

A Prophet on the Run

<i>Text</i>	Jonah 1:1-3
<i>Readings</i>	Acts 1:1-9, 2:38-41; 2 Kings 14:23-29
<i>Theme</i>	Jonah was disobedient to God's call to take a message of judgement to Nineveh.
<i>Purpose</i>	To emphasise the need of each believer and the church to obey the call of God and take his Word to the world.

Congregation,

Most of us have probably read one or two missionary biographies (if you haven't, you should!). These are the great stories of people like Hudson Taylor to China, David Livingstone to North Africa, William Carey to India, John Paton to the New Hebrides, Jim Elliot to the Auca Indians in Ecuador, and, closer to home, William Williams to the Maori.

These are inspiring accounts of the lives of men and women who made huge sacrifices to serve Jesus; who went to inhospitable places and faced extreme difficulties to bring the gospel to those who had not heard it; who were prepared to obey God's call at great personal cost, even to the point of giving up their lives for the sake of Christ. They were noble men and women who served the Lord eagerly and courageously; who obeyed the call to go out into all the world and make disciples of all nations.

Then there is Jonah. His example is not inspiring. He did not have a missionary heart. He did not obey God's command. He was not eager. The book of Jonah is a missionary story but it does not follow the usual pattern; it is not your standard story; Jonah is not your regular missionary hero.

Yet there are many lessons to learn here:

Lessons about God and his love for the nations; about our place in God's plan; about our need to be obedient to his command; and, most of all, about the centrality of Jesus Christ in all that God is doing in the world.

The Historical Situation

This story begins with the command of God to Jonah. In the Hebrew text the first word is, "And". In other words, the story has already begun. We are picking it up in the middle. Jonah is already a prophet and is already serving the Lord. He lived somewhere between 800 and 750 BC and came from a place called Gath Hopher, a town in Northern Israel to the west of the sea of Galilee. In 2 Kings 14 we read that he was the one who prophesied that Jeroboam II would extend the boundaries of Israel.

Jereboam was the King of Israel, the Northern kingdom. He had a long reign of 41 years from 793 to 753 BC. Even though he was an evil king the Lord was merciful to Israel and allowed the nation to prosper.

Jeroboam was able to extend the borders of Israel because Assyria had attacked Israel's northern neighbour Syria and had weakened them, allowing him to take advantage of that weakness.

At the same time Assyria was weakened by internal struggles and turmoil and it was not in a position to prevent Israel from expanding. So although Israel was a minor power, she was growing in strength at a time when the ruling world empire of Assyria was comparatively weak.

It was at this time that God commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh. The prophet was sent at a time when his ministry would have the greatest effect.

"Go to the great city of Nineveh", God says to Jonah. This was an ancient city with a long history having been founded by Nimrod, as described in the early chapters of Genesis (10:11-12).

It was often known as "The Great City". We know from chapter 4:11 that there were 120,000 people living there, and in chapter 3:3 we are told that a visit to the city "required three days". That could be a description of the greater city which was about 60 miles in circumference, or it could be a way of describing a medium sized city by the standards of the day. In 700 BC it was made the capital city of Assyrian Empire but in 612 BC, about 100 years later, it fell to the Babylonian armies and was destroyed.

One day "The word of the Lord came to Jonah Son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because **its wickedness has come up before me.**" This is similar to the language used to describe the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In chapter 3:8 the King of Nineveh acknowledges "their evil ways and their violence". And the prophet Nahum has a long list of the sins of the city including cruelty, bloodshed, lust, lies, prostitution, witchcraft and exploitation.

Jonah had to do what God commanded all the prophets to do: **"Preach against it"**. The word preach can also mean call, proclaim, or cry. The prophets of God received a direct word from the Lord and then they had to proclaim it to the people. This involved *forth*-telling as well as *fore*-telling; an explanation of God's word about the present situation as well as predictions about the future.

He was not at all keen on this assignment.

To be fair, this was *not the easiest* of missions. Nineveh was about 500 miles east of Jonah's home town, far across the desert sands. There was no Assyrian Air Flight and no Israeli Bullet Train to ease the journey.

What's more, Jonah, like most of the Jews, did not have a great love for the Gentiles. Nineveh was not high on his prayer list; in fact, it probably wasn't there at all! The Jews despised the Gentiles and he did not want to preach to *them*!

Moreover, he was a bringer of bad tidings: It was a message of gloom and doom – "Preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." These were going to be "hellfire and brimstone" sermons!

This was not a sought after assignment for a Hebrew prophet. It was not, to be sure, a mission impossible, but it certainly wasn't a plum job either!

He could have anticipated a *hostile* reaction! However, he anticipated the *opposite* reaction.

At the end of the story God decides to spare Nineveh because they repent. Jonah is upset! He is angry! He is mad! And he explains why; "O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." (4:2).

"You see", he says, "I told you so! I knew this would happen! I knew they would repent and that you would let them off the hook!" He wanted the city punished, obliterated, annihilated, destroyed!

So he decided he would not go. **"But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish"** (vs 3).

Tarshish was probably a Phoenician mining colony near Gibraltar in what is now south west Spain. In 1 Kings 10:22 we read that King Solomon had a fleet of "Ships of Tarshish at sea along with the ships of Hiram. Once every three years it returned carrying gold, silver and ivory, and apes and baboons." These were ships that sailed the Mediterranean, from Israel at one end to Tarshish at the other end.

Nineveh was 500 miles to the East; Tarshish was as far as you could go to the West. It was at the edge of the then known world. Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. So he went in the opposite direction, as far away as he could go!

When God came to his prophets most of them did what he told them to do.

Amos felt he couldn't do anything else: (3:8)

"The lion has roared – who will not fear? The sovereign Lord has spoken – who can but prophesy?"

Moses was very reluctant to go to Egypt and speak to the Pharaoh, and he had a list of excuses as long as your arm, but in the end he went.

And *most of the others* stepped up to the mark and did what they were told, even with extremely difficult assignments: Think of *Elijah* going to *Ahab*, *Jeremiah* in the years leading up to the fall of Jerusalem, and *Ezekiel* prophesying to God's people in exile.

But not our friend Jonah. No sir! He wasn't going to Nineveh. He "ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish." (3a). This was rebellion – blatant, planned and deliberate. Now Nineveh fades into the background for two chapters while the story concentrates on the shocking disobedience of the prophet.

Jonah wanted to run away from the Lord. The Hebrew reads that he fled **"from the face of the Lord"**. The NASB translates it; "from the presence of the Lord." The phrase has the sense of being "in the full view of the Lord".

That same phrase is repeated at the end of verse 3 for emphasis. The repetition of these words highlights how ridiculous this was. This was impossible. He could not get away from the Lord like this. The Lord is omnipresent – everywhere present; and he is omniscient – all-knowing.

Psalm 139 explains this with a series of questions and answers, like a catechism: “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” (verses 7-8).

Remember this in your own life. The Lord sees everything you do. Nothing, absolutely nothing, escapes his notice. He knows your every thought, every action, and every word. He sees through every hidden motive. He knows you through and through. Nothing is hidden from him.

So Jonah headed off to find a travel agent in the busy sea port of Joppa who could advise him on the best means to get to Tarshish. The many verbs in verse 3 give us an impression of the hustle and bustle of the prophet as he sought to get away from the Lord: “He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.”

No doubt he found confirmation for his plans in what happened in Joppa. He arrived there and it just so happened that there was a ship going to exactly the place he wanted to go to! So he was confirmed in his disobedience. He convinced himself this was the right thing to do.

We need to be careful that we don't fall into the same trap. Circumstances are a poor guide for finding God's will because they can be read in many different ways. Is this event an open door or a temptation? Is God sending you an opportunity or is he testing your resolve to be faithful to him? Matthew Henry comments that “The ready way is not always the right way”; and someone else has observed that “getting away with the crime is no proof that God approves of what you have done.”

Jonah may well have taken it this way. His disobedience certainly did not keep him awake at night. He went on board and fell asleep and even slept on soundly through a mighty storm!

But he could not get away from the presence of the Lord; he could not disappear from the face of God. The Lord did not give up on his runaway prophet. God had his eye on him. We see that in the rest of the story.

Jonah heard the call of God and he disobeyed. How you respond to the call of God on your life? Sure, we don't have God speaking to us directly like he did to Jonah and the other prophets. But we have the Word of the Lord in the Bible. We have this revelation of his will – also in this book here.

The book of Jonah tells us about God's loving concern for all people. It illustrates the vast scope of God's love. That love of the Lord is reflected in his command to “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew

28:18). We are to take the gospel to those around us telling them about the judgement that is going to come and about the good news about the Lord Jesus.

We are to do that as individuals and as the church. Sometimes we fail in that task because we are like the Jews; we get caught up with ourselves. We think we are superior to others.

We think there is something in us that makes us better than them. And we act as though the treasure of the kingdom was just for us – just for our enjoyment and pleasure.

We forget that Jesus has commanded us to be witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). We are to spread the news about him to all who are willing to hear.

Sadly, some are not willing and then we should not cast our pearls before pigs. But sometimes we stop too early, before we even know whether they are interested or not. Sometimes we think they won't listen anyway, so why bother.

But we have a command from God, just as Jonah did – to proclaim the good news about Jesus to all men and women, all through this city and nation and all over the world. This is our missionary task.

Jonah is not your typical missionary story, but it should still inspire you to be obedient to God's command, especially in that Great Commission to make disciples of all nations.

Let's seek to imitate the Lord Jesus who was obedient to the will of his Father in all things.

And let's imitate those missionary heroes who were prepared to sacrifice all they had for the sake of Christ and proclaiming His Name.

Amen.