

**Hearing.... And running?  
Jonah 1:1-17**

Well brothers and sisters that was quite a start to our Breakfast Theatre presentation, this first chapter in the story of Jonah the son of Amittai.

And once you get past the amazing set design and all the technical bells and whistles - you may have noticed that the story is a bit sparse on details.

There's no description of the setting, the dialogue is functional, and the main focus in the first chapter is the struggle against the violent storm.

It would be the perfect piece of scripture to make into a classic Arnold action movie. *"Jonah! Go to Nineveh!"*

But seriously - it's very sparse on the details. When God speaks to Jonah we aren't told where Jonah is, God does not specify what Jonah is to say nor does He list any particular offences which the city of Nineveh has committed.

When Jonah flees we're not told how he fled, what route He took, or how long it took for Him to get to Joppa. He boards a ship, but we're not told what kind, or how much he paid,

It doesn't even give us a good description of who Jonah is?

And this lack of detail makes it difficult for us to really understand what is going on in this story and why it happened and what significance it has for our lives today.

So, the first thing we need to do as we begin our study of Jonah is to familiarize ourselves with the background info that sets the context for when this story takes place, and we find that information in 2 Kings 14:23-27.

Which reads "*In the fifteenth year of Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah*" now this gives us a historical date of 786 B.C. – so roughly in the same time period as the starting of the Olympic Games, and the founding of the city of Rome.

But King Amaziah is only a calendar reference marker here...

It's King "*Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel*" who is the focus and in vs. 23 it says he "*became king in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years.*"

So we're in 786 BC, and because we've just heard about the King of Judah and the King of Israel - we know this is the time period when God's people had separated into two Kingdoms. The ten northern tribes had split from the two southern tribes and they each had their own King and capital city.

So vs.24 says King Jeroboam "*did evil in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn away from any of the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit.*" What sins were those?

Well, remember Jerusalem was both the religious and political center for God's people. When the Kingdom split in two, Jerusalem stayed with the Southern Kingdom and so the Northern Kingdom had to create another religious worship center with different worship practices in northern Israel so that they wouldn't be weakened politically by their people

going back to worship at Jerusalem. But worshiping God in different ways apart from the Temple were serious sins.

let's keep reading – vs. 25 "*He was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea, in accordance with the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hopher.*"

Ah-ha! So, here we discover that Jonah son of Amittai was a from Gath Hopher, he lived during the reign of Jeroboam II, and his claim to fame as a prophet was giving the Word which prophesied King Jeroboam II would win a military victory and enlarge the northern Kingdom.

Now if you have never heard a reference to Jonah apart from the story that we started this morning - you're forgiven. Jonah rarely made headline news in ancient Israel because he worked in the shadow of some of the greatest prophets that Israel ever had.

Elijah and Elisha were his predecessors; Amos and Hosea were his contemporaries; and Isaiah came after him.

These were all amazing men of God who did miracles and stood up to ungodly Kings and actually wrote scripture.

By contrast - Jonah's only claim to fame at the start of this story was a prophecy that a wicked King, who used religion for political purposes, would succeed in building up the Northern Kingdom – Samaria - and expand its territory.

However, Jonah's one-hit wonder prophecy was actually very significant and 2 Kings 14:26-27 explains why. We read *“The Lord had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the Lord had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash.”*

It's interesting how this explanation for salvation is worded as a double negative.

The text says God didn't say He was going to wipe them out – so instead He had compassion on them and He lets them know this by sending His Word to Jonah to prophesy that King Jeroboam would win a military victory and end the Northern Kingdom's suffering at the hands of their enemies.

So why is all this background information important?

Well brothers and sisters it helps us understand why Jonah is disobedient to God's command that he must go and preach against the city of Nineveh, the capitol of the Assyrian Empire to the point of defying this command and fleeing from God!

Now it is true that the Ninevites were enemies of God's people, the Assyrian empire was brutal and cruel and had inflicted much suffering and oppression upon Israel and the surrounding nations, and they were feared and hated.

And we usually present this as the reason for Jonah's refusal to go and preach against Nineveh – but there's much more to it - and since Breakfast Theatre is supposed to help us really

dig into the story – we’re going to get to the bottom of Jonah’s extreme effort to disobey God this morning.

So the information in 2 Kings reveals to us that Jonah’s “one-hit wonder prophecy” had come to epitomize the entitlement that Israel thought they possessed as God’s Chosen people.

They believed they were special and unique- which was true- but they mistakenly believed this was why God had chosen them, protected them, blessed them and had decided not to blot their name out from under heaven.

By contrast the Assyrian Empire, represented by its capital city of Nineveh, epitomized everything that was Gentile and not Israelite. It was a constant threat to Israel - culturally, then religiously, and then militarily and politically.

So Jonah rejects God’s command to go to Nineveh because Israel and Assyria are the antithesis of each other, polar opposites which repel each other - like magnets do when you try to force the same ends of a magnet together.

And everything that happens in the first chapter of this story reflects this opposition of opposites – the details and dialogue may be sparse, but you can’t miss the opposites...

The wickedness of Nineveh has come up to God, but Jonah goes down to Joppa,

Jonah is supposed to go to Nineveh, which is northeast from Gath-Hepher - but he flees to Joppa, which is southwest from Gath-Hepher. Nineveh is in the east; Tarshish is in the west...

So what do we learn from this focus on opposites at the very start of the story?

Well friends – this is the Scripture’s way of telling us that human beings do not naturally seek out, or obey the one True God – instead they oppose him, they do the opposite of what He wants.

Either because we are ignorant of God and his Laws – we’ve never heard of them, or more likely we only have a superficial

knowledge of them, and so like the Ninevites we go about our day to day lives doing whatever it is that we think is best.

We live life by our own morals and ethics or whatever seems to be socially appropriate, BUT we are unaware of how we actually break God's Laws and offend Him!

Or, we might know all about God and His Laws because He has revealed himself to us through His Word, like He did to Jonah.

So, we may know all about the Bible, how it reveals the 10 Commandments, and Jesus and our salvation... but we don't realize that our relationship with God, with Jesus Christ has become loaded with entitlement and stems from self-focused, self-serving motives.

Brothers and sisters, it was the entitlement, and self-serving motives tht caused Jonah to simply refuse to obey God's command to go to Nineveh.

Jonah and the Northern Kingdom were thrilled when God's Word, the Word of YAHWEH, came and assured them they would defeat their enemies – it benefited them. Boy it's great when the one true God takes your side!

But when YAHWEH instructs Jonah to go to preach against Nineveh - Jonah's self-centered nature is revealed because he knows it's not in Israel's or his best interests.

Now we might be thinking – Hold on... why not go? Didn't YAWEH tell Jonah that it was Nineveh's evil which has come up before Him and prompted God to command this?

Isn't God angry with Nineveh and won't He destroy them? Wouldn't that be in Israel's best interests, wouldn't that be something that Jonah would want?

But this's why the explanation that Jonah disobeys God's command because he hated the Ninevites doesn't work very well. His dislike should be a motivating factor to go and bring a word of judgement and destruction against them.

But in actual fact brothers and sisters it was Jonah's previous prophetic experience of delivering the Word from YAWEH to the Northern Kingdom... that made him disobey.

We need to remember Israel had a Covenant relationship with God, and this fact is highlighted throughout this story by the use of God's covenant name – YAHWEH.

And the Covenant between YAHWEH and Israel formalized the arrangement for blessings and protection which God would give and how they were to respond in gratitude, AND it also spelled out the consequences if Israel was unfaithful to this agreement.

And as we read in 2 Kings 14:24, Jeroboam II and the people in the Northern Kingdom had been unfaithful. They had changed the location and ways in which Yahweh was worshiped, and this was a violation of the Covenant, it was considered to evil in the eyes of God.

So YAHWEH had every right to let Israel suffer – in fact the suffering often caused them to repent and turn back to seek Him in the past. Then they would cry for God's help and He would send someone to deliver them and they would turn back and be faithful...for a while.

But in Jonah's experience the Northern Kingdom had not cried out to YAHWEH, they had not turned away from their sin – Rather YAHWEH had seen their suffering and had compassion on them and graciously delivered them IN SPITE of it.

So the point that had Jonah worried, was that if YAHWEH was not going to hold His chosen people to their end of the covenant and enforce the consequences for unfaithfulness –

Why would Jonah expect YAHWEH to judge Nineveh who had no such relationship with God? To put it bluntly – if Israel could get away with murder...what would Nineveh get away with!?

So Jonah hears YAHWEH's command to go and preach against Nineveh and he's got a pretty good idea of what's coming.

This is the real reason that Jonah defies God and flees; he will not do it. In fact – when Jonah is rebuked, by gentile sailors who don't know YAHWEH - His answer may sound noble to us, but pay closer attention and what you hear Jonah really saying is that He would rather die than turn back and be the one who brings God's grace to those who are not part of God's people.

So the true nature of Jonah's relationship with YAHWEH is revealed – it is entitled and self-focused. Shame!

But... what about us brothers and sisters? What about our relationship with YAHWEH? Is it self-focused and entitled?

Friends the self-centeredness of Jonah is revealed by how he responds to the content of God's Word when it comes to him, and God's Word still does that for us today.

So think about it... do we only respond with interest and enthusiasm to those chapters and verses in the Bible that really resonate with what we want to hear about?

These days people respond enthusiastically to God's Word when it speaks to us about blessings, how to be successful in life, be better parents and spouses, finding our purpose and we love how it talks about Love and not being judgmental, and preachers who stick to these topics will get no complaints from their congregants.

And there is nothing wrong with what God's Word says about these topics – provided we don't twist what it says – God speaks to us about these things for our benefit.

But are we as eager and willing to listen with interest and enthusiasm on what the Bible has to say to us about what we don't want to hear?

How do we react when the Bible talks about our sins and how they are offensive to God?

Do we try and soften the parts of the scripture that speak about God's anger with our sin? Do we avoid reading sections of the Word that talk about the Devil and demons and Hell and eternal punishment?

What about the commands of Jesus to look after the poor and needy, heal the sick and do miracles in His name – and what about the command to Go and make disciples of all nations?

Do we avoid reading about those things? And when those parts of God's Word come to us in a message or a sermon and confront us – how do we respond? Do we obey or do we hear it... and deliberately choose to disobey.

In the answers to those questions brothers and sisters we will find the truth about how much of our relationship with God is motivated by self-interest and entitlement –just like Jonah.

Now I don't know what you are struggling with personally that God's Word might be confronting you about these days.

Perhaps you don't want to hear what it says about how you ought to treat your wife with love or your husband with respect?

Maybe you don't want to hear what it says about being overbearing in discipline with your kids, or that you mustn't avoid or neglect disciplining them?

Maybe you want to avoid hearing that God's design for marriage is between one man and one woman, for life... and this is the only appropriate context for sexual intimacy?

Maybe you don't want to hear that we have a responsibility to help the poor and take care of those who can't take care of themselves, and to administer the healing power of Jesus...

Maybe you don't want to hear that the only way to truly know God as YAHWEH is through Jesus Christ? Or maybe you're ok with that personally - but I don't want to hear about having to actually GO OUT in some organized fashion to pray about that, or... God-forbid, actually talk to other people about that!



So brothers and sisters... after being confronted by what God's Word says on all these topics - how are you feeling?

Defensive, indignant, a little bit angry, do you want to obey - or do you want to run away?

You see brothers and sisters, this is how the Word of God exposes our own entitlement and self-focus in our relationship with God – you've just experienced what Jonah experienced, but please... lets learn from this first chapter of Jonah's story – don't run away! Stay – and let God deal with your selfishness.

First – listen and hear and believe the good news that is part of the background info in this first chapter - that God saw the suffering of his people and decided to do something about it; even when they did not cry out to Him or turn to Him in repentance...

In the same way – the wickedness of Nineveh had come up before God and He will not let that go unchecked and leave them to perish in their ignorance...

Brothers and sisters this good news is summarized best in Paul's words in Romans 5:8 *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* Take this truth home with you today – mull over it in your hearts, consider it in your minds, act on it.

God is not waiting for you to show Him that you have good potential to be a Christian or that there is a possibility you might turn to Him and repent from your sins – He is coming after us to save us even when we are not pursuing Him – even when we are fleeing from Him.

Now I know I said "don't be like Jonah, don't run away" but the truth is that we really can't help it!

So the other piece of good news that we need to hear is that we shouldn't grow discouraged when God's Word shows us how much self-interest we have in our hearts. We mustn't give up when we catch ourselves running from God and what His Word is confronting us with.

We don't need to strive to force our entitlement down and make ourselves grudgingly obey... instead the good news is that we only need to look to Jesus and trust and believe that He had NO self-interest or entitlement in His relationship to YAHWEH.

The scripture bears witness to this - Philippians 2:7-8 says that Jesus *"made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant... being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death...on a cross!"*

Jonah was willing to die to avoid being a messenger of grace, Jesus was willing die to become the very means of grace. So let us do as Hebrews 12:2 says *"fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."*

You see brothers and sisters, in keeping our eyes on Jesus we are reminded of how God first sought us out – how He determined to come and save us without our even asking Him to come and do that for us – He is the Author.

And this relieves us of the guilt and pressure of trying to change ourselves – we can leave that work in the hands of God's Holy Spirit.

So brothers and sisters – take note of how God's Word confronted you in this message this morning and remember it, write it down somewhere because I'm going to prophesy something for us...

God is going to change us, He's going to change each of us in those areas where we want to run from His Word – and we are not going to react the same way a year from now.

We will have been changed by God.

Why – because His Word says so... that's why I am *"confident of this, because he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* (Phil 1:6)

Amen.