

Jonah is a prophet who lived about 750 years before Jesus was born. And we learn from other parts of the Bible that Jonah lived during a very good time in Israel. Things were prosperous. Things were expanding. Things were looking pretty good. But there was always on the horizon a great evil that was hanging over the land, and evil that had a name, and that was the city of Nineveh, the very heart of the Assyrian Empire, because they would later cause all kinds of problems for Israel. But this city Nineveh, being a very large city, one of the largest in the ancient world, was also the heart of great evil. Assyrians were very well known for their sins. They were very well known for their vices. They were very well known for their idolatry. But perhaps worst of all, they were very well known for their cruelty. Because the Assyrians treated their captives that they caught in war very badly, torturing them, killing them in nasty ways, and at the very least taking them away from their homes. These were a terrible people, the kind of people you probably didn't want to associate with. But there they were out there somewhere in the distance.

But the Lord came to Jonah with a very clear command. He said to him: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." Now, there's nothing confusing about this command. There's nothing unclear about it. It's as plain as day. It's as simple as simple can be. But the Lord doesn't give any more explanation. It's not like he said, "Jonah, you should go to Nineveh, and here's the reasons why." It's not like the Lord gave him instructions: "Jonah, you should go to Nineveh, and here's how you should do it." All he says is, very, very clearly: "Arise and go and proclaim against it what I tell you." You would think that this would be as plain as day, the simplest thing to obey, to listen to what God has to say. But Jonah doesn't go. Jonah doesn't want to listen to the Lord, even though it's as plain as day, even though he would understand perfectly what he said. Jonah refuses to obey the Lord's command. Why? Why would he do that? What reason would compel him to ignore such a plain command of the Lord?

Maybe we would say he thought it was too hard. It's just too hard for one man to do. Nineveh was a huge city. We learn in chapter 4, for example, that it had 120,000 people at least, and maybe that might be just the men of the city. It could be much larger than that. But it's a huge amount of people. And Jonah is just one man. What is he supposed to do in a situation like that? Can you imagine if God told you, you personally have to go to Fargo and to preach to every single person who lives there? We would say that's impossible! There's no way we could preach to that many people. That's just too much work for one man. The job seems far too hard. And besides, they're probably not going to listen anyway. It's bad enough at home trying to preach to the Israelites. They barely listen. But to go to these foreigners, to go to these Gentiles, and to tell them the Word of the Lord? Certainly, that must seem impossible! No, there's no way it would work. Is that what Jonah thought? Is that the reason why he refuses to listen to the Lord? I don't think so. And the reason I say that is because in chapter 3 when he's told to go again the second time, he doesn't waffle. He doesn't waver. He doesn't make excuses. He just goes and he does it. It doesn't matter that there's so many people. He's not afraid of the size of the task. He simply goes the second time when he's commanded. So no, I don't think Jonah was afraid that it was too hard.

But Christians, how often are we tempted to not listen to what God has to say because we think it's too hard? Because we think what God is telling us to do is something far beyond our

abilities? Maybe we think it would take too much time. Maybe we think it would take too much effort. Maybe we think it wouldn't do any good anyway. And so we come up with all kinds of excuses as to why it's just too hard to listen to God. But God doesn't give us suggestions, Christians. He's not commanding us to do things and then leaving it up to us to decide what to do with it. When God tells us to do something, he means it, and he wants us to do it. So we should listen for that reason. But again, I don't think this is the reason why Jonah refused to go.

Maybe you would say, "Okay, so maybe he's not worried about how big it is. But maybe he's afraid for his life. Nineveh is a cruel city. These are an evil, wicked people. Who knows what they would do to him? Because it never makes you popular to go and to tell somebody that they have sinned. And these people haven't even heard of the Lord. Certainly, they would treat him badly, right? Certainly, they would probably try to kill him. If he just stays home, then things would be easier. He could live a pretty long life and a pretty comfortable life at that. Is that the reason why he refuses to go?" I don't think that's the reason either, Christians. Because you'll notice, when we get to the rest of chapter 1, for example, Jonah tells the sailors: "Throw me overboard." He's not afraid of death. He's not afraid of what might happen to him. If he's willing to be thrown overboard without a second thought, he's not really that afraid of what's going to happen in the days ahead. And even at the end of the book of Jonah when he tells the Lord, "Take my life because it would be better for me to die than to live," he's not looking for comfort. He's looking for something else. So no, I don't think that this is the reason either.

But how often do we get worried about what other people think, about what might happen to us if we listen to the Lord? Listening to God is going to make me look weird. It's going to make me look different from my community. It might cause some strain with the family if I do what God wants me to do. What will the neighbors think if I do what God wants me to do? That's a very easy temptation to fall into, to be worried about what other people think when it comes to the things of God. And I think that's especially true for us here in a small community, because we know everybody. We're related to everybody in many cases. These are people that you see day in and day out, so you want to be on good terms with them, right? You wouldn't want to get on somebody's bad side because of something that you have done. But God is not asking for our input or what other people think when he commands us to do things. Sometimes it will make us weird. Sometimes it will make us different. But God calls us to listen, to listen to what he has to say. But no, I don't think this is the reason why Jonah does not listen to the Lord either.

But Jonah himself actually tells us the reason in chapter 4 verse 2. He says this: "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster." He doesn't want to go, he says, because of God! Because he knows God is merciful, because he knows God is probably going to forgive them. If he goes and he tells them, "Repent, because God's going to destroy your city," and then God has mercy on them and doesn't do it, what's that going to look like? It's going to look like God isn't true to his Word, isn't it? Like God says something, but he doesn't really mean it. That he says one thing and he does another. He threatens destruction, but then he doesn't follow through. So certainly, Jonah must think, the best thing to do here to preserve God's honor, to preserve God's reputation, is to just not go in the first place. "I will do the right thing," he thinks, "by not listening to the Lord."

Now, that might be something that's a little hard for us to see, this desire to want to do the right thing when we disobey the Lord. But because it's so hard to see, Christians, that makes it all the more dangerous to us. It makes it even more deadly than anything else we might encounter. Let me use some examples so you can see what I mean here. God commands us to be diligent and watchful against sin. He tells us very, very clearly that we need to pay attention, because there is not one of us who is outside the danger of falling away. So we need to be diligent. We need to be watchful, so that we don't fall into sin. And maybe that's easy to do at first, when you know and feel your own sin, when you know what you need to fight against. But what about when you've made some progress? When you've kind of gotten away from certain sins? When you're not really doing that thing anymore? Then you might start to think, "Hey! I've gotten better. I'm strong in my faith, so I don't need to be as watchful anymore. Because now it doesn't make that big of a difference. That's a warning for somebody else, somebody who is weak in their faith, but not for me." But don't you see what's happening, Christians? Thinking that we're doing something good, we end up not listening to what God has to say.

Let me use another example. God commands us to be holy. He wants us to do what is right. He wants us to follow after him and to keep his commandments. And maybe we find that easy to do in most circumstances. But then we have some family or some friends who we want to make a good impression on, and so we say, "Maybe we won't be as strict anymore. We're not going to be quite so holy, so that they can see that we're not stuck up, so that they can see that we are actually really nice people. And in that way," we think, "we will entice them to come and believe in God. We're just like you! We're just like you and the way that the world is. We know how to have fun!" But in so doing, Christians, we end up not listening to what God has to say. Because what good can come of not listening to God and of not following after God in this idea that we can bring someone to faith by doing so? It's only going to bring us down to their level.

One last example. God tells us very clearly what is right and what is wrong according to his Word. And he says this is sin, this isn't. But maybe out of this desire for love, we say we will think of this in our own terms. We will define what is right and what is wrong according to the way we think what is right and what is wrong. So maybe we won't be so hard on a particular sin, because then we would be seen as loving. Maybe we will try to fudge a little bit with the definition of what is sin, so that we can come across as more loving to the world. And all in this idea of showing Christian love, we turn away from what God has commanded. But is that really true, Christians? Can we really follow after God and show true Christian love if we don't actually listen to what he has to say? Do we think that we are good Christians if we are disobedient to God? Do we think that we are wiser than he is?

And the other thing to watch out for here, Christians, is to think that the easy way is somehow always the right way. Jonah certainly found an easy way, didn't he? He went down to Joppa. That was easy. He found the boat. That was easy. He went to Tarshish. That was easy. But it led him into sin. Sometimes the easy way is the wrong way. Jesus himself says "Wide and easy is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who find it. But narrow and hard is the way that leads to life, and there are few who find it." Listening to God is sometimes the hardest thing we can do, sometimes the hardest thing that we will ever have to do.

But Christians, it is always meant for our good. Whatever God commands us, no matter how hard it seems, no matter how difficult it may be to carry out, it is always meant for our good. Think of it this way. Think of how hard Jesus had it when he had to listen to his Father in Gethsemane. He said very clearly, "If it's possible, take this cup away from me. I don't want to have to suffer this. Yet not my will, but yours be done." Jesus did what was hard, because he knew that it would bring the greatest blessing, the blessing of life, the blessing of salvation, the blessing of forgiveness through his obedience, his death, and his resurrection. Jesus shows us and calls on us to listen to God in everything, because God is your loving Father. God knows what is best for you. And even the hardest command that you may have to follow, even the hardest thing that God wants you to do is meant for good. The bitterest pill that God will give you is the sweetest medicine that leads to everlasting life. So yeah, it's going to be hard. We're going to struggle. We're going to fight. We're going to want to push through it and wonder what the purpose of all of it is. But if God loves you in his Son Jesus Christ and has given to you Jesus for your salvation, do you not think that all of these things that he is doing is also meant for your good? He will lead you through the storm. He will lead you through your darkest and hardest times. And all of it, all of it will be a benefit to life everlasting. Because in Jesus, all things work together for good for those who love God.

So follow after him, Christians. Listen to him even when it's really hard to do so. Because God as your loving Father will lead you to what is best. Follow after him without compromise. Because if he has given you his Son, he will also give you all good through him.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank you for all things that you have done for us, especially for giving us your Son Jesus Christ. Help us always to follow after you and to listen to your Word, knowing that you do all things for our good. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.