

Keynotes from Pastor Tim's am Sermon on 2/05/2021

Series – Jonah, the runaway servant Part 1 – “Grace abounding”

Text: Jonah 1 verses 1-16

All scripture references are from the ESV.

Jonah 1:1-16 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” ³ 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 down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. ⁴ 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. ⁵ Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶ So the captain came and said to him, “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.” ⁷ And they said to one another, “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. ⁸ Then they said to him, “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹ And he said to them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰ Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. ¹¹ Then they said to him, “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.” ¹³ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard^[b] to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴ Therefore they called out to the LORD, “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.

Racism has recently dominated the news, but racism isn't new. It existed even when the Bible was written and therefore it will not surprise you to learn that God has

something to say about it. It is an issue that the book of Jonah deals with. Many people think that Jonah is just a story about a man who got swallowed by a big fish when he refused to obey God, but it is a book that speaks with relevance into our culture today. It deals with issues such as racism, national pride and unhealthy patriotism, violence and religious legalism.

Ultimately, it is about a God of grace who relentlessly pursues sinners from every nation in order to save them.

Jonah is God's man on the ground, hearing a message from God that he is to pass on to the people to whom God is sending him. A prophet with a message from God was not a surprise for the Jews. What was surprising was who the message was for. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, home to pagans who were enemies of Israel. The Assyrians oppressed Israel at many times in their history and were known to be utterly ruthless and unspeakably evil. God had had enough of their evil and so was sending Jonah, a Jewish prophet, to warn them that judgement was imminent. At this point, we might think that it sounds as if they deserved to be judged, but when God sends a message of warning it is **an act of mercy** to give people time to turn from their sin and so be spared the judgement.

These violent evil people were the object of God's missionary outreach, and Jonah was to be his missionary.

Jonah's response was to head 2,500 miles west to Tarshish (near Gibraltar), rather than 550 miles east to Nineveh! Working through the book of Jonah, we will see how God:

- Needs to expose Jonah's sinful heart, a heart full of national pride and hatred of other nations
- Needs to teach Jonah what grace is before Jonah can teach grace
- Is patient with his runaway prophet but how that patience comes at a cost to Jonah
- Providentially works through Jonah's sin to save pagan sailors and bring a pagan nation to repentance

Permeating this book is the story of God's grace to sinful people – a grace that is extended to us also.

Where our sin abounds, God's grace abounds all the more, but that grace may come wrapped in storms and rebukes.

Ultimately, sin is running away from God, as both the Old and New Testaments show us. The first commandment, from which the other nine proceed, says 'You shall have no other gods before me'. **Exodus 20:3**. Sin is loving anything (our family, job, material possessions etc) more than we love God. In **Romans 3:10-11** (see p4), Paul shows that every human being is born a sinner, failing to seek God.

The essence of sin is running away from the true and living God.

This is exactly what Jonah is doing (**Jonah 1:2** above). Jonah chooses to go in the opposite direction to where God has told him to go. In **v3**, his action is described as running from the presence of the Lord. Yet **Psalms 139:7-12** (see p4), which Jonah would have known, tells us that it is impossible to hide from the God who created the universe. God is omnipresent, that is present everywhere including Tarshish, Jerusalem, Nineveh, and on the sea in the storm. Jonah couldn't run from the God of creation, and he knew that (**v9** above).

Why was Jonah trying to run when he knew it was impossible? What does it mean to run from the presence of God?

Jonah was effectively saying he no longer wanted to serve God, to go where God wanted him to go or to speak out the words God gave him. In choosing to go to Tarshish, Jonah was fleeing from everything that reminded him of God – from the temple, the sacrifices and the priests of his Jewish home land.

The essence of sin is running away from the true and living God.

We are running away from God when we:

- Read in the Bible what God expects of us and don't do it or do the opposite
- Try to get away from everything that reminds us of him so we stop attending church, reading our Bible and praying, and cut ourselves off from other Christians

Sin is running away from God but **grace is God pursuing sinners**

Jonah was determined to get as far away from God as he could, and conveniently found a boat that would take him as far away geographically as he could get. God's servant is on the run but he can't run or hide from God.

No matter how we try to get away from the Christian influences in our life, **we can't get away from God.**

Jonah finds this out in **vv4-5** (above). God hurls a great wind on the sea, causing a storm so severe that even the sailors are terrified. If Jonah won't go to the great city (Nineveh) then he must go into a great storm. The lesson is

Sin always brings a storm into our lives

Not every storm in our lives is because of sin (as we see from the sailors who were caught up in a storm that was due to Jonah's sin), but sin could be the cause of tough times we are faced with. The storm might not come upon us instantly, and at first, we might think God isn't that bothered by our sin, but that is a misconception. The holy God, who created humanity in his image to be holy as he is holy, is deeply offended by our sin and won't allow us to continue in it, bringing storms into our lives.

Every act of disobedience to God comes with a storm attached.

- If we abuse our bodies through the sins of gluttony, drunkenness or drug abuse, our health will suffer
- If we treat people badly through the sin of gossip, or emotional, spiritual or physical abuse, we will lose their friendship
- If we hold bitterness against those who have hurt us, and don't forgive them, we will lose the joy of the Lord
- If we sin by sleeping around or looking at pornographic images and videos, the sexual intimacy that God intended to be enjoyed within marriage will be ruined.

We need to see God's hand in these consequences though they may just seem like the natural outcome. God is graciously warning us, showing us that the path we're taking leads to loss – eternal loss. If we don't wake up to the storm, God will send someone to rebuke us as he did with Jonah. Jonah was fast asleep, unaware of the

storm raging around him until the captain spoke (v6). Using the very words God had used to send Jonah to Nineveh (Arise, call out), the captain rebuked Jonah. God's mercy shows in this rebuke. Jonah's sin brought him into a storm that threatened his life and the lives of those around him, and it is a pagan sailor who tells him to turn back to his God! If you try to run from God, you can be sure that God will bring a storm into your life to wake you up, and if you won't wake up, then he will bring a rebuke from a most unlikely source. God is not being vindictive. The prophet Isaiah, speaking about God's affliction of Israel, said of God 'In all their affliction he too was afflicted' (Is 63:9) and goes on to say 'in his love and pity he redeemed them'.

The ultimate storm against sin that will come one day is the righteous, just judgement of God, an eternal storm from which there will be no shelter or rescue for those who refuse to repent.

In the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, God endured the storm of his own righteous justice. Jesus faced God's righteous and eternal wrath head on to redeem us from our life of running from God so that we could return to him.

God doesn't take delight in sending storms and rebukes into our lives. He does it to bring us back to himself in repentance and to make us useful in service to him.

Jonah couldn't preach grace to the Ninevites because he hadn't understood the grace of God himself. God had to teach him this by exposing Jonah's heart of sin - a heart that had no pity for the Ninevites or love for those who were loved by God. God allowed Jonah to fall into sin so that he could deal with him in mercy.

Jonah may be running from God but God has not cast Jonah off.

That is the abounding grace of God and it is available to you now.

If you are currently running from God because you don't like what he commands, but are reading this sermon, it is because God, in his grace:

- is pursuing you to bring you back to himself

- is giving you the opportunity to repent and find forgiveness and mercy

If you are currently in a storm, it may be because you are sinning against God.

Don't keep running from God.

Instead, go to him and ask if the current storm is because of your sin. If it is, don't add to your sin by continuing to run from him. Today could have been the day when the final trumpet sounded and the Lord Jesus Christ returned, a day when it would have been too late to repent, but we have been given another day and another opportunity.

Today is a day of grace and God in his grace calls you to come to him.

Jesus stood on this earth and called to himself people who feel the weight of their sin in the storms and rebukes.

When you stop running from him and come back to him, what you discover is grace in the welcoming arms of a God who has been pursuing you and who loves you enough to pay for your sin himself and to clothe you with his own perfection, changing your heart and giving you an eternal future.

If you are running from God, don't ignore the call of Christ today to return to him and discover his grace.

Romans 3:10-11 as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one;¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God.

Psalm 139:7-12

Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Or where shall I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there!

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning

and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,

and the light about me be night,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is bright as the day,

for darkness is as light with you.