

Jonah 1:3

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[0 : 0 0] Now, let's turn to God's Word together, and we seek God's own help as we hear His Word, and I hope for all of us, as we're asking, Lord, how can this apply to me today?

And we're going to read one verse here, chapter 1 of Jonah. Chapter 1 in Jonah, he got his command in verse 2 to go and preach against the wickedness of the city of Nineveh, and in verse 3 we read this, but Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.

A friend of ours called John recently told me of an incident that took place when he was a student in Glasgow. One day he saw a young black man with a suitcase looking lost in the city center.

He asked if he could help, and the young man told him he was West Indian, and he needed to get to Paisley College to matriculate as a new student. My friend helped him on his way, and also invited him to his parents' home for lunch any Sunday. Sometime later, the student phoned, said he would like to come the next Sunday, and could he bring a friend, a student from Finland whom he'd got to know in the college. They both arrived, as did several other students who'd also been invited, and they were mainly in the college. After the meal, one of them, who was known to be an accomplished musician, played and sang various Christian songs, including some in his native language, which was Swedish. During one of the songs,

John noticed that the Finnish student was becoming more and more agitated. And when the song was over, the Finnish student asked to speak with John. He told him that the song was about someone trying to run away from God, but that God would not let him go. Maybe the song was based on Psalm 139. The verses we've just been singing. He then said that he'd been brought up in a Christian home in Finland, and that his father was a pastor. But he hated what he saw as a miserable and restricted life, and he couldn't wait to get away to anywhere outside Finland. At the airport, his father, the pastor, said to him, son, son, you can run away from God, but you can never hide from him. And as this song was being sung in that

[3 : 4 9] Glasgow home, these words cut into his heart, and he asked the Christians present to show him the way to peace with God. They did so. They prayed with him, and he left that Glasgow home rejoicing.

Now, when you hear that story, don't you think straight away of Jonah? Jonah, we read, ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.

And it's generally reckoned that Tarshish was away at the far end of the Mediterranean from the land of Israel, where he was. And perhaps it strikes a chord with someone here today. So, let's see what God has to say to us through Jonah today. First of all, quite obviously, we're going to look at Jonah running away from God.

Jonah running away from God. Now, you've got to bear in mind that Jonah was a prophet. He was a true believer in God.

In 2 Kings chapter 14 at verse 25, we're told that King Jeroboam II of Israel, and I quote, restored the boundaries of Israel in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-Hefer. But now it's very different, isn't it? He's running away from God instead of proclaiming God's word. Now, of course, there are many people who are not believers who are not believers like Jonah was who also run away from God. Think, for example, of Pharaoh, faced again and again with God's call to action through Moses, yet and really replying, who is the Lord that I should serve him. Or think of those people who were impressed by Jesus' signs and miracles, who were enthusiastically crowded around them. But as soon as Jesus made clear the demands of discipleship, they turned around and, we're told, they walked no more with him.

[6 : 45] So that means that the challenge today is for every single one of us, whether we're Christians or not, whether we're active in Christ's service or perhaps holding back from some kind of service that we should be giving them. So, thinking of Jonah running away from God, I'd suggest that there are at least two, probably more, but two reasons underlying his action in running away. First of all, we see that Jonah questioned God's wisdom. He questioned God's wisdom. Prophets were God's messengers, God's spokesmen, under God's marching orders. But when God sent Jonah to preach in Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, Jonah didn't like it. And he was completely upfront about his reasons, telling God that he was about to make a big mistake. Listen to chapter 4 at the beginning.

Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the Lord. That's because God wasn't carrying out his threat to bring severe punishment in Nineveh. He was acting in mercy. He prayed to the Lord. Oh, Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That's why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you were gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

And in effect, he's saying to God, but you shouldn't be. Well, just imagine a mere mortal telling the Almighty, all-knowing God that he didn't know what he was doing. Remember in Romans chapter 9, it's verse 19, Paul exposes the utter stupidity of such an attitude. Here's what Paul says, Who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, Why did you make me like this? Or think of Lot, Abram's nephew, a man who knew perfectly well that God had forbidden his covenant people to settle down comfortably alongside immoral, idolatrous people. But hey, Sodom was a great place to do business, a great place to get rich and prosperous. So God's warnings didn't matter. I read, oh, quite a long time ago, about the first superintendent of the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, R.A. Torrey.

And he tells of his younger days when he was unwilling to accept the authority of the Bible as God's Word and to follow God's commands.

There was a day, says Torrey, there was a day when I believed as much of the Bible as was wise enough to agree with me. Like Jonah, he questioned God's wisdom and went astray. So there's an underlying reason for Jonah running away from God. He questioned God's wisdom. But there is one other thing that follows from that, and it is that Jonah rejected God's call. God's personal call on Jonah's life, Jonah rejected it. Now, as you read through the story, you see that Jonah didn't make a song and a dance about it. He didn't head up a popular campaign against God, the kind of thing we see happening more and more in our society today. No, he just ran away. Keeping up appearances as a good citizen, keeping up what nowadays are often called as national values. He acted very respectfully as far as the people around him were concerned. You remember that he paid his fare. In the middle of the storm, he went peacefully to sleep with an apparently easy conscience. And I find this quite remarkable, that he was quite open with the sailors, telling them frankly, and he had been from the beginning, that he was fleeing God. Think of another character in the Old Testament. We're not told his name.

[12 : 20] He was an old man, and we're told about him in 1 Kings chapter 14. And he was a prophet, charged with speaking out God's word without fear or favor, but somewhere along the line, he turned aside from God's way. And we find him living at ease in Bethel under the shadow of the most abominable idolatry. The golden calves that King Jeroboam I. There were two Jeroboam kings in Israel, Jeroboam I. And it took the action of a brave young prophet willing to face the wrath of King Jeroboam to jolt the old prophet out of his complacency, even though sadly, if you know the story, you know that he simply chose another path to run away from God.

But you know, it's all so utterly stupid. It's more ridiculous than a worm trying to topple an elephant.

It doesn't matter if you're shaking your fist at God, like Pharaoh and countless others, or perhaps acknowledging him outwardly while cutting him out of all your decision-making and your everyday lifestyle. The truth of the matter is what we've just been singing in Psalm 139.

Let me quote some of those verses again. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, take note, Jonah, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, surely the darkness will hide me and the light around me become like the night. Even the darkness will not be dark to you. The night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. You can run away from God, as that young man from Finland was trying to do. You can run away from God, but you can't hide from Him. So, we see in the story, first of all, Jonah running away from God. But as the story progresses, we see, secondly,

Jonah brought back to God. Jonah brought back to God. What happened? How come the turnabout that we saw when we read the opening verses of chapter 3? Verse 3 of chapter 3, Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord the second time and went to Nineveh. Well, undoubtedly, a lot had to happen in Jonah's life. But much more fundamental than that is what we read at the end of chapter 2. Jonah is in the belly of the great fish. He's crying out to God for mercy in prayer. And we read at the very end of his prayer, the last phrase in chapter 9 of verse 2, salvation comes from the Lord. And at the end of chapter 1, we read in verse 17, but the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. You see, behind the scenes, God was at work in Jonah's life. It was God who brought Jonah back. And that's always true for every single one of us. Whether we're thinking of salvation in terms of our initial conversion to

[17 : 17] Christ, if we're Christian believers, or salvation in its fullest sense, as referred to by Paul in Romans chapter 13, chapter 13, when he says, our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed, he's thinking of the full completion, consummation of our salvation. It's always God who is the author of salvation. And that truth is so well put in one of the answers of the shorter catechism.

The question is, what is effectual calling? A calling that brings results. And it says, effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby convincing us of our sin and misery and enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ to embrace Jesus Christ freely offered to us in the gospel. And without this, without this sovereign work of God, no spiritual fugitive ever turned back, no runaway is ever restored.

But having said that, and it's vital that we do, at the same time, we've got to recognize that Jonah wasn't just a passive spectator, nor was that young man in that Glasgow home listening to that gospel song. And there are two clear elements in what happened to Jonah during his traumatic man overboard experience. And the first is repentance. In chapter 2, verses 1 to 5, that's his prayer. Let's just listen to the opening verses of it. In my distress, I called to the Lord, and he answered me. From the depths of the grave, I called for help, and you listened to my cry. You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me. All your waves and breakers swept over me. I said, I've been banished from your sight, yet I will look again towards your holy temple. See, Jonah is confessing that running away from God is a dead end, leading to utter disaster. Now, it's striking, encouraging that he didn't, even in that, he didn't lose hope. Verse 4 says, I will look again towards your holy temple. But still, his case must have seemed hopeless. The only possible outcome being that he would be suffocated or crushed or drowned to death. No more service as a prophet. No more sight of friends and family. And the sailors, from what we read, they obviously thought the same as they saw him sink into the depths of the stormy sea.

And isn't that true in the lives of so many of the people in the Bible that are selected by God the Holy Spirit for us to consider? Who would ever have thought that Zacchaeus, rich and powerful, hated and despised, would ever confess his sins and cast himself on God's mercy? Who would have dreamt that the sinful woman person who would have dreamt that the sinful man who would have dreamt that the Savior would come in tears to the feet of the Savior? And nobody, nobody could ever have imagined that the murderous arch enemy of Jesus of Nazareth, Saul of Tarsus, would one day lie prostrate before Jesus as Savior and Messiah.

And let's bring it up to date to our own context here. Can you really picture the lifelong addict determined to claim to his darling habits, come what may, or the most aggressive new atheist, utterly contemptuous of all religion, or the person who just loves his worldly lusts and pleasures and has a means to indulge them? Can you imagine any of them praying the prayer of Jonah in chapter 2, at verse 2, in my distress, I called to the Lord? But friends, the heart of the gospel is that all these imaginings can become and do become reality when God works in men's and women's hearts.

[23 : 07] There's absolutely no situation where God cannot bring about repentance and saving faith. As an old chorus puts it, there's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin. There's a door that is open and you may open and you may go in. But Calvary's cross is where you begin when you come as a sinner to Jesus.

Now, undoubtedly, the way back can sometimes be very slow and very painful. It was for Jonah.

But what glory when it leads to true repentance. Tears, maybe, maybe plenty of them. But most certainly, as we read in verse 9, joy. But I, says Jonah, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. So, again, the message is to all of us, don't run away from God when God is at work in your life, whatever it takes.

Just listen to the repentance and recovery that are described in a poem that some of you may be familiar with. It's by Francis Thompson, 19th century poet, and the poem's entitled, Hound of Heaven. And he describes his own experience.

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 of my own mind. And in the midst of tears, I hid from him, I hid from those strong feet that followed, followed after. But with unhurrying chase and unperturbed pace, deliberate speed, majestic instancy, they beat, and a voice beat, more instant than the feet. Halts by me that footfall. Is my gloom after all, shade of his hand, outstretched caressingly? Ah, fondest, weakest, blindest, I am he whom thou seekest. Thou dravest love from thee who dravest me.

[25 : 53] So, I suggested that in Jonah being brought back to God, there had to be repentance, and there also had to be, following on the repentance, obedience.

That's what we read about at the beginning of chapter 3. See, repentance wasn't just a case of Jonah saying, get me out of this fix, and I'll promise anything.

I think we've heard that on many occasions, perhaps we've even been guilty of it. Pharaoh was upset by the plagues and promised Moses to let his people go, but he never did.

Saul, King Saul, admitted to David that he was completely in the wrong and promised to stop trying killing him, but he never did. And once again, let's bring the shorter catechism to our help.

Question 87, describing repentance unto life. Repentance that leads to life, to a new life with God. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God with true purpose of and endeavor after.

[27 : 16] New obedience. That's it. New obedience. A new kind of life. So, is that God's word for you or me today?

And then the last thing that we notice. Jonah running away from God. Jonah molded by God. The second thing was Jonah brought back to God after running away.

And now thirdly, we have Jonah molded by God. See, in the story, shouldn't we have reached the end of it by now? A young man's running away from God.

Well, I don't know how young Jonah was, but anyway. A young man running away from God. A young man is brought back to God in highly dramatic fashion. His life is straightened out and all goes well.

Unfortunately not. There are still flaws in Jonah. And God is to mold him into the kind of prophet he wants him to be.

[28 : 21] See, God's not looking just for the kind of obedience that's a flash in the pan. God's work of sanctification, making us more and more like Jesus, needs to go on in Jonah and in us, bringing him and us into ever closer alignment with the mind and character of Christ.

And I suggest to you there are still two problems. We haven't had time today to read the last chapter of the story, but in chapter 4 there are two problems still in Jonah that have to be sorted out.

First of all, there's half-hearted obedience. Half-hearted obedience. See, Jonah obeyed God. That was good. Jonah obeyed God immediately.

That was even better. But Jonah obeyed God reluctantly. His heart wasn't in it. Things didn't go the way that he thought they should.

So, he blamed God. Read the verses at the beginning of chapter 4. He blamed God. And in speaking this way, he forgot all God's goodness to him.

[29 : 51] Hadn't he been called to the high office of prophet? Hadn't he been honored in carrying out that office when his words to King Jeroboam came true?

Hadn't he been saved from a watery grave? Hadn't he been given a second chance? And given all of that, his heart should have been overflowing like David's in Psalm 119.

You know, there's a phrase there that David constantly repeats. For example, he says, I seek you with all my heart. I will obey your law with all my heart.

I have sought your face with all my heart. And Jude's doxology at the end of his little letter should have been Jonah's song of praise.

To him who is able to keep me from falling and to present me before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy.

[30 : 53] To the only God our Savior be glory and majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord before all ages, now and forevermore.

A half-hearted obedience isn't enough, is it? And the other thing that I'd suggest is that there was in Jonah an incomplete gospel.

Let me explain what I mean. An incomplete gospel. God's dealings with the people of Nineveh and with Jonah take us to the very heart of the gospel.

Gospel means good news. But as you know, we have to begin with the bad news. That there is no one righteous. No, not one.

That Jesus came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Now, of course, that was no problem for Jonah. Because he knew very well that the Assyrians were a bad lot.

[32 : 00] And they needed to be told of God's judgment on their sin. But that was only half of God's message. Jonah knew the other half.

As he admits plainly in chapter 4, verse 2, I know that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love.

He himself knew the wonder of God's saving love. And so did his Jewish people. But the Assyrians? Cruel oppressors of Israel?

Proud idolaters whose guiding principle was might is right? No good news for them. No way. But when our Savior returned to heaven, his last charge to you and me, his church, was crystal clear.

Go into all the world and preach the gospel. The good news to every creature. And we rightly call this the free offer of the gospel.

[33 : 11] No exclusions allowed. I've just been reading for the first time. I hadn't actually heard of the man before. The biography of the Reverend John Geddy.

A Scots-Canadian minister who was the very first Christian to preach the gospel in the Pacific Island, which was part of what used to be called the New Hebrides.

Now the Republic of Vanuatu. And before he went, there in Nova Scotia, in the Presbyterian church that he belonged to, he faced considerable opposition from some in his own church.

Well meant, no doubt. But intended to close the door to gospel work in such a remote part of the world.

You'll be eaten by cannibals, some actually said. Yes, there was cannibalism in the islands. There are diseases you can't cure and you'll probably die.

[34 : 23] Yes, there were. The church can't afford it. Yes, there were mostly rural poor. But Geddy and his wife knew that the free offer of the gospel did not exclude cannibals.

And they went. Through many hardships they persevered. And the church was born and eventually flourished. See, Jonah was comfortable preaching to people like himself.

And we find that much easier too, don't we? But that's an incomplete gospel. It's not the gospel of the crucified Christ with outstretched arms that embraced at one and the same time the Jewish criminal at his side and the foreign oppressor, the Roman centurion, making sure that he died in agony.

It's not the gospel of the just and merciful God who reached out to save his fugitive prophet, trying to hide away in his bunk at the bottom of the ship.

I began this sermon, and just as we closed, talking about this student from Finland. This must have been about perhaps 50 years ago it happened, who was running away from God.

[35 : 45] Was his decision to follow Christ that day, was it just a pressurized response to a very emotional situation?

Well, many years later, our friend John, he'd occasioned to visit Finland in a professional capacity.

So he sought out the visitor to his home all those many years before. And he succeeded in making contact with him. And he found him actively serving the Savior from whom he had fled, but from whom he'd been unable to hide.

So whatever your situation today, don't run away from God. Don't miss out on a blessing, a life of blessing and an eternity of joy.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

[36 : 57] O Lord our God, we seek your forgiveness for the many times that we have been reluctant to do your will.

Grant that now, whether it be a coming for the first time, with all our sin and all our failure, to the Christ of the cross and seeking new life through faith in him, or whether it be to put right or carry out what we've been reluctant to do before, be pleased to work in our hearts and lives.

And may we know to its full extent the joy of your salvation. In Jesus' name, amen.