

## Jonah: The Problem of Mercy

Jonah 4:1-11

The story of Jonah is a "Mercy" story. Most of us know about the fish, but Jonah is not fundamentally a fish story. It's a story about the great mercy and the free grace of almighty God.

### **I. WHEN JONAH IS RUNNING, THERE'S MERCY WITH THE LORD.**

You know the story:

- God calls Jonah to Nineveh. He catches a boat for Tarshish.
- God calls Jonah east. He goes west.
- God calls Jonah up to Nineveh. He heads down to Joppa.
- God calls Jonah to modern day Iraq. He sails for modern day Spain.
- God calls Jonah to follow. He elects to flee.

Have you ever thought about just running away? James Thurber wrote, "All men must learn before they die what they are running from and to and why?"

In Anne Taylor's novel, *Ladder of Years*, Delia Grinstead, the wife of a prominent physician, mother of three children, the caretaker of an extended family, took a stroll down a Delaware beach while on a family vacation and never came back. She did not drown. She was not abducted. This slender, small-boned woman with light brown hair simply strolled into the afternoon sun, and into a strange new way of life.

I guess there is more than one way to run away. Some run with their feet. Others run with their feelings. They shut down emotionally. Some run with their work. Others run with their pleasure. Some don't run at all; they are just no longer there. Looking them in the eye is like staring into a blank wall.

### **II. WHEN JONAH IS PRAYING, THERE'S MERCY WITH THE LORD.**

On this downward flight, Jonah winds up in the belly of a whale, or more precisely, a "large fish provided by the Lord." Our inquiring minds want to know, how can this be? How can a man live three days in the belly of a whale? Over the years, I've made this observation. Children love it. Adults question it. Literalists try to prove it. Some try to dismiss it. Believers celebrate the message: Psalm 139 says: "Whither shall I go from your Spirit or whither shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me."

So, what do you do in the belly of a whale? You pray!

Three ministers were in a discussion about appropriate positions for prayer while a telephone repairman worked on the phone system in the background. First minister says, "The key to prayer is in your hands. Fold your hands pointing toward heaven and God will hear." The second minister had a better idea. "Real prayer happens on your knees," he said authoritatively. The third minister with appreciation for monks said, "I have come to believe that our deepest prayers are said while lying prostrate on the floor, flat on your face." The telephone repairman spoke up and said, "I believe the most powerful prayer I ever made was while I was dangling upside down by my heels from a telephone pole suspended some 40 feet above the ground."

Jonah prays, I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me. Out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and You heard my voice. As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord, and my prayer came to You in your holy temple.

Not even a whale can stomach a runaway preacher, so you can call it a miracle, or a bad case of fish indigestion, but as the story goes, the whale vomits Jonah onto dry land. When Jonah is praying, God is merciful.

### **III. WHEN JONAH IS PREACHING, THERE'S MERCY WITH THE LORD.**

This time Jonah goes to Nineveh. His sermon was short and sweet. "Hell is better than you deserve. In 40 days, you are headed there." One senses a kind of glee in Jonah's voice as he delivers the message. As an old fellow said to me one time, "Preacher, it's one thing to dangle us over the fires of hell, but it's another thing to be smiling as you do it."

So, God is confronted with a major problem. How can he communicate a divine message using mere mortals? How can people see Jesus with frail humans in the pulpit?

Jonah had good reason to hate Nineveh. It was the capital city of Assyria. Assyria, then as now, was a hotbed of terrorism. Assyrians tortured their POWs by skinning them alive.

What Jonah fears most, happens. When everyone from the king down to the livestock put on the sackcloth of repentance, God has mercy and changes God's mind. Nineveh finds mercy in the eyes of the Lord.

A. W. Tozer reminds us "Mercy is not something God has. Mercy is something God is. Mercy is infinite, boundless, and unlimited."

I used to think that God got better as he got older. I thought the God of the New Testament was much more compassionate than the God of the Old Testament, but that is not true. The word "mercy" appears four times more often in the Old Testament than in the New Testament.

When we are sick, God is sad. When we sin, God forgives. When we miss the mark, God sends a messenger. God is merciful.

### **IV. WHEN JONAH IS POUTING, THERE'S MERCY WITH THE LORD.**

So, Jonah laments. Didn't I tell you this would happen? "I knew you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

Mercy is a wonderful idea until it is extended to an enemy. Then we tend to think God has gone too far. Several years ago many reacted to the sudden death of Ken Lay, the convicted CEO of Enron, by exclaiming, 'How dare he get off that easy? He should have rotted in jail. Only then would justice be served.'

While Nineveh is repenting, Jonah is pouting. His anger is so hot, that it even kills the bush that provides him shade. His rage is so deep that he wants to die. Once more he is in no mood to listen to God. There this story ends!

Do you ever pout? When things don't go your way, do you sit around feeling sorry for yourself? Are you angry with God? Maybe there's a reason this story ends the way it does. Great stories pull you into the plot. The reader is Jonah. Jonah is the reader.

When you are running, there's mercy with the Lord.

When you are praying, there's mercy with the Lord.

When you are angry, there's mercy with the Lord.

When you are sitting in the hot sun pouting, there's mercy with the Lord.

Come every soul by sin oppressed; there's mercy with the Lord.