

The Reluctant Prophet & the Great City: *Running from God*

Jonah 1:1-10

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on March 16, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ For a book supposedly about a whale, there is surprising little said about it. Did you know that in the entire story of Jonah the whale is only mentioned in three verses (1:17; 2:1, 10)? It only plays a minor role and yet it usually takes up a majority of our attention.
 - ▶ Every kid's bible, every Sunday School lesson, focuses on this fascinating aspect of the story – this whale or “*great fish*”. It captures the imagination. But the problem is that the fish tends to dominate the story, causing us to either miss the overall message or to distract us with questions about whether this narrative is historical or fictional.

- ❖ Just as we can't ignore the elephant in the room, we can't ignore the whale in the pool. We're going to have to talk about whether the whale should be interpreted as a literary device of fiction or a literal fish of history. With the kind of skepticism that people have nowadays towards the Bible and its reliability, of course we'll have to address this.
 - ▶ Today we're starting a five-part series through Jonah, so we'll have plenty of time to cover your questions. But my goal this morning is to step back and show you how the story of Jonah functions as a great illustration of the Christian message, the gospel.
 - Our passage, in particular, is about sin – the biblical doctrine of sin. And the essence of sin is illustrated for us by Jonah running away. **The essence of sin is running away from God.**¹ Sin is not just breaking a rule or violating a law. It's not just disobedience. Sin at its core is a running away from God, from his rule, from his Word, from his grace – yes, we run from his grace.

- ❖ It's safe to say every person here is a runner. You might be thinking, “*Are you kidding me? I hate running. It's so boring. It hurts my joints. I'm not a runner.*” Yes you are. In the spiritual sense, you're a runner. We all are. Everyone falls into one of two categories.
 - ▶ **Some people are actively running from God.** They want little to do with him or religion in general. Perhaps they grew up with a non-religious upbringing so running away from God feels normal. Their entire direction of life has gone this way.
 - But others grew up in a Christian home or in a church/youth group, and yet now they're trying to get away from religion as far as possible. Religion felt too restrictive. Christianity was too constraining. So after going to college, after leaving their parent's household, they felt a sense of liberation.
 - Some of you may be here today. You've been avoiding all those places you think God might be for so long, but for a reason you can't explain you're here this morning. Here you are listening to Jonah's story, and you can totally relate. You know what it's like to run from God.

- ❖ So that's one group of people, those who are active runners. **But then there are those who are sitting still right now but they're primed to run.** I'm talking about those of us who would be considered religious. We know our Bibles. We have proper theology. We're in church. We're committed. We serve regularly. We're considered mature.

¹ Credit to Pastor Timothy Keller for this insight found in his sermon “Runaway Believer” preached on July 22, 1990.

- ❖ We're like Jonah in that sense. This man is a prophet. He's in the Lord's service. He would've been considered one of the mature. One of the good ones sitting at the feet of God. And yet the whole time he was primed to run. When push came to shove, he was ready to shove off. He was primed. All it took was a test. Once his theology was put to the test by the call of God to go to Nineveh and preach, he took off in the wrong direction. He ran.
 - ▶ For many of us, all it'll take is for God's Word to come to us and call us to do something we don't like, something that doesn't sit right with us, and then we're off running. So though we're sitting still now, we're primed to run.

- ❖ That's an important discovery we need to make about ourselves. **We won't make much progress in a relationship with God unless we come to realize that it's in our nature to flee when he calls.** In other words, we need to recognize that, without Christ, we are plagued by a sin nature that's bent on running. We are natural born runners away from God.
 - ▶ Until you admit that, you won't find God. That's the paradox in Christianity. **If you're seeking God, if you want to be close to God, you have to first admit you're running away from God.** That's what the Bible teaches. That's what Jonah teaches.
 - I want to show you. We're going to see three things. First, God calls. Second, man flees. Third, God pursues. Like I said, this is a picture of the gospel.

God Calls

- ❖ First, let's see God calling. Look with me back at v1, "*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.'*"
 - ▶ So here is Jonah sitting still. When suddenly the word of the Lord comes to him and calls him to get up and go to Nineveh and call out against it, to preach its destruction.

- ❖ ***So where is Nineveh?*** It's about 600 miles northeast of Israel in modern-day northern Iraq. In Jonah's day it was the capital city of the Assyrian empire, which was *the* world power of its day. It truly was a "great city".
 - ▶ And it was a wicked city. The Assyrians were a nasty bunch. They were conquerors of nations, plunderers of cities. There's a whole book in the Old Testament devoted to their downfall. The book of Nahum is a prophesy of punishment against Nineveh.

- ❖ Let me read a section from **Nahum 3:1-4**. "*Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims! ²The crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots! ³Charging cavalry, flashing swords and glittering spears! Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses —⁴all because of the wanton lust of a harlot, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft.*"
 - ▶ **So God is calling Jonah to go to this nasty, murderous, prostituting, witchcrafting nation and pronounces its doom.** It's like calling a Jew during WWII to go to Berlin, the heart of the Nazi regime, and preach its demise. Calling it a tough job would be a gross understatement.

- ❖ Nineveh was wicked and evil. It was full of runners, people running away from God chasing after false gods. For centuries the Assyrian empire accrued power and wealth through wickedness and violence. In God's forbearance he passed over their sins but now no more. Their evil has come up before him. He'll show no more mercy. The message Jonah eventually brings in chapter 3:4 is straightforward, "*Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.*"
- ❖ **Now here's where some people are offended.** Not by Nineveh and its wickedness but by the Bible's suggestion that God is the kind of God who destroys whole cities, who wipes out in a single stroke all the inhabitants of a city – men, women, and children.
 - ▶ You might be thinking to yourself, "*See, this is why I have a hard time believing in the God of the Bible. He destroys whole cities like Sodom and Gomorrah. He tells Israel to sack all the cities of Canaan. He's threatening Nineveh with destruction. I can't believe in this kind of god. If there's a god out there and if he's a god of love then he can't be the kind who would get angry and judge like this.*"
- ❖ I understand where you're coming from, but you must understand that this is a profound misunderstanding of both love and judgment. They're not mutually exclusive. **The opposite of judgment is not love. The opposite of judgment is indifference.**
 - ▶ If you don't care about what's right, about justice, if you sit back and let sin and evil triumph when you have the power to stop it, then you're anything *but* loving. You're indifferent. **Love cares enough to want to see sin punished and justice done.**
- ❖ When I consider all the horrendous evil in this world and the great depths of sin in the heart of man, **I'm grateful that God gets angry with evil and sin.** I'm thankful that he'll never let them win out in the end. My hope rests in the belief that one day God will bring all sinners to perfect justice and eradicate all traces of evil from this world. For that I give thanks.
 - ▶ **But then I can't forget that all of that includes me.** The evil in my heart and the sin I commit may differ in degree compared to a Ninevite but not in kind. Evil is still evil and sin is still sin. Which is why I'm even more grateful that God is a God of grace.
- ❖ And his grace comes across loud and clear here in vv1-2. Think about it. **Even though the wickedness of Nineveh had reached a tipping point, God still gave them one last chance to repent.** *You realize he didn't have to warn them, right?* He never warned Sodom or Gomorrah. Yes, he told Abraham what he intended to do, but he never sent Abraham to go and preach to them. He just wiped them out.
 - ▶ But in his infinite wisdom and his sovereign grace, God gave Nineveh a warning. He gave them a chance to respond favorably and repent. That's undeserved. That's grace. And for Jonah, that was a problem.

Man Flees

- ❖ It says in v3, "*But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.*" So God calls but man flees. Again this is the essence of sin – taking flight and running from the presence of God.

- ❖ The verse goes on to say that Jonah went down to Joppa, which was an ancient port town on the Mediterranean (close to Tel-Aviv). And there he hops onto a vessel bound for Tarshish, which scholars believe to be a western city located on the Atlantic coast of southern Spain. So literally the opposite direction of Nineveh and as far as a ship would probably take him.
- ❖ Now twice it says he's running away from the presence of the LORD (of Yahweh). **I find it strange that Jonah could think he'd escape God's watchful eye or cross some border beyond God's jurisdiction.** Because he even says himself in v9 that the LORD is the one who made all the sea and dry land. In other words, the whole world is God's jurisdiction.
 - ▶ I'm sure, as a prophet of Israel, he knew his Bible. He could probably recite **Psalm 139**, "*7Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? 8If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!*"
 - God's everywhere. I'm sure that was part of Jonah's theology of God. I'm sure he affirmed God's omnipresence. **But when you're dealing with sin, what you believe and how you behave don't always correspond.**
- ❖ Sin really messes up your mind. You don't think straight. This is what theologians call the **noetic effects of the Fall**. Sin has corrupted more than just our moral will. It's affected our minds, our intellect, our cognitive reasoning, which leads to irrational, childish behavior.
 - ▶ *Have you ever played hide-and-seek with a toddler?* You count to ten, walk back in the room, and she might be standing there facing the wall. That's hiding for a toddler. As long as I can't see you, surely you can't see me.
 - *Isn't that what Jonah's thinking?* If I run away from his presence, from his people, then surely the sovereign, omniscient, omnipresent Creator and Lord over every square inch of this little blue planet – surely he can't see me.
- ❖ But before we get too hard on Jonah, let's confess that we do the same thing. **Those of us who have sound theology can behave just as irrationally, just as childishly.** Surely God can't see what an unmarried Christian couple does in the privacy of the bedroom. Surely God can't see my browser history. Surely God can't see the financial decisions that I'm making. Surely he doesn't know what's going on in my marriage or in the depths of my heart.
 - ▶ If you're running from God, chasing after the fleeting pleasures of sin, don't fool yourself into thinking God can't see what's happening. Sometimes you need to see the unmistakable noetic effects of the Fall in another sinner in order to realize what sin is actually doing to you. May Jonah's foolish actions serve as a wake up call.
- ❖ **But I think we should dig even deeper beneath Jonah's irrational behavior and to get at his motivation.** We can't tell just by reading chapter 1. We really have to jump forward to chapter 4 where Jonah says in his own words why he ran.
 - ▶ Look at chapter 4:2. This is after the LORD relents and spares Nineveh. Listen to what Jonah prays, "*O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*"

- ❖ This is amazing. **Jonah didn't fear failure. He actually feared success.** He feared the Ninevites were going to respond favorably and repent. Jonah knew what kind of God he's dealing with – a God who is so gracious and merciful that if a wicked king and a wicked people were to heed a divine warning and for just one day out of all the evil days of their existence, fall on their face in repentance – God would relent.
 - ▶ The thought of it sickened Jonah. He wanted these Ninevites destroyed. He knew that the future of his people, the future of Israel, depended on something big happening that would curb the growing strength of the Assyrian empire.
 - *See what's going on?* It's not so much that Jonah feared the Ninevites. He actually despised them. He looked down on them. He felt superior to them.

- ❖ **At the root of Jonah's running away from God – what triggered him to get up and flee – is what the Bible calls self-righteousness.** He was operating out of a worldview where, yes I agree, everyone is born a sinner. But there are sinners and then there are *sinner*s. I'm sure Jonah would readily admit he's a sinner but he probably justified himself by thinking, "*At least I'm not a Ninevite. Those guys are the real sinners.*"
 - ▶ **You see, Jonah had no problem with the idea that God is both just and merciful as long as his justice and mercy are going towards the right people.** As long as God reserves his justice for those really bad people out there and showers his mercy on devout, religious people like me.

- ❖ That's his mentality. It's clear in chapter 4. There Jonah is furious that God is showing mercy to Nineveh. He sulks outside the city waiting to see what will become of it. He wants to see if God really did relent. Maybe God just might destroy them after all.
 - ▶ Now as he waits, God causes a plant to spring up over Jonah offering him comfort and shade. God's showing mercy to Jonah, and he's pleased. But the next day God causes a worm to destroy the plant and again Jonah is furious. "*Take me now, Lord!*"

- ❖ *Do you see the irony?* The self-righteousness irony. **When it comes to the Ninevites, Jonah is disgusted to see God give mercy instead of justice.** "*Lord, why are you being so kind? They don't deserve it.*" But then the moment God turns around and takes away Jonah's plant, giving him justice instead of mercy (what he was demanding for the Ninevites), he starts to pout. "*Lord, why are you being so cruel? Don't I deserve better than this?*"

- ❖ But the truth is we're all guilty of this – of self-righteousness. It's in our nature to feel superior to somebody – to compensate for our unrighteousness by comparing ourselves to someone or some group that we're convinced are less righteous.
 - ▶ **In Jonah's case, his self-righteousness took the form of racism or nationalistic pride.** That's a common way to express this. No matter how uneducated you are or how poor you are, you can always feel better about yourself because you're of a particular race or nationality. God's justice and mercy always serves our people, our purposes. In every war, every conflict, God's always fighting on our side. God blesses America but it's justice for everyone else. That's a way to be self-righteous.

- ❖ But you know there's another way to do it. **If you're disgusted by those who have a racist or nationalistic air of superiority, you can turn that into a form of self-righteousness.** You can look down at all those racists, all those bigots out there. They don't deserve any good thing from God. They're not as educated and enlightened like us. *You see how that works?* Self-righteousness can go both ways.
 - ▶ **It can also go through religion and devotion to God.** Bet you didn't know that, that there could be self-righteous religious people out there – in here. It's when we start to think, *"I live a pretty moral life, I serve in the church, I cherish the Word of God, I try to do his will – these least he could do is answer my prayer. The least he could do is heal the cancer or provide that job or finally bring me a spouse or give me a baby."*
- ❖ But when the prayer remains unanswered – and what's worse, when those we know who couldn't care less about God are receiving the healing, the job, the marriage, the family – then we get furious. We shake our fist at God and demand some mercy to come our way.
 - ▶ I've done that. To be honest, I still catch myself doing that. It comes far too natural. Just as it's in our nature to run, it's in our nature to be righteous in our own eyes, to think we deserve mercy while justice is something for other people.
- ❖ Like I said, there are two kinds of sinners. **There are those of us who have been severely disappointed by God.** You're disillusioned. He didn't dispense his justice and mercy like you expected. He let you down in some major way, and then he lifted up someone else – someone you consider totally undeserving. If there really is a God out there, how can he let this happen? So ever since then you've been on the run.
 - ▶ **Then there are those of us who are sitting still because, as of now, you're life has gone pretty much as planned.** God's justice and mercy are working fine. You have no real complaints. But listen to me: So long as you're right in your own eyes, so long as you consider yourself deserving of God's mercy, you are primed to run. You're set up for a huge fall, a crisis of faith, the first time God's mercy doesn't go your way in a major way.
- ❖ All of us are naturally self-righteous, and that's why we naturally run away from God and his gospel of grace. Think about it: *If you're right in your own eyes, then why would you need a gospel of grace to make you right before God?*
 - ▶ **If you're operating out of self-righteousness, then the grace God offers in Christ is actually quite offensive.** It might sicken you to imagine sinners getting something better than they deserve. That's why Jonah ran.

God Pursues

- ❖ Fortunately for him, Jonah serves a God who loves to put up a chase, a God who doesn't just let his people run away. **He's a God who pursues sinners no matter where they try to run.**
 - ▶ And here in our story, how does God put up a chase? What does he do? He sends a storm, a violent storm. Look at v4, *"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."*

- ❖ Now you know this is a seriously bad storm, like category five, if even seasoned sailors are terrified. V5 says they were crying out to their gods and throwing out cargo in order to lighten the ship to help it ride out the storm. The point is this is a big, bad storm. When God chases after you he doesn't play around. He pursues you with dogged determination.
 - ▶ There's this old poem by Francis Thompson called *The Hound of Heaven*. In it he compares God to a hound that never ceases in pursuit of a hare. Thompson writes, "*I fled him, down the night and down the days; I fled him, down the arches of the years; I fled him, down the labyrinthine ways.*"
 - Jonah could've penned those words. We all could've. We're all runners. But Thompson goes on to describe the Feet of God in hot pursuit. "*A down titanic glooms of chasm'd fears, from those strong Feet that followed, followed after.*"

- ❖ The following Feet. The Hound of Heaven. That's the God of heaven. **He's a God of grace who will mercifully chase you down when you try to run.** He'll chase you with a storm. He might even send a fish after you.
 - ▶ It'll feel like you're drowning. It'll feel like he's killing you. But he's not. He's trying to save you. It's actually grace that he's giving you. **Those storms that God sends into your life, those storms that generate so much fear, that threaten to break up everything you hold dear – those storms are a mercy, a severe mercy.**
 - They're intended by God to wake you up to recognize how far you've run from God, to expose any self-righteousness in the heart, to make you despair of your own righteousness that you might hunger and thirst after God's.

- ❖ Stop running away from God. **You come to grips with the reality that there's no refuge from God – only refuge in God.** Run, run, run as hard as you can, but there's nowhere to hide *from* him. But in the gospel of grace, there is a place to hide *in* God. You go to God and say, "*I want your Son, Jesus Christ, to be my Savior, to be my hiding place.*"
 - ▶ The Bible tells us that Jesus is the Greater Jonah (Lk. 11:32). Jonah was thrown into the sea and calmed the storm. But Jesus is the Greater Jonah who was thrown into the storm of God's wrath against our sin. And when he died on the cross for our sins, the storm of God's wrath against us subsided for good. It will never rise again.

- ❖ *Do you see what this means?* If Jesus is your refuge, your hiding place, your Savior, then you can know with absolute confidence that God is showing mercy when he sends those storms into your life. **It doesn't matter if the waves are crashing over you or you find yourself in the belly of despair, you can be sure that all of this pain is a severe mercy from a loving God.** Listen, God's not trying to pay you back for sin. He's trying to bring you back from sin.

- ❖ The only question is: ***How will you respond to God's pursuit of you?*** Will you maintain a self-righteous attitude, accuse God of being excessively cruel, and continue pressing on towards Tarshish? Or will you stop justifying yourself, confess your unrighteousness, bend to his mercy, and allow him to bring you back on course? What will it be?