

God Shaped Identity: Jonah by John Burchardt

Storms, Great Fish, Plants, giant worms, Sun-burn, strong winds, man overboard fasting, sleeping, fleeing, praying, crying.

No it's not the newest survival series from ITV but Jonah summarised.

Jonah – the story of the prophet running from the presence of God... and I'm going to lay it out now at the start –

There are some here this morning or listening to this online who are today knowingly running from the presence of God – and what God has called them to do!!!

You know He wants you. You know He has called you. You know He has told you to go where he has said.

BUT – You're going your own way – or at least trying!!!!

Even in the company you keep you let people know you're running from God.

BUT – I'm in church you say. I'm active in church life. I'm here this morning. Surely this isn't right.

BUT remember the sons of Eli – Hophni and Phineas – they were so far away from God and they served at the tabernacle. There was a physical nearness yet spiritual distance.

Physical distance is sometimes not the only sign. Yet it can be an indicator and Jonah is no exception.

Jonah is called by God in verse 2 –

“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

³ But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

So a quick Geography lesson – (slide 2)

God told Jonah to make the journey of about 650 miles from his home town – just north of Nazareth to Nineveh.

Instead Jonah goes the opposite way, we are told out from the presence of God. – He could have gone anywhere - but he chooses what for nearly everyone at the time would have been the furthest known point – beyond that lay nothing but sea.

He's running out from the presence of God – and look at the language that gets used.

He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (Verse 3)

⁵ Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his god, and threw the cargo that *was* in the ship into the sea, to lighten ^[b] the load. But Jonah had gone down into the lowest parts of the ship, had lain down, and was fast asleep.

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Notice the repetition of the word down. Like the horizontal distance in attempting to flee the opposite way Jonah now attempts to flee vertically.

And the words of Psalm 139 come to mind

Where can I go from Your Spirit?

Or where can I flee from Your presence?

⁸ If I ascend into heaven, You *are* there;

If I make my bed in Sheol (hell), behold, You *are there*.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning,

And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

¹⁰ Even there Your hand shall lead me,

And Your right hand shall hold me.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall ^[d]fall on me,"

Even the night shall be light about me;

¹² Indeed, the darkness ^[e]shall not hide from You,

But the night shines as the day;

The darkness and the light *are* both alike *to You*.

In Jonah chapter 2, whilst in belly of the fish – further down again than the belly of the boat Jonah expands on the verses from Psalm 139

Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the fish's belly. ² And he said:

"I cried out to the LORD because of my affliction,

And He answered me.

"Out of the belly of Sheol I cried,

And You heard my voice.

³ For You cast me into the deep,

Into the heart of the seas,

And the floods surrounded me;

All Your billows and Your waves passed over me.

⁴ Then I said, 'I have been cast out of Your sight;

Yet I will look again toward Your holy temple.'

⁵ The waters surrounded me, *even* to my soul;

The deep closed around me;

Weeds were wrapped around my head.

⁶ I went down to the ^[a]moorings of the mountains;

The earth with its bars *closed* behind me forever;

Yet You have brought up my life from the pit,

O LORD, my God.

⁷ “When my soul fainted within me,
I remembered the LORD;
And my prayer went *up* to You,
Into Your holy temple.

⁸ “Those who regard worthless idols
Forsake their own ^[b] Mercy.

⁹ But I will sacrifice to You
With the voice of thanksgiving;
I will pay what I have vowed.
Salvation *is* of the LORD.”

¹⁰ So the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry *land*.

In the depths Jonah repents of his disobedience.

But only after putting the lives of the others on the ship at risk. God was after Jonah – God was not going to allow Jonah to get away – and the sailors were caught in the middle of this.

The sailors lost their cargo, they were put in fear. And eventually they cried to God on behalf of Jonah.

WHY??? Because Jonah had told them who he was and what he was doing on that ship

¹⁰ Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, “Why have you done this?” For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. ¹¹ Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you that the sea may be calm for us?”—for the sea was growing more tempestuous.

¹² And he said to them, “Pick me up and ^[d] throw me into the sea; then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest *is* because of me.”

¹³ Nevertheless the men rowed hard to return to land, but they could not, for the sea continued to grow more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴ Therefore they cried out to the LORD and said, “We pray, O LORD, please do not let us perish for this man’s life, and do not charge us with innocent blood; for You, O LORD, have done as it pleased You.” ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the LORD and took vows.

Who are you affecting by running from the word and presence of God?

What dangers are you putting those around you in by refusing to obey the Call and word of God?

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Yet God in his mercy saved not only Jonah, by the coming of the great fish but the sailors feared the Lord.

They had seen the majesty and the splendour and the awe and wonder of God. They had seen that God was in control and would not allow one of his prophets to run.

Their fear of the sea is replaced by the fear of God – God who calms the sea. Like the disciples who were exceedingly afraid when Jesus calmed the sea – and said

“Who is this that even the wind and waves obey Him”. (Matthew 8:27)

These hardened sailors found the mercy of God.

Everyone in this short book needed the mercy of God.

Jonah – for his running

The sailors – those who were idolaters and outside the family of God now welcomed in

And finally the Ninevites.

Chapter 3 –

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.

Jonah’s second commission is the same as the first. Just because Jonah had disobeyed didn’t mean the command changed.

God still expected the same from Jonah. God would not allow what He had begun to not be seen to completion.

Nineveh needed to hear the mercy and call of God – Jonah was the one God had called.

Now from running and being tired, wet, disfigured and prone to sunburn Jonah sets out for Nineveh.

Nineveh was a great and formidable city.

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, ^[a]a three-day journey *in extent*.

This size would be like walking from Liverpool to Manchester and beyond and would refer to the city state of Nineveh – all the little villages and small towns and farm land that fell under the control and protection of Nineveh would have been classed as Nineveh.

As Jonah walked down the roads, likely witnessing early victims of the brutal practise of crucifixion he

⁴began to enter the city on the first day’s walk and he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

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Here is a great city – an empire of utmost evil, so bad that it is before God like a stench and here is this pathetic little Hebrew walking down their highways telling them God is going to destroy them. And yet the Bible tells us

So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them. ⁶ Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered *himself* with sackcloth and sat in ashes.

The people of Nineveh responded to the call of God – Jonah message was simple – not full of platitudes – not excusing their evil, not looking to build a bridge and see them skip over.

It was simple. Like John the Baptist – repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand (Matthew 3:2) Jonah called for the people to repent.

His simple words – coupled with his appearance and testimony of running away and how God dragged him back brought this proud arrogant mighty nation to its knees.

God uses the simple things – the lowly, the weak to bring change – because when human power is laid down then He is magnified.

Jonah in running had sort to control – to dictate to God what was happening – to run to places other than what God had called Him to.

Yet God showed Jonah mercy because God's heart was for Jonah and for Nineveh.

Yet – as we enter chapter 4 Jonah shows us a number of things that running from the presence of God had left him with:

⁴ But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. ² So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You *are* a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. ³ Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for *it is* better for me to die than to live!"

⁴ Then the LORD said, "*Is it* right for you to be angry?"

⁵ So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city. ⁶ And the LORD God prepared a ^[a]plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah ^[b]was very grateful for the plant. ⁷ But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it *so* damaged the plant that it withered. ⁸ And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head,

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so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, “*It is better for me to die than to live.*”

⁹ Then God said to Jonah, “*Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?*”

And he said, “*It is right for me to be angry, even to death!*”

¹⁰ But the LORD said, “You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which ^[c]came up in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?”

Number 1 – Jonah didn’t believe these people deserved God’s mercy. Their behaviour, their sin, their ethnicity was enough for Jonah to bar them from the grace and mercy of God.

And we fall into that trap today!!!!

That group don’t need to know – you can’t be a Christian and support XYZ policy.

Yet Jonah was happy to give a wicked King of Israel a prophecy of enlargement of his kingdom

2 kings 14 v 23

²³ In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, became king in Samaria, *and reigned* forty-one years.

²⁴ And he did evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who had made Israel sin.

²⁵ He restored the ^[l]territory of Israel from the entrance of Hamath to the ^[k]Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD God of Israel, which He had spoken through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet who *was* from Gath Hopher.

²⁶ For the LORD saw *that* the affliction of Israel *was* very bitter; and whether bond or free, there was no helper for Israel.

²⁷ And the LORD did not say that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven; but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash.

He was operating a double standard – his own were fine to continue in the mess of worshipping Baal – yet when God wanted to extend his mercy, by the hand of the prophet, to the Gentiles, Jonah saw that as shameful.

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There's no mention of Jonah calling Israel to repentance. He prophesied prosperity to his own with no complaints – and complained about God doing what God wanted – people from every tribe and tongue knowing Him.

Number 2 – Jonah becomes concerned with secondary and tertiary issues than the primary important things..

He was more concerned with the fate of the plant than with the people of Nineveh. Because the plant was his crutch – it gave him relief – probably from the ease and which his skin burnt after being in the fish.

I'm probably going to take some flak for this but too much effort, energy, words and statements are wasted by the church on stuff like Veganism, Environmentalism, and carbon footprint than on the primary concern – which as the Apostle Paul declared

We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, (1 Corinthians 1:23)

Because it is by showing Jesus as the crucified and risen Saviour we see people repent, we see lives changed we present Christ as the answer.

Too often we don't preach Christ – we preach a self-help humanity triumphing rather than laying out the riches and mercy of God.

For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. ¹⁰ For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. ¹¹ And not only *that*, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

Too often we buy into worldly religious fads and spiritualise them. Trying to give a veneer of scripture when all around people are entering eternity without the knowledge of God.

We don't see people enter the Kingdom of God by lecturing on meat consumption or compostable waste.

Are we focussing on these things because we are pursuing the presence and focus of what God is calling us for – to tell the world who He is, to call all to repentance – to call all to draw on the mercy and grace of God.

This world will pass away – this world will all be made new – yet failing to respond to the call of God will lead to an eternity lost.

Not that these things are without merit but God's heart is for all people everywhere to be saved... Salvation changes people – it leads people into new life in Christ which is the highest, the greatest gift that God gives.

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Jonah was more bothered about other things than the primary things of God.

Because when we seek the presence of God in places other than where God is calling and has called then we look for fulfilment in all the wrong places.

We run whilst telling others who we are.

And this morning God wants us to stop running before we end up being tossed into the sea.

He's calling us back – back to the place where he wants us to be.

For some that means moving – because we've sat down and stopped – given up on the moving forward. Wanting to see out days without effort.

When the Children of Israel where in the wilderness they only moved camp when the Cloud of presence over the tabernacle moved.

For some the cloud moved a long time ago but we're still in the same place. Longing for the days gone by but not prepared to catch up with God and experience the wonders and beauty of what He is doing now.

Instead our lives become filled with life, with lesser concerns than being joyous servants in the advancement of God's kingdom.

Back to the first love. Back to where the upward call of God in Christ is have our hearts Lord take our lives.

And this morning what is our response...

Do we keep going down and away or do we turn and face and call and cry out to God.

Perhaps we should take some moments in quiet now and respond in prayer, in our own song, perhaps in tears, perhaps in joy to the one who calls by name and calls us to Himself. And seek Him about what His call for our lives is and whether we are there or in a boat heading to Tarshish away from his presence.