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| **THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR**  **"The God Who Would Not Let Go”**  **Rev. Carl Haak**  [haak@prca.org](mailto:haak@prca.org)  **July 24, 2011; No. 3577**  (Printed copies in a four-message booklet can be sent monthly without charge.  Request from: Reformed Witness Hour, Box 1230, Grand Rapids, MI 49501) |

Dear Radio Friends,

    Please open your Bibles to Jonah, chapter 1.  Last week we looked at Jonah, the prophet who ran away.  We left him in a ship headed for Tarshish, the most remote place in the then-known world.  And we imagined that at first the winds were favorable, the sails billowed, the coast of Palestine receded in the distance, and perhaps Jonah believed that God would be tolerant.  Jonah, although he had received a clear commission from God, did not believe that God’s mercy should be shown to those despicable pagans in Nineveh.  He would not go to Nineveh.

      In his disobedience, he wanted to push away from him as far as possible anything that reminded him of God’s presence and commandment, anything that could remind him of his obligation to God.  He fled from the presence of the Lord, from that place where God was worshiped, where His Word was heard, where prayer was offered, where His people were found.  He wanted all of that removed from his sight.

      We saw, then, that the best of the saints, when left to themselves, are capable of the greatest and most foolish of sins.

      Today, our focus shifts drastically to the God who will not let go.  The whole picture changes in three words:  “But the LORD” (v. 4), words that express the sovereign grace of God in the preservation and the restoration of backslidden children.  In verse 3 we read, “But Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord.”  Those words represent our depravity, in our sinful nature, to choose the way of disobedience to God.  In verse 4, “But the Lord,” we see an expression of the cause of our salvation.

      According to many churches and theologians, almost everything depends upon man, and a little on God’s election and persevering grace.  If that were so, it would have been the end of Jonah.  If God’s dealings with Jonah depended upon Jonah himself, God would have said, “Jonah, you did it now.  You disobeyed and forfeited any right to be called My prophet.  I’m casting you away.”  But that is not how God works.

      God had elected Jonah to a task.  God had a purpose with Jonah.  And God would not let go and allow Jonah to destroy himself.  He would restore him.

      But that way of restoration is hard.  Do not abuse the doctrines of grace.  Do not play with the seriousness of disobeying God.  The way back for Jonah would be slow, it would be hard, and it would break him in pieces.  The way of hell is easy.  The way of grace, of restoration, is severe, though it be blessed.  Jonah, in his disobedience, rebelled against God, and he involved others in his rebellion.  Now the Lord is going to work and bring him back.  He is going to restore him to obedience.

      Let us look, then, for a few moments at the God who would not let go.

      “But the LORD,” we read, “sent out a great wind into the sea, and there was a mighty tempest in the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken” (v. 4).  That is a very comforting truth.  That shows that the hand of God reached out for Jonah.  God’s purpose is to bring His child to repentance.  And we see, first of all, that the repentance of the child of God, and of Jonah, was due to God’s initiative, it was due to the activity of God Himself.  “But the LORD sent out a great wind” (v. 4).  “Now the LORD had prepared a great fish” (v. 17).  “The LORD spake unto the fish” (2:10).  “And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah” (3:1).  God takes Jonah in hand and says, “You, by the weakness of your flesh, by your foolish disobedience, and by your carnal mind, have chosen the path of disobedience, which will lead you to destruction and bring ruin upon all around you.  That is what you did.  But you have not silenced My love for you.  My purpose is to bring you to repentance, Jonah, because My covenant is sure; no change can it know ( [Ps. 89](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Ps+89)).   ‘It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed’ ([Lam. 3:22](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Lam+3:22)).   ‘I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed’ ([Mal. 3:6](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Mal+3:6)). ”  God brings *you* to repentance.  God changes the heart.  God’s love tracks you down.

      We see, then, that God is going to restore a man who walked in blatant disobedience because His divine love takes the initiative.

      But we marvel at the diversity of the means of God.  What Jonah had tried to do, of course, was preposterous.  It shows the folly and the stupidity of Jonah’s sin.  To flee from the presence of the Lord?  God Himself calls Himself “the Lord of hosts.”  All the creation, all of its creatures, man, ocean and wind, insects and fish are His army to do His will.  God uses first the element of wind.  “The Lord sent out,” literally, “hurled,” a great wind into the sea.  And that stormy wind fulfilled His will.  It blew harder and harder, as the narrative goes on to say, “the sea wrought, and was tempestuous.”  As the captain and the sailors questioned Jonah on the deck of the heaving ship, more and more violent became the waves of the sea.  It is as if the Lord says, “What shall I use?  All is at My disposal, from the tiny cut worm that will eat the root of Jonah’s gourd (chapter 4), to the air current and the weather patterns.  They are all My servants.”

      You remember that God also used the lot.  Pagan sailors cast lots to find out who was the root-cause of their problems.  They say, “Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us.”  The Lord controlled that.  The lot is cast into the lap ( [Prov. 16](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Prov+16)), but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.  So we read, “and the lot fell upon Jonah.”  People call it chance.  It just so happened that way.  A sinner says:  “A mere coincidence caught me.  I had it all figured out.  It was perfect.  Just one thing, and who could have known?”  Do you talk that way?  Do you curse “bad luck”?  The lot fell upon Jonah.  Of course it did, because God is in His heavens ( [Deut. 32](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Deut+32)).   Be very sure:  your sins will find you out.

      Then God uses a great fish.  Even though translated in the New Testament KJV as a whale, it was simply a great fish.  God prepared one.  The mighty God spoke and brought that fish to swallow Jonah.

      So God is able to use all things.  But in the narrative we see that Jonah’s restoration was not confined to the brute creation.  That is, the elements God used were not only found in the brute creation, but they included men, pagan men.  That is something to notice.  If you read Jonah, chapter 1, then you see that the pagan sailors were used of God to ask some very probing questions, questions  that nailed Jonah in his disobedience.  God did not have another prophet somewhere hidden in the vessel to jump out and rebuke Jonah.  No, God used unbelieving and idolatrous sailors.  “What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God.  Tell us why this evil is come upon us.  Who are you?  What is your occupation?  What did you do?  Why did you do that?”

      Has that ever happened to you?  There is shame here.  There is shame when the church is rebuked by the world.  But it happens.  One child of God in disobedience sometimes sees less than even the unbelieving world sees concerning the consequences of sin.  That happens.  Maybe it was your boss who is an unbelieving man.  He rebuked you on an issue involving your faith and walk with God.  He has come to know how you work and your personal life.  And he calls you into his office and says, “Now listen.  You can’t do that.”  Maybe it is the neighbor lady who sees you as a wife all upset and she says, “But why are you so upset?  You go to church.  You believe in God, don’t you?”  There is shame here.  Sometimes God uses even the wicked world to rebuke the church.

      There was a very painful and slow process of restoration.  The process that God used with Jonah is often the process that He uses in our lives.  I would be very greatly surprised if there were not many Jonahs listening today.  The Word of God has come to you and to me.  No, it did not come as it did to Jonah with a voice or a vision.  But it came in its inspired Word, a Word that has called you to a duty that you are not willing to do, a Word that has called you to deal with a sin, perhaps, a Word that calls you to a certain act of obedience.  It comes to you, as it did with Jonah, at a point where you do not want to obey and you do not want to accept that responsibility and you do not want to put away that sin.  So you, too, go to find your ship and go to sleep.

      How does God restore us?  The first thing we read is that Jonah is awakened.  The point, perhaps, of greatest tragedy in the narrative is verse 5:  “Then the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god, and cast forth the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it of them.  But Jonah was gone down into the sides of the ship; and he lay, and was fast asleep.”  Why was he asleep?  The storm was great.  And even though Jonah might have been weary from a two or three-day travel from Gath-hepher to Joppa, that could not explain that sleep in a storm.  Why?  You see, this is the sleep of the disobedient child of God who finds sleep an escape from the terrors of conscience.  Awake he could not but feel the terror of his conscience.  Sleep sometimes does what drunkenness can do — escape reality.  Jonah does not want to wake up to the reality of what he has done.  A sleepy man is oblivious to reality.  Jonah is utterly oblivious to the danger to which he has exposed not just himself but the whole crew on the deck.  And he is down below asleep.  In the path of disobedience, he sleeps.  Disobedience can be like a drug, a sedative.  Disobedience can do to your soul what no sleeping pill can do.  The further you go in the disobedience, the deeper comes your stupor.

      The shipmaster’s words were abrupt.  “What meanest thou, O sleeper? arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not.”  When God will restore us to repentance, to a clear understanding, God does not immediately fix everything.  It is not simply that you say a prayer (of Jabez) and now all is OK from then on.  Oh, no!  That is not the Bible.  God wakes you up to your sin and to the danger that is come upon you because of your sin.  He woke Jonah up to the reality that the pagan mariners saw that this was no ordinary storm, but was God’s judgment, God’s chastening hand.

      Are you a Jonah today?  Do you know God’s first work?  God will use whatever He pleases to hurl into your ear, “What meanest thou, O sleeper?  What do you mean, father, to cast your whole family into a turmoil because of your sin?  Son and daughter, the storms are brewing in your household.  There is no trust.  There are bad attitudes.  There is bitterness and bickering, resentment because of your sin.  It is high time to awake out of your sleep.”

      Sometimes we congratulate ourselves with our ability to sleep in a storm.  Well, if that means, as with David in [Psalm 4](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Psalm+4), that as a humble, repentant child of God we are leaving to God the outcome of our fears, good.  But if you sleep when crashing above you are broken relationships, yelling, bickering, distance, and the life of your whole family is subject to the waves of trouble and you are not bothered by it, it is high time that you awake.

      The second thing that God did was to bring an indictment of Jonah’s disobedience.  When Jonah appeared on the deck and he was singled out by the lot, questions came pouring from the sailors:  “Who are you?  Why did you do this?  What is your occupation?  What people are you from?”  Every eye was upon him.  Now there is an irony here.  Jonah refused to preach to pagan Ninevites.  Now, in spite of himself, he is about to do exactly that.  He is going to preach a pretty good sermon, he is going to leave a pretty good testimony before these unbelieving sailors who have come with the indictment, “Why did you run from the presence of the Lord?” for he had told them that he did.  “Why hast thou done this?”

      Now suppose yourself to be Jonah.  The question is put to you by a heathen man, “Did your God provoke you to flee from Him?  Did He deal harshly with you?  Did He give you a calling without any encouragement to be with you?  Is your God, then, a harsh taskmaster, so that you have to run away from Him?  Why?  Why have you followed the ways of the world?  Why did you set your heart upon them, you who know the Scriptures, you who know fellowship with God?  Why?  Why did you do that?  Is it because the fellowship of sin is better than the fellowship of your God?  Produce your reason.  Has God been a wilderness to you?  Do you have a better friend than your God?  Have you found His promises unfaithful?  Has the world been better than God to you?  Why did you do this?”

      Then the third step in the restoration was Jonah’s acknowledgment.  Jonah evidently told them what he had done.  He confesses that the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land, is his God.  He is a Hebrew.  He was God’s servant.  “I fear God,” he said.  “I reverence God.”  That is all good.  But it comes short of a clear and simple confession:  “I sinned.  I will arise and go to Nineveh.  I will obey.”  Jonah did not say that.

      At this point, although Jonah begins to acknowledge a few things, he is still a mass of contradictions.  He says to these sailors, “I fear God, but I’m on this ship in disobedience to His command.  I am a Hebrew, a friend of God; but I’m running from His presence.  The God of heaven made the sea and the dry land, but I’m running from Him.”  The backslidden Christian is a mass of contradictions.  The child of God overtaken in a fault is the most contradictory thing on the earth.  The beauty of an obedient life is symmetry.  Symmetry is when everything is in proportion.  That is something beautiful.  That is when confession and walk of life are consistent.  But for a child of God to walk in disobedience, he becomes a mass, a bundle, of contradictions.

      The full repentance of Jonah is going to be learned in the belly of a fish.  Jonah did not get to the point of full repentance on the deck of the ship.  It is going to take being cast into the sea.  God’s purpose is to restore Jonah to obedience, not sacrifice.  God’s purpose in repentance was to bring Jonah back to where he went wrong.  God’s purpose with Jonah was not that he be drowned in the sea, but that he go to Nineveh and preach the preaching that he was told.

      Repentance leads you to obedience.  But even strong measures of the storm and drowning at sea would not bring Jonah to the point where he would get up and obey God.  He had to go down to the belly of a fish to learn to do that.

      The pagan sailors asked him, “What shall we do to you that the sea be calm?”  What could he say?  Could he say, “Repent of your sins and turn to Jehovah and serve Him like I do”?  No, he could not say that.  Could he claim ignorance, could he say to the sailors, “I don’t know what to do.  Give me an oar and let’s row”?  No.  He knew exactly why this storm had come.  And it was getting worse.

      What could he say?  Did he say this:  “Sailors, it’s very obvious what God wants me to do.  God called me to go to Nineveh.  I have to obey God.  Captain, put the bow of this ship back toward Palestine.  Point it towards Nineveh.  And I assure you that the moment the bow is pointed toward Nineveh the sea will be calm.”

      But Jonah did not say that either.  He said, “Take me up, and cast me forth into the sea; so shall the sea be calm unto you.”  There is acknowledgment there, all right.  There is an accepting even of the justice that his sin deserves:  death.  But, you see, God did not call him to death.  He called him to obedience.  Repentance is not just being awakened.  It is not just being indicted.  It is not just acknowledging your fault.  It is not even saying that “my death will be justice.”  Repentance is more.  Repentance is the hardest yet of all.  Go back, the long way, to where you went wrong.  And this time obey.

      That is where God’s grace is going to lead Jonah.  Sometimes death is easier.  Sometimes we are brought by God to see just how far down we have gone.  The consequences, the long consequences, and the guilt are upon us.  And we would say that it is easier now to acknowledge our sin and die.  “Cast me into the sea.”

      But God would not have it.  “No, child of God.  I’m going to bring you back, over many miles, in a fish’s belly, back to my command.  And I’m going to show you the blessing of obeying Me.  You see,” says God, “you’re going to go back where you got off the road.  There is where you have to go back to and, by grace, in My mercy, you will begin anew.”

      Do you see yourself?  Do you walk away from God?  Do you say, No?  Listen.  The way of disobedience appears cheap.  You can pay for it with what you have in your pockets.  You have the fare.  But the way back, you cannot find, you cannot buy it.  It is all of God’s grace.

      God did not let Jonah go.  In His mercy and grace He brings us back.  He gave His Son to forgive our sins and to ransom us from all of our folly.  God shows His mercy when He arrests you in your sin, when He wakes you up, stops you, indicts you, calls you:  “Son, daughter, obedience to Me in love—that is the path that will bring you blessing and peace.”

      Let us pray.

      Father in heaven, we thank Thee for Thy holy Word.  We pray that it may enter into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.  Defeat our proud natures and humble us to obey Thee.  In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.