

RUNNING AWAY FROM GOD

Did you ever notice the tendency of people to develop strong loyalty and identity with group to which they are a part? We see this during the football season as certain rabid fans follow their favorite team. They are blind to anything else and intolerant of any other team or school. I can remember having feeling somewhat of this sort when I was choosing a school to attend for my graduate work. I was attending LSU and the school's major rival for decades was Tulane and we generally had a low opinion of Tulane University. We classified their people as snobbish, highbrow, impractical, and generally useless. Because of deadlines, my choices were down to Tulane and the University of Tennessee. Because of my opinion about Tulane I did not give any serious thought to applying there and choose instead UT. We see the same kind of thinking in political parties and among the nationalities. Many people are still struggling with these kinds of feelings with regard to differences in race. We are sometimes surprised to learn that people hold on to bitter feeling for years and pass them on to their children so that the rift in relationships are perpetuated for decades. The animosity between the Japanese and the Koreans and the bitter feelings and fighting between the Serbs and Croats are good examples of this.

Such strong negative feelings can prevent people from doing God's will or doing what we know to be the right thing to do. For example, if we are driving down the street and see an elderly woman that is obviously having car trouble, most of us would likely stop and help. Take that same situation and replace the elderly woman with a black man and very few would stop, even if you had a car load of people so that there was no real threat of being hurt.

The nation of Israel was highly nationalistic. They had a low opinion of everyone else. Hatred of certain other nations was not uncommon. This was especially true if there had been fighting between the two nations. There were bitter feelings toward the Assyrians by most (if not all) Israelites. Jonah was no exception. He probably had never met an Assyrian and yet he believed that they were bad people and would have gloated over anything that might happen to harm them.

JONAH 1:1-3 We are very reluctant to believe and especially to say that God told us to do something. We feel uncomfortable when we encounter someone who makes a statement such as "the Lord told me to do this and so." I believe that God does tell us to do things; however, most of us do not want to recognize that it is God that has reminded us to do a certain thing. Friday night as I was watching one of the news programs, I thought that I really should call Mr. Hurd and remind him to come to Sunday School and Church this Sunday. I didn't do it. It may have been that God had prepared his heart to be receptive to such an invitation and I missed an opportunity to take advantage of such preparation. We really need to discipline ourselves to be sensitive to such leadings and to be responsive to them. Otherwise, we will find that we do as Jonah did and run away from God by getting absorbed in the TV or our jobs or sports or a thousand and one other things.

Ninevah was the capital city of Assyria. The Assyrians were a decadent and warlike people. The goddess of the Assyrians was Ishtar, goddess of sexual love and war. The society of the Assyrians was influenced by what they considered to be their deity. They were a promiscuous people who fought with nearly everyone. Their values were such that the wickedness of their society was like a foul odor that came up to heaven. You've heard of something that stinks to high heaven -- this was such a thing.

JONAH 1:4-9 We encounter tempestuous times at times in our lives. We would be wrong to conclude that each storm is a result of disobedience or running away from God. We would also be wrong to conclude that this is never the reason for trouble. We often claim that since we are free moral agents that God will not cause us to do anything against our will. Whatever we believe about that subject, we should make note of the fact that God can be very "persuasive" in getting us to change our minds about obeying Him.

The term "cultural elite" has been thrown around quite a bit lately in reference to that part of our society that put little stock in traditional moral values. This same "cultural elite" would think that belief in the supernatural or the spiritual is something that should be relegated to the unenlightened past when people were full of superstition. Yet the reality of the spiritual world is undeniable and we should not let those who are spiritually dead deprive and rob the rest of us of the fullness of our existence. The sailors on the ship that carried Jonah knew the reality of the spiritual and the fact of spiritual influence on our physical lives. They sensed that the rage of the sea was a manifestation of the wrath of some deity and that it was directed toward one of those on board the ship. They even trusted this influence enough to seek guidance by casting lots to see who was at fault. Jonah drew the "short straw" and was faced with confessing what he was doing. It may have been that every man on that ship was running away from something in his life. Most of us are avoiding doing something that we know we should do.

There are people who never come to church as a means of avoiding or running away from God.

When the sailors heard that Jonah's God was the God of the Hebrews, they were afraid. Perhaps they had heard about the mighty acts of God that had happened years ago as the children of Israel left Egypt and went into the land of Canaan. These men showed genuine concern for Jonah and kindness for Jonah. Even though Jonah had told them that the only way that the storm would stop was for them to throw him overboard, they tried as hard as they could to row and bring the boat to safety. When they were convinced that it was useless, they prayed to God that they would not die because of the sin of Jonah and that they would not be held guilty of throwing him overboard. (One might wonder what lessons there are for us today regarding how to deal with those people whose sin endangers the lives of many.)

JONAH 1:15-16 The ship had been battered and buffeted and all were in danger of perishing. These pagans, in their ignorance of the truth of the situation, had sacrificed their wealth (they threw the cargo overboard) in trying to deal with the problem and then when they knew the cause (that Jonah was running from God) they had compassion and worked very hard to avoid really dealing with the problem because they wanted to be "fair" to Jonah. Yet Jonah had not been fair with them in that he did not tell them at first that he was running away from God. Eventually, they saw no alternative but to throw Jonah overboard and the storm stopped. This was a great lesson for these men and they showed their fear and reverence for God by offering a sacrifice to Him and by making vows to Him.

JONAH 1:17 Jonah could have lied about his situation and he might have protested his being thrown overboard; however, we see that he was a man of some integrity and he cared for the lives of other people (at least those that were not his avowed enemies). When he let go of his own selfish desires and allowed himself to be thrown away (humility), then the Lord was ready to rescue with a mighty miracle.

What can we learn from Jonah: it is not enough to know God's will, we must accept and obey it; there is no place that we can go to hide from God; God can reveal Himself to others in His dealings with us; and God can use and create circumstances to affect our relationship with him.