

The God Who Will Not Let Go

A Study from the Book of Jonah No. 1

(Please read Jonah 1)

In the first chapter of the book of Jonah nothing is said about Jonah's birth or his previous ministry. But at some point in his life, God came with a message for Jonah to deliver. We are not told in what manner the Word of the Lord came to him; he may have had a dream, or have seen a vision, or have heard a voice. Jonah is a very practical Book, very interesting, and it can be applied to today's life experiences.

The Book of Jonah brings to our attention three great characteristics of God: God's mercy, God's sovereignty, and God's love. Mercy is not getting what we really deserve. We deserve to go to Hell because of our sins. But God does not allow that to happen if we open our hearts to Jesus Christ, God's Son. As we open our hearts to God's plan of salvation, the punishment for our sins will be removed. The sovereignty of God means that God is over all. He is all knowing and all powerful. Man can plan and choose and go his own way, but God always writes the final chapter. And then too, a careful study of the Book of Jonah reveals how great a love God has for us, and how marvelously God works in each of our lives, even as He did in Jonah's life. We see how great a love God has for the whole world. We notice how God wills not to let people go their own self-willed ways, but seeks diligently to bring all of us to a realization of our need to follow Jesus.

1. The Call Which Came to the Prophet

"Now the word of the Lord came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me" (Jonah 1:1-2). The words "arise," "go," and "cry" are imperatives. They signify the urgency and the authority of God's command. Jonah was told in no uncertain terms what he must do. Jonah was to get up, go to Nineveh, and cry out the message that God would reveal to him.

Jonah 1:3a says, "But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the Lord." Why did Jonah not obey God's command? What was the reason he headed for Tarshish? In his own words, the prophet tells us, "And he prayed unto the Lord, and said, I pray thee, O Lord, was not this my saying when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil" (Jonah 4:2). Jonah knew that God was gracious and that God was not sending him to Nineveh only to announce impending judgment, but the real purpose was to urge the people of Nineveh to repent. Those who lived there were enemies of Jonah's people, the Jews. And Jonah was afraid that if he did go and preach the message of judgment, they would believe it and repent of their sins and turn to God, and God would bless them. But Jonah did not want them blessed!

Jonah's problem was that he wanted to limit his love and sympathy to just certain people, while excluding others. He was not willing to go to the place where God had sent him. The people from

Nineveh were not the people to whom Jonah wished to minister. But God's mercy is extended to all people.

Far too many times Christians unconsciously display an attitude very similar to Jonah's. The call comes to every Christian today just as it came to Jonah, "Arise, go, and cry!" The lost need to hear about Jesus! They need to repent and be saved. These people need to be shown an example of true Christianity. They need to hear about the love of God and need to be introduced to a Savior who can save us from our sins. When the message comes to us—to "Arise, go and tell the lost"—what are we going to do? Will we be too busy? Will our own problems keep us from obeying the Word of the Lord? Will our fear of not knowing what to say, prevent us from telling someone about the good news of salvation? Or, will we do what God says, and go into all the world and preach the Gospel?

2. The Prophet Who Ran Away

We see how Jonah attempted to get away from God, and the consequences of his attempt. Jonah got up, but he didn't go toward Nineveh. Instead, he fled toward Tarshish from the presence of the Lord, and went down to Joppa. There he found a ship going to Tarshish. So Jonah paid the fare, and went down into the ship, to go with it to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

Since Jonah lived after the Psalms were written, he knew the great truths of Psalm 139:7-10. The Psalmist says, "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me." But in spite of that knowledge, Jonah went in a direction opposite from Nineveh.

In Jonah's attempt to get away from God, we notice two results that will follow anyone who tries to disobey God. First, we see that Jonah's course was down hill. Jonah would have said that he was improving his life. But it was down hill. Jonah 1:3 clearly says it. First he went **down** to Joppa. Then he went **down** into the ship. Later, he went **down** into the sides of the ship. And later, Jonah confessed that he went **down** to the bottom of the mountains. The path of one who acts in self-will is always a downward path.

The second result of running from God was that Jonah paid the fare, yet he did not get to where he wanted to go, since he was thrown overboard. And he did not get a refund on his ticket for that part of the journey which he did not experience. Jonah paid the full fare and did not get to the end of his journey. Jonah was acting rebelliously. He knew better than what he was doing. It seems that whenever we decide to go wrong, the devil is right there to give us all the assistance we need. However, many times we put the blame on some other person or think up some excuse. But the fact is, as with Jonah, we are sinning because of a deliberate act and choice. Each of us must ask, "Will I go God's way, or will I go my own way?"

3. The God Who Will Not Let Go

Jonah had sinned. God had told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah decided that he was not going to go, and headed off in the other direction. But remember that God is sovereign. God has the final word. "But the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken" (Jonah 1:4). Note the contrast. The Lord who can calm the troubled waters of our lives is the same Lord who can stir them up to great difficulties and problems. What He does depends on whether or not we are with Him in the boat. If Jesus is in our boat and we are going His way and trusting Him, then when the storms do come, we can cry out, "Master, help me!" He will calm the tempest. But if we are disobeying Him, then He may need to stir up the troubled waters to have us realize our need to follow Him. The fact is clear that we are allowed to resist God and that we may choose to disobey Him.

If we choose to stop reading the Bible, God does not send a special prophet to get us to read it again. If we choose to stop praying, He does not send a disaster into our lives to make us turn to Him. He will not necessarily send the "cock to crow" at the very beginning. He simply will allow us to go down hill and eventually pay for our own foolish choices. However, if we persist in our disobedience, God will not let us go. He will begin gently at first, and then more and more firmly remind us of the way we ought to be going. If we persist in our rebellion, He may need to send a tempest in order that His purpose may be accomplished in our lives.

We see also that the disobedience of one of God's children involved others. Not only was Jonah experiencing a problem, but the sailors were in trouble as well. Jonah had sinned, and innocent sailors were on the verge of drowning. They knew how to sail a ship, but the intensity of this storm was something which they had never experienced before. "Then the mariners were afraid, they cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them" (Jonah 1:5).

We must remember that the trouble that came upon these sailors had come because of Jonah. This means that, in some cases, problems come to the world because of God's judgment on His own children. While the storms were raging, Jonah (who represents the church) was asleep down within the hold of the ship. How many of God's people are asleep today, totally indifferent while the world rushes on, and the storm is still raging?

4. The Sleeping Man Is Interrupted

Jonah went down into the sides of the ship, and he was fast asleep. "So the shipmaster came to him, and said unto him, What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not" (Jonah 1:6).

The captain was a pagan man, as were the sailors. He did not know the true God. His ideas of religion were undoubtedly filled with superstitions. Nevertheless, he wanted Jonah to wake out of his sleep and pray. Maybe after all Jonah's God might hear and lend some help to the sailors, seeing the dire situation which they were experiencing.

Meanwhile, up on the deck of the ship, the sailors had been discussing the storm and had concluded that this storm was not like other storms they had witnessed. They had been able to handle other

storms, but this one was more violent and cruel. The sailors concluded that it must have been because of some individual. “And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah” (Jonah 1:7).

As soon as Jonah was singled out, a flurry of questions came from the troubled sailors. “Then they said unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; What is thine occupation? And whence comest thou? What is thy country? And of what people art thou?” (Jonah 1:8). Here is Jonah—running away from God. He is running away from giving the message to a heathen people who needed to repent. Now he was asked by people who didn’t know God, and in a sense is being reprimanded by them.

Jonah gave a straightforward answer. “And he said unto them (the sailors), I am a Hebrew; I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land” (Jonah 1:9). For Jonah to answer the sailors in this way shows some measure of self-righteousness. As far as Jonah was concerned, he still seemed to feel that he was doing the right thing in running away. But those unsaved sailors reasoned differently. “Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him (Jonah), Why hast thou done this? For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them” (Jonah 1:10).

Though these men didn’t know Jonah’s God personally, they knew much **about** Jonah’s God. They had traveled from port to port around the Mediterranean Sea. They had heard that this was the God who had brought down the plagues on Egypt so that He might lead His people out. They knew that the Children of Israel had walked on dry ground across the Red Sea as it parted, and that the Egyptian forces were drowned. The sailors knew that this was the God who had leveled the walls of Jericho, and had made the sun stand still. They knew that He was the God of the Hebrews, and that He was pursuing them for the sake of Jonah. No wonder they were exceedingly afraid!

But Jonah was like many of God’s people when they sin. Instead of thinking clearly, he hardened his heart, kept his back turned toward God, and plunged on into even greater separation from God. Notice what happened. “Then said they unto him, What shall we do unto thee, that the sea may be calm unto us? For the sea wrought, and was tempestuous” (Jonah 1:11).

The condition of Jonah’s heart is revealed in his answer. “And he said unto them, Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you; for I know that for my sake this great tempest is upon you” (Jonah 1:12). Actually, his answer was a sad one. So determined was he to resist the Lord’s will that he actually said, “Throw me overboard.” It seems obvious that Jonah meant, “I would rather die than to do God’s will.” He had no knowledge that God was going to have a fish ready for him. He would have rather been dead than to do God’s bidding.

The sailors were unwilling to see Jonah die if it could be prevented. “Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring it to the land, but they could not; for the sea wrought, and was tempestuous against them” (Jonah 1:13). There was only one thing left to do. But before they did it, they prayed. “Wherefore they cried unto the Lord, and said, We beseech thee, O Lord, we beseech thee, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not upon us innocent blood; for thou, O Lord, hast done as it pleased thee” (Jonah 1:14).

Having prayed to Jonah's God, the men lifted Jonah up and hurled him into the sea. Since Jonah had made up his mind to die, he offered no resistance. He was more concerned about maintaining his spirit of rebellion than the saving of his own life. "So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea; and the sea ceased from her raging" (Jonah 1:15).

Would that not have been an awesome experience? "Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice unto the Lord, and made vows" (Jonah 1:16). Jonah was running away from God because he did not want God to save the heathen of Nineveh. But as a result of this experience, the sailors, unfamiliar as they were, responded to the mercy of God with sincere hearts.

As for Jonah, God also showed him mercy. "Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17).

What are the lessons that we can learn from this chapter? God is merciful; God is sovereign; and God is love. And because God is sovereign, He wants us to follow Him and to obey His bidding. We can choose to be disobedient. But if we are, He will gently at first, and then more forcefully, bring to our mind and realization that He wants our first love, our lives, and our service.

Whether it be a man going away from God, a city steeped in sin, or a group of sailors who were worshipers of pagan gods—God loved them all and wanted them to be saved. It is the same today. 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that God "is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." That is why He sent Jesus. That is why Christ was willing to hang on Calvary's Cross. But you don't have to accept it. However, if you don't, you make the decision not to inhabit Heaven. God's love is great enough and Heaven is large enough for all who will say yes to Jesus. Might you do that today if you have never done it before.

As Christians, let us take a lesson from the life of Jonah. We might be disobedient, but God is a God who won't quickly let us go. Through many and varied experiences, I am sure each of us could reflect upon how God, gently at first, and then in stronger ways, nudged us, drew us, and had us come back to a closer walk with Him.

Let us come daily to Christ, and in the words of Psalm 139:23-24, say, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts. And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." God is a God who will not let go. Each of us makes the final decision.

-Luke B. Bucher