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| **THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR****"The Prophet Who Ran Away”****Rev. Carl Haak**haak@prca.org**July 17, 2011; No. 3576**(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,

    Continuing today our series on the prophecy of Jonah, we come to [Jonah 1:3](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jonah+1:3):   “But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish:  so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.”  The question we face as we come under this Word of God is this:  Are you walking in obedience to the will of God, or are you running away?

      God’s will for our lives is holiness, obedience, and trust.  But that will of God clashes with our sinful will.  At times so strong is that clash that we deliberately set aside God’s will and then attempt to remove or get away from anything that would remind us of Him, whether that be in the family or in the church; whether that be parents or husband or wife; whether that be prayer or the Bible.  At first it seems that everything is going to go well.  But if you are God’s child, it will not be long before God begins to break your life up into little pieces.  The question then is:  Do you go God’s way, or do you try to run as Jonah ran?  If you run, as a child of God, God will trouble your life.  For God is committed to doing whatever it takes.  He chastens us, corrects us, and teaches us the good of obeying His will.

      One of the most amazing aspects of the Bible is the untouched portraits of the saints.  You know the difference between the professionally altered portrait and the untouched snapshot.  Seldom would we say of a professional portrait, “I don’t take a good picture.”  But the Bible is not a gallery of professional portraits, but of untouched snapshots.  Noah, for a hundred and twenty years, built the ark out of faith ... and then he became drunk and naked before his family.  Abraham, the father of all the faithful, lied to save his skin.  David, a man after God’s own heart,  one evening allowed lust to cripple himself and his family for the rest of his days.  And we could go on and on.

      In Jonah we have an episode probably unparalleled in the whole Bible.  We have a true prophet of God who has received a call from God.  And he deliberately disobeys.  God issued a clear, sovereign, righteous commission:  “Jonah, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city.  And cry against it, for their wickedness is come up before me.”  And, without one word of explanation, we read that Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord.

      We know that all that is given by God in His Word is instruction for our righteousness.  So, we consider today, the prophet who ran away.

      Now the Word of God to Jonah, as I said, was very clear.  It is always very clear.  Jonah, arise.  That is, interrupt your normal life as a prophet in Israel.  Go to Nineveh.  Use whatever means of transportation that is available to go to that city that everybody knows about (he did not need to look it up on the map.  It was the capital of the mighty kingdom of Assyria).  And cry against it.  Deliver a message of impending judgment.  But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

      If you are acquainted with Bible geography, you will remember that Nineveh was in what is the present-day country of Iran, on the converse of the Tigris and Euphrates River.  For Jonah, it was east and a little north.  But Jonah, instead, went to Tarshish.  Most probably Tarshish was on the far coast of Spain, beyond Gibraltar, some two thousand miles from Nineveh, which was in the other direction.  It was one of the most distant places west then known.  It was on the edge of the known world.  It was as far as possible in the other direction from where God was sending him.  We can visualize it.  Jonah comes out of his house in Gath-hepher, in Israel.  He looks down the long road east that led through the Arabian desert to the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates and ended before the gates of Nineveh.  And he turned on his heels and went the other direction, west to Joppa, where he finds conveniently a ship laden for Tarshish.  He pays his fare.  The ship weighs anchor.  There are favorable winds.  The sails unfurl as billowing clouds.  The shoreline recedes.  He flees from the presence of the Lord!

      Now, what does that mean?  Does it mean that Jonah could go somewhere on earth where God was not?  He could escape?  No!  It does not mean that.  Jonah knew the Word of God.  [Jeremiah 23:24](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Jeremiah+23:24):   “Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the Lord.  Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord.”  Jonah knew the truth of God’s omnipresence — that the Lord God fills heaven and earth and that it is impossible to hide from God.  “Thou, God, seest me” ([Gen. 16:13](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Gen+16:13)).   Jonah knew that.  Later on, he is going to pray to God out of the belly of a fish, in the confidence that God fills heaven and earth and that there is no place where God is not.

      By the presence of the Lord we must understand those places and those means whereby God makes Himself known.  The concept of the presence of the Lord is, first of all, initiated in [Genesis 4:16](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=Genesis+4:16), where we read, “And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.”  That does not mean that Cain, who murdered Abel, went to a place where God could not see him.  But he went outside of the land of Eden, where Adam lived, where God was manifesting Himself.  Cain left the realm where God was feared.

      Likewise we read in [II Kings 13:23](http://bible.gospelcom.net/bible?version=KJV&passage=II+Kings+13:23) that God was gracious to Israel and did not cast them yet from His presence.  God’s presence was experienced in the land of promise, Canaan.  There He had given prophets to bring His Word.  There He gave priests to lead in worship.  There were the temple and the sacrifices.  God had not yet cast Israel from His presence.  He had not yet dispersed them from that land.

      So the presence of the Lord refers to those places and to those things by which God, in a covenant way, manifests Himself to His people through the means He has appointed.  For Jonah, that was the land of Canaan.  That was the sacrifices of the priests.  For us, that is the preaching of the Word of God on the Sabbath.  That is divine worship services on Sunday, two times.  That is prayer and Scripture reading.  That is fellowship with the people of God.  Those are the means, those are the places, where the presence of God is experienced.

      But Jonah, in a state of disobedience, having decided he was going to go his own way, was determined to put away from himself as far as possible anything that would sting his conscience or remind him of the claims of His God.  He would flee from the presence of the Lord.  He would go to a place where he could forget.  And what better place than in the company of pagan sailors heading toward the most distant location known to man.

      All seemed to go well at first.  Everything falls into place.  He finds a ship going to Tarshish.  He pays his fare.  He boards the ship, going up the gangplank.  Do we see the   rats coming off the ship?  The captain welcomes him aboard, “Welcome, Jonah.”  Orders are given:  “Hoist the sail.  Weigh anchor.”  And with a sigh of relief, Jonah believes he has put behind him everything that could remind him of the presence of God and of God’s call to him.

      Do you ever do that?  The Word of God presses upon your conscience.  You believe that the solution will be simply to get away from whatever reminds you of God and His call and His Word.  You say, “I’ve got to get away from those parents — that house—that family—that church.  Who can live with those people?”  All an attempt to avoid the presence of God and His call upon you.  Do you see this played out before you in your own life?  Do you see yourself in Jonah?  This is what happens when you have a controversy with God.  Then you want to get away from everything that is going to remind you of your obligation to the living God, because you do not like what He is saying to you.  You do not like it.  Maybe you have even said, “I’ll leave the church.  I’ll leave this marriage.  Who can live with that woman, with that man?  I’ll leave this family.  I’ll leave these people.  They’re my problem.  They’re a strait jacket.  I envision that everything is going to be fine on the high seas of life, in some remote part — new people, adventure, glamour.”

      Any Jonahs listening today?  This is what happens when you have a controversy with God and, for whatever reason, you simply have decided that you are not going to do what He calls you to do because you do not like it.

      Here are the symptoms.  You can feel it when you go to church.  You do not want to go.  You become infrequent in your attendance.  You come because your parents make you.  You have as much dealings with the Bible as you have to.  You do not read it.  Why?  Because it reminds you of God’s claims.  You begin to criticize.  You say, “I can’t understand the words of the Bible.  I can’t understand those sermons.  My family doesn’t understand me.  My wife doesn’t understand me.  The people, the way they are, who could live with them?”  All to silence the voice of your own obligation to God.

      So, you say, “Oh, yes, I’ll read my Bible before I go to sleep, a little later, after I check the newspaper or click off the TV.”   Do you flee from the presence of the Lord?

      But, you see, it is not just the *symptoms* of disobedience there, but it is also the *cost*of disobedience.  Think of it.  What greater good, what greater comfort, than the presence of the *Lord.*  “In Thy presence,” says the psalmist, “is fullness of joy.  At Thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore.”  Scripture says the presence of God is the *super bonum,* it is the quintessence of blessing.  What ought to be our greatest delight?  The presence of God.  Now, look at the cost of disobedience.  Is it worth that?  The presence of God will be our greatest joy in heaven.  If you find yourself running from those things that bring His presence to you now—the church, the Bible, prayer, worship services twice on Sunday, your believing family, the communion of saints—if you find yourself avoiding them, you had better look in the mirror...and see Jonah.

      Why did Jonah do this?  What was there about his commission that collided with his will?  We want to be very careful in that.  We want to be careful when we assign motives to God’s people.  Now we might speculate.  It would not be too hard to speculate.  Why did Jonah do that?  We could imagine, perhaps, that Jonah was overcome by thoughts of the sheer difficulty of the commission — that great city Nineveh, alien to God.  What could one man do?  Who was going to listen?  Where was his support?  And, remember, he was to bring God’s Word.  And that Word was not, “God has a wonderful plan for your life,” but, “forty days, and God will destroy you in your sins.”  The best he could anticipate was that he would be laughed at and called a fanatic.  But if those were his thoughts, we are not told that they were.  There is no hint of that in the book.  And besides, God would have answered him and said, “Jonah, I will be with you.  Is not My Word like a hammer?”  No, it was not because of the difficulty.

      Was it because of the danger?  It was not just difficult.  It was dangerous!  If you read the prophecy of Nahum, you will find that that prophecy is concerned with the wickedness of Nineveh.  It is called a bloody city, full of lies and robbery.  The dead were unburied on the streets.  What was one preacher to do against such wickedness?  Would they not just kill him and add his body to the pile of carcasses?  But if Jonah had thoughts of fear (and we would not blame him), we do not read of that in this book.  And still again, God would say, “Jonah, what time you are afraid, put your trust in Me.”

      Why?  If you look ahead in the prophecy to chapter 4:2, you find the reason.  There, after he had been swallowed by the fish, vomited out, gone to Nineveh to preach, and Nineveh has repented, we read, “But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry.  And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country?  Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil.”   There Jonah stands before God and he is not perplexed and confused over what God has done, but he is angry over what God has done.  Why?  He says, “I fled to Tarshish because I suspicioned when I was in my own country that the reason I was being sent to the Ninevites was that God was going to show sovereign mercy.  He was going to save many of them according to His own eternal, particular good pleasure.”  Jonah was filled with the attitude that had crept in upon Israel — an attitude finding its source in his own sinful flesh.  That attitude was that God’s mercy belonged to Israel.  And those whom *he*considered unworthy, those Gentile dogs, those people of Nineveh, God should not work among them His electing mercy!

      When God’s people were mindful of their own unworthiness and of the sheer mercy of God to them, they had no problem with God’s purpose of extending mercy to the elect placed in other nations.  They remembered the word to Abraham:  “In thee shall all nations of the earth be blessed.”  They confessed and rejoiced in the truth of the universal church out of every nation and manner of people — every tribe and tongue.  But when spiritual apathy set in in Israel, they began to think that they were God’s favorites and God needed them.  They could not conceive of God giving grace to *other* people, to pagans.

      Jonah became resentful of God showing mercy to those he considered unworthy.  And it was not a passing thing.  It was a settled disposition.  It stuck with him through all of his preaching in Nineveh and it was something that God had to chide and rebuke him for over and over and to say to him, “Jonah, I will show mercy to whom *I* will show mercy; and whom *I* will, I will harden.  *I’m* sovereign.  The church is built on *My* good pleasure.  I do not send out My saving mercy on the basis of your prejudice or your ideas or to whom *you* think should make a nice addition to the church.  *I* show mercy as *I* please, to whomsoever *I* will.”

      Now there are some mighty powerful lessons here.  We certainly see the weakness of the most holy of God’s people if they are left to themselves.  Jonah was a holy man of God, make no mistake.  He was a prophet of God.  He was a means to bring God’s Word.  He was faithful in a difficult and a frightening commission.  But the best saint, when left to himself, is foolish and blind.

      Let the Word of God now, today, speak to you.  Jonah is not an excuse.  He is not an example here to follow.  He is a beacon to warn you.  No matter the graces that you have, no matter your spiritual track record, no matter your advancements, if you are left to yourself, there is no sin that you could not commit.  Every child of God—that is you!—is of himself capable of committing the most foul sin.  If you do not believe that, the devil is at your door.

      Look at the frightening power of this spiritual pride — the frightening power when we begin to think that somehow God’s mercy to us was because we deserved it, that somehow we rank higher than someone else, that it is because of our skin color or our income or our social class or our simple decency that we are in the church.  Then we say, “Well, look at those filthy people over there.”  We base our revulsion of sin on ourselves and not on the holy God.  And we condemn others, not because of their sin before God, but because they, apparently, do not measure up to us.

      Still more, would you note with me the danger of judging from God’s providence as to whether or not you are doing the will of God.  Everything at first seemed to work out well for Jonah.  He disobeys, and the ground did not break open under his feet.  He made his way to Joppa, that seaport, and a travel agent could not have done anything better.  Jonah finds a ship.  He is going to Tarshish.  He pays his fare.  The sail is set.  Here is a man who has defied God, disobeyed God’s will, and apparently everything is going well.  It looks as if God is going to wink.  But He is not.

      If you read that first chapter, you will see the repeated play on the word “down.”  He went *down* to Joppa.  He went *down* into the ship.  Jonah was gone *down* into the sides of the ship.  Then he goes *down* to the bottom of the sea.  It is all down!  Do not gauge whether you are doing God’s will by your feelings or by the apparent success in your life.  God says to you as a young person:  “Do not be unequally yoked with an unbeliever.”  But maybe you say, “Well, I’m dating this unbelieving boy (girl).  It’s working out OK.  He’s a nice guy!  He is not a member of the church.  But I asked God that if it was not God’s will then God would not give me these feelings for him.  And if I was not to marry him, then God would stop the marriage.  He’d break my leg.”  Not only young people but even married people reason that way.  The new, the second wife — “I divorced my wife.  And that other woman, if I wasn’t supposed to have her, why would I have these feelings for her.  And she’s *so* nice.  So I am going to do that.”

      Now, what do you want God to do?  Do you want God to lasso you on the way down the aisle of marriage to tell you that you are not supposed to get married to that person?  Is that what you want?  You must not gauge God’s will by your feelings.  But you gauge it from the holy Scriptures.  We could apply that to a career.  You might say, “Well, if God doesn’t want me to have that job that takes me away from the church, then He’s going to close the door, right?”  What do you want God to do—send bankruptcy into that new corporation to tell you not to join it?  God’s will is, Seek His kingdom!  Be faithful to the church.  Your Sabbath life, your family life, that is how you gauge where you are going to work—not on their offer.

      But sometimes we get our own will into our teeth, just like the horse gets the bit in its teeth.  And we interpret everything by feel.  We interpret God’s providence to be an evidence of His approval, that this is His will.

      Now, listen.  God’s providence does not teach you His will.  God’s Word teaches you His will.

      Jonah, at this point, leaves us with a heavy heart.  We see ourselves.  And we pray, Lord, conform me to Thy will.  Make me obedient, holy, and trusting.

      Let us pray.

      Father, bless Thy word to our hearts through Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.