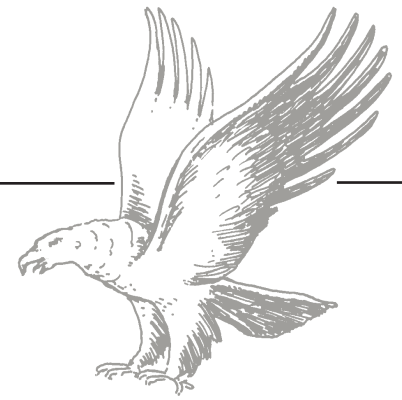


Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



July 19, 2015

Running From God

How we look at those around us who live in defiance of God says much about our own relationship with God. The story of Jonah calls us to examine more closely our own motivations.

“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.’ But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord” (Job 1:1-2).

“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” (Job 4:2-3).

The story of Jonah’s encounter with the big fish gets all the attention in popular culture, but that incident is really secondary to the larger message of the book. These two passages—from the first and last chapters—neatly frame a major theme in the book: The high cost of running away from God.

But even that theme obscures a deeper lesson. We are not surprised to read of someone fleeing from God. After all, we see people around us doing it every day. They despise God and all He

stands for. Their lives are a living expression of their rejection of Him.

But Jonah does not fit that mold at all. He was not a defiant rebel, but a loyal prophet who in every other respect was faithful to his calling. However, in this one incident he foolishly abandoned his assigned mission and tried to run away. Why? What was it about this particular task that triggered such a negative response?

Look more closely at Jonah’s complaint to God in chapter four: “Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; *for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness . . .*” Jonah’s mission to Nineveh was to preach repentance to its citizens. Jonah did not fear the demands of the work, nor the threats of the people, nor the possibility of failure. Rather, *he feared success!* He was afraid that his preaching would accomplish the very thing God wanted it to accomplish: the repentance and restoration of Nineveh.

This sounds bizarre—but not if we are familiar with the history behind the story. The Assyrians were a bloodthirsty

people whose reputation for butchery was legendary. By preaching repentance to this crowd, Jonah faced the possibility of delivering them from the wrath of God. The very thought of these savages being spared by God’s mercy was more than Jonah could bear. So he ran away from God and from his calling.

The big fish, of course, was God’s instrument for getting Jonah’s attention and putting him back on the right track. (And Jonah was right; the Ninevites did indeed repent.) But we would do well to reflect on the motivation behind Jonah’s initial refusal to cooperate with God. Here was a man who loved God and was fearless in his service. Yet he could not bear the idea of God showing mercy to someone less deserving than he. Better that they die in their sins than experience the grace of God!

The story of Jonah speaks directly to God’s people today. If we ever slip into a mode of thought that views the unwashed masses as unworthy of God’s mercy, we are, like Jonah, running away from God and from our mission. And God is not happy with us.

– David King