

RUNNING FROM GOD

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In the belly of a whale is a strange place to get religion. But it is better to get it there than not at all! Jonah had to be swallowed by a whale before God was through with him—just as we do today when obedience is the course of God's command. To many the story of Jonah is a myth, a fabrication of Jewish lore, but to others of us it is historical fact, revealing the relentless dealings of God with heathen people and religious bigotry. The lessons he had to learn are valid for us.

RUNNING FROM GOD IMPOSSIBLE

He had to learn that running from God is impossible. The God of dry land is also the God of the salty sea. Jonah, a proud Hebrew, like modern man, was obsessed with the notion that God's message is designed for a select few, a so-called chosen people. He felt himself superior to the Ninevites—surely God could not save heathens like those folks!

Why, to go to Ninevah, Jonah would have to rethink his whole racial outlook, and he just couldn't bring himself to do that. Now note what happened when God spoke:

Jonah packed his grip and went down to the ship and snuggled up in the hold in a specious security. He found it easier to run than to face it. Don't we all! This man was called to stand up and cry; instead he stood up to fly. It calls for no courage to run from life, no capital to set one up in the business of escaping. Multimillions today are running from their problems! Some run from job to job. Some unfaithful parents run from partner to partner, rather than working patiently at the sin that is within them.

Others escape life by alcohol, still others punish themselves by constantly working. The method varies, but the cause is the same. You cannot run from God.

Could it be that I am now speaking to those of you who are running from God? He has pointed his finger toward your Ninevah and said, "I want you to go there; but instead you have packed your grip and determined that you will not. Then stop to think that this may be the reason for your unhappiness, this is why you have no peace of mind, this explains the tears on the midnight pillow, this the wretched frame of mind. God wants you to

go to Ninevah and you say by a stubborn self-will, "It is Tarshish for me!"

STING OF AN ACCUSING CONSCIENCE

But as he lay on the rope in the ship's hold, an accusing conscience was making his soul run. The conscience is the thermostat of divine origin, a safety valve for the soul. It is of innate worth, which, like the needle in a ship's compass, is designed to keep us from running around. But in our day when an accusing conscience begins to whip us, we reach for the sleeping pills. That is why there are so many dry eyes, eyes that should be wet with sorrow and penitence.

I was in Manila when General Yamashita was brought to trial. That little beastly man earned the title of "The raper of Malaya." He was found guilty of dozens of counts—all the way from pillage to murdering little children. I was anxious to see what a man's face would look like who had committed such heinous crimes. When the judge read the sentence demanding that he be hanged at sunrise, Yamashita didn't bat an eye, not the slightest trace of emotion. His conscience was dead. Sin can be habitual and the conscience will not respond!

BRINGS SUFFERING TO OTHERS

Jonah had to learn another lesson, that his running from God meant suffering to other people. The Bible says that the sea was troubled, the waves were angry, and the ship was endangered. Fear came over the sailors, for some ill-omen possessed their ship. They cast lots to see who was guilty and the lot fell on Jonah. There he confessed his guilt.

Many a sinner overlooks the fact that his disobedience is the source of hurt to his fellowman. That is why sin is so selfish. He reasons, "Well, I don't harm anybody but myself." Did you ever reason that perhaps someone loves you? Could you be hurting them?

Is your unfaithful running not related to your dear old parents? Are they not hurt? Why in the name of God can't we see how selfish sin is! A whole family in rags because of one sinning father. A total community strangled by one selfish landlord. An entire church in the grips of a totali-

tarian system. You cannot sin without involving other people. Oh, to think that my indulgence may be producing pain in my brother!

EVEN IN THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

With one big heave they threw Jonah overboard and the record says he was swallowed by a fish which God had prepared. Imagine the strange surprise to find God in the bottom of the sea. If God is anywhere, then He is everywhere. Neither geography nor time nor space limit His presence. God's searching eyes are forever upon us.

Not that He is acting in the role of a snooper, not a policing providence, but because He loves and cannot take His eyes off of us.

Daniel found him in the lion's den; the Hebrew children found him in the fiery furnace; Bunyan found him in Bedford jail; the soldier found him in Buchenwald. The God of the mountain top is also God of the valley. God of the high noon is also God of the midnight. God of the dry land was also God of the ocean depths. You cannot elude the glance of his searching eyes.

He sees into every dark closet, into every living room with draperies drawn, he watches the backseat of every parked automobile, he traces the lines of every tax return, he views every secret agreement, every dishonest contract, every marriage vow, every signed commitment.

Jonah had to learn it the hard way. He had to learn that no place is secular, that all places are sacred when the life is holy; that all days, not just the seventh, are holy when consecrated to God; that all sexes are holy, not just the male; that all ages, not just the old; that all races, not just the whites;

that all nations, not just America. Once and for all this proud religious bigot had to know that God's saving grace is for everybody! "His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me."

GOD'S CONCERN

Then that leaves the question, how about our Ninevehs today? Jonah was preserved for God's mission, expelled from the whale, and did an about-face. But he found that preaching judgment came easier than preaching mercy. He wept because God blessed his message by repentance. Many a religionist finds himself in the same predicament.

Is God equally concerned with the natives of Africa as with those of the western hemisphere? Is the commission to go all out-of-date? Today we are caught in an ugly morass of thought, saying that all people have a certain type of religion, and what right has Christianity to go in and confuse them, presuming that ours is better than theirs.

Then look at the results: watch a heathen mother as she tries to cool the fever of her dying child with mud; look at the shrivelling bodies of the dying babies because of the witchdoctor; observe the millions that kiss the wooden image and pray to a dumb God! Do we need to go to Nineveh? Yes, sir! God had one child and he became a foreign missionary. No people ever received the gospel other than at the hand of a foreigner. This is not just another religion, it is the only faith that can lead this world to God.

I think God is saying to some of you now, "You are my child; I want to give you an inheritance of life eternal." Will you stop running and come to God?

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