

Have you ever had that person you just couldn't get away from?

When I first started in ministry, I worked as a youth pastor at a medium sized church in North Central Ohio. There was this old guy there who, for the first couple of weeks at least, was humorous...but then he just got annoying and his the same three jokes he told every. single. Sunday. grew tiresome.

I still remember his favorite...He would say hello, purely to set things up, and then ask how you were doing..then when you asked him how he was doing he would say, "Well, I'm not all right. Because I'm half left too!"

Most of the time I could put on the smile, laugh, and say, "Oh, Gibby, you got me again!" But one day, I was just not in the mood. Gibby had this little chugging kind of walk he always did if he was coming specifically to see you. I was standing on the stage at the front of the sanctuary, and I saw him huffing and puffing down the center aisle toward me. So I waited until he got halfway down, and then pretended like someone had waved for me. I started one of the side aisles, hoping he would get distracted by someone else. I was not so lucky. He had something he wanted to tell me and no one was going to stop him.

He made the swing around the front and started down the side aisle...so I decided to keep going I went out the back doors and into the foyer...Gibby kept coming...so I went down the hallway and around the courtyard...Gibby kept coming. I ended up leading him around a few more hallways, out a side door, around the parking lot, and back into the building before I finally just stopped so he could tell me his joke.

There are some people and some situations that seem impossible to get away from... unless it is something that God wants you to do...then, you may notice...it gets extremely easy to find an out...to get away.

We are starting a message series on the Book of Jonah. As I do every time we start a message series on a book of the Bible, I want to encourage you to read it through a time or two over the next month. The danger with a book like Jonah, is that we have read or at least heard the story a million times. We reduce it to a Prophet who ran away from God and was swallowed by a big fish!

But if we dig just a bit deeper we will find a message the still speaks to us and may even point a finger at us these thousands of years since it was written.

Jonah 1:1-2 begins this way...

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."

This was the standard call for the Prophets...The Word of the Lord...God is speaking... God is calling...and the Prophet is meant to obey.

This is a call that had come to many known and unknown prophets through the centuries of Israel's existence.

But Jonah does something completely different from all the other prophets.
Jonah 1:3 says...

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.

Rather than obey, Jonah ran from God's call on His life.

Why would Jonah run? There are a couple of reasons...

Jonah was scared.

Most of the time, Prophets looked forward to casting messages of judgment on the enemies of Israel. Usually, they got to do so from the comfortable confines of their homeland, but this time, God was asking Jonah to actually travel to Nineveh and proclaim the message there.

The Assyrians were the stuff of legends...they conquered and destroyed many nations and cities. They were ruthless! They had traveled the thousand or so miles with their army to conquer Jonah's homeland. So being asked to go into this enemy city...could be a death sentence.

I don't know exactly what they did to foreign prophets who pointed out their atrocities and sinfulness...but I can imagine. If the leaders of Nineveh not to ignore him as insane and decided to do something about Jonah's message of coming destruction...Jonah could be tortured and put to death in some very painful ways...So I'm guessing he had some fear.

Jonah was prejudiced.

As I mentioned just a minute ago, the Assyrians had invaded and destroyed Jonah's homeland. Destroyed the cities, sacked all their wealth, taken his people as slaves, left many of its citizens to simply work the fields and provide food and resources for to support the Assyrians and their armies....taken their women and children...murdered and killed many of them.

Jonah had a reason to hate them. He wanted to see them destroyed, but He also knew that when God sends a word of judgment to a people...there is always the chance they will turn and seek after God and receive forgiveness.

Later in Jonah 4, after the people of Nineveh repent and turn to God, it says,

Jonah 4:2

He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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 didn’t want these people who had murdered his family and friends, destroyed his homeland, and done terrible things to his people...to have a chance to escape the judgment of God. He knew that if they turned from their sin, God would forgive them and he didn’t want to give them that opportunity.

Jonah was frustrated.

He couldn’t imagine why God would want to forgive such heathen destructive people. He was frustrated because he wanted them destroyed and here he was a Prophet of God being asked to take a message that might, and eventually did, lead to them being forgiven.

By the end of Jonah 4...Jonah is an angry, bitter, and calloused man shaking his fist at God.

Many of us, put in this same situation, could very well understand why Jonah responded the way he did.

Who of us would not be afraid to face down a nation, a people that could and would kill us for proclaiming a message of judgment against them?

Who of us would not wish for God’s judgment to take place against those who have harmed our families or homeland? And frustrated if God wanted YOU to be the one to take the message of his love and forgiveness to those whom you would consider enemies?

We can certainly understand all the things that got in the way, but despite all these very reasonable feelings and the trauma that caused them...God had called him to do a task...and Jonah’s refusal meant that

He was disobedient.

All the fear and prejudice and frustration Jonah felt caused him to be disobedient, and he decided to run.

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Many of us wrestle with knowing the will of God and obeying His call on our lives. As a pastor, I have been asked probably about a hundred thousand times by someone to “pray for God’s will in this situation” or “Pray that I will know God’s will in this situation.”

Some people want handwriting in the sky. Others want to know for sure that something is the right thing to do. Others know what God wants them to do, but they are looking for a reason to get out of it. Some, unfortunately too many, don't even ask. They profess to follow God and want his will, but never really ask God what He wants for them.

And I will admit that seeking out the Will of God or the Direction of God for our lives is not always an easy thing. So many times we want to know the will of God...and we don't and we can't because we have not invested in our relationship with Him or we haven't grown our character in Him enough to know the will of God so we resort to some very poor replacements for knowing the will of God.

One of the most common ways is to use the Open and Closed Door as an indicator of God's will.

The God of the Open Door

You may have been there. You may have even used this method. There a bunch of variations, but the most common is that an Open Door indicates we have found God's will and we are supposed to go that direction. A Closed Door means God has shut the door and we are not supposed to go that direction.

You may have heard it, "When God closes one door He opens another!" or someone else says, "God is leading me this way...He is opening all the doors!"

I can tell you that that method is completely false and misleading. God is not the God of the Open Door. God is a God who calls us to go a direction whether the door is closed or not. He calls us to go a direction whether the way is easy or not. He is a God who leads us in a direction that may or may not have a happy ending, it may or may not make us happy, it may or may not be a good and enjoyable time for us.

But it is the way God has called. In fact, I have found that the easy way...the way of the Open Door is often NOT the way God is calling us to go.

Jonah 1:3 says...

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.

Jonah knew the will of God, he ran the other way...and very, very easily found a ship headed in the opposite direction he was supposed to be traveling. I have found that when it comes to following the will of God in our lives there is always a ship waiting to help us make a quick and easy escape in the opposite direction. When we decide to not do the will of God it is amazing how often a ship is waiting to take us away.

And it will always seem like the better option.

In my years as a church planter, I have seen many church planters profess that God had called them to plant a church here or there...only to find the work extremely difficult...and within a year "hear" God's calling to go somewhere else that has better pay, benefits for their family, more stability, easier work hours.

In many ways, I don't blame them. The work is hard. It is never what you expect. You work a lot. You have a lot of heartaches. You find out you are not God's gift to preaching or church planting or growing a church. You are not that amazing preacher over there that has the big church. So better hours, better pay, more free time, being able to do something you love full-time...I can tell you that sounds great!

There is all kinds of stuff that I'm not privy to in their relationship with God, but, in my life, God has never called me to do something that, once it got difficult, He changed his mind and allowed me to stop.

You and I are faced with constant challenges to the work of God in our lives, and it is so easy to look for the easy open door because the work of God in our lives and on our character is not always fun and it is certainly never easy. And I fully understand, on a human level, why we want to get out of the situations as quickly as possible, but as followers of Jesus, God uses the challenges and struggles of our lives to shape us and mold us and make us into the image of Jesus...if we let him. If we don't resist. If we don't run off to the closest ship.

Should we take the new job or stay where we are? Should we move into the new house or stay where we are? Should I take this great opportunity that has come up? Should I take this path or that path? We face a million different challenges every day of our lives...and the primary starting point for each follower of Jesus must be this: What has God called me to do? and then Is this part of it?

Time after time, I have seen men and women called to a ministry...who are then tempted away by more money or better conditions. I have seen followers of Christ called to be ministers to a particular neighborhood or workplace who are soon offered a promotion that requires a relocation. I have found that every time you take steps forward in serving others and following the will and call of God for your life...there comes a challenge to whether or not you will follow the call...and easy boat to sail you in the opposite direction.

One of my favorite books growing up was the story of Brother Andrew. He resisted God for many years, until one day he surrendered his life, and God called him to help get Bibles through the Iron Curtain into Russia. On a regular basis he faced imprisonment or worse if caught. Every day he had the opportunity to simply stop. At every check point he could simply turn around...but he didn't.

The Easy "Yes" is not usually the one that honors God and fulfills his call on our lives. The open door is often not the door God wants us to walk through.

Doing what God has called requires sacrifice. It requires perseverance. It requires a commitment to obey to the call of God.

Some of us, need to start asking more directly, God, what have you called me to do for your Kingdom?

Others of us need God's strength, because the way is difficult.

Others need to stop running.