

Text: Jonah 1:1-3

Title: “Living the Will of God” (Pew Bible, pg.916)

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION – We’re going to board a special airplane flying over biblical history. If we start at the very beginning of history we fly over...

- Age of Beginnings – God’s creation of the universe, the earth, Adam and Eve, up to the great Flood of Noah’s times
- Age of the Patriarchs – God’s dealings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
- Egyptian Age – Joseph, Moses and the Exodus
- Age of the Conquest of Canaan – Joshua leading the Israelites into the Promised Land, the period of the Judges

Note: Now our special plane is beginning its initial descent to our destination as we come to the ...

- Age of the Monarchs – Saul, David and Solomon ... Golden Age

Here we are getting ready to land in the time in which the first of the prophets begin their ministry. This is a time of great apostasy in Israel, and God has special spokesmen He is sending to them as we come to the period known as the ...

- Divided Kingdoms – Israel (Northern Kingdom) splits from Judah (Southern Kingdom)

There are sixteen of the writing prophets in the OT and eleven of them preach during this time frame. The remainder of their ministries will extend into the next periods ... The Age of the Exile and the Age of the Return from Exile.

I’ll tell you more about the prophets in a moment. But for the next few months we’re going to get better acquainted with these unusual guys as I preach a series of messages entitled “Profiting from the Prophets.” Each week I’ll preach a message from a different prophetic book, going mostly in chronological order.

So we’ve landed in the Northern Kingdom of Israel 750 to 800 years before the birth of Christ. And we’ve caught up with a prophet by the name of Jonah who prophesied in the Northern Kingdom, but also God sent him on an international mission trip. Let’s open our Bibles to the book that bears Jonah’s name ... Jonah 1 (pg.916 in the Pew Bible). Now to get us started let’s read vv.1-3.

Here in these first three verses of Jonah we are introduced to the three main characters in this biblical account. Let’s just get acquainted with them in the order that they are introduced, and as I introduce them I’ll remind you of the story of Jonah.

THE GRACIOUS GOD (vv.1,3)

Jonah 1:1 - The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:

The whole story begins and ends with the word of the Lord. The Lord speaks to Jonah in v.1. And the last words of the book in Jonah 4 are the Lord speaking. And in between Jonah 1:1 and 4:11 we have the Lord clearly orchestrating everything according to His sovereign gracious purposes.

You notice in Jonah 1:1 that the name “LORD” is in all caps. When you see that in the OT you should know that the writer is indicating that this is the proper name of the One True God, Jehovah ... the great God of Israel.

The events that unfold in the four chapters of Jonah are all orchestrated by the sovereign, gracious God. Everything is initiated by Him. The intentions and actions of the Lord is the main point of the story. The hero of the Book of Jonah is not Jonah or the big fish that swallows him. The hero is the gracious God.

The next character is...

THE WAYWARD PROPHET (vv.1,3)

Jonah 1:1 - The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:

Jonah is only mentioned in one other place in the OT, II Kings 14:25 where we are told a little about his ministry of prophecy in Israel. There he is called a prophet, though here in v.1 he is not.

Jonah is one of a category of prophets called the Minor Prophets. The Major Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Lamentations is also grouped with the Major Prophets because of its association with Jeremiah. The Minor Prophets are the remaining twelve prophetic books in the OT ... the last twelve books of the OT.

Now they aren't called Minor Prophets because they are like Minor League prophets ... not as good as the Major League guys like Isaiah and Jeremiah. And it's not like they are doing minor surgery and the big boys have the major surgery messages. No, they are simply called Minor Prophets because the books are shorter.

Jonah's message and ministry have nothing to do with Israel, at least directly. It has to do with one of Israel's neighbors ... in fact, a fierce and dreaded enemy of Israel. Jonah is sent to city of Nineveh, the capital of the powerful nation of Assyria. We'll learn more about Nineveh in just a moment, but I will say that Assyria looms like a massive cloud on the horizon for Israel. It controls all the land to the north and east of Israel. Imagine if you will a foreign enemy that was as close as Oklahoma City to our north, and spreading up to the Great Lakes and all across the eastern side of the US to New England and down to Florida. That's how big and how close Nineveh was.

Now back to Jonah. He's a prophet of the Lord, but he's not acting like one. The word of the Lord came to him about Nineveh. Jonah is to go there and preach against it. But that's not what Jonah does.

Jonah 1:3 - 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.

Now Jonah has a problem with going to Nineveh. Remember I said that Nineveh is to the east and north of Israel. When Jonah gets on the ship headed to Tarshish, he is probably headed to a port at the far western end of the Mediterranean Sea ... as far away as he can possibly get from Nineveh. It's like God tells you to go to Dallas, and instead you get on a bus and go to Los Angeles.

Jonah hates the Ninevites and he thinks that if he doesn't go and preach against them, they will not be warned of God's looming judgment and they'll be destroyed ... exactly what Jonah wants to happen to them.

But according to the text, the main issue with Jonah is not his hatred of Nineveh. He is rebelling against the Lord. He is running from the Lord and God's will for his life.

ILLUSTRATION – There's been a commercial airing recently about some guys who are travelling about in their SUV and periodically they stop to check to see if there's a cell signal. After checking they move on. The assumption is, from our own experience, that they are roaming around trying to find a place where they have a cell signal. We all understand that. So the assumption is that this is a cellular company commercial advertising that they have a stronger signal that you don't have to go searching for. But no, the commercial is actually a car company commercial advertising that their SUV will take you to places that you *can't* get a signal. These guys are driving around, not trying to find a signal, but trying to get somewhere where they don't have a signal ... where they can't be reached. That's exactly what Jonah was doing.

Is that where you are today? Oh sure, you're in church, but in the rest of your life you are running from the will of the Lord. Pay careful attention to what follows.

The rest of Chapter One happens at sea. The Lord is dealing with Jonah, and He sends such a violent storm that the ship that Jonah has set sail on is about to break up and sink. The pagan sailors on board begin to toss up prayers to their gods and toss out anything that could lighten the ship.

Somebody's god is mad and they need to figure it out. Soon Jonah's story comes out. He admits:

Jonah 1:9 - "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

He goes on to confess to them that he is running from the Lord. "It's all my fault." They must have thought, "You're a man of God and you're running from God. Even pagans know you don't mess with the will of your God."

So to appease Jonah's God, the sailors, reluctantly throw Jonah overboard, and storm subsides and we hear no more of the sailors. But things are just getting interesting for Jonah.

Just as God called up a storm to stop Jonah's escape, He calls up a big fish that swallows Jonah. Now don't misunderstand. God sent the big fish (we're not told it was a whale, but something that big) to actually rescue Jonah. For three days and three nights Jonah lives in the belly of this big fish.

Note: Jesus used Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights as a parable of His own death on the cross and His resurrection three days later.

This is actually a spiritual turning point for Jonah. In the belly of the fish Jonah cries out to the Lord. You read his prayer in Jonah 2. Jonah finally comes to his senses.

Now the Lord intervenes again and has the fish vomit Jonah up on the shore, perhaps not far from where Jonah set out to begin with. And we see hand of our gracious God in the words of...

Jonah 3:1-2 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."

It's as if the Lord is saying, "Alright Jonah, let's try this again ... Go!" And this time Jonah obeyed the Lord. He walks into the city of Nineveh and announces the Lord's message, which unfolds in more detail.

Jonah 3:4b - "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

Now Jonah must have been stunned to see the results. Nineveh repents. They believed God and, from the most important to the least important person, they repented before God. The king of Nineveh gets word and he issues a proclamation that the city is to fast and pray and stop their sinning. Maybe God will relent of the judgment He intended to bring on Nineveh. And God, seeing all this unfold, has compassion on the city and spares them.

Note: O that the same kind of spiritual awakening would occur in our land.

Now you would think that Jonah would be delighted at the response of the Ninevites. But no!

Jonah 4:1 - Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.

And he prays, "I knew it. I knew that You were a gracious and compassionate God, and if I preached and Nineveh repented You would spare them. I knew it." And Jonah prays to die. Imagine that! A great national spiritual awakening has occurred and Jonah is sick with disappointment.

Jonah goes outside the city and sits down to wait and see what will happen. It's hot and the Lord once again orchestrates nature by causing a vine to grow up over Jonah to provide some shade for him. Jonah kind of likes this. But no sooner had the sun come up the next day, the Lord caused a worm to come along and chew on the vine, causing it to wither. And Jonah starts to bake under the hot sun ... and he gets hot under the collar. He's angry at God again for what He did to the poor little vine.

And God says, “Jonah! Just listen to yourself. You had more concern for that silly vine than you had for the city of Nineveh that was on the verge of annihilation.” Just push the pause button with Jonah for a minute.

Now this is a good place for us to look at the third major character in the story. There’s the gracious God and the rebellious prophet, but also there is ...

THE WICKED CITY (v.2)

Nineveh is one of the most powerful cities in the world, located in present-day Iraq. It was a very important and impressive city in the day. But God is most concerned for this city because of its wickedness.

Jonah 1:2 - “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

Their wickedness stinks to high heaven. This city is living outside the will of God. They are a barbaric and evil city. And the Israelites not only fear them ... they hate them.

But as wicked and violent as Nineveh is, look at God’s heart for the city:

Jonah 4:11 - But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”

So God is working on two tracks. God wants His will to be done in Nineveh. And He wants His will to be done in the life of His servant Jonah. Let me close with reminding you of some important truths about living the will of God for your life:

1. GOD REVEALS HIS WILL AND EXPECTS US TO LIVE IT.

He’s not going to hide it from you. God has a will for the morals of your life, just as He did for Nineveh. He sent Jonah to reveal that to them. And for us, God has revealed in His Word what is right and what is wrong.

The bad news is that we have all violated God’s moral law which makes us sinners separated from Him because He is a holy God. The good news is that God sent His Son to perfectly live God’s will, to die as a substitute in our place so our sins could be forgiven when we put our trust in Him.

So God has a will for the *morals* of your life. He also has a will for the *details* of your life ... where you should go to college, the person you will marry, the job you will take, the car you will buy.

Now Jonah got out of the will of God not because he did something immoral or illegal. It was not immoral or illegal for Jonah to get on the ship and to sail off to Tarshish. But he was violating the will of God for a very important detail of his life. God told Jonah to do something ... to go

somewhere ... and Jonah stubbornly refused. And that's just as much a sin for a believer as violating God's moral will.

2. WHEN YOU DISOBEY GOD'S WILL HE WILL COME AFTER YOU.

Why? God loves you. He knows His will for you is the very best thing for you. If He loves you why wouldn't He do everything to help you live in His will? That's why God came after Nineveh. They were living outside His will and He loved them and wanted them to live in His will. And God went after Jonah who was also out of His will.

You can't outrun God. God disciplines His people when we get out of His will. Why? Because He loves us. He knows His will is the best place for us to live. That's why God blows up storms and calls up big fish. If you are a Christian and you are trying to run away from God in some area of your life, realize that you will never succeed. You can never outrun God.

3. REPENTANCE IS THE PATH BACK TO GOD.

God is gracious and gives us second chances. God did it for Nineveh. When they repented God relented. And for a period of time Nineveh lived under the blessing of the presence of God. It was also true for Jonah. Remember, the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Jonah stopped running from God and obeyed. Folks, that's repentance, pure and simple.

4. ULTIMATELY GOD IS AFTER A HEART-CHANGE IN US.

The city of Nineveh needed a heart change. Their evil and violent behavior came from an evil and violent heart. And for a time, the heart of that city was changed. And Jonah's problem with going to Nineveh was because there was something wrong in His heart. And it all comes out at the end of the story. Jonah was sulking because God had mercy on Nineveh. Jonah obeyed and preached what God told him to preach, but his heart wasn't in it. The fact is that he hated those Assyrians; they didn't deserve a second chance.

And at the end here is Jonah sitting outside Nineveh sulking that the vine had been eaten by a worm. And God says, "Jonah, just look at you. You had so much concern for that vine..."

Jonah 4:11c - Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

ILLUSTRATION – God got in my face about this when I was in India. Near the end of our trip we went into the city to let the team do a little souvenir shopping. David and Peggy Shepherd, some of our missionaries in Bangalore were helping us out. Peggy has a great heart for the Indian people, particularly the poor. When we Americans go into the city we are spotted instantly and the street vendors soon surround us trying to sell us their stuff. I have to be honest with you, it annoys me. I mostly ignore them, but sometimes I lose my cool and say, "No, I don't want it." Not Peggy. There was this young man who followed us for several blocks. He had this little basket that opens up and reveals a cobra inside. Peggy kept bargaining with the young man. It started out with 500 rupees (about \$10) and she kept getting him to go lower. She kidded with the guy and he responded by lower his price finally down to about 100 rupees. She said, "Sold." I could see this guy's face.

“Wow lady, you drive a hard bargain.” We paid the guy and then Peggy looked into his face and said, “Are you hungry?” The guys said “yes.” Peggy went over and bought him something to eat from a street vendor and gave it to him. Then she said, “Let’s pray for this young man, and we all gathered around him and prayed for him.” It then dawned on me what Peggy was doing all along. I was annoyed by the guy; Peggy saw a lost, hopeless soul. And God was after me on the streets of Bangalore as well.