

Prayer: You are working through our lives to fulfill your mighty will and plan and it requires a submission we sometimes cannot understand. But as you promised to never forsake us, we each say: Lord, here I am. Amen.

“Prophet Jonah as a Model for Running from God”

Last week, we saw from the first 7 verses of chapter 1, the beginning of the story of Jonah. Jonah was a prophet who fled God’s call to warn Nineveh of the coming judgment. He foolishly hopped a boat to Tarshish instead of obeying, and in response, God hurls a great storm upon the ship. We pick up the story in chapter 1, verse 8.

As is typical with Twelve Prophets, the Book of Jonah begins with a call from God to the prophet (Jonah 1:1-2). Unlike the others, however, Jonah rejects God’s call. Foolishly, he attempts to flee the presence of the Lord by taking a ship to foreign shores (Jonah 1:3). This imperils not only him, but his shipmates, for—as we have seen throughout the Book of the Twelve—breaking covenant with God has tangible consequences, and the actions of individuals always affect the community. God sends a storm. First, it ruins the mariners’ commercial prospects, as they are forced to throw all the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship (Jonah 1:5). Eventually it threatens their very lives (Jonah 1:11). Only when Jonah offers to be thrown into the sea—which the sailors reluctantly accept—does the storm abate and the danger to the community subside (Jonah 1:12-15).

The purpose of a call from God is to serve other people. Jonah’s call is for the benefit of Nineveh. When he rejects God’s guidance, not only do the people he was called to serve languish, but the people surrounding him suffer. If we accept that we are all called to serve God in our work—which is probably different from Jonah’s work, but no less important to God—then we recognize that failing to serve God in our work also diminishes our communities.

The more powerful our gifts and talents, the greater the harm we are apt to do if we reject God’s guidance in our life and work. Undoubtedly, we can all bring to mind people whose impressive abilities enabled them to do great harm in fields of business, government, society, science, religion, and all the rest. Imagine the good they could have done, the evil they could have avoided, if they had submitted their skills first to the worship and service of the Lord. Our gifts may seem puny in comparison, yet imagine the good we could do and the evil we could avert if we did our work in service to God over the course of a lifetime.

For that reason, we can and should spend this time in the wilderness of Lent revisiting the story of Jonah. We are all Jonah. Jonah is not an anomaly. He’s the norm. God gives us the story of Jonah not merely as a bad example to learn from but as a window into our soul. We’re all fugitives on the run from God.

Whew, Jonah is in a mess. And we think, “Well, he got himself into this.” He did. But we shouldn’t be too smug about it. Consider your life. Who hasn’t run from God? Okay, maybe we haven’t actually hopped a boat to Tarshish, but we’ve run from God, if not physically, certainly in our heart.

How can I say that? Because the Bible says we’ve all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That means no one is outside the need of God’s grace—not moral Jonah nor immoral Nineveh. No one is so good that they don’t need God’s grace, and no one is so bad that they can’t get God’s grace. God is saying to us today, as he does throughout the Bible, that our sin is uglier than we can imagine, and his grace is greater than we can hope.

The Bible calls evil sin. But it’s not as easy for everyone to recognize sin as evil living within each of us. We like to think we’re basically good people who do bad things from time to time. But the Bible says otherwise. We’re really bad people who do good things from time to time, by God’s grace. Jonah is a classic example. Here is a prophet—one of the godliest men in his nation—and he’s running from the presence of God because he doesn’t want God to be merciful to his enemies.

We look at Jonah’s life and we’re probably all a little amazed at how unconcerned he seems to be. He’s asleep in the ship, for goodness sake! How could he sleep knowing what he’s done? Well, at this point, he didn’t yet see the evil of what he’d done. No one else even knew about it. It didn’t seem to be a problem. After all, the ship was there, ready to go. Why did God make it so easy to run if he didn’t want him to?

Here's the problem: sin is deceptive. And part of the deceptive power of sin is convincing us that we're really not that bad. That's why Jonah could lay down and go to sleep. When we're deceived by sin, we're not bothered by sin. In fact, it's possible to be so deceived that we actually feel justified in our sin. Sin questions God. It whispers, as the serpent in the Garden of Eden, "Did God really say?" That's how Jonah felt—as if he were right and God was wrong. "Mercy for the Ninevites?! No way that's God's will. They're the evil empire!" And they were. They were really bad people. But apparently, God loves really bad people: Nineveh and Jonah.

My guess is Jonah's plan for his life didn't include running from God. Who's does? But over time, Jonah put up walls around the word of God. When God called him to Nineveh, Jonah wouldn't obey because long before he put up a wall of nationalism. Jonah limited what God could ask of him. He drifted from God. He didn't see the drift, because we never see the drift. He floated away slowly, but he could still see the shore. So he still felt he operated within his calling. He wasn't cheating on his wife, he wasn't stealing, he was being a good Israelite. But over time, he drifted far enough away that when God asked him to go beyond his own land to his enemies, he could not and would not do it. Not only that, he was appalled that God would even ask it of him. I wonder, are there some things God asks that are appalling to us?

Drifting happens when two evils coincide: we neglect God's word and we accept an alternative message. That's what happened to Jonah. He ignored God's word to go to Nineveh and accepted an alternative word that God should judge, not forgive Nineveh. Jonah turned our most merciful God into an unforgiving Judge. And Jonah thought he was justified in doing so.

When we refuse to listen to all of God's word and substitute other, more palatable messages instead, we set ourselves on a path to sin big-time. And we might not even see the depth of it until something extraordinary comes along and wakes us up—something like a storm at sea and a group of pagan sailors pleading with us to pray for salvation.

The storm forced out of Jonah more than an inward consideration of his failings. It forced his failings to his mouth before many witnesses. Jonah thought he ran from God's presence. He thought his sin was his own personal issue. But his sin found him out. God knows, no matter where you are, if you're faithful or not. Others may not know your sin yet, but God does.

Look at the narrative; the sailors cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. Casting lots was an old way of answering an unanswerable question. Roll the dice and let God (or in this case, the gods, as the pagan sailors believed) decide where it falls. For it to fall on Jonah means this was no mere coincidence; it was divine providence. God used these pagan sailors to confront the prophet with his sin. Oh, the irony! Pagan sailors doing what the prophet should have done!

So, they confront him in verse 8. "What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" Jonah answers in verse 9. "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."

It's an interesting response. Jonah is technically right about who he is and who God is. He's a Hebrew, an Israelite. God is the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. But there seems to be a disconnect in the middle, doesn't there? Does Jonah fear the Lord? It doesn't look like it.

There's one question Jonah didn't answer. "What is your occupation?" He was a prophet. But he didn't tell the sailors that, did he? He couldn't be a prophet if he failed to speak God's word.

By this point, the sailors understood Jonah's sin. During the conversation, he told them he was running from God. They knew then the reason the storm was so strong. Verse 10 says they became exceedingly afraid. Literally, they feared a greater fear. Jonah said he feared God, but it's the pagan sailors who act like God-fearers. They cry out, "What is this you have done!" that isn't a question. It's an accusation. There is no question mark. It's an exclamation point. When our sin finds us out, it's shocking.

Jonah's sin found him out, and he was about to face the consequences.

In verse 11, the sailors ask, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea grew more and more tempestuous.” Notice the language—what shall we do to you. Jonah’s sin required something to be done to him.

Sin requires something to be done. It can’t just be passed over. It must be paid for. Sin is costly. And here we see Jonah’s sin involved the sailors merely by their proximity to him. So, it’s costly not only to us but those around us.

Until Jonah’s sin was dealt with, the storm only grew in intensity. Isn’t that how sin goes? The longer we delay confession, the more horrible the storm becomes.

Jonah knew the solution. Verse 12, “Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.” Jonah realized for the sailors to be saved, he must sacrifice himself.

Now, imagine the sailors’ position. The only way out is by throwing him overboard? No wonder in verse 13 the men rowed hard to get back to dry land. But their rowing was in vain. Literally, it says of their rowing, they dug in their oars. Just as Jonah dug in his oars to Tarshish instead of to Nineveh. Sin urges us to dig in our oars against God’s purposes. But God won’t allow it. It says of the sailors, “they could not” get to dry land. We can never go further from God than he will allow. God has more ways of confronting us than we have ways of evading him.

When the sailors realized the rowing was in vain, their response was to cry out to the Lord. Jonah, the prophet of God, wouldn’t turn to God, but these unbelieving sailors did! They turned to prayer, asking God not to hold what they were about to do against them. Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard. Jonah’s sin faced its consequence. And the sea was calm.

Storms are a normal part of life but calming a storm at sea like this is a miracle. The calmness of the sea led to a new awareness among the sailors. Look at verse 16. “Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.” That fear is the kind of reverent awe that befalls those who’ve seen the Lord. They thought to themselves, “Who is this God that can calm the storm?” In a time when they too faced the consequences of their sin, they found at the end a calm by way of Jonah’s sacrifice.

But what about Jonah? He must have felt useless. He threw it all away, and it was time to face the Judge once and for all. At some point in our life, we’re going to face a similar situation. We’re going to see our sin for what it is, and we’re going to have to face the consequences. What will that time be like?

As Jonah fell to the sea, he knew it was what he deserved. But when he hit the water, he got something he didn’t deserve. “And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”

Jonah didn’t deserve this fish, did he? He deserved God’s wrath. But God gives his people better than what they deserve. With God—as amazing as it sounds—our sin is swallowed by his grace. As the waves swallowed Jonah, God’s grace came to the sailors. And as Jonah was swallowed by the fish, God’s grace came to him as well.

When did God’s grace come to you? Has it yet? Maybe you need to see your sin first. Maybe you need to suffer the consequences of your sin first. I know that sounds terrifying, but we can trust God with it. There’s a deep spiritual truth that we can affirm from Scripture but it’s difficult for us to believe. When we cover our sins in the darkness, God will drag them into the light. Jonah is proof of that. But when we drag our sins into the light, God will cover them with the cross.

We can keep running from God, or we can stop and face him. Our only hope is casting ourselves upon his mercy and grace. Our only hope is turning away from our sin and toward him. And what will happen when we do that? What will we find?

The Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign to prove himself. “But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The people of

Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.”

Jesus affirms Jonah’s prophetic voice—that Jonah speaks of Jesus. Jonah is a type of Christ. Of course, Jesus didn’t sin like Jonah. Jesus didn’t say, “Another Jonah is here.” He said, “One greater than Jonah is here.”

How is Jesus greater?

- Jonah heard God’s call and said, “Not your will but mine.”
- But Jesus heard God’s call and said, “Not my will but thine.”
- Jonah showed no care for the lost. He didn’t care about the sailors on the ship. He didn’t care about the Ninevites in their sin. The compassion of God didn’t melt his heart, it angered him.
- But Jesus came to seek and save the lost. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.
- Jonah fought against God’s heart.
- But Jesus is God’s heart.
- Jonah brought news of God’s grace.
- But Jesus is God’s grace.
- Jonah was thrown overboard for his own sins.
- But Jesus was thrown overboard for the sins of others.
- Jonah’s sacrifice caused the storm at sea to cease.
- But Jesus’ sacrifice caused the storm of God’s wrath to cease.
- Jonah was swallowed by the great fish that saved him from death.
- But Jesus swallowed sin on the cross to save his people from death.
- God loved the Ninevites enough to send Jonah.
- But God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Do you see the difference? Everything thing and everyone but Jonah is obeying God in this story! But Jesus went willingly into the weakness of flesh, to make himself like us so he could save us. Jesus came to find our sin out on the cross and to pay the consequences of our sin in his death.

Here’s God’s promise to us. When we face our sins, openly and honestly, and turn to God with open hands of faith, God will swallow our sins in Christ. He will not throw us overboard because Christ has already been thrown overboard. He endured the wrath for us. And we can now have the storehouses of his mercy and grace. The grave could not hold him. And if you believe in the One greater than Jonah, the grave can’t hold you either. That’s way better than we deserve, isn’t it? It turns out that when we hurl ourselves into the ocean of God’s justice, we find at the bottom God’s mercy and grace. Yes, we’ll have to change our lives. We’ll have to run wherever he says to run. But where did running on our own ever get us? Why not try listening to God for a change?

We see so much of ourselves in Jonah, don’t we? But the Apostle John says in 1 John 3, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” Yes, we’re like Jonah. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, when we say yes to Christ, we are becoming like him.

If you feel more like Jonah than Jesus, don’t worry. God will send storms into your life. He uses them as interventions to show us who we are. And when our sin finds us out, and we face the consequences, God has a word for us that blows us away. God looks us square in the eye, without coddling us, without downplaying our sin, and presents his answer to our sin. There is One greater than Jonah who speaks a better word. His sacrificial blood can clean your sinful heart, and his resurrected life can grant you the newness you need. All you must do is listen to his word. Don’t let the Ninevites rise at the judgment and condemn you. Come to Christ now and find life!

The sign of Jonah is this. Jesus swallows your sin by his cross. Sin may belong to us, but salvation belongs to the Lord. To the Glory of God who saves us, amen!