

The Call of a Reluctant Missionary

(Jonah 1)

The focus of the Book of Jonah is not about the big fish nor about Jonah, but it is about the compassionate and sovereign God, who calls Jonah on a mission, to leave his comfort zone, to minister to an evil group of people with God's message. Although Jonah rebels and flees from God's presence, God uses Jonah's resistance to bring glory to Himself.

INTRODUCTION

I remember when I felt God was calling me into full time vocational service, I was excited to serve God. Although I had not been on a short-term mission, I had a distorted view of missions. I pictured a missionary going into the jungle to serve the cannibals. There was no way that I wanted to serve in the mission field. I told God that I would go anywhere... in the United States... to serve Him. After being accepted to Dallas Seminary, I went to a winter conference, where the speaker spoke on being available to serve the Lord. I felt the Lord was speaking to me, "If you want to serve me, you need to obey where I send you- No matter where I send you." I realized that I was restricting God. Instead of God telling me where to go, I was telling God where I needed to go. As God spoke to me, I submitted myself to the Lord.

In the next four weeks, the four HCC pastors are going to preach through the Book of Jonah, where Jonah also had his own idea as to where he should serve the Lord. This preaching series is to prepare us for the Chinese Missions' Convention at the end of December. God has called all of us to be His ambassador whether it is across the street in our neighborhood or across the seas in another country. Let us turn to Jonah 1:1-2, "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." God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh.

A. God Calls Jonah to Go to Nineveh

Before we dive into this passage, let me give you some background. Jonah was mentioned one other time in the Bible besides here in this book. In 2 Kings 14:25, Jonah became a national hero when he accomplished the first mission God gave him. Jonah encouraged King Jeroboam to extend his territories, and the king successfully carried out the message of God that Jonah delivered. When God called Jonah with his first mission, he responded positively and there was great success.

With this as a background, the Lord called Jonah for his second mission. Could you imagine how Jonah might have reacted? He might have been very excited and eager to be used by the Lord for another mission. It is a tremendous privilege to serve the Lord and to represent Him. When God said, "Go." I am sure Jonah might have said, "Where?" God said to "go to the great city Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh. Let me give you some background about Nineveh, which is the capital of Assyria. Before the Babylonians became a world force, it was the Assyrians that had a mighty army. They had a reputation as a brutal, mean, blood-thirsty army that wanted to intimidate their enemies. They were a heartless group of people. Once they conquered a land, they wanted to make sure that the people would be afraid of them and would not rebel against the new conquerors. They used vivid object lessons, that said, "Don't mess with us or else." This brutal army intimidated their subordinates by decapitating a number of captives and stacking their heads in front of the entry gate as well as on top of the wall of the city. In addition, they would stick a pole through the mid-section of their captives and put them up for display in the town square. Also, they would skin people alive and hang them on the city wall to show their authority and superiority.

Because God is a just God, He judges the wicked in His time. Therefore, God commanded Jonah to go to these Assyrians, to preach a message of condemnation to them because they had demonstrated wickedness before the holy God. They were relentless and persistent in their sins. Jonah was supposed to announce to these brutal people that they have been bad boys and God was going to judge them. Could you imagine how you would have responded to God's command? I do not know about you, but I would have said, "Ah, I think you got the wrong person for this job. I will serve you anywhere in the United States. I am not going out to those blood thirsty people. As a matter of fact, they do not deserve any mercy from you. You should just destroy them because they are wicked people. You don't need me to tell them that they are wicked and they will be judged."

B. Jonah Refuses to Go to Nineveh

Notice how Jonah responded to this mission that God gave him. He didn't say, "Let me pray about it." He immediately ran away. Let's read v.3, "But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. 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." Jonah did not want any part of being close to the Ninevites. Jonah refuses to go to Nineveh. I do not blame him. I know Jonah gets a bad rap because he was not willing to obey God, but instead ran away from God to Tarshish, which is the furthest point that was known back in those days. It is located in Spain. In other words, Jonah wanted to get as far away as possible.

ILLUSTRATION: I was like Jonah in not wanting to go on the mission field. God had to break my heart before I yielded to be obedient to the Lord. God might be calling you out of your comfort zone to do something that you have never done before or something you feel uncomfortable in doing. You might be fearful and want to run away. However, if God calls you, he will always provide the necessary resources for you to complete that task. We just need to trust Him. As a matter of fact, the more difficult the task, the more we realize that we cannot do it by ourselves. God loves it when we come to a point that we need to depend on God alone. That is when He goes to work and do great things. God just wants us to be available for him.

Last month, I led the Father/Daughter Retreat. I needed a female counselor to help me. I looked high and low, but could not find one. The Lord spoke to me to ask my wife, Ellie. When I first approached her, she felt very uncomfortable. She was fearful of how the youth was going to respond to her. She didn't think that she could relate with them. She hesitantly agreed to go. Because she made herself available, God used her mightily. It was a step of faith. It is during the times when we feel least qualified to do something that is when God shows up to do something wonderful. May we not rob ourselves of what God can do through us. May we not run away from God.

Jonah deceived himself into thinking that if he ran away, God would leave him alone. In reality, that was going to back fire. If God has a plan for us, no one can thwart his plan. (Prov. 19:21) "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." His plan will come to being whether or not we choose to follow. It does not make any sense to go against God's will because His purpose will prevail. It only makes sense if we listen and obey.

C. Jonah and the Sailors have Contrasting Responses to Yahweh's Plan

How did God respond? He did not stand still. He took action by creating a great wind on the sea and violent storm was aroused. Remember, the main focus on this book is on God. God is sovereign and is in charge. He is in control. It was not any ordinary storm - even the sailors, who are expert sailors, were afraid because the ship was threatening to break up. God was not just going to let Jonah run away. God was in control of the circumstances. He

altered the direction of Jonah's plan. God is not only a sovereign God, but also a compassionate God, who also cares for people that committed brutal atrocities. He is willing to give them a second chance. In spite of their wickedness, God still loves them.

APPLICATION: Are there people that have done wrong to you and you feel that they do not deserve to be saved? Well, that is how Jonah felt. He was fearful of them, but also did not want them to be saved. Jonah was a proud Jew that did not want wicked Gentiles to be saved. (4:2) "He prayed to the Lord, "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." Jonah knew that if he preached to them, they would get saved. Let's look at the contrasting responses between Jonah and the sailors to Yahweh's plan. Let us look at Jonah's response first. Jonah resists submitting to Yahweh's plan.

1. Jonah Resists Submitting to Yahweh's Plan

Let's look in v.5, "All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep." In the middle of a horrendous storm, Jonah fell into a deep asleep. He really did not care what was going on. While he was sleeping, the sailors were panicking as they tossed out cargo to lighten the ship, but it did not change anything. They got desperate as they cried out to their gods for help. But there was no result.

They figured that this tragic storm was the cause of wrongdoing from someone on board. They casted lots to see who the culprit was. As we look at verse 7, the lot fell on Jonah. Casting lots was a common practice in Israel and other ancient Near East countries to find out the will of God. We see here again of God's sovereignty as He directed the lot to fall on Jonah. Jonah thought he was in control, but in reality, God was in control.

After the lot fell on Jonah, the sailors interrogated him with questions in v.8 "Who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" They understood that the gods were not pleased with Jonah and he must have done something wrong. Instead of trying to cover up, Jonah did not hesitate to tell them the truth. He admitted that he was a Hebrew and he worships the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

Jonah addresses God as LORD, which means Yahweh, the covenant-making God of Israel. He is also described as the Creator, who made the sea and the land. As creator, He has authority over all of nature.. Ironically, Jonah knew who God is, but was not willing to obey Him. This is only intellectual knowledge. According to 1 John 2:3-4, "We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, "I know him, "but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him." This knowledge did not travel down to Jonah's heart to make the right decision.

The sailors did not expect Jonah to describe his God in such details. They were terrified and asked, "What have you done?" Although Jonah earlier had admitted that he is running away from the Lord, they asked him again. Jonah is very truthful that he is responsible for the storm and he acknowledges that his God has the power to cause the sea and storm to come. He has good theology of God, but he did not want to follow God. That is empty belief.

APPLICATION: We are like Jonah also. We know a lot about God, but when He tells us to do something, we do not want to follow because we are uncomfortable in doing it. We do not think we can do it. It can endanger our life.

2. The Sailors Submitting to Yahweh's Plan

We see God is in control of the whole story. Jonah cannot run away from Him. God puts more pressure upon Jonah by stirring up the sea and it was getting rougher and rougher as recorded in v11. The sailors asked Jonah what to do to calm down the sea. On the one hand, the sailors were panicking and fearful of their life. However, Jonah was calm and collected, admitting that he is responsible for the storm. He knew exactly what needed to be done to calm the sea.

Without any hesitation, Jonah confidently told the sailors to throw him into the sea. He was so sure that the sea would become calm once God's wrath was appeased. There was no way that Jonah was going to the Ninevites, even if it caused his life. Jonah admitted that it is his fault that caused the great storm. He resisted submitting to Yahweh's plan.

In contrast, we see the sailors submitting to Yahweh's plan. Note their faith in the Lord changes as time moved along. Initially, they did not know anything about Yahweh. As Jonah described Yahweh's authority and power, they believed that it was Yahweh who caused this storm to rage. The sailors did not comply with Jonah's request because it would be immoral and a sin against God to throw him overboard. Therefore, they tried to figure out a way to resolve the problem by taking things into their own hands as they tried to row back to land. Their meager efforts brought no relief against God's sovereign will. Instead the storm intensified.

APPL: When we face a problem, it is natural for us to want to solve the problem by ourselves with our own abilities. God really wants us to see that we are incapable of resolving the problem and our need to submit to Yahweh's plan. All the effort from the sailors did not accomplish what they desired. The sea grew even wilder than before.

The sailors' faith in God grew as they recognize that it was the Lord that was controlling the sea. Therefore, they cried out the Lord, Yahweh. They recognized the God of Jonah, Yahweh, and they cried out to Him for mercy. V. 14, "Then they cried to the LORD, "O LORD, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O LORD, have done as you pleased." They knew that it would be a sin to throw Jonah overboard, which would kill him. Therefore, they pleaded with God not to hold them accountable for killing this innocent man. This demonstrated the great compassion that the sailors had for Jonah in contrast to Jonah's lack of compassion for the Ninevites. The sailors also acknowledged God's sovereignty in the great storm and the casting of lots as they said, "For you, O LORD, have done as you pleased." This whole story is really about the LORD.

Since the sailors had tried everything out of their own effort and failed, they submitted to Jonah's recommendation by throwing him into the raging sea. All of a sudden, just as Jonah predicted, the violent sea grew calm.

Note the progression of the faith of the sailors through this whole process. Now the men greatly feared the Lord. Let's read v. 16, "At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him." The sailors were in awe at what they witnessed with their own eyes. Their false gods could not rescue them, but Yahweh was able to rescue them as they submitted to His plan. . The calmness of the sea also show that Jonah's disobedience was the cause of the raging storm.

In response to Yahweh saving them, they offered a sacrifice to the LORD. It was an expression of their gratitude to the Lord as they gave praise to the Lord. In addition, they made vows to him. They were promising to God that they would continue to praise Him. Here we see an ironic contrast where Jonah, the prophet of God, was disobedient to God. He resisted submitting to Yahweh's plan. Jonah knew God, but did not trust God enough to obey Him. However, the sailors, who did not know God, grew to know Him personally as they saw God's hand at work. They ended up fearing the Lord and praising Him as they submitted to Yahweh's plan.

Although Jonah chose death over obeying God, it was not the end of the story. Verse 17 begins with the word, "but." God was not done with Jonah. The Lord expressed his sovereignty by providing a great fish to swallow Jonah. God rescues Jonah; again, it shows God's compassion for Jonah. In spite of his rebellion, God was gracious toward him by saving him because God had a plan for his prophet. The LORD had not given up on him yet. God had to break Jonah's stubborn will before He could use Him, as Jonah was in the stomach of the fish for three days and three nights. The story will continue next week.

In conclusion, the focus of the Book of Jonah is not about the big fish nor about Jonah, but it is about the compassionate and sovereign God, who calls Jonah on a mission, to leave his comfort zone, to minister to an evil group of people with God's message. Although Jonah rebels and flees from God's presence, God uses Jonah's resistance to bring glory to Himself. God's ultimate goal is to save the Ninevites, the brutal, blood thirsty Gentiles.

In 2 Peter 3:9b, "He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." God wants us to reach out to those around us to share with them the Good News of God's salvation- even with those that we think do not deserve it. God loves them also. God has a heart for all people. I encourage you if you have not already signed up for the Chinese Mission Convention to do so today and learn how we can reach the lost for Christ.