

ON THE RUN

JONAH 1:1-16

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Recently, I ran across an interesting statement. See if you agree... “There are two great moments in a person’s life: **the moment you were born, and the moment you learn why you were born.**”

On the one hand, the birth of a child is a tremendous thrill. A new life comes into the world - there’s new potential among us. But the one event that rivals a birthday is the day a person discovers God’s will.

This is also a landmark - a potentially world-changing event. When *God calls, and you sense Him say, “this is what you’re here to do”* - the *creature* is aligned with His *Creator*. The pieces of our lives come together.

In the wake of this revelation, circumstances that seemed random now make sense. Our lives take on an amazing clarity when we realize **why** we were born.

But as glorious as that day may be... the saddest day is when a man runs from God’s call. He knows God’s will, but chooses to disobey, *and runs the other way.*

Disobedience upsets the universe. The betrayal of God shocks nature. The *winds howl* and *storms brew* when God’s children choose to disobey their Creator.

It’s interesting, in this book the *storm* obeys God, the *fish* obeys God, *Nineveh* obeys God, the *wind* obeys God, the *worm* obeys God... the only thing in nature that doesn’t obey God is the supposed *man of God.*

This is what made the day Jonah bought his ticket to Tarshish such a gloomy day. It's possible *the sun was shining - the sky was clear - the sea was calm*, but from heaven's perspective it was a dark and dreary day. God was not pleased with one of his children.

That one-way ticket to a far-away port, meant there was a prophet was on the run. And God was in hot pursuit to catch him - arrest him - and redirect him.

Last week we read the first three verses of the book of Jonah. Let's read them again, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me."

Understand, God notices man's evil. God knows all. He sees all. He takes notice of every sin done or said.

God never gets use to our evil even though He's seen it all before, and He tires of man's failure to learn from his mistakes... nevertheless God loves us.

God grieves over everyone who believes that his sinful ways will prosper - that the *wicked way* is the *better way*... The wickedness of the Ninevites rose to God in the updraft of His compassion and mercy.

And God chose a man - a prophet. Jonah was good and godly - he'd proven in the past to be a faithful servant. He was called to rescue an entire metropolis.

The city of Nineveh had a population in excess of a million people. And the thought of a just one of the Ninevites dying in sin was more than God could bear.

That's why He picks a man from His people, the Jews - the nation that knew His name and nature, and for centuries benefited from His grace and mercy.

He calls a Jewish prophet named Jonah to leave his borders and preach to these wicked Assyrians. Jonah is called on a mission for God - a mission of mercy.

But Jonah refuses to go. He disobeys. He tells God, "*thanks but no thanks.*" Verse 3, "**But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.**"

Nineveh was 500 miles east. Tarshish was 2500 miles west. Jonah heads in the opposite direction from where God calls him. *Jonah tries to run from God.*

As we discussed last week, Jonah hated Ninevites.

Their wickedness had not only come up to heaven. It had come over to Gath Hopher - Jonah's hometown.

Jonah knew firsthand of their wickedness, cruelty, and bloodthirstiness. Jonah believed the world would be a better place if Nineveh was wiped off the map.

He wasn't about to risk it... *What if he warned Nineveh, and they repented, and God forgave them.* In Jonah's mind **he** was judge and jury of the universe.

And he had condemned Nineveh to hell. He wasn't about to let God overturn his verdict. He'd rather run to the ends of the earth than to see one Ninevite saved.

On December 4, 1986 Gary Tindle was tried for robbery in the California courtroom of Judge Armando Rodriguez. In the midst of the trial, Tindle asked to use the restroom. He was escorted by two police officers who stood watch outside the door of the lavatory.

But inside the restroom Tindle shimmied up some plumbing and scurried threw the crawlspace. He was trying to escape. He made it 30 feet before one of the panels broke underneath him and he fell to the floor.

And surprise, surprise... Guess where Gary Tindle ended up? Back in the courtroom of Judge Rodriguez!

Gary Tindle and Jonah have a lot in common. Both tried to run from the authorities and came crashing down at the Judges' feet, right back where they started. **The story of Jonah proves you can't outrun God.**

Jonah was an angry man. *He hated the Assyrians and he was angry at God for not hating them too...*

Last week I said, "**Anger is one letter short of danger.**" And it's true. In Jonah's anger he tried to run from God, and ended up running into serious trouble.

Not only does he make his own life hard - Jonah also causes severe problems for the other people in his life.

The story of Jonah teaches us that running from God is not only futile, it's hazardous to your health. It can put you and the people you love in harm's way.

So, "**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 from the presence of the LORD.**" Note the

phrases, “*down to Joppa*” and “*down into (the ship).*” Look ahead to verse 5, “*Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship.*” Verse 15 he went *down* into the sea. Verse 17 *down* into a fish.

Once Jonah made up his mind to run from God his life was established on a **downward trajectory**.

From the moment Jonah chose to disobey his every move was *down, down, down*. This is what happens to a person who rejects God’s will. Life goes downward.

I’m sure Jonah thought his life was on the upswing!

He was about to put 3000 miles between him and where he **didn’t** want to be. He came to Joppa without a reservation... yet low and behold, he found a ship, and had the fare... *what a coincidence!* He thought his plan was working swimmingly, flawlessly.

Jonah had no idea he was going down. The Almighty would make sure of it! We all need to realize, there is no long term upside when we disobey God. You head down - not up. Jonah thought his plan was *working swimmingly*, but in reality he was about to take a *swim*.

Verse 4 “**But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea...**” One commentator writes, “**There is no place where you can hide from God. He has at His disposal all the forces of the universe, and summons them to do His bidding as He wills.**” The Hebrew word translated “*sent*” - “*the Lord sent out a great wind*” - means “**to hurl**” - like you would hurl a spear or a javelin.

Implied is that there was a target. The Lord aimed this great wind straight at an on-the-run Jonah.

“And there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up. Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god...”

The Bible doesn't say it, but based on the sailor's reaction, this *great wind* seems to be a supernatural phenomenon. It was as if the wind held a grudge and was attacking the specific ship that carried Jonah.

Perhaps it was a fairly localized storm - one that spanned only a few miles. It pitched and rocked only the get-a-way ship. The shaking seemed deliberate.

It was as if God was shouting at this ship, “Alright, Jonah come out with your hands up!”

This storm scared the sailors. And remember these were not just weekend boaters, but experienced seaman. These guys were old salts who'd weathered many a storm before – but *there was something different about this storm*. This was the perfect storm.

They sensed something unique - that forces not of this earth were at play in this storm. That's why in their panic and fear they cried out to their pagan gods.

A divine hand had gripped their ship, and was shaking it... like a child trying to pry coins from a piggy bank, God wanted what (*or who*) was inside the boat.

That's why they decided to give the sea their payload. We're told the crew “*threw the cargo that was in the ship into the*

sea, to lighten the load.” A lighter ship sat higher in the water, out of the churning waves.

Understand this was a costly voyage for this captain and his crew. We're not told the voyage's ultimate outcome, but I'm sure it eventually reached Tarshish - and there were merchants expecting their freight.

This captain and crew had a lot of explaining to do.

They were docked pay for late arrival and lost cargo. This voyage was a business loss on their 1040 form.

And I would imagine that embarrassed Jonah.

He never thought his disobedience would cost someone else their livelihood - even threaten their life.

Jonah assumed the only person his disobedience would hurt was Jonah - *but that's never the case*. Our disobedience not only hurts us, but the folks around us.

It reminds me of the pastor who was an avid golfer, but he couldn't control his temper - so rather than be a poor witness he decided to give up golf for awhile.

After a couple of years he felt he'd made progress on his besetting sin. He was ready to try it again. But after just 12 holes he realized he had miscalculated...

The 13th hole was a par-5 dogleg around a lake. Five balls and 12 strokes later the pastor was steaming. He was angry. He ripped the bag of clubs off the cart and threw them into the lake. That's when he shouted to his partner, “Finish without me!” The failed and frustrated pastor started walking back to the clubhouse.

Suddenly, the cart pulled up alongside the pastor.

His partner told him, “I can’t.” “*You can’t what?*” “I can’t finish.” “*Why?*” “You threw **my** clubs into the lake!”

And the moral of the story is clear - when you get angry and sin you **will** affect the people around you...

Just ask the sailors on Jonah’s boat!

When we buck God’s will we think the only person we’re hurting is ourselves. But disobey God and *your spouse will suffer, your kids will suffer, your friends and co-workers will suffer, even your neighbors will suffer.*

Your disobedience is a rock thrown into a pond. It creates ripples that move over the water in an ever-expanding circles. You have no idea the extent your sin may reach. Because you refuse to follow God’s will you may rob future generations of God’s blessing. You can’t overestimate the ramifications of disobedience.

Trust me, **sin complicates** - your sin complicates life for yourself and for other people. Jonah’s sin certainly complicated this voyage for the captain and his crew.

Verse 5 “**But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep.**”

The expression “*fast asleep*” is translated in other places as “*deep sleep.*” Jonah may’ve been a heavy sleeper, *but not this heavy.* The ship he’s on is splitting apart at the seams, while Jonah sleeps like a baby.

Before we go further let me make an observation. Jonah is a state of denial. He's made assumptions that have created in him a false sense of security.

First, every thing had gone so easy. Circumstances had fallen into place. Jonah thought, *"Surely, God wasn't upset. None of this could've happened if he wasn't doing the right thing. He and God were cool."*

Remember Jonah didn't have a reservation... a boat just happened to be available... And Tarshish was not a typical destination. Passage from Joppa to Tarshish was like a nonstop flight from Atlanta to Juneau - very rare... And when he purchased his ticket the exact amount just happened to fall out of his pocket...

Jonah was so convinced he was in the right, he boarded the ship - and found his cabin - and took a long nap. *Jonah slept the sleep of an innocent man.*

Here's an important truth - *no amount of favorable circumstances - or amazing coincidences - can justify an act of disobedience to the revealed will of God.*

I don't care if you have peace in your heart - a peace so strong you can sleep through a storm. If you sail in opposition to God's will you're headed for trouble.

I've heard people say stuff like, *"Pastor, you'll never believe what happened. I was on my knees praying for a new job - when a friend I hadn't heard from in years called. He offered me the perfect position. I'll have to work on Sundays and miss church, but I have such a peace about it."* I hear this kind of rationale all the time.

Has it ever dawned on you that God is not the only person who can manipulate circumstances? Satan can also engineer what appears to be a coincidence.

“But Pastor, you’ll never believe how we met. It was such a miracle. I was praying for a sign from God that it was okay to divorce my spouse, and we just happened to bump into each other - at church of all places... I have such a peace about our relationship... I’m so happy... it just has to be God’s will.”

Well, that’s exactly what Jonah concluded until God hurled the great wind.

It is amazing to me how some people are quick to exalt *an experience* or *a feeling* above the authority of God’s Word. If the Bible says it’s a sin it doesn’t matter if 10,000 circumstances come together to make it happened... *it’s still a sin!* God authored the Bible - and He will never contradict what He has already said.

God had spoken clearly for Jonah to go to Nineveh. Any other destination was an act of disobedience.

We should always remember, **“Opportunity doesn’t equal permission.”** Just because you *can...* doesn’t mean you *should*. God is about to shock a disobedient Jonah out of his false sense of security.

“So the captain came to him, and said to him, “What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God; perhaps your God will consider us, so that we may not perish.” What irony! An idol-worshipping captain wakes up the prophet of the true God, and encourages him to pray. It should be Jonah exhorting the sailors to pray.

But when you're on the run from God - your spiritual *sense* grows *dense*. The pagan captain thinks to pray before Jonah. In fact, though the prophet Jonah is asked to pray, there's no record he ever does.

By this point he knows there's no use. Without him presenting to God a repentant heart Jonah would just be bouncing his prayers off the roof of his cabin.

“And they said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this trouble has come upon us.” They threw the freight overboard, and since God didn't want the cargo - He must be after a passenger. They roll the dice to detect the fugitive.

Today, when a Christian wants to discern God's will we pray and listen for the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit. But in OT times, before the Spirit's indwelling, God's will was often discerned by casting lots.

You drew from a hat - the white ball meant “yes,” and the black ball meant “no.” It was that sort of operation.

In fact, Proverbs 16:33 reads, **“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”** The writer is saying there's no such thing as luck or chance or happenstance. Every roll of the dice - every bounce of the football - is controlled by God's providence.

“So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.” Suddenly, his cover was busted. The rebel is exposed.

“Then they said to him, “Please tell us! For whose cause is this trouble upon us? What is your occupation? And where do

you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

Evidently, though the ship had been docked in Joppa (*in Israel*), it had a diverse crew. Its sailors were from all over the world. They all served foreign gods.

“And (Jonah) said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” Jonah isn't timid. He confesses He's a Hebrew, and He serves the Hebrew God - the God of all the earth - “*who made the sea and the dry land.*”

Realize, the idolatrous nations around Israel served local deities. Pagan gods were either *the gods of the lowland*, or *gods of the hills*, or *gods of the mountains*, or *gods of the sea*, or *gods of the deep*.

The pagan gods had boundaries. A person could travel, or climb, or sail *into and out of* their jurisdiction.

The false gods of the pagan world were limited. They weren't omnipotent. They could ply their powers only within their own territory. In fact, these sailors were probably hoping to sail beyond the borders of whatever god was manipulating this storm, and into safer waters.

But Israel served the one, true God - the Creator of heaven and earth. Yahweh of the Hebrews was no localized sovereign. He was Lord of both sea and land.

All of nature is at Yahweh's beck and call.

His reach blankets the whole universe.

Sadly, people on the run from God tend to adopt the sailor's theology. They treat God like He's a local deity.

He's the *Lord of Sundays*, but not the *Lord of Saturday night*. He governs what happens *at church*, but not *at work*. He cares about *religious stuff*, but *not other stuff* like sex, money, and entertainment - all of that is up to the individual. *Secular stuff* is our domain.

And this leaves a person room to run...

He thinks, *"If I stay out of church, God will leave me alone. I'll skip town on Sundays - God won't find me. I'll just show up at church for weddings, funerals, Easter and Christmas - I'll lay low the rest of the time."*

Don't be foolish. All of life is God's domain. Nothing lies beyond His jurisdiction... Once a couple came to me for marriage counseling. After our session the wife asked me, *"Pastor Sandy, please don't tell God about our problems."* *Sorry, but God already had the info.*

Like Jonah, you and I serve *"the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*

The elite combat unit of the Navy gets its name "**Navy Seals**" from the elements in which they operate.

The word "**Seals**" is an acronym for *sea, air, and land*. But this makes **God the ultimate Seal**. He rules over the sea, and the air, and every inch of dry land.

God's GPS tracks you everyday of the week, anywhere in the world. And at the time of this on-deck conversation, God was locked in on the prophet Jonah.

The sailors knew the scope of the Hebrew God. *Look at their reaction...* “Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, “Why have you done this?”

Now the sailors know what they’re up against. There’s no escaping the hand and will of Yahweh.

Jonah might’ve thought he could outrun God, but these savvy sailors know better. To fight this storm was to fight the will of the Sovereign God - *a losing battle*.

There’s a book titled, “Arms too short to box with God.” Spar with God and you’ll get K-O’d. Even the pagan sailors knew God should be obeyed, not fought.

It reminds me of pro golfer, Tommy Bolt. Tommy was known for his *sweet swing* and *terrible temper*.

Once, after lipping the cup on six straight putts, Bolt threw his club, shook his fist to heaven, and shouted at God, “Why don't you come out and fight like a man!”

Jonah fought against God’s will, *but at least the sailors knew better*. Nobody fights with God and wins!

Evidently, Jonah finally spilled the beans. He told them his story. “For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.”

Verse 11, “Then (the sailors) said to him, “What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?” - for the sea was growing more tempestuous.” They now know they’re dealing with Jonah’s God. *He’ll know...*

And he said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me.”

It's amazing, Jonah is willing to sacrifice his life to save these Gentile sailors, but he's unwilling to travel to Nineveh and preach to the Assyrians. Like all prejudice, Jonah's dislike for Assyrians was irrational.

“Nevertheless the men rowed hard...” There must've been some sailor's code of ethics - *a law of the sea* - that said you never throw a passenger overboard.

Again, it's ironic, but these pagan sailors show more compassion to the one man, Jonah - than Jonah was willing to show the million-plus population of Nineveh.

“The men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them.” The harder the sailors row the stronger the storm becomes. God is angling to catch a Jonah. He's not letting up on his rebel servant.

“Therefore they cried out to the LORD and said, “We pray, O LORD, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O LORD, have done as it pleased You.”

These sailors were in a life-and-death quandary.

They're sure Jonah will drown in the churning waters if they throw him overboard, *and they don't want God to hold them accountable for his death*. Yet God picked Jonah out of a line-up. Everyone knows God's beef is with Jonah. *The sailors don't know what else to do...*

“So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea...”
“Man overboard!” *And there was no lifeline.*

As soon as his body went over the rail, and before it hit the surface of the water... **“The sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.”**

It sounds like these pagan sailors were converted. They offer a sacrifice to Yahweh - the Hebrew God.

And they take a vow - *in some way they pledge their allegiance to Yahweh.* These guys were so impressed by the storm's obvious intentionality, and its abrupt halt, they were certain the God of Jonah was controlling nature and calling the shots. He was the one, true God.

The sailors became believers without even learning the end of Jonah's story. Even in Jonah's obstinance, God was already using him to convert pagan people.

The story of Jonah teaches us that God accomplishes His purposes with or without our cooperation. Throughout the book of Jonah, **God uses the prophet more *in spite of him* than *because of him*.**

Author Frances Thompson penned a classic poem entitled, **“The Hound of Heaven.”** It portrays God's relentless pursuit of a man who runs from His will. It applies to Jonah of old... *and any Jonahs here today.*

“I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinth ways of my own mind, and tears.

I hid from Him... from those strong feet that followed, but with un-hurrying chase, and unperturbed pace, and deliberate speed... they beat - and a Voice beat more constant than the

Feet...” God’s Voice says, *“All things betray thee, who betray Me.”* And again: *“Nothing shelters thee, who will not shelter Me.”* And again: *“Nothing will satisfy thee, who is not satisfied in Me.”*

“And in the end: “All which I took from thee I took, not for your harm, but just so you would seek it in my arms... I have stored up for thee at home: rise, clasp My hand, and come!” A fugitive from God is actually running from everything he or she *really* wants. God has storehouses of blessing waiting for each of us, but we find them only when we come back home to Him.

Sometimes Christians think their lives would be better spent if they were doing something other than what God called them to do... We feel like we’re wasting our time... throwing our days away *on this job, or with our family, or in a marriage, or in pursuit of an unfulfilling task, or at a church that has problems...*

We think we deserve better.

We’re tempted to believe God’s will is holding us back - it’s depriving us of what could be or should be.

Oh, if we were free to seek what’s out there. If we could launch out to find our own happiness... so we run. Like Jonah, we run from God and His will.

Here’s what the story of Jonah teaches me: **No plan for my life is better than the plan God has for me.**

No matter how taxing, or stretching, or challenging, or sacrificial God’s plan might be - *it’s still the best plan for me.*

From eternity's perspective the best use of my short, one and only life on this earth, is the will of God.

Romans 12:2 tells us that God's will is "good, and acceptable, and perfect." Part ways with what's "good, acceptable, and perfect" - and it's downhill from there. You can't improve on "good, acceptable, and perfect."

I love Psalm 84:10, "No good thing will (God) withhold from those who walk uprightly." You can't miss out on what's really good if you stay in the will of God.

I admit God's will isn't always easy. At times it's difficult. Throughout the history of the Church God's will has called on His people *to make great sacrifices - to resistance to temptation - to endure persecution - to love their enemies - to rejoice in trials - to stand for truth - to live in obscurity, and poverty, and suffering.*

God's will, can involve years of perseverance amidst difficult circumstances. The cost in *the short run* can be terribly high, but God's will is worth it in *the long run*.

Trust me, you'll hear zero complaints among the inhabitants of heaven - the prize of paradise will be worth any sacrifice God's will required on earth!

There's only one task more difficult than *following God's will*, and that's living in *running from God's will*.

The path that leads *from God* is paved with misery.

Just ask Jonah. God loved Jonah too much to let the prophet succeed without Him. And He loves you too much to let you prosper in your disobedience.

As hard as it is to *obey* God's calling on your life, the one thing harder is to *disobey*... *God makes sure of it.*

Recall the quote I read earlier, "God has at His disposal all the forces of the universe, and summons them to do His bidding as He wills." In other words, God has plenty of wrenches He can use to toss into the gears of our run-away lives and upset our plans.

God has innumerable ways of grinding our lives to a halt... *a wind, a storm, frustrated sailors, a fish... a financial setback, a sickness, a lay-off, a rebellious child, a ornery neighbor - storms come in many forms.*

The story of Jonah teaches us that the Almighty God is angling *for us*. He'll use whatever it takes to catch us, wake the sleeper, and steer us back into His will.

If you're on the run from God, it's time to stop...

Stop making the people around you miserable! Stop running before someone points at you and yells, "*Man overboard.*" Turn your boat around, before it's too late.

Head back in the direction of God's will.

Always remember, "*You're either running **with** God, or you're running **from** God.*" Which is it with you?