



The Runaway

Jonah 1:1-16

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*** This original sermon was not written by A.I.*

We're beginning a short series going through the book of Jonah. When we think of Jonah, probably the first thing that comes to mind is a man swallowed by a whale who lives to tell about it. There was an atheist who overheard a Christian talking about Jonah and the whale, and he said, "you really believe that story?" The Christian said, "yeah, Jonah was swallowed by a huge fish and lived three days in its belly." The Atheist said, "That's physically impossible, if he did get swallowed, he would die in an hour." The Christian said, "well, when I get to heaven, I'll ask him how he lived." The atheist said, "what if he's not in heaven?" The Christian said, "then you can ask him."

Jonah is most well-known for being swallowed by a fish. Rightly so, because the most memorable part of Jonah's story happens to be a prophecy about the resurrection of Jesus. In Matt. 12:40, Jesus referenced Jonah, saying, "for as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

It could be that the sole purpose of Jonah's story is to foretell the resurrection of Christ and, with that, the riches of God's mercy falling to those who are not considered the people of God. As we know, the message of Jesus' resurrection has historically been more received by Gentiles than the Jews. The Pharisees in the time of Christ rejected his message and his resurrection; consequently, they could not accept that the mercy of God had crossed the boundaries of the Jewish people and had come to the Gentiles, who they considered to be evil sinners. Because the Pharisees largely rejected Jesus, the Gospel spread further into the world and brought salvation to sinners. Jonah is a sign for those Jews who cannot accept the mercy of God shown through Christ to the whole world.

So, the story of Jonah puts God's mercy and compassion toward sinners on full display. Not only toward sinners, but toward people who are not considered God's people. In fact, Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire were known for their brutality toward the Israelites, and they were a very wicked and godless people. God was asking Jonah to go bring the Word of God to the worst of the worst, in Jonah's mind. To compare, think of the worst sort of human beings you can imagine and place them together in a city, then imagine God telling you to preach the Word to them. Then, think of God lavishing his compassion and mercy upon them rather than erasing them from the planet like you think he should. I can tell you, when I think of child traffickers and con artists who prey on the elderly together in community—I would rather fire come down from heaven upon them than see them experience God's compassion and mercy.

I have been very involved in prison ministry over the years, and I had no problem blindly bringing the compassion and mercy of God to prisoners— It didn't matter to me what they had done, I was there to minister to them. However, my thoughts about that changed when my brother's dear mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law whom I loved dearly were killed by an active shooter. They caught him, but when I saw him on TV being led to the courtroom, I

thought, “let him rot in prison, and Lord, don’t have mercy on his soul.” Those are very raw feelings, but when pure evil hits you personally, it’s very tough to think about God’s mercy.

That is precisely how Jonah felt about the prospect of going to a notoriously wicked, enemy city knowing that God’s mercy would come to them should they repent. The very idea of God dealing compassion to the pagans provoked anger in the Israelites because of how they were treated by the pagans. And the Israelites were very stingy with their God. They did not want to share their God with anyone, let alone a people that pillaged and raped them. They were stingy with their God because they knew that following God meant mercy and blessing.

On the flip side of that, whenever the Israelites turned away from God and worshiped the gods of the pagans, God would speak to them and warn them through the prophets, saying, “I am a jealous God, you shall have no other gods before me.” God would then show his compassion and mercy to the pagans to shake the Israelites from their stupor and get them to repent. So, the Jonah story is a call to God’s people to return to the Lord, just as much as it is to show to all people that God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

With that bit of background, I invite you to open to Jonah 1. If you go to Matthew and turn left about 8 books, you’ll find Jonah.

Jonah 1 (NIV).

1 The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ²“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

³But 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.

⁴Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. ⁶The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.”

⁷Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

⁹He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

¹⁰This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.)

¹¹The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?”

¹²“Pick me up and throw me into the sea,” he replied, “and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.”

¹³Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. ¹⁴Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord,

have done as you pleased.” ¹⁵Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. ¹⁶At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Jon 1:1–16.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Let's pray.

Jonah is a mystifying character in the Bible, and one of the oddest prophets. Not a lot is known about him, we only have this book and one other mention of him in 2 Kings 14:23-29. I think that passage gives us a little bit of history for why Jonah responds the way he does to the Lord.

2 Kings 14:23-29 talks about the wicked reign of King Jeroboam II in Israel. Vs. 24 says Jeroboam did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, causing Israel to sin. However, there is one peculiar detail about Jeroboam where Jonah comes into the picture. Vss. 25-27 say, “Jeroboam restored the border of Israel according to the Word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet. For the Lord saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none to help Israel. But the Lord had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved the Israelites by the hand of Jeroboam...” So essentially, you’ve got wicked Israel led by their wicked king, Jeroboam, and the prophet Jonah prophesying the blessing of a renewed border and greater security for wicked Israel. We don’t know exactly how Jonah prophesied to Jeroboam, but prophets normally do not prophesy blessing and security for the wicked! So, Jonah was a bit of a non-conformist prophet.

This story might have been the root of Jonah’s running away from God. As a prophet desiring to speak oracles of judgment for wickedness and rebellion, Jonah might have been enamored with the other prophets who were able to successfully call God’s judgment down upon the rebellious. Maybe he wanted to see God’s judgment reign down upon Israel because of the wickedness of Jeroboam and the Israelites. He might have believed that the success of a prophet lies not in merely making threats, but in the ability to rain down actual fire and brimstone from heaven. So, Jonah seems to be the reluctant prophet who God uses to bring his compassion and mercy to Israel and Jeroboam in spite of their wickedness and rebellion. He might have been seen as a wannabe prophet since his oracles of judgment never came to pass.

So now, in the story of Jonah, here is God telling Jonah to go preach to a wicked people who are not even the people of God. As for pagan nations, Israel’s prophets often spoke oracles of doom over them from afar, but they never actually took the message of doom to the pagan nations like God was asking Jonah to do. So, Jonah knew God was up to something. He had already been used by God to pronounce blessing and security to wicked Israel, and now he sensed God was going to use him to show his compassion and mercy to their most bitter enemies, the Ninevites. In this sense, God’s call was contrary to what Jonah wanted God to do, so he ran the other direction.

I want to hang on that for a second— Jonah wanted God to do something other than what God was planning to do. My friends, how many times have we turned away from God because he’s doing something contrary to what we want him to do? God’s call to Jonah is a call to let go of the demands we’ve placed on God and to simply let him be God. When God is not doing what

you want him to do or what you expect him to do, don't try to force God's hand. Just let God be God and trust him!

There are times when God's work is wonderful, and you want to be as involved as you can. There are other times when you'd rather die than be involved in what he's doing. You want to run away and hide— jump on a ship and get out of dodge, so to speak! We cannot dictate God's character or demand what he should do. My friends, if you're in a situation where you'd rather be dead than continue on in what God is doing in your life, let go of who you've made God out to be, and trust God. Let him do his work. The bottom line is God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. He is rich in mercy, and if you hang on, the riches of his mercy and love will surely come to you in time.

Jonah didn't want God to be God, so he headed west instead of east, the opposite direction from where God told him to go, and he descended upon a ship. What I want to highlight in this chapter are some key words describing Jonah's flight from God. You don't really catch some of these nuances in the English language, but there is a progression of Jonah going down to lower and lower levels as he runs away from God.

In vs. 3, Jonah went down to Joppa to a ship, and this begins a progression of 'going down' that the author intends for us to catch. The English says he went aboard the ship in Joppa, but the literal translation is descended. He descended upon the ship in Joppa. In verse 5, Jonah had gone down below the deck and had fallen fast asleep while the storm raged outside. So, we can see the downward progression of Jonah's running away from God: he descended to Joppa, descended upon the ship, and descended further under the deck of the boat, where he laid his head down to sleep. So, Jonah is caught in a downward spiral of his own doing solely because he is running away from the Lord. Physically, he has gone about as low as you can possibly get— laying his head in the lower deck of a ship. All the while there is a storm raging just outside and threatening the ship.

With the storm raging, the crew of the ship wakes Jonah, and they decide to cast lots to see who is responsible for the calamity. If you don't know, casting lots was an ancient way of determining an outcome or even discerning God's will. The Israelites considered the lot to reveal God's will, and the pagans also believed that their gods were somehow involved in the outcome. So, they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Again, we see Jonah caught in this progression of a downward spiral. Everything is going against him now.

The crew was unable to fight the storm further, the ship was threatening to break apart, so at Jonah's request, they threw him down into the sea. Jonah's downward progression continued on, and it was about to get much worse. Next week, we'll see Jonah's acknowledgment of his downward spiral, which he rightly attributes to his running away from God. From deep down in the belly of the fish, he admits to the Lord that he had sunken to the deepest depths of the earth.

My friends, this is the most valuable lesson from Jonah Ch. 1. When you run away from God, it begins a downward spiral that will not stop until you've returned to the Lord. At first, that downward turn will come as a result of your choices to run away from God. Jonah chose to go down to Joppa; he chose to descend upon the ship; he chose to step down into the lower deck; he chose to lay his head down and sleep. One bad choice after another. When we run from God it usually begins a series of really, really bad choices that spin up the downward spiral.

From there, his choices in the matter became severely limited. The lot fell upon him, exposing his sin. This is where his running away from God starts to catch up with him, and his rebellion severely affects those around him. We aren't the only ones who suffer when we turn our backs on God. The people around us get caught up in all of the chaos of our downward spiral too. Family members, friends, co-workers can all suffer from the spiral.

Jonah finally had to be expelled from the ship at his request, but by this time, Jonah didn't have a choice. Either he takes the whole innocent crew down with him, or he gets off the ship and keeps it between him and God. As he sunk toward the bottom of the sea, he was in a literal downward spiral that only God could save him from.

Maybe you've been caught in a downward spiral in which every step you take just seems to take you further into new depths. Or maybe you've started running away from God because he's not acting like the god you've imagined him to be— maybe you're expecting God to do something different than he has and it's left you running the opposite direction. That downward spiral doesn't have to start or continue on— I want to be the voice in your ear that says return to the Lord and trust him. Turn your face to him. He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. He would rather end your chaos than allow it to continue. No downward spiral is too deep for God to save you from it. Amen.

Let's pray.