

It is more profitable to know Jesus than to know about Him.

Weekly Edition – May 20, 2016

Jonah – Chapter 1 – part 3

Jonah Flees From the Lord

1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai:² "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

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.

Four Reflections on today's Text:

First Consideration: Before Me

- 1) "Before Me." The Hebrew means "has come up before My face." The face of the Lord is His presence. We are always before His face. We sometimes think that God isn't watching – that the things going on in His creation have somehow escaped His attention – that whatever is going on is somehow not before His face.
- 2) From the context of this opening line in Jonah we might conclude that Nineveh was a city steeped in sin that festered away unnoticed by God until one day God looked and was surprised to see the city filled with wickedness. This would be the wrong impression, as Joshua proclaimed: "*The Mighty One, God, the Lord! He knows!*" (Joshua 22:22) And David testified saying: "*If we had forgotten the name of our God or spread out our hands to a foreign god,²¹ would not God have discovered it, since He knows the secrets of the heart?*" (Psalm 44:20-21) God knows! It is a remarkable statement. God is not like us – we from whom secrets can be hidden. Things do happen outside our purview. Yet, God knows!
- 3) We cannot flee from the face of the Lord. Nothing escapes His attention. Just because He is patient and does not render to man immediately what man deserves does not mean that God is unaware. The Psalmist cried out that there is no way to flee from God's presence, no place we can go to hide from His Spirit. At all times we are before His face, even when we would prefer that our thoughts and deeds be covered over and hidden under a cloak of darkness. (Psalm 139:7-12)
- 4) What about me? There are definitely times when we don't want to see His face, and yet there are other times when we are so desperate to feel God's presence in our lives. Between these two experiences it is not God's face that changes – it is we who are different. Our conscience bears the marks of our desires and choices.
- 5) A condemned man does not want to see God's Face, because to see it is to receive one's sentence. Yet to the man with no condemnation, there is nothing but joy and gladness in seeing this Face. It is one and the same Face. It is not the Face of God that changes, but rather the conscience of the man who stands before God, a conscience that radiates guilt or joy.
- 6) While all men stand guilty, not all men stand condemned. *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,* (Romans 3:23) – referring to our guilt: yet *there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* (Romans 8:1) Our guilt is covered over and forgotten in Christ Jesus our Lord. He forgives our sins.

Jonah

One of the Twelve Prophets

1. The Word of the Lord
2. Jonah's mission
3. Jonah flees
4. The storm
5. The great fish
6. Three days in the belly
7. Jonah delivered
8. Nineveh repents
9. Jonah pouts
10. The gourd
11. God's mercy

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Application: Have I come to the point of claiming that everything in my life is at all times before the face of God? Does this inspire in me joy or dread? Does my conscience radiate joy or dread before the Lord's face?

Second Consideration – But Jonah Ran Away from the Lord

- 1) Jonah never doubted that it was the Lord who spoke. He wasn't unsure of the message or the One who spoke the message to him. He just didn't like what he heard. So instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah went in the opposite direction – heading to the port of Joppa to board a ship headed for Tarshish.
- 2) I take great comfort in Jonah's disobedience because through Jonah I can plainly see how the Lord deals with people like me – people who sometimes do the exact opposite of what the Lord, our God, would have us do.
- 3) It's not like I set out to be obstinate and stubborn from the beginning. I really *do* love God and really *do* desire to walk in His ways – but I am also attracted to my *own* way sometimes, and find attraction in my own ideas and my own sense of priorities and my own desires. So, at times, I find myself going in the exact opposite direction.
- 4) It takes effort to follow Jesus. It takes effort to remain in the Vine. (John 15:5) It requires that we stay vigilant in guarding our hearts and keeping watch over our wandering thoughts – because some of our thoughts can lead us right out from under the protective shelter we find at God's right hand.
- 5) The Lord our God never shows any sense of disappointment in Jonah. Jonah is not berated by God, nor does the Lord raise His voice in anger at Jonah's obstinacy, nor does He threaten Jonah. No, God shows perfect patience: God simply engineers Jonah's circumstances in such a way as to present Jonah with a decision: On the one hand, Jonah can continue to go his own way. On the other hand, Jonah can decide to stop fleeing from the Lord and instead do what God wants him to do.
- 6) I think we all know this sense of fleeing from God, or wanting to avoid Him. Whether it comes in a decisive moment like is the case here with Jonah, or it comes simply by neglecting our spiritual life and slowly drifting away from Him, there are times when we go in the opposite direction.

Application: What is my experience of God when I have run from Him? Have I encountered a harsh judge, a biting critic, or have I instead encountered a God of seemingly endless patience and mercy? Are there certain habits of my heart that take me away from God? When I go in the opposite direction, does it tend to be a choice – with full awareness that I am doing so, or is it more like a slow drifting away, even perhaps unnoticed until some triggering event in my circumstances snaps me back to awareness?

Third Consideration: Tarshish

- 1) We know that Tarshish was a real place from both Biblical and extra-Biblical sources. Besides being mentioned in the book of Jonah, it is also identified as a place in Isaiah, Psalms, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Biblical passages name Tarshish as a source of King Solomon's great wealth in metals - especially silver, but also gold, tin and iron. (Ezekiel 27)
- 2) Tarshish is named in the Akkadian inscriptions of the Assyrian king, Esarhaddon (669 B.C.) and also named in the Phoenician inscription on the Nora Stone – the oldest Phoenician inscription known from Sardinia and dated to the late 9th to early 8th century B.C.
- 3) The exact location of this famous place has been lost to historians since the time of Christ. Some scholars identify it with the Phoenician port in the south of Spain known to the Greeks as Tartessos – making it very far away indeed. The historian Josephus identified it with Tarsus – not far from Antioch. This has immediate New Testament resonance because we know Paul was originally known as “Saul of Tarsus” and he is another one called to take up an unexpected mission. Jesus called Peter “the son of Jonah.” (Matthew 16:17) Both Peter and Paul would take up Jonah's mission to preach to the gentiles.

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- 4) Whether it was one of these two or some other place, it was clearly in the opposite direction of Nineveh. Jonah had to travel west towards the port of Joppa to go there, not east towards the Assyrian city of Nineveh.
- 5) While Nineveh was a seat of power, Tarshish was a seat of wealth. Tarshish trades with Israel but poses no military threat. It would be considered "friendly" territory, while Nineveh was clearly hostile and had been at odds with Israel since very early on in history.
- 6) Is it significant that Jonah flees towards Tarshish – away from God's call on him and toward the seats of wealth and luxury? Does Jonah think that he can hide from God under the cover of wealth?

Application: What about me? How do I relate to money and wealth? Do I think I can hide from God under the protective power of personal wealth? Do I think to myself, "okay, when I have this much money and I know I am financially okay, then I will do such and such to serve God?" Am I generous in my tithes and in helping those in need? Or do I place more faith in my bank account than I do in my personal relationship with Jesus?