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You Can Run, But You Can't Hide

Jonah 1

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You don't have to turn too far in the Bible before you discover a wonderful truth about us, as people, and that is page 1. You learn that we as people, men and women, are made in the image of God. That is a wonderful gift that God has given to us that separates us from the animal kingdom.

One of the aspects of what it means to be made in the image of God is the ability to choose. It's the ability to choose out of a volitional will – to choose to obey God, to choose to disobey God, to choose to love God or to flee from God. Some people call this free will. I struggle a little bit with that term, because the will is never really free. From the moment of conception, it's bound to the bondage of our sin nature, but it is clearly a will to choose. In other words, God hasn't made us as pre-programmed robots. We do have a will and we do make our choices.

But that also has to be balanced with a reality that God is a sovereign God. He rules and reigns in the universe. God is sovereign, ruling through people, in order to accomplish His perfect will on this earth. Now there are those who hold a theology called Deism. Deism was held by many of our founding fathers of this country. While they were highly religious people, many of them held to a position called Deism. It basically means that God exists and God is the Creator. God got everything going, and then God basically pulled His hands off and simply sits in the bleachers of heaven and watches things unfold on earth, and in a sense, is a non-player or a non-factor in what happens on earth.

You don't have to read too far in the Bible to realize that clearly is not the case. God is very involved in the affairs of men and women and God is at work in the lives of people. Working through the lives of people, He does accomplish His sovereign will. But we do run into this collision: if both of those are true, how can it be that God is sovereign? He has a sovereign will and purpose and it will be accomplished. But He also works that plan and purpose through people who have a will to choose to obey or disobey. In other words, they can choose to be uncooperative with that plan and purpose. How, ultimately, can those two coexist? And my answer is, "I really don't know." I think ultimately you have to be God to figure it out, but somehow in the mind of God, those two concepts are balanced out. Clearly the Bible teaches both are true.

There's a wonderful book in the Old Testament called the Book of Jonah which wrestles through this collision between the sovereignty of God (God having a plan and purpose and seeing that fulfilled) and a prophet's will to choose. In this case, it is an uncooperative prophet who chooses to go his own way and wrestles through what God is willing to do in order to bring that prophet back and accomplish His plan. In the process of studying that story, we learn a lot about God and we learn a lot about ourselves.

Jonah is considered one of the minor prophets – not because his message was minor – but because the length of the book is shorter. The major prophets are the larger prophetic books, such as Ezekiel, Daniel and Isaiah, and the minor prophets are the shorter prophetic books, such as Jonah.

In Jonah 1:1, we read: “The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.’ ”

We’re introduced to Jonah here. I do not believe the readers were unaware of Jonah. Jonah was a prophet in Israel and they probably were aware of him. In 2 Kings 14 we’re introduced to Jonah who was a prophet under the reign of Jeroboam II, which would have been about the 8th Century B.C. We’re told there that Jonah actually had a very wonderful calling to take a blessing to the nation of Israel from God. Typically, the prophets carried a message of judgment and doom and gloom. So, to have an opportunity to carry a message of blessing was unusual and a very positive thing. Other than that, one would have to assume that Jonah was active in his role of prophet in Israel in other ways, and so probably was familiar to these readers.

Vs. 2: “Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me.” This is Jonah’s calling as a prophet. This is what God is asking him to do. God, in His sovereign will and His sovereign plan, wants to reach Nineveh and Jonah has been called to be a part of that. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and the Assyrians were the archenemies of the Hebrew people. It’s really hard to put into words how deeply these people hated one another. Maybe just looking at the conflict between the Arabs and the Jews today would be some hint of that. They really did hate one another, and didn’t want anything to do with each other.

Nineveh was an extremely wicked and evil city. It was a highly immoral city, but more than that, it was a very violent city. When Nahum the prophet wrote about Nineveh, he described it as a place where the killing never stops. It was a bloodbath, and history records many of the things the Assyrian people did to prisoners of war – it’s hard to even imagine. If you think of the atrocities and the violence and wickedness that has gone on in the war in Bosnia and Somalia, that is probably just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the depth of depravity that was going on in Nineveh. It was an extremely wicked place – not a place where a Jew would want to be called to be a prophet. Jonah would have understood the consequences that these people wouldn’t like the message and the potential of the people capturing him and torturing him. It wasn’t a very pleasant assignment.

Within verse 2 there is some very important theology that we need to look at in order to understand the rest of the quote. When you read verse 2, there is a temptation to see the heart of God as being judgmental and to see a God who is angry, who wants to pour out His wrath. It can be seen as a vindictive God who is sending this prophet out to nail these people. But I am suggesting to you that verse 2 reveals just the opposite of that. It’s very important that we see a proper view of the heart of God out of verse 2. These people in Nineveh had basically thumbed their nose at God, were living very wicked lives and wanted nothing to do with God. God would have been perfectly just in punishing them and pouring out His wrath on these people. They certainly deserved that. But verse 2 reveals to us that is not what God wanted. If that was what God had wanted, He would have done that. But the whole idea of sending a prophet shows that what God wants is to pour out His mercy, His forgiveness and His compassion on these people.

The point of sending a prophet to them was so they would hear the message and hear the warning and have an opportunity to repent of their sin and experience God’s grace and

forgiveness, not God's wrath. So in verse 2 we see a beautiful window into the heart of God. God is sending a prophet because He wants to warn them and give them one more chance to change before they experience His judgment.

I don't think Jonah understood much about the heart of God or that he understood God's mercy and grace. Jonah didn't understand his calling or why he was needing to go to Nineveh. We really don't know what's going on for sure in the heart of Jonah, but we do know from verse 3 that he wasn't willing to go:

But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

Jonah receives the call of God and, for whatever reason, Jonah decides, "I'm not going." So he goes the exact opposite direction. Nineveh would have been in what we call today northern Turkey, on the Tigris River, and would have been east/northeast of where he was at. Most people believed this Tarshish was in Spain, and so he would have been going directly the opposite way as far as he could across the Mediterranean Sea to escape the presence of the Lord. In verse 3 we notice that the writer wants to make sure we understand clearly what Jonah was doing: He is running from God. It's repeated twice – he's fleeing from the presence of God.

Now it's hard to run from God when God is an everywhere present Spirit. How do you really run from God? Obviously, you can't. But what's being said here is that Jonah was running from God's will, from the relationship with God, from anything that had to do with God. He didn't like this assignment, so he was trying to get as far away from God and God's will and plan and purpose as he possibly could get. So he goes down and hops on a ship that's headed to Tarshish and is going as much toward the opposite direction as he can possibly go.

Vs. 4: And the LORD hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. Then the sailors became afraid, and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down, and fallen sound asleep. So the captain approached him and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on you god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish."

Notice in verse 4 that the writer is very clear to let us know that this storm did not just come up – the storm was not just a coincidence. The storm was specifically created by God in order to stop this ship, which is a statement of the sovereignty of God. This is the sovereign God who rules over the land and the sea. God is appointing the storm to calm. He's going to stop that ship and He's going to deal with Jonah, because you can run from God, but you cannot hide from God. One way or another, God is going to get Jonah's attention.

The Lord brings on this great storm and the sailors don't know what to do. They are polytheistic in their belief system, which meant they believed in multiple gods. So they are calling out to whatever god they can think of, hoping that somehow they might get one of their gods to be in a good mood that day, and somehow be able to deal with this situation.

Jonah is asleep down below. A lot of people have tried to figure out what he was doing down there. Some think he may have been sick. Jonah was a land lover – he maybe had never been on the sea before and may have been down below because he was sick. Who knows what

he was doing? All we know is that the captain went down and woke him up and said, “What are you doing?” He is basically saying to Jonah, “I don’t know who your god is, but call on him and maybe he’ll listen to you today.” They were at the point of having little or no hope in the midst of all this.

Vs. 7: “And each man said to his mate, ‘Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us.’ So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.” I don’t think God is necessarily condoning the methodology, but God is certainly at work sovereignly pointing the arrow to Jonah, so when it’s said and done, there’s no doubt. Jonah has to know deep within his heart that, “This is all about me... the storm...the ship is going nowhere because God has me here.”

That’s the feeling you get when you read on in verse 8: “Then they said to him, ‘Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?’ ” A literary feature that you may find interesting is that, in verse 8, we notice how the pace of the text quickly picks up. Verse 8 is a high energy verse because there are a battery of questions that are short and to the point, and pick up the energy of the text. It reveals that there is a tremendous amount of anxiety here. These people are on the edge. They hear they’re going to die, and they’re trying to figure this thing out. They are basically in Jonah’s face and are hammering him with these questions. More questions than he can answer before they drown! But they’re simply unleashing on him. They are now focusing on Jonah and want some answers. You can contrast that with the pace of the text from verses 3,4,5 & 6 – it’s fairly slow and methodical there. We have details of Jonah fleeing from the presence of the Lord and a lot of repetition. Then he goes down below the ship and the text labors. Part of that is for us to slow down and come to grips with what Jonah is doing. But now, at this point, it’s very fast-paced and very intense because they’re at a point now where something needs to be done, which raises the anxiety level.

Vs. 9: “And he said to them, ‘I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.’ ” Now these people, most likely, would have had a concept for understanding what Jonah said. They would have been familiar with the Hebrew people and the stories of the Hebrew God. The stories of the Hebrew God were basically spread all around the area and people had heard stories about what God had done in Egypt, in the Red Sea, and the walls of Jericho. Whether they believed them or not, they at least would have had some basic understanding that this God of the Hebrew people supposedly is an awesome, powerful God. So immediately, when Jonah would reveal who he was, they would have had some sense of, “This is someone who is fleeing from the Hebrew God.”

That would have caused a certain reaction, and that’s exactly what happens in verse 10: “Then the men became extremely frightened {*in Hebrew, it says ‘feared a great fear.’ In other words, this is pretty intense here*} and they said to him, ‘How could you do this?’ For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord.” How did they know that? Because he had told them. Jonah knew exactly what was going on. Jonah knew that he was running from God, and he knew that the storm could stop the ship. Jonah knew that he could not ultimately run from a sovereign God and he was had.

Somewhere in the conversation, Jonah told the others on the ship what was happening. With what limited knowledge they had of this Hebrew God, they now were experiencing

demonstration of His awesome power, so the one question they asked Jonah was: “How could you do this?” Out of the mouth of pagans came a pretty good question: “Jonah, what were you thinking? How could you be so foolish to think you could run from a God like this?”

That’s a question that would be worth answering in our own hearts. Why would we run from a God like this? To get a glimpse into the heart of God in verse 2, we see a heart filled with compassion and forgiveness and grace. Why would we flee from a God like that? You say, “Bryan, I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re talking to people who come into church – they’re not fleeing from God.” Oh, I’m not so sure about that. I think there are a lot of people who attend church who are still fleeing from God. We’re not jumping on a ship and heading across the Mediterranean or getting on a sailboat and going across Holmes Lake, but the reality is we still can be fleeing from God. What it’s talking about is an unwillingness to submit to the sovereign will of God. It’s an unwillingness to say, “God, you’re in charge. You can ask me to do what You will. You can command me to do whatever You want to command me to do. My response is one of submission and obedience.” Anything less than that is to flee from God. It’s to flee from God’s will, from God’s plan, from God’s purpose. Therefore, we have people in church all the time who are fleeing from God.

The question is: Why would we do that? Why would we flee from a God like this? I can think of only one answer and that is because we do not know God. I’m convinced that if Jonah really knew God he would not have fled to Tarshish. But he didn’t. We will see in the text that he clearly did not understand the heart of God, therefore he turns and runs. We often find ourselves fleeing from God. God calls us to something, and rather than obeying, we turn and run and hide from God, because we don’t trust Him. It’s because we don’t know Him.

At this point in the story, I’m convinced that Jonah knows he’s done for it. When the lots fell on Jonah, he knew, “I’ve been had. This is about me.” He even told them, “I’m fleeing from the God of the Hebrews.” And they told him, “You’re crazy. That isn’t going to work.” *{That’s my interpretation.}* In verse 11: “So they said to Him, ‘What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?’ – for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy.” So these pagans now understand something must be done with Jonah. But, also you have a statement that the storm is becoming more intense. You can picture God turning up the intensity of the storm with higher and higher waves until these people do something. So, in a sense, the sovereign God is forcing some sort of action here.

Vs. 12: “And he *{Jonah}* said to them, ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you.’ ” I am absolutely convinced that in verse 12 Jonah believes he is dead. Jonah believes there is nothing to do now but throw him into the sea. You cannot convince me that he thought anything was going to happen other than he would die. Don’t try to tell me that he thought some fish was going to come swallow him. And don’t tell me that he thought somehow he could swim or get to land. In a storm like this, there is only one thing that could have been in his mind and that had to have been, “Throw me overboard. I must die.” What that reveals is that Jonah did not know the heart of God. God wasn’t chasing Jonah down so He could kill him. God wasn’t tracking Jonah down so he could punish him and drown him. God was tracking Jonah down because God cared about Jonah, but Jonah didn’t get it. So, in his mind, there’s only one thing to do. “I have failed miserably. Throw me overboard. Let me die here.” And he was convinced, at that point, the storm then would cease. I find verse 12 very insightful concerning Jonah’s understanding of God. Nowhere in this text do you see

Jonah repenting of the sin, crying out to God, saying, “God, I’m sorry. Forgive me.” It’s as if Jonah really doesn’t even understand that part of God’s character. Jonah doesn’t cry out to God at all. He’s just resolved himself that he’s blown it and he must go.

The sailors on the ship understood it exactly the same way. Vs. 13: “However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.” So, when Jonah says, “This is what you must do,” they’re going to try one more time to try and row to land, because they know that if they throw him overboard he will die. But here, again, you see the sovereignty of God, as men in their will to choose, say, “Let’s try this one more time.” With every pull of the oar, you can imagine the hand of God pushing that ship right back out into the ocean, saying, “Boys, this isn’t going to work. I’m dealing with Jonah and I’m going to keep you out there in the storm until we get this done.” So you have the sailors exercising their will, and you have God exercising His sovereignty to accomplish His plan.

Vs. 14: “Then they called on the LORD and said, ‘We earnestly pray, O LORD, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life and do not put innocent blood on us; for Thou, O LORD, has done as Thou hast pleased.’” That is a tremendous statement out of the mouth of pagans related to the sovereignty of God. It’s worth noting that the first prayer in this story does not come out of the mouth of Jonah, but out of the mouths of the pagans. The pagans have now experienced the power of this God. They are aware that this is the God of the land and the sea. This is not a God you can fight, but this is a God to submit to. They are simply saying, “God, you are doing as you please. We cannot change that. We cannot alter that. So don’t hold us responsible for throwing Jonah into the ocean.” In other words they’re saying, “You’re sovereign. You’re mighty. You do as You please. We have no choice but simply to submit to what must be done. Therefore, don’t hold this to our account.”

Vs. 15: “So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.” Can you just imagine what these men experienced as they pitched Jonah into this terrible storm and suddenly the waves died down and the sea became calm? They had to have been just absolutely blown away at the awesome demonstration of power by this Hebrew God.

Vs. 16: “Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.” Now I’m going to go out on a limb and say I think verse 16 is a conversion experience for them. I don’t know what else it could be talking about. They basically submitted to the God of the universe. They submitted to the Hebrew God and they offered Him a sacrifice. They made vows to Him and they said, “You are God,” and they submitted to Him.” They had seen the awesome demonstration of God’s power and they knew that there was no god like this God.

It’s interesting that, even in this story of Jonah disobeying and fleeing from God and God going out to bring Jonah back, that God reveals Himself to these pagan sailors. Before it’s over, they are exposed to God in such a way that they realize this God is the one true God and they submit to that God. That, again, is a picture of the heart of God that, even in this story, God is reaching out to these pagan sailors and along the way bringing them into a knowledge of Himself.

If we had never read the story of Jonah or had never heard the story of what happens, we would be thinking Jonah is going to be dead. Jonah was disobedient. Jonah ran from God.

They pitched Jonah into the raging sea. Everything is calm. End of story for Jonah. That's what would make verse 17 so bizarre. It would cause us to just back peddle and say, "Whoa, I wasn't expecting this." Because if you never had read the story – let's be honest – you wouldn't be expecting a fish to swallow Jonah.

Vs. 17: "And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights." The writer is careful to make sure we understand in verse 17 that this was not just a fish that happened along. This was a fish that was appointed by God specifically to carry out this task. In other words, it's a demonstration of the sovereignty of God. God is even sovereign over the fish and He tells this fish to do this job. But the fish is not made in the image of God, so the fish doesn't have the ability to disobey. The fish just does what God tells him and he swallows up Jonah.

It's also interesting to notice the way this even is recorded somewhat matter-of-factly. This is a spectacular event. It is up over the top and yet it's described as a nonchalant, "Oh, by the way, the Lord appointed a fish and he swallowed Jonah. And he camped out there for three days in the bottom of the ocean." The reason it's recorded that way is because part of the point that's being made is that this is nothing for God. This isn't a problem for God. Jonah cannot get away from God. If he's pitched into the sea, God will send a fish, swallow him, and God is going to accomplish His will. It's not hard for God to do what's necessary to accomplish that.

There are some people who doubt this story when they get to this part about Jonah swallowed by a fish, and they raise their eyebrows and say, "You'd have to put your brain in neutral to believe something that silly." Other people go out and find newspaper accounts of whales that have swallowed people and spit them back up on the beach and say it is possible. I don't find any of that really necessary. I just consider it a miracle. Why is that really a problem when the Old Testament is full of miracles? I don't find parting the Red Sea to be a normal, everyday experience. I don't find the walls of Jericho crashing down to be normal. I don't find manna from heaven to be a daily experience. The Old Testament is filled with miracles, and this is just a miracle. Either we throw out all the miracles or we don't. One other interesting note is that, in the New Testament, Jesus clearly affirmed the historical fact of the story of Jonah. So if the story of Jonah is not true, then Jesus was wrong. Then Jesus isn't God, and all Christianity comes crumbling down. Jesus believed it was true, and that's good enough for me. It was a miracle that God provided and the point being made in the text is that this is an act of God's sovereignty – that God can even control the fish of the sea to accomplish His will.

What happens to Jonah next we won't find out until next week, and no reading ahead! But there are a couple of things about God and the heart of God that are extremely important to understand in Jonah 1. We have a beautiful picture into the heart of God in verse 2 as we realize this is the God of such infinite compassion and grace and mercy and forgiveness. He is so compassionate that He even wants to offer that forgiveness and grace to these unbelievably wicked people in Nineveh. But what we also see is the heart of compassion toward Jonah the prophet. When Jonah the prophet took off for Tarshish, God could have said, "Fine. If that's the way you want to be. Have a nice life." Because God could have raised up 50 prophets in Israel. God did not need Jonah. God went looking for Jonah because God cared for Jonah. God was unwilling to see Jonah walk away, and was willing to do whatever was necessary to get Jonah back into relationship with Him. He wanted Jonah back into His will, and into accomplishing what God had called him to. God cared about Jonah.

As a parent, if one of our children begins to go down a path of self-destruction, we wouldn't say, "Well, if that's the way you want to choose. Fine. Good riddance. Have a nice life." We wouldn't do that. As a parent, we would do everything necessary to get that child back to where that child should be. That's what God is doing with Jonah. In the text the name for God that is used is LORD – all capitals. In Hebrew that is Yaweh, Jehovah – the intimate and personal God. It's the covenant-keeping God and the God who's involved in our lives. What we see again is the heart of God and His kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and mercy. He's unwilling to give up on Jonah, and He's going to do whatever is necessary to get Jonah back on track in order to accomplish His sovereign plan.

God is good and faithful and kind and compassionate, but God is sovereign. God has a plan and a purpose, and that plan will be accomplished. Sometimes in order to accomplish that plan, for reasons we cannot know or understand, God calls us to Nineveh. He calls us to assignments that are very difficult and that are, indeed, a struggle. We don't understand why He is calling us to go there. It's in those moments where sometimes we're tempted to flee to Tarshish. We flee because we do not really know God. We do not really trust God. We don't realize that if we will listen to His call and we will go to Nineveh, we will experience God in a way we never would have otherwise known Him.

For you, Nineveh may be a physical disease. It may be a relationship issue. It may be something related to finances or work. It could be one of 100 different things. But, as you are called to experience something that you do not understand, it's very difficult to trust God and believe that He is good and that He is faithful.

A number of years ago a couple in our church, Steve and Dena, were called to Nineveh through the birth of their son, Matthew. I'm sure there have been many times along the way where they have been tempted to flee to Tarshish, not understanding why God was doing this and why it had to be this way. But instead, they have chosen to trust God. They have chosen to take this journey to Nineveh. Along the way, they have discovered God in ways they never would have known Him otherwise. I have asked Steve and Dena to share just a little bit of their story of their journey to Nineveh. Listen to how God has been faithful to reveal Himself in this very difficult journey:

"We had found out the day before that the doctors gave him no hope of coming through the surgery. They told us the risks were so great but the risks of not doing surgery were just as great. They told us to say "goodbye." He was 6 months old and only 8 pounds. The anesthesia alone could kill him if the surgery didn't. For the last 6 months I had begged and pleaded for God to let him be. "Let it be me, not him!" I would beg God to allow it all to happen to me and heal him. We knew Matthew was a miracle to this point. He shouldn't have lived anyway, but God had allowed that. But why?

We spent every minute that day with him. We took turns holding him. I kept smelling him because I wanted to remember that. We cried and held each other. We didn't talk much. We knew this might be the last time we would see his beautiful brown eyes and touch his warm soft skin. I knew what they were going to do to him, and all I wanted to do was take him and run out of the hospital with him and never look back.

The time finally came and the nurse said we could carry him downstairs to the surgery suite. She let us each hold him one more time and kiss his sweet head and

smell his hair, and then he was gone behind the surgical doors. I leaned against the wall and inside started to scream. I was screaming at the top of my lungs at God. I just kept screaming, “Why? Don’t you know how much I love him? Why don’t you leave him alone and allow me to bear this for him?”

Those questions kept running over and over in my head and all I could do was just keep screaming at God in my heart. I leaned over and put my head in my hands. I asked God again, “Don’t you know how much I love him and that I would die for him?” And in that instant my life was changed forever. It was then that I knew just what God did know and just what God was doing and had done in my life and my son’s. You see, in my heart, God told me that He did know how much I loved Matthew because He loved His Son that much and more, and yet He let His Son die for me so that I might have life. Now, you might think that was when I received Christ. I received Christ when I was 6 years old. I never understood just exactly what that love was all about until God gave us Matthew.

You see, all of us love our children and all of us would certainly die for our children. But would any of us give our child’s life in exchange for someone else to live? All of us would probably surrender our life so someone we deeply love might live. But would you die for someone you didn’t know? I don’t think so.

In that very instant I knew that God loved Matthew more deeply than I did. He loved me more than I ever knew He did. I knew about salvation in my head and now He was showing me in my heart. God’s love is unconditional, freely given, no strings attached. He already knew my pain. He knew what it was like to give up a child and hand him over to someone who was to cause Him even more pain. He knew anger and knew how it felt to feel separated from His child.

Steve and I had heard about many people praying for Matthew and some had shared how his life had changed theirs. We knew of someone who had actually accepted Christ just because of coming to see him once. Now, I’ll be honest to say, I thought all of that was nice, but I didn’t realize the significance of it until that moment. I was 29 years old and Matthew was only 6 months. In his 6 months of life, he had probably reached more people than I had in my 29 years! If God were to take both of us that day, what would I say? What would be my excuse? How do I explain to God that I didn’t fulfill His purpose? There were no answers. There was nothing I would be able to say. I had chosen to walk away from about every opportunity to show God to someone in my life. But God also showed me about forgiveness and grace that day.

There are many stories I could tell you about Matthew, but I think the most important thing you need to know is that it really is not about what you do for God, but about you abiding with God. Once you are abiding with God, then He will work to fulfill His purpose through you. Medically, Matthew should be dead. The stroke that he had when he was born should have killed him. His heart should have killed him. Every time he had surgery we would have to say goodbye, because the risks were so great. The liver failure Matthew experienced this past June should have killed him and it didn’t. God and God alone is the giver and taker of life, and He has a specific purpose for Matthew’s life. Matthew’s life will be over only when he has fulfilled the eternal purpose God has set for him.

Matthew is also blind. We didn’t find this out until about two years ago. Shortly after we found out, someone asked us, “Why do you think God waited until now to let you know this?” Just a week after finding out he was blind, I was listening to a speaker on the radio talk about sheep and shepherds. One thing you may not have known is that sheep don’t follow by sight. They follow by learning and listening to

their master's voice. I remember thinking, "How often do I just sit and listen to God's voice or am I too busy?" This only confirmed to me that God was ever present in my son's life and Matthew was choosing to listen to Him.

God was showing me that if He can use a little boy who can't eat, walk, talk or see to reach people's lives, how much greater can He use me? How much more can He use you? Matthew loves unconditionally. He can't see your skin color. He doesn't know what you look like or the clothes you wear. He doesn't know your past, present, or your future. All he does is just sit with you, cuddle with you and love you. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't do anything but allow God to work through him. I truly believe God and Matthew have a very deep relationship, and the rewards for Matthew are awaiting him in heaven. I believe those rewards are far beyond what my mind can comprehend.

When I look at him I see a little slice of heaven. When people see me, do they see heaven? When I see him smile, I see pure joy. Would I have that kind of joy if I had to bear what he does? When I see him laugh, I hear God's voice, pure and simple. When I see him take a breath, I see God's power. When I see him live life every day, I see God's sovereignty. When I see him crying in pain, I see God's unconditional love. You see, I see Matthew just the way God intended. God intended for me to be like Matthew, broken and humbled and abiding so that He might be glorified, and bringing others to the wonderful knowledge of His Son, Jesus Christ."

With their permission, I want to share an email that Matthew received. It gives you another glimpse of how Matthew has touched someone's life:

Dear Matthew,

I just wanted to tell you what you did for me this past Sunday morning at church. When one of the pastors was saying a prayer during church service the room got very quiet. Everyone in the church was sitting very still, listening to the pastor pray. God let me hear something else – God let me hear you!

Hearing you make the sweet little noises, I'm sure you so often make, just lifted my heart with joy! It made me happy! It made me happy because God showed me how precious your life is to Him! And how a little boy can touch a great big adult, without even saying a word. I felt so happy inside that I began to pray in my heart and thank God for you and for your life. You are a living miracle, Matthew, and seeing you makes me remember how loving and gracious our God truly is. Thank you, Matthew, for just being you. You are one person in my life who shows me a little better who Jesus is.

God is faithful and God is sovereign and sometimes He calls us to Nineveh. If we don't really believe that God is good and kind, we will run. We will flee to Tarshish. But God, in His grace and His mercy, will do what he needs to do to bring us home. If we will accept our call to Nineveh, those difficult things in life, where we do not understand why or what God is doing, will cause us to trust the heart of God. En route to Nineveh we will learn things about God we never would have known. We'll experience life in a way we never would have understood. Maybe the next time you see Matthew in the hallway, you'll be reminded that it's worth the trip to Nineveh, because there we find God.