

Jonah 1:1-4 - God's determination to save

Today we begin a series on the book of Jonah. If you have been in the church for any length of time you will no doubt be familiar with the story. Kids, if I asked you, "What happens to Jonah?" You would probably say he gets swallowed by a big fish. And your right he does. Everyone knows the story about the fish. But that is only a small part of the Jonah narrative. And so today we want to start at the beginning. We will see how God calls his prophet, but then the prophet runs, and yet God pursues him.

And as we work through the book, we want to see how the covenant God of Israel appoints a prophet to go to the pagans and tell them that they deserve God's wrath and judgment for their sins. And even though the prophet stubbornly resists God's commission, Yahweh the covenant God is determined to send word to the pagans and to have pity on them when they repent.

Our headings are three:

1. God commissions his messenger
2. God's messenger flees
3. God pursues his messenger

1) God commissions his messenger (vs 1-2)

The Word of the LORD came to Jonah:

This is very standard.

Hosea 1:1; I Kg. 16:1; Zeph. 1:1 (cf. also 2 Sam. 7:4; 1 Kg. 13:20; 21:17, 28; 2 Chr. 11:2; Jeremiah 1:1-2; Joel 1:1;).

This little phrase appears some 112x in the OT, with minor variations, as God gave his divine message to one of his messengers (21x in the prophecy of Jeremiah and 41x in Ezekiel; In Leviticus we are told some 60x that the LORD spoke to Moses).

But who is the LORD? He is Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, the creator of the world and the redeemer of Israel. The one who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, the one who forgives sins but also punishes the guilty. *This all-powerful God, in his sovereignty*, appoints messengers to bear his word to others.

And when God commissions he chooses, in his wisdom, to use specific people to be his mouthpiece. And here he chose Jonah the son of Amittai.

We are given more background for Jonah in II Kg. 14:25-28. We are told there that Jeroboam II is the king in Israel—remember that after Solomon Israel split into north and south. Jeroboam II was the king in the north from 781-746 BC (mid-late 8th C), and he did evil in God's eyes. But II Kg. 14:25 tells us that he expanded the borders of Israel further north than northern king before him. And this was "according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, *which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.*"

Jonah's name literally means "dove." And Amittai means "faithful." Gath-hepher was in the central and northern region of Israel. Jonah was also a contemporary of Hosea and Amos. So, we are set somewhere within the early to mid 8th C. BC, while God is expanding the borders of Israel.

And by the way, there is no clear statement of this, but the most likely author for the book is Jonah himself, writing sometime after his experience.

God commissions his messenger to go to a specific audience.

Vs. 2. Up! Go to Nineveh, that great city.

The first verb ("arise") is commonly used in the OT to denote immediacy. (There are instances where you could literally translate it "Up! Sit down.") It carries the notion of *prompt action*.

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, located along the Tigris river deep within the heart of the Assyrian empire (right outside modern Mosul). Assyria, which at this time, was already rising up on the world stage as the next great superpower.

This isn't just *go stand in safety at the bottom of the mountain and call towards the mouth of the lions cave; this is go right into the lion's cave*. This isn't just, speak against Nineveh from the comfort of your home country of Israel; this is, *Jonah, promptly walk right into the heart of enemy territory!*

Remember that to an Israelite these Assyrians are pagans. They are unclean. They would soon enough come to be known as the epitome of evil and violence. They would develop into a merciless war machine which would finally crush Israel in 722.

Jonah prophesied the expansion of Israel's northern borders; and pagan Assyria to the north is the biggest looming threat on the horizon. And these are the people Jonah must go to.

Why does God commission Jonah?

Cry out against *her*; because God has seen *their* evil/wickedness.

Here this word captures the idea of complete moral corruption before God. Jonah ch. 3 makes this evident. The Ninevites are described with common OT pictures of having evil paths and violent hands. The wickedness of the Ninevites has come before YHWH.

Nineveh is spoken of in a personified way. Cry out against her: God's judgment is coming. Then the text adds that *their sins* have come before God. There is a plurality here: *their sins*. Warn her of judgment (the city) because they (the people) have sinned. People are guilty before God. God neither ignores sins nor do the super powers of this world intimidate him. But as you read through the OT prophets (and the gospels for that matter) you can see that after warning there is almost always a call to repent, and also an offer of peace. It's as if the prophet holds out both hands, one with God's judgment, the other with grace.

This text reminds us that God is sovereign. And his sovereign rule sin gets noticed. This is the case in Genesis 6:5 where God sees the wickedness of the earth, that every intention of the thoughts of the hearts of mankind is inclined towards evil, *continually*. And God judges the world with the flood. In Genesis 18 the wickedness of Sodom is very great and the LORD looks down towards Sodom, he goes down to see their sin. God reigned brimstone and fire down upon Sodom and Gomorrah and obliterated them off the map *because of their wickedness*. Babylon, the representation of all things evil, is portrayed in Revelation 18 as having her sins heaped up as high as heaven. And God judges her with a very great judgment.

Take warning, if you are not yet a child of Christ, and if you have not confessed your sins to God, don't ever be deceived into thinking that God won't notice your sins. God knows everything evil thing that we say and think. *Our sin does not escape God's knowledge, and by the way neither does the wickedness of Toronto*. Ecclesiastes 12:14 says that God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

But remember, God's word comes to real people and is for real people. It is never abstract or arbitrary. God names his messenger and the one who must hear his message. Nineveh was a pagan nation. Israel, despite their frequent rebellion, was God's chosen and pure covenant bride. It would be like if we portrayed Israel as every good and beautiful princess in the Disney archives: (Snow White, Sleeping beauty, and so on); but the Assyrians as the evil witch queen: (Maleficent, Ursula, the Wicked Queen). God says to Jonah, "I want you to be my messenger to her." God does not delight to leave people in their sin. He delights to warn them of the judgment so that they can turn to him.

Similarly, Christ commissioned his New Testament church in Matt. 28 and said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus didn't say, "go to the people you're comfortable with." He said make disciples of all nations. Do you see people as Christ saw them? As people scattered without a shepherd, as lost sinners under judgment, but needing grace? Jesus died even for the worst of sinners, even wicked Nineveh, for anyone who will repent and believe.

2) God's messenger flees (vs 3)

God commissioned his servant to go. And verse 3 says that Jonah arose (same word as verse 2). Ah great, that's exactly what God just said. But then we have a purpose clause: Jonah's purpose is to *promptly* flee in the exact opposite direction of Nineveh! Kids, we live close to one of the busiest airports in North America. Imagine God said to one of us, "Up! Go preach the gospel to Russia, or Iraq." You promptly pack your bag, go to the airport, and board a flight headed for...Hawaii!

Jonah arose, in order to flee to Tarshish, from before Yahweh.

God commissions Jonah to go to the heart of pagan territory and warn them of judgment because of their sins. And Jonah's immediate response is to flee from God's call. But where oh Jonah will you go from the presence of the LORD? To the end of the world, and hopefully away from God's presence.

The most likely location for Tarshish is on the far West end of the Mediterranean Sea, way out by Spain. The most Eastern end of the Sea is at Palestine. You must understand, Tarshish is basically the last stop for the geography lesson. For a Jew in the Ancient world this is the edge of the map! Isaiah 66 referred it as the place which had not yet seen God's glory. And Jonah has just conveniently found a ship which will be bound soon for Tarshish.

The determination and the immediacy of Jonah's desire to disregard God's commission is captured by the rapid succession of verbs: Jonah *goes down* to Joppa, *finds* a ship, *pays* his way, and *goes down* into the ship. Jonah doesn't miss God's commission out of ignorance; he deliberately disregards the clear call. Jonah has paid the fair and has gone down into the ship in order to accompany the sailors to Tarshish. It's almost as if he has become one of them.

And by the way, this is why it's important to study doctrines like God's sovereignty and to have an understanding of its practical implications. When Jonah gets to Joppa he just conveniently finds a ship headed in the direction he wants to go. This must be God's will. The ship is here, God must be ok it. No, Jonah was humanly responsible and should still have turned away and obeyed God's revealed will.

Jonah flees down to Joppa, where he finds a ship bound for Tarshish.

Twice in verse 3 the text mentions that Jonah went down. And twice it mentions that Jonah is going from the presence of Yahweh.

In the mind of a Hebrew God is, primarily, in heaven. Heaven is up. Where does Jonah go? He goes down to Joppa. And down into

the ship. Now, Israel is mountainous and Jonah's hometown of Gath-hepher would be inland, above sea level. So naturally for him to go to the port city he travels down. And it's certainly natural to go down into a ship. But the author is giving us a sense of Jonah's spiritual journey as much as his physical. When Jonah will be cast into the Sea he mouths a Psalm in which he compares his experience as going down into to death itself. Here in chapter 1, Jonah's destination is Tarshish. His goal: to go away from the presence of Yahweh. His disobedience is effectively distancing him from God.

We must ask ourselves the very simple question. When God commands someone to do something, what happens when they disobey? Answer: there is a growing *separation* between God and mankind. This is of course exactly what happened in the garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve wilfully rejected God's commands they were subsequently exiled from God's presence and lost the intimate communion they once experienced. Cain is exiled further away when he kills his brother. Israel is exiled from the promised land when they disobey God.

Whether you are a Christian or an unbeliever, if you are living in sin, if you are disregarding God's commands, it will only create a greater separation between you and the Holy God. And you don't just try to escape God so you can sin, but the sin that has already taken root makes you run and hide from God. Think of Adam and Eve in the garden who tried to hide from God after sin had already taken root in their heart.

Are you living in sin? Turn from it. Repent. Sin will only ostracize you from God.

Christ died to redeem sinners, even the filthiest and worst of sinners. Jonah prophesied to Jeroboam II that the boundaries of Israel would be expanded. But Jonah himself was not willing to cross into the boundaries of sinful Nineveh. Think about Christ's ministry. He ate and drank, spoke with and touched tax collectors, harlots, pharisees, gentile pagans, lepers. A lot of these people you probably wouldn't want to invite to grandma's tea party. How often do we evade Christ's commission to take the gospel to those around us? Or even to ensure that the gospel frontier is expanding to the corners of the globe?

3) God pursues his messenger (vs 4)

It's fair to assume that verses 1-2 are somewhere in the North of Israel. In verse 3 Jonah goes to the Western port city of Joppa. And the verse ends with Jonah is safely stowed away in the hull of a ship, sailing blissfully away to the west, away from Nineveh in the East, away from God's commission, sailing off into the sunset. His course is set for Honolulu as it were, the edge of the map, away from the presence of YHWH. Now in verse 4 we are at open sea. The last word in verse 3 was the name of Yahweh; verse 4 begins with the same, "But Yahweh hurled a great wind upon the sea!"

God uses means:

God doesn't appear to Jonah in a vision and say, "Hey, you rebellious prophet, get up, jump over board, and start swimming back!" He doesn't stand angrily on shore waving his fist, "Hey, get back here!" YHWH is the sovereign LORD who made the heavens and the dry land. He controls the winds and the sea. And he hurls down a great wind upon the sea, after his fleeing prophet. You can imagine the waves beginning to billow higher and higher. The storm will soon develop into a mighty tempest that will threaten the integrity of the ship and the very lives of everyone on board. God is in control of land and sea—he is able to use means to accomplish his purposes. And he quite literally storms after his delinquent messenger.

But why does God send this great wind? Is it Judgment? Is it Wrath? There certainly is an element of judgment and discipline. To sin and to disobey God, in Scripture, is a life-threatening endeavour.

But as we continue through Jonah, we see that God sends the storm as an act of mercy, because he is determined to save. Jonah was unwilling to warn Nineveh of God's judgment. Think about how selfish and unloving that is. Nineveh will be destroyed and the people will go to hell if Jonah doesn't warn them. And even though he is an Israelite of God, who experienced God's salvation and blessing, he is unwilling to extend the same to Nineveh. As if Jonah was better, or deserved God's grace more than others. But God was determined to show that his grace can be freely offered to all peoples.

Application:

1. Do you disregard God's command to go and make disciples of all nations?

God doesn't call you to go to Nineveh. And you might not get a storm hurled at you. But Christ has commissioned his people to go make disciples of all nations. Maybe you have neighbors, they're not really the most pleasant of people, not your friend type. Do you know they need to hear the gospel? You're at work on Monday or Tuesday and someone asks you, "How was your weekend?" "Oh, it was good (period). How was yours?" "Oh, it was great, I was at the bar Friday night and last night I went with a couple buddies to the strip club." "Oh, nice (period)" Nice? That's not nice. If this person doesn't know Jesus they're under God's judgment just like Nineveh! We do need wisdom as to when and how to speak of Christ. You need to be careful not to rob time from your boss. When the McDonalds employee says, "Here's your sandwich;" "Do you have the bread of life?" might be a little forced. Start by praying and asking God to open doors for you to share the gospel. And then look for him to present opportunities and you may be surprised at what occasions arise: at the doctor's office, or school, or the mechanic, or the teller at the grocery store you see every week, or at work, or soccer, ladies social club or music club, your friends on the basketball court. Some of us will inevitably rub shoulders with more people, and some of us will have more time to talk than others, and that's fine. But may we never forget the compassion of Christ, and

that he delights to use his people to build his kingdom.

Jesus died to save wretched sinners like you and I. But we often trivialize the gospel simply by thinking that we are saved, all is well with the world, now we can remain within our own little Christian boundaries. One of the greatest crises in the Reformed North American churches is that we can often be very inward focused. But a church that is inward focused will only implode. Jonah could not escape from before the presence of Yahweh. May God help us to desire the salvation of the Gentiles. Often we are just fearful. That's pretty normal. Pray for boldness like the believers did in the early church. Remember also the gospel frontier. If you can't go be a missionary, remember to support those who are with your blessings, gifts, and prayers.

2. Secondly, God is determined to save sinners.

And when God's people disregard his commission, he disciplines them. For some it is the constant prodding of the Spirit through the means of grace. For others it may be drastic events like a car crash, or the passing of a loved one. God could use persecution to wake up his church. But God uses means to call and challenge his people to be faithful ambassadors for Christ.

Jonah resented Nineveh. And remember Peter in Acts 10. God shows him a vision with all sorts of clean and unclean animals and God tells him to eat. Peter says, "No way, I've never touched anything unclean." But God was showing him, "No Peter, you think the gentiles are unclean, but I want you to bring the gospel to them." Are there people outside the church that you think are too vile for God to save? God's mercy is able to cover all the sins of the leper, the prostitute, the junky, the homo-sexual, the drunk. God's grace is sufficient, and he is determined to save.

3. Lastly, consider Christ, the most faithful messenger.

God could have disregarded Nineveh. But God in his wisdom chose Jonah the son of Amittai to be a messenger to them. And it is striking to note that the name Jonah literally means "dove." The dove often symbolizes peace of the deepest kind. Jonah's name should suggest that amidst the message of wrath, there would also be terms of peace, should Nineveh repent. Jonah was also the son of Amittai. Amittai means "faithfulness." But in Jonah 1 the messenger will not extend peace. He will not be faithful to God's call.

Now consider Jesus Christ, the one who was entirely faithful, and who alone can offer true terms of peace through the blood of his cross!

Jesus in John 10:14-18 says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ...I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. ***This charge I have received from my Father.***" Jesus had the power to lay down his life, and to take it up again. Why did he lay down his life? Because the Father commissioned him to do so. And he did so willingly, in order to save his sheep.

And on that dark night in the garden of Gethsemane, John 18 tells us of how a rabble came against Christ with clubs and swords. Jesus says to them, "Who are you looking for?" They answer, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus simply responds, "That's me," and the wicked mob shrink back and fall to the ground.

And when Peter cuts off the ear of one of these guys Matthew tells us that Jesus rebukes him and says, "Don't you think I could ask my Father and he would promptly send 12 legions of angels?" (Roman legion is 6000 strong=tens of thousands!)

What do we see but that Jesus was clearly in control and yet he willingly handed himself over to his enemies. He willingly went to the cross. Jesus was perfectly faithful, to that point even when in John 19 he cries out "It is finished," and Luke adds that he cried out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!"

Jesus' task was infinitely greater than Jonah's, yet he did not shrink from it. He was determined to die, **because the Father desired to have mercy on sinners.** It was only through Christ's absolute faithfulness, to the point even of dying on a shameful cross, that your sins can be taken away, and that the risen Christ can offer to you terms of perfect peace!

Then precisely in light of Christ's faithfulness, and out of thankfulness to him, you and I can go and make disciples of all nations.

Christ gave up the glories of heaven to be your messenger. He left his royal garments, the host of heaven, and his father's nearness, and he took on our form, wore a crown of thorns and died a shameful death on a cross, to save you! What's standing in your way from sharing the gospel with the pagans? Remember also that you on your own are not called to save the whole world. **You have brothers and sisters to work alongside you, (in order)** to pray for your unsaved neighbors, co-workers, friends, family. **And Christ himself promises to be with us until his return.**

And if Christ is not your savior, realize that God does see your sins. And that's precisely why he has appointed means by which your sin can be confronted, and peace can be extended to you. God has provided a way for you to be saved, it's through the blood of Jesus Christ, and he has provided means through which you can hear the gospel. Do not run from him. Repent and believe in Jesus and you will find a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness!