

## **WHY IS GOD'S GRACE SOMETIMES HARSH?**

**JOEL 1 & 2**

Sometimes just giving up and giving in is the wisest and best thing you could ever do. During the Vietnam War, the Communist North Vietnamese soldiers were told by their officers to avoid surrender to the Americans at all costs. They were told that the Americans would torture them, beat them and starve them to death. Some of them surrendered anyway and were taken to prisoner of war camps. Once there, many of them discovered that their American enemies actually treated them far better than their own military. After the war, many of them elected to come to the United States. Many have become American citizens and are living in a land of freedom and plenty. For them, giving up and giving in – surrender – was the wisest and best thing they ever did.

The prophet Jonah learned the very same lesson the hard way in his relationship with God. Surrender and submission to God were the very best things he could ever have done. But what a time Jonah had learning that important fact in life! Most people have a great struggle giving up and giving in to God. Your situation may not be as dramatic as Jonah's, but it can be just as real. You and I can resist God's will and ways in our lives more often than we care to admit. Like Jonah, that choice leads to heartache every time. On the other hand, when you do surrender and submit to God, you discover a life full of His presence, His greatness and His abundance. You always win when you surrender to God!

We're in the midst of a message series entitled "Faith In A Minor Key" – a look at the Minor Prophets – those last twelve books of the Old Testament. In most cases, we're just looking at key passages in some of these books, but this Sunday and next I want to consider with you the entire book and story of Jonah. Today we'll consider chapters one and two of Jonah and then next Sunday we'll reflect on chapters three and four. Now chapter one of Jonah is all about running away from God while chapter two is all about running back to God. At different times in your life's journey, you will find yourself somewhere at some time in Jonah's story: running away from God or running back to God. Let's read Jonah 1 right now.

### **RUNNING AWAY FROM GOD**

When Jonah began to run away from God, he revealed that he had at least two very inaccurate ideas about God. If you buy into these same concepts about God, you're headed for trouble just like Jonah. First of all, Jonah believed God was little. God gives Jonah a clear, explicit command. Go to a city called Nineveh and preach to its citizens. Jonah had immediate issues with what God wanted him to do. For one thing, it was a long and difficult journey to Nineveh – several hundred miles across a desert. But that wasn't the main reason for Jonah's reluctance. In that day and time, Nineveh was the largest city in the world and the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were enemies of the people of Israel and Jonah flat out hated them with a passion. Along with his

hatred, Jonah had good reason to fear how he would be received in Nineveh. How was a Jewish prophet warning of God's destruction going to be received in Nineveh? Probably none too warmly!

But the deepest reason for Jonah's reluctance in going to Nineveh was about something else, however. He knew that there was a chance the Assyrians would repent of all their many personal and national sins. As a result, he was afraid God wouldn't punish and judge them for their sins. Jonah hated the Assyrians. He hated the people of Nineveh and wanted nothing more than to see God exterminate, butcher and wipe them out completely. How do I know this? When the people of Nineveh did respond to Jonah's preaching and did repent, Jonah was anything but pleased. Later in his story he says to God, "... 'Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, LORD? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people.'" (Jon 4:2 NLT) The Assyrians were not nice people. They were, in fact, brutal, barbaric and cruel. For example, the Assyrian army made of habit of building a pyramid of human skulls in every city it conquered just to drive the point home how ruthless it could be to the folk they'd just conquered. On a human level, Jonah's hatred of them was well-deserved. If anybody richly deserved to be nuked by the Almighty it was those accursed Assyrians!

Jonah worshipped a little God. He thought God should only love the people of Israel – only the good people, only the right kind of people. Jonah wanted to see the proper people to go to heaven and the improper people go to hell. Followers of Jesus can adopt that mentality. Often a comment about certain lost people reveals your conviction that God's compassion should only go so far. Or you can give lip service to God's love for lost people generally but then do nothing to reach out to any lost person specifically. Do you pray for anyone by name who doesn't know Jesus yet as Savior and Lord? Are you by intent trying to build a relationship with anyone who is not a believer? Are you inviting a lost person to a worship service, a Sunday school class, a small group meeting or some kind of Kingdom event you think he or she might enjoy? Jesus said, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." (Luke 19:10 NLT) Lost people matter so much to God. They ought to matter to you and me, too.

There's another evidence that Jonah thought God was little. Instead of heading east towards Nineveh, he went exactly the opposite direction – west towards Tarshish which was then a port in what we now know as Spain. It was about as far away from Nineveh as you could get in that day and time. Maybe Jonah thought God was limited to the actual geographical boundaries of Israel or that He wasn't as present and powerful in Tarshish as He was in Jerusalem. Jonah should have known better. He had either heard or read the psalm that says, "Is there anyplace I can go to avoid your Spirit? To be out of your sight? If I climb to the sky, you're there! If I go underground, you're there! If I flew on morning's

wings to the far western horizon, You'd find me in a minute— you're already there waiting!" (Ps 139:7-10 MSG)

Jonah couldn't run away from God or the call of God because God is everywhere. That truth will be a great comfort to you along life's journey unless, of course, you're trying to get away from God! Because Jonah was trying to run away from God, the fact that God is everywhere caused him distress not comfort. Are you trying to run away from God? Some of you know that you need to surrender your life to Jesus, invite Him into your life to be your Savior and Lord, but you resist making that decision for a variety of reasons. That's running away from God. Some of you know that God wants you to move into a deeper commitment of your life to Him. It may be that there's a sin in your life that God wants you to forsake, but, quite frankly, you love that sin. Or, it may be that God wants you to start participating in a ministry either inside or outside of the church, but you're saying, "I don't have the time, Lord." Or it may be that you're being reminded by the Holy Spirit almost daily to reach out to a specific lost person in your life, but you're saying, "I don't like that person, Lord" or "What if he or she rejects me, Lord?" Whenever you resist God's voice for any reason, you're running away from Him. You're just like Jonah.

Not only did Jonah think God was little. His actions reveal that he thought God was limited, too. Did Jonah know it was sinful and wrong to run away from God? Yes, he did. He knew God was capable of both great anger and great mercy. Maybe he thought God would overlook or ignore his personal rebellion. Jonah had to learn that while God is indeed merciful, He is never indulgent. Yes, God hates sin because of what it does to you, me and others. For just that reason, He's merciful when you confess and turn away from your sin. But He never indulges sin because He knows only too well its power to destroy those He loves. The fact is that God loves you too much - just like He loved Jonah - to indulge or overlook your sin.

Do you see that word "down" in the text? It shows up often. Literally and spiritually, sin is a downward spiral. Jonah decides to run away from God, so he went "down" to Joppa; then he went "down" to the ship; then he went "down" to the sea; then he went "down" into the fish; and once there, he went "down" into the lowest parts of the earth. Whenever you insist on running away from God for any reason, you will always go in just one direction only: down.

This story also reveals how sin affects other people around you – innocent people. The sailors on Jonah's boat almost lost their lives because of his sin. Jonah's experience also reminds me that the end result of constantly running away from God is self-destruction. When the sailors find out that this terrible storm is because of Jonah, they ask him what they should do. His answer is interesting. He could have suggested that they try all the harder to ride out the storm. He could have suggested that they turn the boat around and go back to Israel so he could obey the Lord's command to go to Nineveh. But, instead, what

does Jonah say? "... 'Throw me overboard, into the sea. Then the storm will stop. It's all my fault. I'm the cause of the storm. Get rid of me and you'll get rid of the storm.'" (Jon 1:12 MSG) What was Jonah suggesting? "Go ahead, kill me. Let me die. I'd rather die than obey God." That's how far sin and the devil can push a person when he or she is trying to run away from God. Scary!

All that tells me that Jonah thought God's power and sovereignty were limited. His story is, ironically, perhaps the most compelling example of God's total and complete control over all things at all times. God sends a storm to get Jonah's attention. God controls the fall of the lots so that Jonah is revealed as the cause of the storm. God sends the great fish to swallow Jonah. Over and over again, you see that God is in control. God is not limited by you, by me, by anyone or anything else. And in the end, God always wins. It's like the little spider that climbed a telephone pole and swinging her body out in a wide arc attached her web to another pole nearby in order to spin a magnificent web for catching insects. Unfortunately, her choice of location was poor because a railroad track ran between the poles. She'd no sooner made contact with the second pole when a train traveled by taking her first strand with it. Undaunted, the persistent little spider made several hasty trips from pole to pole. Swish! Another train roared through destroying her web. She persevered yet again. Back and forth she went as quickly as she could calling on all her energy to make a web that would trap the very noisy and powerful bug. She was at last confident of victory. Then the next train arrived. So it is with anyone and everyone who attempts to oppose God's sovereign will. Like the spider, you can try to stop God or run from God. But God will win. God always wins.

Never forget that the same Lord who can calm the troubled waters of your life is the same One who can stir them up into the greatest frenzy. It's true that God allowed Jonah to resist Him for a period of time. "But Jonah..." is the way verse three starts out – true enough. The next verse – verse four says – "Then the Lord..." God's sovereignty doesn't rule out your little "buts" along life's journey, but neither is God troubled by them. God always has an answer for them. Will you go God's way? Then God will bless you. Will you run away from God? Then God will allow trouble to come into your life until you surrender to Him. He loves you too much not to do so. Donald Grey Barnhouse had a great summary statement for Jonah 1: "When you run away from the Lord, you never get to where you are going and you always pay your own bill. But when you go the Lord's way, you always get to where you are going and He pays the bill."

## **RUNNING BACK TO GOD**

If Jonah 1 is all about running away from God, chapter two is all about running back to God. Fortunately, that's what happened to Jonah and what can happen in your experience, too. Many people scoff at Jonah being swallowed by a whale and living to tell about it. They say, "It just goes to show that the Bible is a book of fairy tales and can't be historically reliable." By the way, the Bible never says

a whale swallowed Jonah. It says it was a great fish. Many scholars believe it was a creature common in the Mediterranean Sea called a whale shark – an enormous fish fully capable of swallowing a man alive. You should also know that there are several reliable stories of other people being swallowed by whale sharks and living to tell about it. Besides, if you believe God raised Jesus from the dead, you shouldn't have a problem with the story of a great fish swallowing Jonah and then vomiting him up alive three days later.

Have you ever tried to imagine what it must have been like to be inside the stomach of this creature for three days? Pastor and author, Chuck Swindoll, describes it like this: "Pitch black. Sloshing gastric juices wash over you, burning skin, eyes, throat, nostrils. Oxygen is scarce and each frantic gulp of air is saturated with salt water. The rancid smell of digested food causes you to throw up repeatedly until you have only dry heaves left. Everything you touch has the slimy feel of the mucous membrane that lines the stomach. You feel claustrophobic. With every turn and dive of the great fish, you slip and slide in the cesspool of digestive fluid. There are no footholds. No blankets to keep you warm from the cold, clammy depths of the sea. For three days and three nights you endure this harsh womb of God's grace."

God's grace can indeed seem harsh at times. Why is that? Because sometimes you have to come to the end of yourself before you're willing to listen to and obey God. God's grace sometimes comes to you in ways you'd never expect, wish for or even imagine. It could be the Lord has you right now today in the stomach of some dark, slippery and distasteful set of circumstances. If so, you need to do exactly what Jonah did: run back to God. No, I'm quite sure that Jonah didn't pull out paper and pen from his shirt pocket and compose this beautiful prayer right there literally in the great fish's stomach. But sometime after this amazing experience, Jonah began to reflect on what God had done and how it at transformed Jonah. That's when he actually wrote the poem here.

I want you to notice two important parts of this prayer. First, there is honest confession. You need both when you run back to God: honesty and confession. It's always best to be honest with God. After all, He already knows the truth anyway, so why try and sugarcoat how you've blown it. On the other hand, honesty all by itself isn't enough. People can honestly admit their mistakes but feel no remorse about them. When you confess your sin, you tell God that you know you've done wrong, that you feel the wrongness in your heart, you ask His forgiveness and for His strength to change your behavior. When Jonah began his journey back to God, he took the big step of honest confession. You can never go wrong if that's how you start your journey back to God as well.

The second important part of this prayer is thankful submission. Again, you need both when you're running back to God – both thankfulness and submission. I've met people who are sincerely thankful to God for who He is and how He's provided for them, but there's absolutely no desire or willingness to submit their

lives to Him. By the same token, it's possible to give up and give in to God – submission – without any spirit of thankfulness at all. Submission can be just so much resignation. You can actually submit to God and still “pout” spiritually! What you hear in Jonah's prayer is thankful submission. “...But you, O LORD my God, snatched me from the jaws of death! As my life was slipping away, I remembered the LORD. And my earnest prayer went out to you.... But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, and I will fulfill all my vows. For my salvation comes from the LORD alone....” (Jon 2:6-7, 9 NLT) There will be times in the life of every follower of Jesus where for many different reasons – just like Jonah - you run away from God. But when you start running back to God, make sure you return the way Jonah did. Honest confession. Thankful submission.

There's an old story about a man who got a job painting the yellow line down the center of the highway. This was before they had invented those nifty machines that do it for you. He had to do it by hand. After three days, his boss said to him, “Your first day out, you did great. You painted that line for three miles! Your second day out wasn't bad. You got two miles of highway painted. But today you only painted one mile. I don't think I've got a choice here. You're fired!” On his way out of the office, the man looked back and said, “It's not my fault. Every day I got further away from the paint can!”

Some people do feel like they're just getting farther and farther away from God. Life gets more difficult, more problematic and more troublesome. My friend, if you're not experiencing God's presence in your life and you feel increasingly distant from Him, I want to ask you a very simple question: “Who moved?” On the one hand, you are fully capable of moving away from God. On the other hand, God will never move away from you. Are you running away from God? Are you ignoring His voice? Is life becoming harder for some unexplained reason? God's grace can indeed be tough – sometimes even harsh – in order to get you to stop running away from real life, real love and real joy. At the end of the day, God will do everything necessary to make sure you are moving in the direction He wants you to go. He loves you that much!