

**Authentic Living – Major Themes from the Minor Prophets
The Fugitive (Jonah)**



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Most mornings around 6:45 my wife Kathy gets out of bed and goes for a run. Being a loving husband I roll over and pray for her safety and then go back to sleep. However, lately I have begun to feel a little guilty about not running myself. That is until I started reading the book of Jonah these last few weeks, as we have been focusing on his story in our series on the Minor Prophets (those smaller prophetic books near the end of the Old Testament). It was as I was reading Jonah that a wonderful thought struck me. I started to wonder if like Jonah, maybe the reason Kathy and many others who run in the morning, are running from something? So I am feeling much better about sleeping while she is out running because, for unlike Jonah I realize that I am not running from anything, actually I am not even moving out of my bed. See the study of scripture has its benefits.

Let me bring you up to speed on our study of Jonah. Last week we wrestled a little with whether the story of Jonah was a real story or not, and then with the question ‘why did God make sure that the story of Jonah was placed in scripture?’ I believe it was so he could show us something about His heart. For despite the fact that some people feel that God seems to only care for the Jewish nation and often is ‘uncaring’ and cruel toward the other nations around them. Jonah would have stood up and said that we have it all wrong. For actually the opposite is true. Jonah would say that from his personal experience, God has a heart for the world. He desires to be in a relationship with all people. How else can you explain why God would send Jonah, at a time when their greatest and most vicious enemy was the Assyrians, to their capital city of Nineveh, in order to give them a chance to repent and change their ways. How else can you explain how a sermon with only 8 words could transform a city and cause a city wide revival? God had already prepared their hearts for a meeting with Him, because he truly loved them. For Jonah would add, that just like he feared, as he told the folks from Nineveh about God, that there was going to be an amazing revival and ½ Million inhabitants of the city would turn to God.

God in his love and care forgave them and blessed them. What Jonah did find out was that often the number one thing that stood in the way of people outside of knowledge of God was finding that relationship with him. We as believers in God often have prejudices which prevent us from sharing that faith with others or we are too selfish (too caught up in our lives and our needs) to bother to share the good news that God has a heart for all people and a desire to come into relationship with them. So we left last week asking, who is our Nineveh? Who are those people whom we don’t believe God will love or that He can touch? So we have given up praying for them or sharing faith and friendship with them. Last week, I started you off in chapters 3 and 4 of Jonah because I wanted us to catch the number one emphasis of the book of Jonah. I wanted to show you that God has a love for the whole world, not just those within the small confines of this world, but our circle of friendships as well.

History and Background:

793 -758 BC was the time of Amos and just before Obadiah. Jonah is a prophet who receives a clear call from God to go and preach to the city of Nineveh, the capital city of Israel's greatest enemy, the Assyrians. These were a people who were culturally advanced, morally corrupt and known for their fierce brutality. Let's jump back to Jonah chapters 1 and 2. Last week as I was reading the book of Jonah, I found myself asking a simple question. Who told (wrote down) the story of Jonah? I came to the conclusion, it could only be one person, and that was Jonah himself. For he was the only person on the trip who was running from God's will, who then ended up in a huge fish, followed by hitting the beach with a stomach turning splash, or watching a city of ½ million turn to God. So here is my second question, why would Jonah record this story which made him look so foolish, so selfish and so ungodly? It could be for only one reason; it had to be that as he looked back at how foolish he had been and how stupid his actions were that he saw a story. That if caught, could save us from taking the same journey he had taken. That would save us the running, and learning lessons the hard way. So he felt it was worth sharing his story with us. His story was the prequel to the movie "The Fugitive."

Grab your bibles and turn to *Jonah 1:1*. Let me set the story up for you again, Jonah during a time when other prophets were getting words about how God is about to harshly judge Israel's enemies, Jonah received word that God wanted him to travel to Nineveh, the capital city of Israel's most dangerous enemies and give them a word from Him. Jonah, knowing the heart of God realizes that he if he tells the people of Nineveh God's word they will probably repent and God will forgive them (it would be like God asking a Jewish rabbi during WWII to preach to the Nazi elite). Israel's dreaded enemy will be saved. So he heads to the nearest port city of Joppa, jumps on a boat and heads the other way. His destination is Tarshish which is over 2000 miles from Nineveh.

Now, picture Jonah sitting on a chair in front of our congregation and saying, 'this morning I want to share 5 simple lessons that I have learned the hard way on my journey to Nineveh. Through a storm I traveled in a great Fish, to a city that no army could capture. Its walls were 100 ft high and wide enough for 2 chariots to meet on it and yet it fell before God in 40 days. This is what I've learnt, When it comes to God 'You can run but you can't hide'. He begins by saying "I know what I am talking about because ... I tried to run from God'. For because I didn't like the assignment God gave him I went to Joppa and purchased a ticket and headed west. Now don't miss this, Jonah's reason for not wanting to witness to those in Nineveh was probably the opposite too why you and I at times, don't want to share Jesus with other people. For you see Jonah's reason for not sharing was that he knew witnessing works and that when the message of God is shared with others they will become follows of God. God will somehow make himself known to them. Where often we don't witness because we aren't sure it works and we aren't convinced that God can change lives.

Here is a run away preacher whose actions show more faith in God than we do at times. When it comes to his running away from God you want to say "Jonah how stupid can you be how far you think you need to run to get away from God?" Will 100 miles or the 1000 miles to Tarshish (modern day Gibraltar) be a place on the map that God can't find. Listen to Psalm 139:7-10. I have been amazed at how many people have said 'I joined the military, took a job way up north, or did such and such because they really didn't want to do what God wanted them to do and then they add and believe it or not the guy

in the next bunk turned out to be a Christian. Or I was running from anything to do with faith and I was stoned out of my mind and because God wasn't going to let me go so he met me on the trip and scared me back to faith. I can personally say I tried to hide from God's call on my life, at Bible School (I was trying to look like I wanted to follow God when the last thing I wanted to do was end up in the ministry). What I found out was that Bible Schools are lousy places to hide from God. In Jonah's case and to his credit he got some distance from God but he still got caught. He found out like I did, God won't give up on us. He is even willing to let the storms of life strike us if that is what it takes to get our attention. Some of you know all about this as God has rocked your boat to get your attention. Because He wants you to live in the center of that sweet spot for which He has created you to be and enjoy he will at times rock our boat to get our attention.

But there is an interesting twist to Jonah's running from God. Look at vs. 5 here is Jonah, far from God and in the middle of a storm that threatens to break the ship apart, which causes seasoned sailors to be terrified. And yet we find Jonah was fast asleep. How is that possible? Well maybe he was asleep because running from God is exhausting work. For I have found that it takes a lot of energy to argue and disobey God. But I think Jonah placed his experience in the story, because he knew that there are times when we are being disobedient to God and his word when we try and fool ourselves into thinking it must be ok (maybe even be ok with God) because somehow we experience what we feel is peace. I mention this because I have sat with Christians who look me right in the eye and say 'I am marrying this person who has no faith, I stole this from work or I am leaving my wife and family for another person and I have a peace about it.' Don't miss this .. here is Jonah in the midst of open rebellion with God and he is sound asleep, resting in a false sense of peace. So we need to remember to always check our 'feelings' against the word of God .. for if we want something badly enough we can fool ourselves into buying a lie (even if it is out of God's will).

Jonah would add ... and then there is this incident with the prepared fish! : 17 He would say .. *I tried running away .. I tried getting out of God's cell range .. I even tried drowning in the Mediterranean .. and God still sent a fish to catch me. Please get this ... Because God is God .. you can run but you can't hide.* Then he would lean forward and ask a simple question *Have you been deliberately running from God in some area of your life?* Is there a sin he wants you to jettison .. a ministry he wants you involved in .. an attitude he wants you to change .. or a calling he has placed in your life that you are running from? Because he would add .. *I tried running from God .. and I was pretty good at it .. but the problem is that God loved me too much to leave me where I was at .. and where I was heading. So can I save you some time and suggest you quit trying to run from God'.*

II. You never stop being a Witness for God .. the only question is what kind of witness you will be.

Poor Jonah, when he was boarding the ship didn't notice the rat were getting off. Let's pick up the story in vs. 4-10 – Here they are in the perfect storm. Real tough sailors are terrified for the ship was about to breakup. And that is when the sailors got religion and began praying to their gods. Then they began to jettison any surplus cargo in order to lighten the load on the ship. And then the captain noticed that Jonah was missing .. his first thought was that he may have fallen overboard in the storm. But when they found him asleep they didn't know what to think. The captain was desperate and so (maybe thinking this man may be religious) he asked him to pray to 'his' god and maybe that would help. Then being superstitious sailors they cast lots to see whose fault it was that this storm which had seemed to come out of nowhere as if God was out to get them. And when the lot fell on the guy with sleep in his eyes .. they started asking questions in vs. 8. Now listen to his reply in vs. 9 .. they were ok until he said his God controlled the 'Sea' .. vs. 11-12. You see Jonah had no question that this was his fault and that he deserved punishment from God. Look at their response .. :13 – These sailors were nice guys.. I would have thrown Jonah overboard just for being so stupid to try and run from God and involve me in

his running. Don't miss this side lesson here .. the last place you want to be in next to a person who is running from God. I say that for I have watched wonderful young women date some guy who is obviously running from God/with poor judgment and they date them/fall in love with them because *"they are going to save them and change them"*. Occasionally that works .. most times you wake us to late/ with too many entanglements in the middle of the storm they created. And the same thing happens when we choose bad company ... the cost of riding along on their journey can harm your future. Back to the story .. look what is happening .. a crew of non-believing sailors are losing their cargo .. endangering their lives .. because a follower of God is not living like a believer should. They are paying the cost for his sinful actions. Acts 1:8 says *"..and you shall be my witnesses .."*. Please notice it doesn't say that when we are doing everything right .. living godly lives .. then we will become God's witnesses. It simply states that if you are a believer ..you ARE a witness. And because you are a witness to Jesus .. the only question is *if you will be a good witness or a bad witness for him.* It is interesting that we seem to think that we can live our lives as 'secret Christian agents' – and somehow no one will connect our actions with our Jesus. Somehow people will always sense your connection to him (the sailors did).. and then they will watch you to see what Jesus is really like. The point is simple .. You never stop being a Witness for God .. the only question is what kind of witness you will be. So be a good one.

III. When a Person is Disobedient .. God will not let it slide

This is when Jonah would really get animated. He would say .. *the sea was raging .. the sailors couldn't look me in the eye .. and then as the waves washed across the deck the sailors grabbed me and threw me into the sea. I can still taste the salt on my lips .. still feel the water filling my lungs .. and as I sank I knew I deserved everything I was getting.* For while God is gracious .. he will not let our sin .. or live in disobedience forever. The Minor Prophets keep reminding us that God is just .. he is fair .. but because justice is a part of his character he will also judge us for our actions. And despite the fact that Jonah had made it an impressive distance from Joppa ... and may have thought he had gotten away with spitting in God's face. God, because he loved Jonah and wasn't going to give up on him .. did business with Jonah. That is what I Cor. 12 is talking about when it says *some of you are sick because you have taken too lightly the blessings of God/ taken communion in a wrong way .. or lived in ways you know are against God's word..*. The fact is from my observation God will allow storms to enter our lives because some of us would never pray or turn back to God unless that happens. But can I remind you what vs.17 says *'but God provided a fish..'* – not to judge Jonah but to save him. Max Lacado says *'if there is 1000 steps between you and God .. God will take the 999 and then leave the last one for you'*. God after not letting Jonah's sin slide .. sent a fish to usher him back toward God and life. The point is .. that God will not allow us to keep doing things that are wrong without consequences .. but God loves to give 2nd chances. So if Jonah's story sounds familiar .. take that step back to God and choose life again.

IV. The Safest Place you Can be is in the Center of God's Will

The miracle of the story isn't that Jonah got swallowed by a huge fish .. but that God saved Jonah. For when he was as good as dead .. God provided a fish. And when Jonah entered the city of 1/2 million Assyrians in Nineveh, a city where any sign of opposition led to the person being impaled/ skinned alive or beheaded. Jonah walked in and preached that unless they change their ways God would destroy their city. And he got away with it, because God was on his side. There will be times in some of your lives you will be in a foreign country/ maybe in a tough spot because of your faith .. or maybe it will be your child who feels called to minister in a place where it is dangerous. When that happens remember that in the middle of the raging storm and challenging Nineveh to repent that the safest place you can be is in the center of God's will for your life.

V. When we listen to God .. we get to be Involved in Amazing life Changing adventures

I am sure Jonah asked himself one simple question over and over again. Why didn't God just choose another preacher to send to Nineveh? He had been such a pain to God .. why didn't he just pass him by and choose someone else? There can be only one answer... God wanted Jonah to have the joy of being a part of the greatest revival in the history of mankind. As Jonah looked back on his action he must have felt like such an idiot .. for what he was trying to run away from, and what God was chasing him across ½ of the known world for .. was to let him be a part of a revival that has never been repeated again in the history of mankind. I wonder how often when we are running from God .. we are actually running from what could be the most amazing adventure of our lives. When I was running from being a pastor ... I was running from what has been the joy of my life. If you are running from God don't miss the fact that as you run from the God .. you are not only robbing others (like the sailors/ folks in Nineveh) of a possible meeting with God. You are not only robbing God of using you in his plans to change our world. But you are also robbing yourself of what could be the greatest joys ...the greatest opportunity to make eternal differences and the greatest chance to have the adventure of a life time.

I am sure, as Jonah ended his story he would wipe a tear from his eyes and say ... don't run from God .. run toward him .. and you will be surprise how wonderful will be the result of joining him on the adventure he has for you. For the second reason for writing the book of Jonah was to let you know that just as God loves the world .. He loves you