

Text: Jonah 1

Theme: Series-Jonah and the Long Suffering God: Jonah runs from God (Not Your Will but Mine)

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Morning Prayer Service on 07/02/2016 at 10.30am

Jonah's attempted escape.

(Verses 1-2) God's call to Jonah.

God spoke to Jonah in His own unique and powerful way and He told Jonah to do two things: First, **Go to Nineveh**;

Second, **Preach against it** - that is, rebuke them for their sin and call them to repentance.

Go to Nineveh.

That is simple enough, and preach against the city. You cannot preach against the city unless you go to Nineveh. The city of **Nineveh** was the capital of the Assyrian Empire and was a large and prominent city in its day. It was not a city of Israel at all; God called Jonah to go to a pagan, Gentile city, which was hostile to Israel and call *them* to repentance.

Why did God want Jonah to go?

For their wickedness has come up before Me: Why did God want Jonah to go? Because God saw their wickedness. None of man's wickedness is hidden before God - He sees it all, and it may come to a point where it demands the specific warning and judgment of God.

Verse (3) is where it becomes interesting when Jonah attempts to flee from God and His call. But Jonah ran away from the Lord...

Why didn't Jonah want to go to Nineveh and do what the LORD told him to do? It may have been because he was given a *difficult job to do*. **Nahum 3:1-4** gives us a good idea of how wicked the people of Nineveh were. Jonah had every reason to expect that at the very best, he would be mocked and treated as a fool. He might be attacked and killed if he did what the Lord told him to do.

It may have been that Jonah didn't *want* the Assyrians in Nineveh to escape God's judgment. Imagine a Jewish man in New York during World War II hearing God say, 'I'm going to bring terrible judgment on Germany. I want you to go to Berlin and tell Nazi Germany to repent.' Instead of doing it, the man heads for San Francisco and then hops on a boat for Hong Kong.

It is easy to discuss *Jonah's* reasons for not doing what God told him to do, but what is *our* reason? God told Jonah to *go* and to *preach*; every Christian has the same command in **Matthew 28:19-20**. With Jonah's example before us, we have *even less reason than Jonah* had for our disobedience.

Why did Jonah choose **Tarshish** as his destination? Jonah wanted to go as far as he could to escape God's presence, but this was a futile attempt. **Found a ship going to Tarshish:** We don't doubt that Jonah *felt* like going to **Tarshish**. There was an impulse within him driving him there, but it was a dangerous impulse. We may take Jonah as an example of the danger of doing things under impulse.

"Now, I very commonly meet with persons who say, 'I felt that I must do so and so. It came upon me that I must do so and so.' I am afraid of these impulses - very greatly afraid of them. People may do right under their power, but they will spoil what they do by doing it out of mere impulse, and not because the action was right in itself." (Spurgeon)

- An impulse may be very brave, yet wrong (Jonah was very brave in embarking on such a long sea-journey).
- An impulse may appear to be self-denying, yet wrong (it cost Jonah much in money and comfort to go on this long sea-journey).
- An impulse may lay claim to freedom, yet be wrong (wasn't Jonah free to go to Tarshish?)
- An impulse may lead someone to do something that they would condemn in others (what would Jonah say to another prophet disobeying God?)
- An impulse can make us do to God or others what we would never want to be done to our self.

So, he paid the fare: It seemed easy enough. Perhaps even Jonah felt that the LORD provided the money for the fare and a waiting ship to take him to his destination! This shows the danger of being guided by circumstances. "Providence or no providence, the Word of the Lord is to be our guide, and we must not depart from it under pretext of necessity or circumstances." (Spurgeon)

Nevertheless, when you run away from the Lord, you never get to where you are going and you always pay your own fare. Did Jonah get to Tarshish? No! When you go the LORD's way, you not only get to where you are going, but He pays the fare.

Jonah should have read Psalm 139:7-10: *Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me.*

You can't escape the presence of God. You get the picture?

"All the while the ship sailed smoothly over the sea, Jonah forgot about his God. You could not have distinguished him from the worst heathen sailor on board. He was just as bad as they were." (Spurgeon)

Verse (4) But the LORD sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was about to be broken up.

We often think of Jesus calming the waters, and He can do that. But He can also stir up the storm. The ship and the sailors were in a dangerous place. This was all due to Jonah being on the ship. There was nothing wrong with the sailors being on the ship, but Jonah had no business there - though on other circumstances it might have been fine for him to go to Tarshish.

(5-6) The sailors of the ship seek their superstitious gods.

Every man cried out to his god: When in trouble, man does his best to fix the problem. In this case, they threw the cargo overboard. When that isn't enough, man also instinctively turns to his god. If we don't know the true God - the God of the Bible - *before* we are in trouble, we may sincerely turn to a false and imaginary god, one of our own making.

Many people assume that they can put off doing their business with God until they choose a "better" time to do it. Nevertheless, it is extremely presumptuous to think that in the moment of crisis we will be able to call upon the true God if we have not dealt with Him before.

In the midst of all the commotion, Jonah was fast asleep. How could Jonah sleep in the middle of this storm? Perhaps because the storm outside seemed insignificant to him in comparison to the storm inside, the storm that came from his resistance against God.

“Jonah was asleep amid all that confusion and noise; and, O Christian man, for you to be indifferent to all that is going on in such a world as this, for you to be negligent of God’s work in such a time as this is just as strange. The devil alone is making noise enough to wake all the Jonahs if they only want to awake . . . All around us there is tumult and storm, yet some professing Christians are able, like Jonah, to go to sleep in the sides of the ship.” (Spurgeon)

The nature of Jonah’s sleep is also instructive, and too much like the sleep of the careless Christian:

- Jonah slept in a place where he hoped no one would see him or disturb him. “Sleeping Christians” like to “hide out” among the church!
- Jonah slept in a place where he could not help with the work that needed to be done. “Sleeping Christians” stay away from the work of the Lord!
- Jonah slept while there was a prayer meeting up on the deck. “Sleeping Christians” don’t like prayer meetings!
- Jonah slept and had no idea of the problems around him. “Sleeping Christians” don’t know what is really going on!
- Jonah slept when he was in great danger. “Sleeping Christians” are in danger, but don’t know it!
- Jonah slept while the heathen needed him. “Sleeping Christians” snooze on while the world needs their message and testimony!

Some sleeping Christians protest that they are not asleep at all.

- “We talk about Jesus” - but you can *talk* in your sleep!
- “We have a walk for Jesus” - but you can *walk* in your sleep!
- “We have passion for Jesus - I just wept in worship the other day” - but you can *cry* in your sleep!
- “We have joy and rejoice in Jesus” - but you can *laugh* in your sleep!
- “We think about Jesus all the time” - but you can *think* while you are asleep; we call it *dreaming*!

How can you know that you are not asleep? “‘Then, what do you mean by a man’s being really awake?’ I mean two or three things. I mean, first, his having a thorough consciousness of the reality of spiritual things. When I speak of a wakeful man, I mean one who does not take the soul to be a fancy, nor heaven to be a fiction, nor hell to be a tale, but who acts among the sons of men as though these were the only substances, and all other things the shadows. I want men of stern resolution, for no Christian is awake unless he steadfastly determines to serve his God, come fair, come foul.” (Spurgeon)

Verses (7-8) The sailors discover that Jonah is the source of the trouble.

That we may know for whose cause this trouble *has come upon us*: It is hard to know what motivated the sailors to think that the storm was sent because one of them had wronged their God. Perhaps it was because of some spiritual insight, and they sensed a *spiritual* power in the storm. Or, perhaps it was just fortunate superstition.

The lot fell on Jonah: Once the lot fell on Jonah, the sailors wanted to know as much as they could from Jonah, so they could discover a remedy and save their lives.

What is your occupation: 2 Kings 14:25 says that Jonah was a recognized prophet. When he was asked, “**What is your occupation?**” and he answered, “prophet” then the sailors must have been even more terrified.

(Verses 9-10) Jonah tells them about who he is and what he has done. Jonah knew the truth about God, even though his claim to **fear the LORD** was only partially true because he was running from the LORD.

Why have you done this? Even an unbeliever who knows *some* truth about God can rightly rebuke a Christian who is resisting God. **“Why have you done this?”** is the most logical question in the world, even for an unbeliever to ask a believer.

Verses (11-16) Jonah, at his own request, asks to be thrown into the sea, and the sailors reluctantly agree. The more the sailors hear, the worse the situation gets - the sea was growing more tempestuous.

Pick me up and throw me into the sea: Why did Jonah ask to be thrown into the sea?

- Perhaps out of compassion for the sailors.
- Perhaps as a coward who prefers death to serving the Lord.
- Perhaps out of a desire to be forced into complete dependence upon God alone. After all, there is no safer place than casting yourself totally upon God.
- Perhaps out of a feeling that *anything* was better than his continual resistance against and running from God.
- Perhaps because he had already truly repented. If this is the case, it illustrates that repentance is not only a matter of heart and mind, but also a matter of *action*.

Instead, the men rowed hard to return to land: The sailors did not want to throw Jonah into the sea, because they believed his God was for real and they dreaded the consequences of throwing a prophet, even a disobedient prophet into the sea. Still, when all hope seemed to be lost they took precautions (**“We pray, O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man’s life, and do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man)”**) and threw Jonah into the sea.

The immediate end of the storm proved that Jonah’s God was for real, and that Jonah’s resistance to that God was the real problem. In a logical response, the sailors **feared the LORD exceedingly**, sacrificed to God and made promises to serve Him.

The sailors moved from fearing the storm to fearing the LORD, just as the disciples in the boat did when Jesus calmed the storm (Mark 4:35-41).

But finally, we have a contrast in the person of Jesus Christ. Let me ask: how do we know for sure that God longs for poor, muddled but responsible sinners like these sailors and the Ninevites to taste his mercy? Because we see it being worked out fully in the person of Jesus, who is the New Testament counterpart and contrast to Jonah.

He was the true son of faithfulness who would proclaim a message of repentance and forgiveness of sins to all who would turn to him. He too, one night found himself caught in the middle of a mighty storm and like the captain of Jonah’s ship, his disciples found him at the bottom of the boat fast asleep and wondered whether he cared if they perished. He didn’t have to pray to God for assistance, he just had to command the storm to stop for he was God. What is more he offered his life over to pagans to be killed. Not as a coward’s way out of doing God’s will like Jonah but as a sacrifice to fulfil God’s will by calming the storm of God’s anger towards sinners as he bore their sin on a cross and spending three days and three nights in the depths of the earth as Jonah was to spend three days and nights in the belly of a fish.

“Brethren, I wish I had meet words with which I could fitly describe the peace which comes to a human heart when we learn to see Jesus cast into the sea of divine wrath on our account. Conscience accuses no longer. Judgment now decides for the sinner instead of against him. Memory can look back upon past sins, with sorrow for the sin it is true, but yet with no dread of any penalty to come. It is a blessed thing for a man to know that he cannot be punished, that heaven and earth may shake, but he cannot be punished for his sin.” (Spurgeon)

The question we all face as we close is this: "have we reckoned with this God who rules over all people?" He's the only God there is. There is no other. The only sensible thing is to reckon with him - whether for the first time or for the umpteenth time.