

When God Catches Up With a Runaway

I began a series from the minor prophets last week and I want to begin today by reading a little story to you from a magazine. It is a true story. It is written by the mother of a teenage girl. Here is how it goes:

“Every weekday morning when my alarm went off at 6:00 a.m. I would get out of bed and walk down the hallway and knock on my daughter’s door.

‘Time to get up, Julie,’ I would say.

‘OK, Mom,’ was my 16-year old’s usual reply.

But on this particular morning when I knocked on Julie’s door there was no response. I knocked again. Still no answer. When I opened the door, I was shocked. Julie wasn’t there. Her bed looked as if it had not been slept in. I ran from room to room calling her name. Julie didn’t answer, but my frenzied voice woke up my husband.

‘Julie is gone,’ I told him.

Jeff looked at me as if I was crazy. But when he saw that I was telling the truth he joined me in the search. With growing desperation we explored even the most unlikely places—under the bed and in closets as if our 16-year old daughter was somehow hiding or lost. She wasn’t in the house.

Jeff threw on his clothes and ran to the car. He jumped in and drove frantically up and down the neighboring streets to look for her. When he couldn’t find her, he took his

flashlight and headed for a nearby park to search in the bushes. I was terrified at the implications of this and relieved when his search proved futile.

My head began to pound with pain. Where could Julie be? What were we going to do? We had been devoted, 24 hour a day, on-duty parents. She had always been gentle and obedient. Why had she done this to us?

As daylight came, it was clear that our search for Julie was getting nowhere and we needed help. I called the police but when I told the officer that there was no sign of foul play, he said that the police could do nothing for 48 hours. Our daughter couldn't be considered missing until she had been gone two full days.

Jeff and I were desperate. We had always been very protective of Julie and as a result she was very innocent compared to many girls her age. The thought of her wandering alone on streets in early hours terrified me. I feared she wouldn't know how to handle herself or might be approached by a stranger or attacked or abducted. We couldn't wait two days. We had to find her now.

I called friends and neighbors and they immediately came to our help. My husband is self-employed so he was able to stay at home with me. An amateur detective group was set up right here around our kitchen table so that Jeff and I could stay by the phone. Our friends asked questions that might give leads.

'Did Julie have a boyfriend?' ventured my neighbor Pat.

'Was she taking drugs?' asked another friend, Joan.

'Did she show signs of depression?'

I shook my head. Julie had always been an intensely private child. Even if she was unhappy, she never would have admitted it and she wouldn't have talked to us about it.

I notified Julie's school that she was missing.

‘You don’t deserve this,’ the Dean of students said indignantly. ‘I have seen Julie’s father waiting for her after school every afternoon.’

I felt a pang of guilt at her well-intentioned words. ‘Though Julie was 16 and had often asked to ride the bus alone, we still insisted on driving her to and from school.’

As these devoted, but over-protective parents learned a little later in this story, Julie fortunately was not abducted. She was not kidnapped. She was not on drugs. But sadly, she chose to run away from the smother love that she was receiving at home. She wanted to grow up. She wanted to spread her wings a little bit. And so she ran away from her parents and their rules.

You know, every year 1½ million kids run away from home. It is as if the entire population of central Ohio, every man, woman, and child; every old person and baby just picked up and fled the city. Half of the kids that run away do so because of abuse—physical abuse or sexual abuse by someone in their family, a stepfather, a boyfriend of mom’s. The other half mentions a variety of reasons. Most common is that they can’t communicate with their parents.

The most shocking statistic on runaways is that of those who call home and say, “Mom/Dad, I have been living out on the street. I am miserable. I have no money. I have been hurt. I have been beaten up. I want to come home, please let me come home.” the police statistics say that 68% of parents say, “No, you can’t come home.” 68% say, “I am sorry, you can’t come home.”

In today’s message I want to talk about a very different kind of runaway, but a runaway nevertheless. It is the story of a man who ran away from God the Father. He tried to run away from the Father’s calling. He tried to run away from the Father’s direction and will for his life. And in many ways he symbolizes a world full of people who are on the run from

God. Virtually every day I talk to someone who in some way or other is running away from God.

“Yeah, I used to really pray and feel close to God when I was a child. I had a pretty strong faith when I was a teenager. I used to be really involved in church. Five years ago I had a much closer, heart relationship with God than I do today. But that was years ago. Something got in the way.”

Today we are going to look at the first chapter of the book of Jonah. I have called this message, “When God Catches Up With a Runaway.” Let’s pray.

Let’s read Jonah 1:

“The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.’

“But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.”

You know, in the newspaper business they often say that if a dog bites a man, that is not a news story. But if a man bites a dog, well you have something. And Jonah is one of those “man bites dog” stories. Every day of the week millions of people eat fish. But it is not every day of the week that you read about a fish eating a man and that the man lives to tell about it. The story is intrinsically interesting to adults as well as to children. It is one of the most popular stories in the Bible.

We will talk about the fish next week. But for now it’s sufficient to tell you that Jonah was a real historical person. He is not a myth or a fairytale like Little Red Riding Hood. Jonah was a real person. He lived during the reign of King Jereboam II of Israel. Jereboam II’s reign was between 786-746 BC. We find Jonah prophesying during that King’s reign.

Jonah is the only prophet in the Old Testament that Jesus mentions by name. It is really clear that Jesus regarded this story as historically true because Jesus compared his own resurrection, in which he was delivered from the grave after three days and nights, to Jonah being in the belly of a fish for three days and three nights.

You have a real problem if you say the story of Jonah is a myth. And the real problem is that you are dangerously close to calling the resurrection of Jesus a myth.

It is also the case that the story of Jonah is not written like ancient mythology. It is written as historical narrative. These events really did happen.

So what do we read in Jonah 1? Well, we read of God's calling to this runaway. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.'"

Why did God want Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh? Well, certainly one reason was to announce a coming judgment against the city. The Bible describes God as being unbelievably forbearing. God is described in the Bible as being very long-suffering. In other words he has a very long, long fuse. Some people, if you do the least little thing, man they have a short fuse. They blow up easily over a minor irritation. Dinner is not quite hot. What they are served is not exactly what they asked for in the restaurant. The cleaners have negligently pulled a button off one of their shirts. The garbage man didn't pick up one of their trash barrels—and they are ready to begin WWII—Nuke 'em! They are on the phone to their attorneys.

But God is not like that. And aren't you incredibly grateful that God our Father is long-suffering and very patient? What would become of us if he was short-fused since all of us, in one way or another, try God's patience?

The Bible teaches that God's patience is not the same thing as God forever overlooking sin or not caring about what we do. In Romans 2:4 it says,

“Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?”

God is very patient, and he gives people time to turn. And so, for many years he gave the city of Nineveh time to turn toward him. God waits and waits intending, during that waiting time, that people will come to their senses and break off from the particular sin of choice. The Assyrians' sins of choice were violence and blasphemy.

Several years ago I was in the British Museum in London, and they had carved reliefs taken from ancient Nineveh from around this period. In the reliefs you see the Assyrians - Nineveh was the capital of Assyria - you see the Assyrians leading captives away from their cities, men, women and children, and they have hooks in the people's mouths. One king of Nineveh was accustomed to tear off the lips and hands of his victims. Another king was known to have made a great pile of the skulls of those whom he took captive—men, women, and children. This was a very violent race of people.

And also a blasphemous race of people. We read about the Assyrians in 2 Kings 18. Now this incident in 2 Kings 18 takes place a little later than the time of Jonah, but it shows the character of the folks who Jonah was called to preach to. The Assyrians come against the city of Jerusalem and one of the Assyrian commanders says, in 2 Kings 18:32, if you are taking notes, “Do not listen to Hezekiah [who is the king of the Jews at the time], for he is misleading you when he says, ‘The Lord will deliver us.’ Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah? Have they rescued Samaria

from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand?"

So the Assyrians are basically saying, "Yahweh, the Lord God of Israel, is another 3rd-rate, local deity who has no more power than any of the other gods that we have burned in heaps as we have sacked other cities. Violence and blasphemy. Though the Lord is patient, there comes a time when the Lord confronts sin.

I don't know how high the pile of sin needs to get before the Lord says, "Now it is time for me to speak a word of judgment." I don't know when God's patience runs out. I don't want to know. I don't want to get even close to that edge of the cliff. And none of you ought to want to get that close to the edge of the cliff either. We should want to avoid that with all of our hearts.

There is another reason, beyond confrontation for sin, that God calls Jonah to preach to the city of Nineveh. And that is to call the city to repentance so that he doesn't have to judge them. You know, the purpose of confrontation is always to restore a person. It is always to rescue a person. To save a person. At least in the plans and heart of God.

Listen to me, because I want to underline a personal point for you. If you are on the warpath wanting to confront a person because of something wrong that they did - even though you may be totally in the right, you have the person nailed; they really have done something wrong - if your purpose in speaking to another person - your ex-husband, a parent, a child, your spouse, a co-worker - if your purpose in speaking to a person is simply to point out to them their fault, without having it in your heart to see them restored in relationship to you, to be reconciled to you, to be changed by the confrontation, then you don't have the heart of the Father.

This is what so upsets me about most of these open-air preachers on the college campuses in central Ohio. They preach judgment at the students, but there doesn't seem to be any desire to see the students restored in relationship to God. Do you want to know what God is like when he confronts people? 2 Samuel 14:14. It is one of my favorite verses in the Old Testament. Here is what it says:

“Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered, so we must all die. But God does not take away life. Instead, he devises his ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him.”

God is always looking for a way, always devising a way, God is infinitely creative in figuring out a way in which people who are running from him might be restored into fellowship with him. I picture the Father plotting and planning and strategizing to turn a person who is running from God back to himself.

Do you know someone who is running from the Lord? You can trust that God the Father is, right now, devising a way for them to be reconciled to God.

So God commissions Jonah to preach to and against the Ninevites and in v. 3 it says, “But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.”

Now, if there is anything clear about God from the Bible, it is that God is everywhere present. Theologians call that idea the omnipresence of God. That means that God is everywhere close to us. He is everywhere near. We can no more run away from God than a fish can run away from the sea. God is all around us. Acts 17 says, “In him we live and move and have our being.” Psalm 139 says,

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me.”

Maybe I will shake off my Christian heritage by moving to California or by getting out of this marriage, or by switching careers. People do the craziest things to run away from God. But nothing will ever set a person free from the presence of God, not even death. Even there, even in Sheol, in the grave, your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. There is no escape from the presence of God.

And yet it says that Jonah tried to run away from God. He is a prophet. His theology was certainly strong enough and clear enough to know that God was not some local deity tied to the land of Palestine. He is the God of the universe and the creator of all that we see. But Jonah tried to do what was impossible.

I think all of this points out something very fundamental about sin. At bottom, sin is irrational. At its most basic level, sin doesn't make any sense at all. It makes no sense to run away from God and to run away from his commandments and his call. Sin makes you stupid!

Why do people destroy their homes and tear their families down brick by brick with their own hands? Why do people wreck their own reputations and risk their own happiness? Why do we watch folks every day self-destruct? I don't mean become victims of the sin of another. I mean self-destruct. Why?

You don't understand sin and running from God unless you see that at bottom sin is completely irrational. It makes no sense at all. The apostle Paul in Romans 7, in describing his own flesh says, "I do not understand what I do." Have you seen that in your own life? There is something totally confusing and bewildering about your sin. You say, "This is just hurting me. I am losing my peace. I am losing my closeness to God. I don't want to continue to do this activity. I know this relationship is really bad for me and yet, and yet, and yet."

And yet we sin. And we continue to run away from our Father and from his care. Why do we do this? Why are we runaways?

There are a few things that present themselves to our attention in Jonah's case. It was very possible that Jonah was afraid of the difficulty of the task. This was an incredibly hard thing that God was calling him to do. Go to the city of Nineveh, this violent group of people - it would be like going to a tribe of headhunters - and preach against them, tell them their wickedness has piled up to the sky and that judgment is about to fall on them.

Jonah may have heard those words as, "Go offer yourself as a martyr." This is a group of people who cut off their enemies' lips. Jonah might have said, "Lord, I just look better with lips. I like my mouth the way it is. I enjoy having my hands attached to my arms. It helps me put things between my lips."

And I have noticed over the years that there are many people who hear the word of God and immediately mentally say to themselves, "I can't do what God is asking me to do. It is too hard. Sorry, God, I hear what you are saying, but this is too difficult an assignment. I can't." Have you ever said that to the Lord? "I am sorry, but I can't do what you are asking me to do. I clearly know what my commission is, but I can't do it. It is too unreasonable. I can't stay in this marriage. The love has completely gone out of it. I can't stay in school. I can't break up with this person, I love them too much. I can't go into the ministry or become a missionary. It is just too hard. I know that is what you are saying to me, Lord, and you have said it for years, but I can't."

So people go on the run from God because they think that what God is asking them is something that they simply cannot deliver. There are two words that simply do not fit together—the words "no" and "Lord." You can't look up to the sky and say, "No, Lord." If you say "no" he is not your Lord. Do you get it?

In Jonah's case, he didn't run because of the difficulty of the task. In Jonah's case, we know that the reason he ran from God was because he knew that God was too merciful. He tells us in Jonah 4:2 why he ran. It says,

“O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? This is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”

Jonah wanted the people of Nineveh to be judged. He did not want to give them an opportunity to repent because he knew what God would do. What God would do would be to reconcile himself to these people. The Ninevites were marching into cities, burning them, looting them, bringing men and women back as prisoners with hooks in their mouths. And God, he knew, would give them another chance. If they repented they would be forgiven. Jonah was offended by the breadth of the love of God for people.

Have you ever been offended by the breadth of God's heart, like Jonah? Wanting God to judge and being afraid that he wouldn't? You have too. You liars. And I will tell you where each one of us has been offended by the breadth of the love of God. God's love offends us concerning every person that we have had a hard time forgiving. God says that we are to forgive everyone for everything. Have you ever struggled with that? I am sure you have; I have. You mean I have to forgive my parents for everything? You mean I have to forgive that person who got me fired from my job? You mean I have to forgive the ex-spouse, an abuser? I just can't do it.

When you say to God, “I don't want to forgive even though you are calling me to,” you are saying, “God, your heart is too big to fit into my chest. You are calling me to push the boundaries of my heart beyond what I am willing to let them be pushed. I refuse, God, to let my heart be stretched to the dimensions of your heart. I want this other person to be

judged. I want them to be dealt with. I want them to be punished. I don't want to feel your heart for them. I don't want to allow myself to feel mercy toward them."

Let's make this personal. If there is anyone at all that you haven't forgiven for anything at all, then in that way and concerning that person, you have a Jonah heart.

I mentioned two reasons why Jonah may have run away. Perhaps because the task was too difficult. We run when we are faced with something that seems overwhelming to us. Jonah 4:2 says he ran because he was afraid that God would be too kind. There are lots of occasions when we don't want the Lord to be kind to someone else.

Some of us run from God when we have been hurt. How many people do you know that are on the run from committed church membership because they were hurt or offended by something in the past? Maybe this applies to a few of you. Someone said something at a former church that offended you, or someone said something here that offended you. Maybe your old pastor had a chauvinistic view of women, or preached too much about judgment, or had an affair. Maybe you were involved in a church in which the leadership was very heavy-handed and very controlling of everyone and everything. Some people have been hurt because they went through a crisis and the church didn't get involved. Or the people in the church were hypocritical.

Whatever the case, there are a lot of folks who are on the run from church involvement and church membership. Now in individualistic America, people fool themselves into thinking, "I am not on the run from God, even though I am keeping myself at arm's length from the church. I love God. I am walking in a really tight way with God. I just don't like the church and I am not going to give myself to the church."

Friends, the fact is that the first thing that Jesus does when he saves a person is he introduces that person to his family. He says, "Son, Daughter, welcome to the family. Now

that you have embraced God as your Father, let me introduce you to your brothers and sisters. I am so glad that you say, Son, Daughter, that you love me. But as it says in 1 John 4:20, 'If anyone says I love God yet hates his brother, he is a liar. If anyone does not love his brother whom he has seen, he cannot love whom he has not seen.'"

Let me give you the bottom line here friends. If you, in some way, are holding yourself back from involvement in the church, if you are running from church membership and from giving yourself to the church because someone has offended you or hurt you, you are running from God. You cannot say "I love God and am walking closely to him" unless you love your brothers and sisters and are walking close to them.

Let's quickly look at what happens when we runaway from our Father. Verse 3 says, "Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed toward Tarshish." Tarshish is exactly in the other direction from Nineveh. Nineveh is about 500 miles Northeast of Israel. It is in present day Iraq. And Tarshish is 2000 miles to the west. It is on the coast of Spain. So what Jonah was essentially doing was running to the other side of the Mediterranean—as far away as possible from what God was calling him to.

Now I have noticed something about people when they are on the run from God. They tend to go to extremes. Way over the edge. And I have noticed that those who have some knowledge of God, and are running, often will go to a further extreme in their behavior than people who have no knowledge of God. Have you noticed that, that when people are on the run from God, they absolutely fill their lives with diversions and escapes and relationships and work? It is often the fact that they are running away from the Father.

If I run fast enough, hard enough and far enough I don't have to think of the fact that I used to have a close and tender relationship with God that I don't have anymore. Of course, the direction that we head when we run to extremes is always down. It says that he went

down to Joppa where he found a ship bound for that port. Topographically, of course, going down to the sea from the hill country where he lived, but going down is always the direction that someone is going to go when they run away from the Father.

Maybe for a time when we are running away, it seems like things are looking up. We have this great new relationship. We have a job promotion. Maybe we bought a new car. Everything in life is really happening. We fool ourselves into thinking we are moving up. But when you run away from the Father, the direction of your life is always ultimately down. Jonah went down to Joppa.

It says that after paying the fare he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. This is the third thing that happens when we run from God. Donald Gray Barnhouse, a great preacher once said, “When we run from God we always pay the fare and we never get where we are going. In contrast, when we follow God he pays the fare and we get where we are going to.”

What’s the fare? What do we pay when we run away from God? One of the fares that people end up paying is that they have to serve a dozen other masters. We don’t want the rules and restrictions of our father’s house. We don’t want to respond to the difficulty of what God is calling us to. We don’t want to overcome our hurt and our anger regarding what someone did to us. We want our freedom. We want to be our own bosses.

But we pay. When we are on the run we end up bound to a thousand other masters. We become bound to a new standard of living that we have to work like crazy to maintain. We pay the fare by losing peace. We end up bound to other people’s impressions of us since we no longer can derive our identity from what our Father in heaven thinks of us. We pay the fare by losing our reputation. We end up bound to a new set of lusts that we are now

enslaved to. We pay the fare by getting addicted. We end up bound to a relationship that doesn't give us any thing like the satisfaction that we used to get from God and fellowship.

When we run away from God, we always pay the fare and we never get where we are going.

It is really important that we keep in our minds that there is an enormous cost involved in running from God. I often talk to people who are on the edge of making a decision to follow Jesus. Maybe some of you are weighing whether you should become a follower of Jesus? Maybe someone has been talking to you about Christ and about his claims and you are evaluating. You are thinking, "Should I become a Christian also?" But then the thought runs through your mind, "I don't know if I have what it takes to be a good follower of Christ." The cost is really high. I have talked with people who have been very open about what they are not willing to pay. "I don't want to give up sleeping with my girlfriend." They understand the deal. They are really weighing up the costs. "If I become a Christian, then I can't get drunk anymore. Is that right, Rich?" Well, that's right.

"You mean I can't cheat on my income tax? I can't puff up my résumé?"

That's correct. You can't if you are a Christian. It is appropriate that you weigh the costs of becoming a follower of Christ. Jesus tells people to weigh the cost of becoming a disciple.

But, friends, I don't know if anyone has ever communicated to you the costs of not being a disciple. See, there is a cost of being on the run from God. Often times folks don't really assess the cost. They think, "I am giving all this stuff up." But there is enormous family cost to not following Jesus. I honestly believe that you can't have anything like the quality of marriage that two committed Christians have if you are on the run from God. You simply will not have the capacity to love each other the way that God will empower you

to love, or to forgive each other the way that God would empower you to forgive, if you are on the run from God.

There is enormous emotional cost in being on the run from God. You will lose your peace. You will lose the sense of contentment in all circumstances. Ultimately, of course, if you are permanently on the run from God, you will pay the largest cost of all—the price of your own soul because you will lose God forever.

So, there is a cost in following Jesus. That is quite right. But there is a much larger bill if you don't follow him. And it says regarding Jonah that after he paid the fare he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. The final cost of running from God is found in v. 4, "Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up and all the sailors were afraid. Each cried out to his own God."

I want you to think about this for a moment as we consider running away from the Father. Here Jonah is the one who sinned. He is the one who ran away from the Lord, but look who is paying the price. Not just Jonah. It says the whole ship was going to break up. All the sailors on board the ship with Jonah were going to drown. You ask if that was fair of God to have other people have to pay for what one person does.

I can't fully answer this, but I know that the world is not like the Simon and Garfunkel song that says, "I am a rock. I am an island." God has designed the world so as to tie our lives together with each other. It is very rare to have a person's sin just affect them. If a husband leaves his wife, it is not just the wife who gets hurt. Yes, he loses the chance to have a relationship with his kids in his old age. I mean, perhaps he will never be able to regain his children's respect. He will never get to grow old with the wife of his youth. But he is not the only one who gets hurt. His children get hurt. They find it more difficult to trust, to form lasting relationships, to have confidence in marriage. Maybe their kids will pay

the bill. You watch this pattern of abuse in families run down family lines. Alcoholism runs down family lines. The consequences of running from God always goes beyond us.

That is why Jesus prayed in John 17, “For their sake, Father, I consecrate myself that they too might be consecrated.” Mom, Dad, why give yourself to God? Not only so that you will personally be blessed, but so that your children might be blessed. For their sake, I choose to master this particular sin in my life so that they won’t have to deal with the same sin. For their sake, I choose to end this sinful tendency from my family line in my generation. I choose to cut the chain; it stops with me. I choose, God, to stop running from you so that those around me, those to whom I am connected, won’t be hurt by my sin.

Now, I want you to note two things parenthetically before we finish up and look at how God catches a runaway. In v. 5 it says that all the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own God and they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. Let’s be honest right here. You and I know that one result of a major difficulty in a person’s life—an illness, job loss, marital break-up—one of the results of going through a major difficulty is that sometimes people begin to open up to God. Tragedy is never a completely irredeemable situation if a person opens up to considering a relationship with God in their stress.

So we see during the storm that these sailors get religion. I have watched people get religion during a crisis. They are in the hospital; they are diagnosed with an illness. They begin to pray fervently, but after they get out of the hospital, they feel better. What was all that religion about? I don’t know. I feel better.

I like a comment I heard once about the difference between a person who was truly converted during a time of crisis and one who was just getting a little bit of religion, but has never really experienced the miracle of the born again experience. The author said that the major difference between a follower of Christ who is real and genuine, and someone who

just got religion in a pinch, is that a real Christian's faith is an all-weather faith. I like that phrase. You can write it down. True Christian faith is an all-weather faith. That means that a real Christian prays when everything in his or her life is going well—when the sun is shining and the birds are singing. A real Christian still continues to want a relationship with God. It is not just when they have tried everything else and there is no other answer or no other cure. When there is no source of money and they need a miracle at all costs. A real Christian prays because they know their Father and they just want to be close to him. It is part of an ongoing love relationship. It is not just out of desperation. A real faith is an all-weather faith.

And I think we see something else, by the way, that happens to folks who don't know God in the time of a storm. It says that they threw the cargo into the sea. I think a storm clarifies what is important real quick. We suddenly realize that all of our stuff, all our cars, computers, family rooms and the things we cared so desperately about—about what office we get and what our job title is and how we look and what we weigh—man, when the storm really hits we gladly throw all of that cargo overboard in exchange for our own life or the life of someone we love. What difference does it make if you have a phone in your car, or you have a Ph.D. after your name, and you are dying?

The storm hits and God catches them. And God catches Jonah. In v. 5 it says, "But Jonah had gone below deck where he laid down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, 'How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God. Maybe he will take notice of us and we will not perish.'"

A lot of folks try to weigh whether something is right or wrong by whether they feel bad about it. Well, I can't see this as really wrong. I don't feel bad about it. I don't know why God would condemn something that feels right to me. Here is a classic text that tells us that

our conscience is not always a reliable guide to what is right or wrong. Jonah is asleep while he is on the run from God. He has shut off his conscience, but God awakens him. Get up and cry out to your God. The impact of these words is not nearly as great in the English as it is in the original Hebrew. Up in v. 2, God used these identical words when he commissioned Jonah. He said to him in Hebrew, “Get up and call out to Nineveh.” And now we have this pagan sailor, this guy who knows nothing about the Lord saying the same thing that God said, “Get up and call out.”

I don’t know if you can feel the sting of this. But one of the ways that God awakens a sleepy conscience is that he sends someone around to basically echo the same thing that God has been saying to you. And that someone may be a person who doesn’t even know God. That really stings.

I remember once having this person who didn’t even know God tell me, “We really shouldn’t be talking this way about this other person because it is gossip.” Here I was supposed to know the rules in the game and what was appropriate to say and what wasn’t, and I had to be reminded by someone who didn’t even know God concerning what God wanted. Sometimes when you hear the voice of God through the mouth of a person who doesn’t even know Him, it has a lot more power than hearing the same thing in church.

But before Jonah could say anything in response, the sailors cast lots. They said to one another, come let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity. A lot was probably like a dice. One side was light colored and one side was dark colored. They would take two of them and toss them. If they both came up black, the answer was no from the Lord. If it came up both white, the answer was yes. If it came up black and white, they would toss the dice again. That is what a lot of people think lots are like. But before Jonah can say anything or pray, these men cast lots and the lot falls on Jonah.

There is a great verse in the Old Testament book of Numbers on this. Some men promise Moses that they will help other tribes fight in a battle. And Moses said to these men in Numbers 32:23, “Fine, but if you fail to do this you will be sinning against the Lord and you may be sure that your sin will find you out.”

Runaways, you may be sure of this, your sin will find you out. That is God’s promise to each runaway. There is no hiding. Maybe someone will find a letter in your coat pocket from a person you shouldn’t be getting a letter from. Maybe the IRS will suddenly conduct an audit. Maybe you will be caught on videotape like Frank Gifford. Maybe someone will see you in a place where you shouldn’t be. Or see you with a person you shouldn’t be with. Maybe there will be a word of knowledge or someone will have a dream about you.

And the fact that we have not been discovered, the fact that there is a delay doesn’t mean that God’s word has fallen to the ground. Be sure of this, the word of the Lord says, “Your sin will find you out.” It is highly appropriate for runaways to feel insecure about being discovered. Sin always makes us insecure. Repentance restores security. You always feel like you are walking on thin ice when you are running from God. And that is the way we should feel because we are on thin ice. Our little house of cards feels so fragile. Something may give way. We may get pregnant. Or get a disease. Or get embarrassed. Or fail in our business scheme. God has ways of smoking us to the surface because he wants a genuine relationship with us. He doesn’t just want lip service and clapping hands. He wants our hearts.

So when the lot falls on Jonah it says, “They asked him, ‘Tell us who is responsible for making all this trouble for us. What do you do? Where do you come from? Where is your country? From what people are you?’”

Now, Jonah didn't cover up. As a runaway from God he could have tried to cut corners and manipulate words and be glib, look better than he is. But I want to take just a few minutes in closing to share with you what restores a runaway to the Father's house. Because I think that Jonah here in these next few verses models for us what real confession is all about. Real confession brings a runaway home.

The first thing Jonah says is, "I am a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, the God of the heavens who made the sea and the land." I am a Hebrew. In other words, I am a person bound by covenant to the Lord. I recognize that God has made a covenant with me, Jonah is saying, to love me, to protect me, to provide for me. And I in turn have covenanted with God, to obey God in everything. So my running away from God is not just this thing that I did wrong. I have broken covenant with God. I have become disloyal in my relationship with God. What I have done is actually an act of unfaithfulness.

Runaways, in returning to God you must see that any sin that you have committed is primarily a sin of disloyalty to God. You have not just hurt yourself, you have not just hurt someone else, you have betrayed a covenant that you have with God. If God has called you to ministry and you have run from that, if God has called you to the church and you have run from that, if God has called you to leadership or missions and you have run from that, you are violating your covenant with God. See, let me put it this way. There is a difference between premarital sex and adultery. Premarital sex, of course, is wrong. It is sin, but adultery is doubly wrong because not only are we having sex with someone that we shouldn't, but we are violating covenant with our spouses.

This terrified them and they said, "What have you done?" They knew he was running away from the Lord because he told them so. Here is the second thing that real confession does. Real confession acknowledges specific sins.

Bill Hybels, the pastor at Willow Creek, once mentioned that he had a conversation with a salesman about committing his life to Jesus. The salesman said, “Well, I am not perfect, but I am no sinner like you are saying.” Hybels said to him, “Well, you are a salesman, right? Let me ask you a few questions. Did you ever pad your expense account just a little? Have the company pay for things that were personal expenses or maybe something you bought for your kids?”

The guy said, “Sure. I may have added a few dollars here and there. Everyone does it.”

Hybels said, “Do you ever exaggerate when you are out there selling your product saying that it will do something that it won’t, or promise to ship it tomorrow when you know it won’t go out until Tuesday?”

The salesman said, “Yeah, I might have done that occasionally to get a sale.”

Hybels asked, “Now, in the 25 years you were on the road, did you ever meet a pretty gal and go back to your motel room with her?”

The salesman responded with a big grin, “Well, you know, I am in sales.”

Hybels looked straight at him and said, “You have just told me that you are a thief, a liar, and an adulterer. Now repeat these words after to me, ‘I am a thief, a liar, and an adulterer.’” That is biblical confession. It is very specific.

Two other marks of biblical confession: Someone who is truly confessing takes the blame. Verse 12: “Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replies, “and it will become calm. I know it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

It is my fault. This is such a little phrase, but it is so hard for many of us to say. Sometimes we say, “I have no choice” particularly when we are asked to do something on the job that is wrong—maybe lie. But of course it is completely false that we have no

choice. We always have a choice regarding what we are going to do. We may not like the choice. But we can't shift the blame by saying that we have no choice.

Or we say we couldn't help ourselves. Or this sin has defeated me. That is a real subtle one. We are not defeated by sin, we are disobedient. Biblical confession accepts the blame. It is my fault. No one made me do it. No one can make me angry, I chose to be this way. I didn't have to run from God, but I did.

And biblical confession accepts all of the consequences of our disobedience. Verse 13 says, "The men did their best to row back to land, but they could not. The sea grew even wilder than before."

I love that phrase. Do you notice that the storm didn't get calmer immediately after Jonah confessed? It says that the sea grew even wilder than it did before. That is so true to life. Sometimes we say, "We confess. We came back to the Father. Things should immediately get better. I should immediately experience relief. My marriage should instantly improve. I should automatically get the job that I was seeking. When I return to God, I know instantly that I am going to get that peace."

The truth is that the storm may grow wilder after we confess. It will calm down eventually, but biblical confession is prepared to accept the consequences. Take me and throw me into the sea. Confession is proven by a willingness to accept whatever God chooses to deal out from the deck. "God, it is good to just get back in the game. Whatever you want to deal me now, deal me. But I am tired of lying to you and I am tired of lying to everyone else. Just let me play again. You pick the position. You pick the place and the time."

Over the years that I have been in ministry, it has been a very rare thing, unfortunately, for me to watch people who have been runaways work these four biblical steps of

confession to be restored to the Father. Every once in a while I come upon someone who is very specific about what they have done wrong and who fully accepts the blame for it and says, “It is my fault,” but it is rare to have someone say, “I take all the consequences for my sin without grousing about it.”

“Gee, what’s the point? I’ve returned to God and stopped running. Things didn’t immediately become easy and instantly fixed in my life.” It has always been a wonderful thing for me to watch people stop running and come back to God with no strings attached. People who stop running are people who say, “I’d rather have you and an authentic relationship with you than anything else.” So what if there’s some social embarrassment. So what if you need to make a job change. So what if certain people get disappointed. So what if you need to end a certain relationship. When you return to the Lord, you get the best thing life has.