

God is Relentless in His Pursuit – Jonah 1

If you were with us last week, you may recall I told a fish story to help illustrate the context of that message. This morning, we are going to begin looking at the greatest fish story ever told. And, just like last week, this fish story is real and has some significant implication for us. Over the next four weeks we are going to spend our time together in the OT book of Jonah. During this study we are going to explore four ways in which **God is Relentless**. What you will see is that God loves us and relentlessly pursues us even when we run from Him. Even when we might not want Him pursuing us. You'll see also that God is relentless in His offers of salvation. He is relentless in His grace and His compassion. I believe these series of messages will help us better understand God's love for us and in turn help us develop a stronger love for Him and for others. Especially those in our community that may be a bit different than us.

Before we begin reading this great book, I want to give you a bit of background information to help set the scene in your mind. Jonah shares a similar background and setting with Amos, another of Israel's prophets. Jonah was a prophet to the northern tribes of Israel during one of the times where nationally, they experienced peace and prosperity. However, as was typical with Israel and is sometimes typical with Christians today, peace and prosperity meant that they had become spiritually, morally, and ethically bankrupt. Their religious practices had become ritualistic and focused on idolatry. One of the ironic situations with the book of Jonah is that it records Jonah's prophecy to the Assyrians of Nineveh, rather than to his own people. Historically, Nineveh, an extremely wealthy port city, was an enemy of Israel and was known for their many brutal acts against them. As we read this book over the next few weeks, you'll see that God's purpose was more than just providing us with one of the most popular children's Bible stories of all time. Instead, God gives us a glimpse into Jonah's life to teach us about how His love and mercy is available for all people, even in the days before Jesus. If you know the story well, then you know that the heathen, Gentile city of Nineveh repented at the preaching of an extremely reluctant prophet during a time in Israel's history where they themselves would not repent even though God had sent many prophets to them. My prayer for you during this time is that you will embrace the RELENTLESSNESS of an Almighty GOD!

Read Jonah 1.

Right off the bat, you need to recognize where Jonah's calling came from. God gave a word of instruction to Jonah and asked him to go over from Joppa to Ninevah and preach against their blatant sinfulness. I don't know whether Jonah wanted to hear from God or not, but many people, especially Christian's say they wish they could hear God speak. I want to give you some truth this morning, if you'll allow. God speaks to us more than we know. Although God will most likely not speak audibly to us, He uses a variety of other ways to deliver His messages. We don't have the time to break all of this down, but I do want to give you a list of some of these ways. First, there is much to be learned by how God reveals Himself through His creation. We know that God is creative. He is a God of order and beauty. He is also a God that loves us so much that

He made the things of this world; beautiful things, inspiring things, moving things, for us to enjoy. God also uses life circumstances to speak to us. Just look at how he spoke to the mariners on the ship that day with Jonah. Those of you who are followers of Jesus already know that you have the Holy Spirit residing in you, so this is yet another way in which God speaks to us. The primary way God speaks to us is through the Bible, which you know from 2 Timothy 3:16 is *“breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”* If you’re one of the ones that wishes to hear from God, then I suggest you open your eyes and ears to what He is doing around you. But more important than that I suggest you read, study, and meditate on His Word, daily.

What happens when God does speak? Most of the time, a decision must be made. When God speaks to you, you are forced to choose between your way and His way. Sometimes God will ask us to do something we really would rather not do. That’s exactly what He asked of Jonah. And of course, we know which plan Jonah decided to go with. The plan that most of us usually go with too. The one that we like better, or think is better than God’s. How often have you decided to go your way and ended up isolated on a ship amid a powerful storm with nowhere else to turn but back to God? Let me tell you, if you want to go the opposite direction of God, Satan will be right there waiting with a ship ready to set sail.

Sometimes too, we think we can delay God. We think, I’m just so busy right now God. Give a day or two and I promise I’ll get to it. Those of you who know this story well will recognize this behavior from Jonah. When we read the rest of his story over the next few weeks, you’ll see that Jonah eventually does things God’s way.

Very rarely, and it’s unfortunate, do we choose the final option. That is to obey God’s command immediately. Oh, we obey when it comes to the “big” things in our lives. But in some of the areas that seem less significant, maybe we just don’t seek God’s guidance or other times maybe we think it won’t hurt to disobey God just this once. But after a while we find that we’re a lot further away from God than we thought we were because we’ve drifted away from Him.

This brings me to another point from our passage this morning. Our disobedience always affects others, whether we realize it or not. Jonah’s sin against God impacted the other passengers on the ship that day too. Our sin is never completely private. Even if you can’t see it on the surface, your sin, no matter how secret you might think it is, affects others. And usually, the effects are felt most by those who are closest to us – our spouses, our children, our co-workers, and our friends. Fortunately, God is in the business of straightening our messes out. Even in our passage this morning, God used Jonah’s sin as an opportunity to bring good into the lives of the other sailors. The powerful storm and Jonah’s testimony brought them to a place where they feared God and began to worship Him. I’m so glad that God, if He chooses, can bring good out of my messes. I’m also glad that God wants me to avoid those messes to begin with. It just requires obedience daily.

My last point today surrounds the place in which Jonah found himself. I don't know for sure, but I think finding himself in the belly of a smelly fish for three days was his low point. Sometimes, it takes a worst-case scenario to bring us to our senses. When he asked the sailors to throw him overboard, I have little doubt that Jonah figured that he would just die and that all his problems here on earth would be over. So, when that fish swallowed him and he had to live in the belly of that fish for three days, it had to have been his worst nightmare. But... this is exactly what Jonah needed in this moment. God used this experience to show Jonah that He had not given up on him, even though it appears Jonah had given up on himself. God was relentless in His pursuit of Jonah. Why? Because of His love for him and for all the people he wanted Jonah to minister to. Maybe you are going through what you consider to be your worst nightmare right now. If so, you need to consider the possibility that God is using it to show you how much he loves you. Maybe, your worst-case scenario is what is needed to draw you back to the arms of a loving and caring God.

This morning, I hope you have heard a word from God. If so, during our time of invitation, will you spend it praising Him and thanking Him for relentlessly pursuing you and loving you, even when you may not be pursuing Him?

Just like with Jonah, God has a plan to rescue you from your sin and disobedience. That way is found when you place your trust in Jesus and accept His love. The only way out of the mess you may find yourself in, is Jesus. If you have some questions about exactly what that means or how to do that, I would love to talk to you more about that.

Finally, as I've been speaking this morning, perhaps God has shown you areas of disobedience in your life, or He's pointed out the times you have chosen your way instead of His way. If this is the case, will you confess those things to Him, seek forgiveness of those things, and ask Him to help you obey His commands from this point forward?

Will you hear the words spoken to you today and respond accordingly during our time of invitation?