - But to the ancient reader, the unbelievable would've been the extraordinary mercy God is showing to this reluctant, rebellious prophet by saving him from drowning. That's unbelievable! *Why would God do that?*

- ❖ The answer is that years later Jesus the Son of God would be talking to some Pharisees in Matthew 12 who were asking him for a sign. And he said to them in v39, “*No sign will be given ... except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. . . . behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*” (12:39-41)
- ❖ *Do you know why Jonah could be hurled into the fury of God’s storm and yet be saved?* Do you know why a Christian can look at the storm raging in his life – threatening to break everything apart – and yet still believe that behind it all is a God who is actually trying to help, to love, to bring us back to our senses, to discipline us and not to punish?
 - ▶ Because there was a greater Jonah. The true and better Jonah was hurled into the real storm of God’s wrath where there was no rescue. Nothing was there to save him. He just sank to the bottom and died.
 - Like Jonah, he sacrificed for others. Because Jesus died, others could live. But unlike Jonah, Jesus’ death was truly heroic since he was truly innocent. Yet he loved us still to the point of death.
- ❖ And like Jonah, Jesus was in the belly of the earth, in the tomb, for three days and three nights. But on the third day, he wasn’t vomited out like Jonah (2:10). No, Jesus exploded out of the belly of the tomb. He rose again in victory declaring God’s wrath and punishment to be satisfied for good.
 - ▶ That’s why, if you’re a Christian (someone who has called out to this Jesus for rescue), you can know with absolute confidence that God always and only has your best interest in mind. You can be sure that the storms he sends into your life are working out your salvation. They are sent with love and mercy.
- ❖ But friends, listen to me: This confidence and comfort is only for those who have turned to Jesus in faith and found new life in him. If you’re still living without Jesus, then the prospect of facing the real storm of God’s wrath and punishment still stands. It awaits you. It’ll find you. And it’ll overwhelm you one day. So I urge you to turn to Jesus this day and find true peace even in the face of storms.