

Thanks, team. And, congratulations to all of you. You made it through a whole book of the Bible. Come back next week for our complete dramatic read through of Leviticus, and please bring with you a couple of meals and a change of clothes. Now, we're not going to do this every Sunday during our Jonah series, but I did want to start this way today for a particular reason. In part of Jonah Chapter Four, the last chapter of this great story, we hear Jonah the prophet say something to God that's incredibly revealing to us as we try to understand all of the other parts of the story that come before it. In fact, I'd venture to say that, without the fourth chapter, the filet mignon of the lesson that the author of Jonah was hoping we'd learn is just cut off and pitched into the trash. It's been so surprising to me, then, as I've looked at different Bible study series about Jonah and seen sermon series from other churches and seen Jonah represented in popular culture, to see that often times the story of Jonah is presented as Chapters 1-3, and Chapter 4 is just neglected.

I imagine that, for many of us, if we know anything about the story of Jonah, we know it as the story of Jonah and ... the whale. The fun part of the story, the part that works best as a kids' story and a Pinocchio-style adventure movie, that's the part that often sticks with people. And, I don't think it's any accident that God chose to infuse this lesson about His heart and His grace into a memorable, if not a little bit fishy, adventure tale. But, I want to make sure that we don't completely trade steak for sushi here. There is some meat to this book that is more hearty than a whale tale and that reminds us of the incredible depth of God's love and God's heart for those who are lost in sin. So, for that reason, I wanted to begin with a complete presentation of Jonah instead of waiting until the end of the series to finally unpack the message from this book that I think is most important.

Now, I'm hoping you still have your Bibles open. If you don't, open them up again, and let's look together at page 865 in the pew Bibles and the beginning of Jonah's story. Here at the beginning of Jonah Chapter 1, we read that *the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai*. Now, if this is new to you, Jonah was a prophet from the people of Israel who lived during the 8th Century before Christ. The job of prophets was to receive messages of truth from God and then to share those messages with the audience God sent them to. Jonah's very name in Hebrew means "Son of Truth," which was remarkably appropriate for a man called to be a prophet. So, the text in Chapter 1 continues with God's message of truth and that assignment. *And the Lord said, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me."* Then, in verse 3, we see Jonah's response. *"But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord."*

So, right from the beginning, we know that God gave His prophet, Jonah, specific instructions to go to a particular place in a particular time frame and to give them a particular message. And, right from the beginning, we read that Jonah heard those instructions and said, "Nope. I heard what you said, Lord, but I'm going to do just the opposite of what you've asked me to do." None of us has ever done this, I know, so I'm sure it's hard for us to relate.

Now, without Chapter 4, we would all go to our graves having to guess at the exact reason why Jonah chose to disobey the orders God had given him. But, thanks to Chapter 4 at verse 2, we don't have to guess. So, let's look over to Chapter 4 again for a moment. Along the way, of course, we read in Chapter 3 that, after all of the running away and the time inside the great fish, Jonah finally went to Nineveh and delivered the message God had given him. And amazingly, the story tells us that the people of Nineveh believed God's word and turned from their evil ways. So then, in Chapter 4, Jonah threw a huge party and, with love in

his heart for the people of Nineveh, celebrated their salvation right along with them. Right? No. What Chapter 4 tells us is that the salvation of the people of Nineveh was very displeasing to Jonah and he became angry. So, at verse 2 of Chapter 4, we read this, ***“Jonah prayed to the Lord and said, ‘O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning: for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.’”***

Now, to some of us, this reaction from Jonah is going to seem really confusing. Why would Jonah be upset about God being gracious and loving and merciful? Isn't that a wonderful and good thing? But, for others of us, this statement from Jonah is very revealing about the condition of our own hearts. Because often times, the last thing we want is for God to show favor on someone we despise. When someone has hurt us, or hurt someone we love, or has shown that they don't for a second deserve God's love and mercy more than we think we do, the one thing we often want is for God to enact His divine justice and bring a world of vindication down to right the wrong that's been done to us. And, when that doesn't happen, it can feel like a death to our sense of fairness and justice. And, that's exactly what Jonah was experiencing.

What this part of Chapter 4 reveals to us is that, right from the beginning of the story of Jonah, there is a conflict of heart going on between God's heart and Jonah's heart. On one hand, what's revealed to us about the heart of God is that God has a heart to forgive and to save people who are lost in wickedness, even if those people have been enemies to people who say they love God, people like us. On the other hand, what's revealed to us about the heart of Jonah is that he would

rather have died than participate in God's plan to show mercy to the people Jonah hated.

Nineveh in the 8th Century before Christ, in case you're not aware, was the capital city of the Assyrian empire. And in the years leading up to the time when Jonah is believed to have been sent, Assyria had cast its threatening, bullying shadow over the people of Israel. In fact, Nineveh is described in another one of the minor books of prophecy, the Bible's book of Nahum, as a city of bloodshed and endless cruelty, one filled with fraud, lies, robbery, sensuousness, violence, witchcraft, and idolatry. So, it was certainly understandable that Jonah (whose name means what? Son of Truth) would have wanted to see truth and justice win out over love and mercy. What Jonah wanted was to see God bring the hammer down to punish Nineveh in an act of divine justice and much-deserved wrath. But, what we learn from Jonah's prayer to God in Chapter 4 is that, as soon as Jonah received the call from God to go to Nineveh, Jonah knew that the desires of his heart were different than the desires of God's heart. And, so rather than doing what God had asked him to do, Jonah spent considerable resources to get as far away from Nineveh as he could possibly get.

Flip back with me to the beginning of Jonah Chapter 1. In verse 3, we read that ***Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish***, and then what's the next phrase? ***From the presence of the Lord***. Now, look at the bottom of that paragraph, and we're going to see that phrase show up again. ***Jonah paid his fare and went on board the ship, to go with them to Tarshish, away from what? The presence of the Lord***. Away from the presence of the Lord. One more place. Look at Chapter 1 in verse 10, just one column over. Verse 10 says this, ***"Then the men, Jonah's shipmates, were even more afraid, and said to him, 'What is this that you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing where? From the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so."***

Three times the author makes clear to us that, while Jonah was physically sailing toward Tarshish, he was spiritually running away from God. Pastor Mike Ashcraft relates Jonah's actions here to the kid who doesn't like the rules of the neighborhood game, so he grabs his ball and takes off. It's sort of like, "Fine. If that's how you're going to be, I'm taking my ball. We'll just see how well you do without me." To which, of course, God is like, "No big deal to me. I'll just send you a storm and then have a giant fish eat you, and eventually you'll be back on track." When our stubborn attitudes get in the ring to fight God's will, it's really not much of a fight. Amen?

Again, the point here for this morning is that, when Jonah's heart of vengeance and bitterness and indifference collided with God's heart of grace and mercy and love, Jonah said, "I'd rather be dead than be a part of your plan, God." And, so he did what he could do to try and get as far away from the presence of the Lord as possible.

Now, there are two seeds of thought I want to plant with you this morning before we close. We'll touch on these over the next few weeks, so this morning I'm just going to introduce them to you as appetizers and let you chew on them this week. **The first idea is this. When we flee from the presence of the Lord, we flee from the Spirit who is our source of life.** Put another way, when we choose to remain in our sin instead allowing God's Spirit to heal us and to turn us in the direction of God's will, we, like Jonah, choose death over life. We essentially say, "It's better for me to die than to live." The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death, and so when we choose sin, we choose death over life.

Many of us have sin in our life that we try desperately to hide from others. And, anytime the corruption of our hearts leads us to an action or a thought that we hope no one else will ever see or hear about or know about, we find ourselves at an

absolutely crucial crossroads. Either we can choose to run toward the presence of the Lord, knowing that God's light may expose that corruption in our hearts and require us to repent, to change, and to experience mercy and healing from God and one another. Or, we can choose to run away from the presence of the Lord with the hope that no one will ever find out about what's happening in our hearts. I have been in that place, and I know the sound of that voice of temptation that says that it will be better if no one ever finds out about my secret sin. I know how frightening it has been to think about confessing those sins to God and exposing them to the people who love me so that they can help me heal. But, as tempting as it is to believe that having our private, hidden sins exposed is the worst thing that could happen to us, the truth is that the worst thing that can happen is that they're never exposed. There's nothing worse than us being left alone to flee from the presence of the Lord as the power of sin kills us a little bit more and a little bit more every day. When we start to become numb to the sin in our lives, it ought to be a terrifying wake up call to us that something in us is dying and needs to change.

So, this morning, if there is a Tarshish that you're fleeing to that seems really attractive but that is taking you away from the presence of the Lord, I want to encourage you to let God's Spirit bring that hidden thing in our life out into the light of truth and grace, where there is mercy and healing, love and hope. On the other hand, if someone in your life chooses in the future to come to you in confession over a sin that's been hidden for a long time, I want to encourage you to ask God to give you His Spirit of mercy, compassion, love, and grace so that you can be a part of the healing in that person's life. We are not called to be people of condemnation but people who gently restore one another when sin is present in our midst. It's that spirit of restoration that we'll see in God's relationship with Jonah as we continue through this book.

Finally, as a second seed to plant with you, I want to think about the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. this morning. What King dreamed about was a world where people of different backgrounds, colors, lifestyles, demographics and socio-economic standings would be given the opportunity to enjoy equal treatment and equal liberties, and would hold hands and stand together in unity, singing the praises of the God of love and justice. It was not a vision of white flight to the suburbs and continued segregation of communities or of the privileged spending great resources to enjoy personal comforts while the oppressed struggled in ghettos amidst violence and desperation. That is not an image of the kingdom of God, and it's certainly not the image of hope that Dr. King dreamed about.

When Jonah bought his ticket to sail to Tarshish, he bought a very expensive ticket to take a very long boat ride away from the troubles of Nineveh and toward a very comfy life in the garden spot of the Mediterranean. In Jonah's mind, this may have been his dream of the perfect retirement at the end of an otherwise successful career as a spokesman for God. But, what Jonah was forgetting is that, when God calls us to be His servants, there is no retirement from that calling. God never promises us an easy and comfortable life. Instead, the Lord promises us the privilege of partnering with the Holy Spirit in transforming our world to reflect His eternal kingdom.

So, what I want us to be thinking about is whether or not we've already bought a ticket to retire from the service of the Lord. Have we traded calling for comfort? Have we, either as individuals or as a congregation, become comfortable enough with our place in this world that we've lost sight of our call to help bring the kingdom of God to those who are lost in wickedness and oppression and injustice? Has our salt lost its saltiness? Has our light lost its brightness? Or, are we ready as a people saved and called by God to stop running from God's call, to

turn from Tarshish, and to engage with Nineveh, even though it may mean a loss of personal comfort and a gift of salvation to those we see as wicked?

Well, enough for this morning. Next week, we'll dig a little deeper into Chapter 1 and the adventures of Jonah and his shipmates, and we'll talk about the ways that our actions reflect on the world's understanding of who God is and how God operates. Let me pray for us.