

Pray

Reading

We're in the book of Jonah. Just a quick recap on the story so far. God has commanded Jonah to go to Ninevah and warn people to repent of their sin. Jonah does not like God's command and tries to run away from God by getting on a ship and sailing in the other direction. And so God sends a storm that threatens to break up the ship.

8 Then [the sailors] said to [Jonah], "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?"

9 And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." 10 Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

11 Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea

grew more and more tempestuous. 12 He said to them, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” 13 Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. 14 Therefore they called out to the Lord, “O Lord, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.” 15 So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

17 And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

(Jonah 1:8–17)

These are the words of God.

Intro

Last week, Larry focused on Jonah as “the runaway”. This week I want us to focus on how God responds to runaways.

Rather than sailing East to Ninevah as God commands, Jonah deliberately sails west to Tarshish. He is doing what children sometimes do which is to put his hands over his ears and say to God, la la la, I can't hear you. Twice it says Jonah tried to get “away from the presence of the Lord”.

And we think, how silly. As if there is anywhere you can go to escape God's presence.

But of course we're not so different to Jonah. Many of us, whether we're Christian or not, have the same issue as Jonah: we don't believe that God's commands are truly for our good and for our joy. We don't believe that God really loves us, and is completely for us. We think that if we submit ourselves to God's will, we will be miserable. So we run away from the clear commands of God.

When I was about 17, I stopped going to church. Why? Because I was hearing things that I didn't want to hear. I had a girlfriend and we had a relationship and I knew God's clear command that I should be sexually pure until I

was married, and I thought that to obey that would make me miserable, so something had to go. Either the girlfriend had to go, or God had to go.

And that's why I stopped going to church. Not because I suddenly stopped believing in God, but because it was too uncomfortable to be in his presence every Sunday. What's the point of having your sin if you're going to be made to feel guilty about it?

There has been a lot of talk recently about people "de-churching" or "deconstructing their faith". And quite often when you listen to the narratives about why this has happened, it's not because God has become harder for that person to believe in, it's because God has become harder for that person to obey.

He asks of us something we don't want to give, we don't trust that his commands are good and loving, and so we run away from them. We do the equivalent of sailing away to Tarshish.

For example we say, "I know God's word clearly says that sex is reserved for a man and a woman in the context of marriage, but the Bible is very much a product of its time, so you can't just take it at face value like that." Or we may

say, “These church people are hypocrites, so I’m not going to church any more.” And that can be our way of doing what Jonah tried to do which is to “get away from the presence of the Lord.”

I remember hearing about one pastor who had seen this kind of thing happen so often that when young men would come to him and said, “I’ve been doing lots of reading about the authority of Scripture, especially the German higher criticism, and I’ve decided I can’t trust the Bible any more”, this pastor would say, “I see. And when did you start sleeping with your girlfriend?”

We like our sin. We want our sin. And so, as Romans 1 says, we suppress the truth about God. Not because God has suddenly become untrue or unclear, but because we don’t like what He’s saying to us.

We LOVE our sin. Two years ago, when my daughter was three, I needed to talk to her about something or other she’d done. I said, sweetheart, that’s not good for you, you have to stop that. And she looked me dead in the eye and said, “No. I don’t want you to steal my naughtiness.”

As a parent, I had mixed feelings about that. I was dismayed by her naughtiness, but at the same time I admired her vocabulary and communication skills.

We don't want God to steal our naughtiness. We love it too much. So we do what we can to get away from his presence. And actually, we don't have to stop coming to church to escape his presence. It's quite possible for your body to be in church every week, but your heart in Tarshish.

Well what is God's response to that? When we treat his word with contempt, when we wilfully suppress it, when we energetically pursue disobedience, when we try to put as much distance as we can between him and us, when we live as if our sin is much more appealing and attractive than He is?

How does God respond to being treated like that? We see in the story of Jonah, God responds by sending a tempest.

Two points I want to make here, the first is unnerving, but the second I hope will be comforting.

Firstly, and this is a phrase I've borrowed from Tim Keller, sin always leads to a storm. And secondly, there is love in the storm.

Firstly, sin always leads to a storm.

Sin always has consequences. Jonah gets on a ship to Tarshish to try and get away from God, and a tempest comes.

Sin always brings a storm into your life. This doesn't mean that every storm in your life is the result of sin - that is not the case. But it is true to say that every sin will create a storm.

One of the things that makes sin appealing to us is the lie that it won't harm us, or it won't harm us much. You can eat the fruit on the tree, nothing bad will happen. Despite what God has said, you will not surely die.

We sin because in the moment of temptation, all we see is the upside. We see the bait but we don't see the hook hidden in it. If we could see clearly in advance exactly how our sin will harm us, and harm others, I suspect we'd sin a lot less.

If a bottle has the word "POISON" on it, no matter how thirsty we are, we don't drink it. Why? Because we know how painful it will be for us if we did. There may be a temporary quenching of thirst as we drink it, but then the

pain comes. And the downside is much worse than any upside.

Well, God tells us, sin - disobeying God - is poison to us. We're told quite explicitly in the Bible that sin leads to death. James chapter 1 says:

15 ...sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.
(James 1:15b)

Or Romans 6, "The wages of sin is death". And in the meantime, before we actually die, sin starts to corrode us inwardly, in all sorts of ways.

There are always unavoidable consequences. There's always a storm.

Numbers 32:23 says:

be sure your sin will find you out.

Do you believe that because you're a Christian and Christ forgives your sin, that you will escape the consequences of sin? No, Galatians 6:7 says:

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.

You may control whether or not you sin, but you cannot control the consequences, any more than Jonah could control the tempest.

You may believe that your sin is a private, unseen thing, and therefore that it's a victimless crime, but it will always harm YOU, and very likely others too.

You may believe the lie that you can escape it any time you want. But sin is strengthened as you feed it. Do it once and it becomes harder not to repeat. One pastor put it like this: "Sinning isn't like filling a stomach; it's like fueling a fire. You're not satisfying a desire; you're waking one up."

And you find that sin changes you as you give in to it, so that after a while, you find yourself even making excuses for it, and feeling you can't live without doing it.

We think of ourselves as doing sin but the reality is that, once we let it in, sin does us. It metastasizes inside us and we are not in control of that process.

Sometimes we believe the lie that sin is harmless, because the consequences are not immediately apparent to us. One writer put it like this:

The results of sin are often more like the physical response you have to a debilitating dose of radiation. You don't suddenly feel pain the moment you are exposed. It isn't like a bullet or a sword tearing into you. You feel quite normal. Only later do you experience symptoms, but by then it is too late. Sin [he says] is a suicidal action of the will upon itself.

But here, the consequences of Jonah's sin are not slow in coming. He disobeys God, and the tempest hits.

Sin always brings a storm into your life.

And into the lives of those around you. Those sailors on the ship with Jonah did nothing to deserve it, but of course the storm was hitting them too. They found themselves in the literal splash zone of Jonah's sin.

But this is where we see something remarkable happening.

There's love in the storm.

That's our second heading. There's love in the storm.
What is it about God that he just can't let Jonah go?

It's not because God NEEDS Jonah to go to Ninevah. God could easily say, "Fine, go to Tarshish, there are plenty of other people I can send to Ninevah instead."

But for some reason, he just does not give up on Jonah.

This is a story in which God spares the lives of 120,000 people in Ninevah, and yet the real focus is the way God relates to this single rebellious man.

As Larry said last week, the word that sums up the way God relates to Jonah - even in the storm - is the Hebrew word "hesed".

Hesed is one of those biblical words that translators have struggled to capture in English.

It occurs some 250 times in the Old Testament. In different versions of the Bible, you may see it translated as "mercy," "kindness," "goodness", "faithfulness," "loyalty."

There's no single English word that quite gets it, which is why some translators have used more than one word: "steadfast love," "loyal love," "loving-kindness."

It's there in Exodus chapter 34:

6 The Lord passed before him and proclaimed,
"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love
[hesed] and faithfulness...
(Exodus 34:6)

What's even more remarkable about the Lord's assurance of hesed here in Exodus is that He doesn't say this because his people have been obeying his laws. He says these words shortly after his people have been found worshiping and sacrificing to a golden calf.

Or take another example. According to the writer of Lamentations:

22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
23 they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
(Lamentations 3:22–23)

Those words are all the more remarkable when you consider that they were written as Jerusalem was being destroyed as a judgement on their wickedness. Love in the storm.

Is that your view of what God is like? That his love toward his children is steadfast, even when they run from him, even when he disciplines them?

I was talking to a dear brother on Wednesday. My car had broken down, he stopped to help, so we got talking. He'd been a Christian for many years but he said that growing up his Dad only ever saw him once a month, and his abiding memory of his Dad was that he would take one look at his school reports and then look at him with anger and disapproval, then just throw the school reports to the ground. That was the thing he most remembered about his Dad. And this dear brother said to me, "I've been trying to erase the face of my Dad from the face of the Father."

That's why we need to take to heart words like these from Lamentations:

31 ...the Lord will not
cast off forever,

32 but, though he cause grief, he will have
compassion according to the abundance of his
steadfast love; [his hesed]
(Lamentations 3:31–32)

You remember the 23rd Psalm, where the psalmist says that the Lord's goodness and hesed will pursue him all the days of his life. The word "pursue" there carries the sense of being chased or even harassed.

So he's saying in the strongest possible terms, the Lord's faithful love and kindness will hunt you down relentlessly.

The Hound of Heaven is a poem that describes being relentlessly pursued by God's loving kindness. It was written by Francis Thompson, a 19th century British poet who had many struggles: poverty, poor health, and an addiction to opium (which in those days was sold as an "over-the-counter" medication).

In the depths of his despair, Thompson described his Jonah-like flight from God:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears

I hid from Him...

But the poem describes how the hound of heaven eventually catches up with him.

In a biography of the pastor John Stott, he refers to that poem. And Stott said that he owed his faith in Christ not to his parents or teachers or even his own decision, but to the relentless pursuit of Jesus. He writes:

[My faith is] due to Jesus Christ himself, who pursued me relentlessly even when I was running away from him in order to go my own way. And if it were not for the gracious pursuit of the hound of heaven I would today be on the scrap-heap of wasted and discarded lives.

Why does Jesus pursue people who are so determined to get away from him?

Sheer loving kindness. But because by nature we do not trust him, we are suspicious of his motives, or because we think obeying him will make us miserable, it often takes a storm to bring us to our senses.

That is what is happening to Jonah, and also to the pagan sailors in this passage. The storm CAUSES them to put their trust in the Lord. Because frankly, where else can they turn at this point? Crying out to their own gods hasn't helped. Trying to row out of the storm by their own effort hasn't helped - in fact verse 13 the storm just gets worse when they try to save themselves:

13 ...the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.
(Jonah 1:13)

But as early as verse 10, they start to see God in the tempest.

...the men were exceedingly afraid and said to [Jonah], "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.
(Jonah 1:10)

And then, verse 14, the men finally call out to the Lord themselves:

14...“O Lord, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.”

(Jonah 1:14)

And verse 16, the result of the tempest is that...

...the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

(Jonah 1:16)

A terrifying storm is the means by which the loving-kindness of God gets through to these sailors.

I think that’s been true for many of us too, hasn’t it?

Sometimes the storms are quite literal. You may know the story of John Newton, the slave trader. On 10th March 1748, Newton was steering his ship through a fierce thunderstorm.

The storm was apparently so terrifying that each time the ship went plunging down into the trough of the sea most of the sailors expected they wouldn’t come up again.

The hold was rapidly filling with water. And as Newton hurried to try and bail the water out, he shouted to the captain, "If THIS will not do, the Lord have mercy on us!" His own words startled him. "Mercy!" he said to himself, "What mercy can there be for me?" He had been running so hard AWAY from God, for so long, he couldn't imagine why God would want anything to do with him.

About six in the evening the hold of the ship was finally free from water. Newton wrote, "I thought I saw the hand of God displayed in our favour. I began to pray. I could not utter the prayer of faith. I could not draw near to a reconciled God and call him Father. My prayer for mercy was like the cry of the ravens, which yet the Lord does not disdain to hear."

Just a simple and inarticulate cry for mercy was enough, and the LORD comes running. Newton later wrote: "On that day the Lord came from on high and delivered me out of deep waters."

It was that event that eventually led to Newton becoming a believer, and a pastor, and the author of many hymns including Amazing Grace.

So sometimes the storms of love are literal. Other times, the storms are not literal but nevertheless real.

This is not as spectacular as John Newton's story, but if I can speak personally for a moment: there was a storm in my life when I was younger which really helped me to understand God's grace better. A relationship I was in had broken up, and this person was really furious with me. She sent my pastor a long email telling him how awful I was. I felt utterly condemned, like I had nowhere to turn. And I can remember telling a good friend of mine, "You know, it's really unfair. She made all these accusations against me, and a lot of it just isn't true."

And he just looked at me and said, "Barry, you're much worse than SHE thinks you are." I said, "Is this supposed to be helping?"

He said, "You're much worse than she thinks you are, JESUS knows EXACTLY how bad you are, and HE loves you so much he died for you. So chin up."

Through that storm, I'd come to see God's loving kindness towards me much more clearly.

Perhaps better than anyone, the poet William Cowper wrote about love in the storm. You remember his words?

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill, He treasures up His bright designs, and works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take, the clouds ye so much dread, are big with mercy, and shall break In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace; Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face.

Maybe you're in the storm right now. It's not always clear that there IS love in the storm. I assume it was not clear to the disciples who were standing heartbroken at the foot of the cross.

But nevertheless, there was love in the storm.

And that brings me to a final point I'd like to make.

Conclusion

One of the great ironies of Jonah is that his refusal to preach the gospel to people in Nineveh means that he ends up preaching the gospel to even more people - like the sailors in the boat with him.

You say, where does Jonah preach the gospel to them? Look at verse 12. Jonah says to them:

12 ...“Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.”
(Jonah 1:12)

In other words, the sacrifice of one man will save many. What Jonah does for the sailors in the tempest is a foreshadowing of what Jesus will do for us, on the cross.

Christ endures the storm in our place - the storm of God's rightful anger at our sin - so that the storm would be calmed, and we would be spared.

Jonah points forward to Jesus. And in a remarkable way, Jesus points backwards to Jonah.

You'll remember, there's a moment in the gospels where Jesus calms a storm. And it has a number of parallels with Jonah chapter 1. In both cases: A group of men set out on a boat. They both leave Jewish territory and head for Gentile territory. In both cases, one of the passengers goes below to sleep. Then a huge storm hits that threatens to break up the boat. Then the men panic, they find the person sleeping and say "Don't you care if we drown? Wake up! Do something! Save us!" Then the sea is calmed. And in both cases, the men on the boat are left "fearing God" because of what they've seen.

But here's the difference between Jonah and Jesus. The sailors wake Jonah up and tell him to cry out to his God to calm the storm.

But when the disciples wake JESUS up, Jesus doesn't cry out to God to calm the storm, He calms the storm Himself. Because He himself IS God in the tempest. And He Himself saves them from the storm - not merely the storm on the Sea of Galilee, but also the greater storm of God's rightful anger at our sin.

There's another parallel in verse 17:

17 ...the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

(Jonah 1:17)

Jesus of course is not swallowed up by a great fish, he is swallowed up by DEATH. Jesus says this in Matthew chapter 12:

40 ...just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

So in other words, Jesus is the greater Jonah, who by becoming a man, puts himself in the same boat as us, and then by going to the cross, deliberately plunges himself into the storm of God's wrath, so that we would live.

You know, when Jesus calms the storm for the disciples, in Luke chapter 8 he says to them, "Where is your faith?" Or to put it another way, "Why don't you trust me?"

That's a good question. Why don't we trust him? Our biggest obstacle to trusting Him is the same as Jonah's: we do not trust that God truly loves us. Like Jonah, we

think that if we submit ourselves to God's will, and obey His word, we will be miserable. Because like Jonah, we don't really trust that God is fully committed to our good and our happiness.

But the cross proves that He is committed to our good and our happiness - at the greatest possible cost to Himself. As one writer puts it,

A God who substitutes himself for us and suffers so that we may go free is a God you can trust. Jonah mistrusted the goodness of God, but he didn't know about the cross. What is our excuse?

Let's pray.