

I'd like to start with a question: Have you ever tried to run away from God? I know it sounds kind of silly. I mean, if there is a God, then how could anyone expect to run away from him successfully? But we do try. Sometimes it's quite obvious we're running. We know He knows what we're doing, and we know it's flat out wrong. But there are also times we're running, and we don't even know it, or at least won't admit it. Like when we know deep down, he wants us to do something, but we ignore it or even pretend we don't really know what he wants us to do.

Sometimes I think we run away from God because we don't like what he's doing. Another way to put it is we simply don't want to participate in his purposes. Maybe he calls us to join him in doing something, but we don't want any part of it, and so we run.

We're starting a four-week series on the book of Jonah. This is the story of a reluctant prophet and a relentless God. Jonah was a prophet of God who tried to run away from God. He knew what God wanted him to do, but he didn't want any part of it. He wasn't on board with what God was doing. What I see in Jonah, I've seen in myself far more often than I'd like to admit.

I'm sure most of us are familiar with the story itself. If you grew up in church, it was probably one of your favorite VeggieTales. You have that image in your mind of poor Jonah sitting in the belly of a whale. Or, if you're my age, you think of Pinocchio's father, Geppetto, sitting alone in the whale's belly, silent and miserable. Or maybe you first encountered Jonah through a professor in a university classroom who used this story to demonstrate the foolishness of believing Bible stories like this actually happened. But the story of Jonah is about more than a guy swallowed by a big fish. In fact, the big fish only shows up in one of four chapters. Instead, this is a story about God's relentless and radical grace, not only towards Jonah but towards his enemies.

What do we know about Jonah? He was a prophet who began his ministry shortly after Elijah and Elisha. According to 2 Kings 14:25, he preached during the reign of Jeroboam II, who was one of the many wicked kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. Israel's biggest problem was the Assyrian Empire to the North, the superpower of the time. Assyria's capital city was Nineveh. We're also told Jonah was from Gath Hepher, which is just a few miles west of the Sea of Galilee. Finally, we're told Jonah was God's servant, which was a truth Jonah had to learn the hard way, as with many of us.

Jonah's Call

The story of Jonah begins with a call. *"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" (vv. 1-2).* So the word of the Lord comes to Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh and preach against it. Nineveh, which is in modern-day Iraq, was about 550 miles north of Jerusalem, so this would be a long journey. Notice God calls Nineveh a great city, and indeed it was. It wasn't only a large city, but it was an important city—the capital of Assyria and the most powerful city in the ancient near east.

But notice also God speaks of its wickedness. There's no need to go into detail here. Just know Nineveh was renowned for its brutal and grisly treatment of its enemies. There's even an entire book of the Bible, Nahum, devoted to calling out the wickedness of Nineveh. When you think of Nineveh, think of the worst examples of fascism, terrorism, or genocide in the last 100 years, and you'll be on target for what they were all about. They were so bad that when it was rumored the Assyrians were about to attack your city, everyone would just commit suicide because that was better than what was coming. That's how feared the Assyrian empire was. It goes without saying they weren't just feared by Israel but despised as well.

So we can safely say this would have been a difficult and dangerous mission for Jonah to embark on. And we're not even told what God was trying to accomplish by sending Jonah. Was this a precursor to judgment? Or was God trying to reach out to these Ninevites to bring repentance and extend grace? We don't know but make no mistake, God is calling Jonah to do something quite out of the box. I mean, this is downright crazy; a suicide mission. This is like a Jewish man or woman in 1944 being called to go right into the headquarters of the Third Reich in Nazi Germany and preach to them.

Let's just start by recognizing sometimes God calls his people to do things that make no sense to us at all. How do you think Abraham felt when God told him to sacrifice his own son? It's in those times all we can do is fall back on the character of God. We know he is good. We know he's wise. We may not understand why he'd call us to do something like this, but we can trust him because we know he's faithful. Of course, in Abraham's case, it was simply a test of his faith and obedience.

Jonah's Response

So how did Jonah respond to this seemingly crazy call of God?

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. v. 3

Notice how the same thing is repeated twice: First, it says Jonah *"ran away from the Lord."* Then it says, *"he sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord."* The Lord says go to Nineveh, and instead, he heads to the port of Joppa and finds a boat headed for Tarshish, which was in southern Spain. This was in the opposite direction of Nineveh and as about as far away as you could go in the known world at the time. Whatever we say about God here, we must recognize he gives Jonah, and he gives us, the freedom to run away, the freedom to say no.

And then it says, *"he found a ship bound for that port."* Isn't that interesting? It's almost like that ship was just waiting for him to go exactly where he wanted to go! You see, if you want to run away from God, there'll always be a ship. Jonah probably thought, "I must be doing the right thing because everything is falling in place. It's like that ship was just waiting for me. Maybe God didn't really want me to go to Nineveh after all. Maybe I made it all up."

Let's be clear: If you're on the run from God, just because things are going well for you at the moment, it doesn't mean everything is okay with you and God. If things are going well in your disobedience, it only means he's being patient with you, and he's giving you a chance to turn back before disaster strikes.

We also must ask the question, what was the real reason Jonah was running from the Lord? We know it would have been a very difficult and dangerous mission. But those weren't the real reasons he ran. The real reason he ran isn't revealed until the end of the book in chapter 4. It says:

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. 4:2

The real reason he fled was that he was afraid, not of failure, but of success. He knew God was gracious and merciful! He knew God would pour out his grace on these pagans if they repented. He hated the idea they'd just get off scot-free. He didn't want them to discover God's grace. Call it racism. Call it self-righteousness. Call it whatever you want, but in his mind, there was a category of people who were beyond the grace of God.

There are two reasons people flee from God. One is what we might call irreligion. These people are actually running from religion. They want to be free from all restraints. They don't want

some superior being telling them how to live their lives. They want to live for whatever they think is right, for whatever pleases them. If it makes you happy, if it works for you, then how can anyone say it's wrong?

But that's not Jonah. No! Jonah is fleeing from God not because of irreligion but because of his religion. At the root of his disobedience from God is his own religious self-righteousness. He's a faithful Jewish man. He's lived the life; walked the talk; sacrificed to and for his God. He's God's servant! Why should God let these wicked people off? Doesn't he know what they've done? Doesn't he care? Why pour out his grace and mercy on them?

By the way, this kind of self-righteousness comes in all shapes and sizes. I mean, you can be self-righteous about not being religious or not being a racist. You can be self-righteous about being educated or being wealthy. Or you can be self-righteous about being poor and having a hard life. You can find all kinds of reasons to flee from a God who wants to pour out his grace on whoever it is you look down on and despise.

You see, the only thing that can cut through religion or self-righteousness is the gospel. The gospel says we're all fallen. We're all lost in our sin. We're all idolators. We're all just in it for ourselves. The gospel says the only thing that can save us is God's mercy and grace in the person and work of Jesus. And grace is the great equalizer because we all need it. We're all lost without it. And God makes no distinctions in who can have it. And until we get that, we'll be running from him and his relentless grace for the very people we look down on.

One of Lynn and my favorite authors is the late Elizabeth Elliott. Her story is told in an excellent book, *Through Gates of Splendor*. She and her husband, Jim, left Wheaton College in Chicago and went to Ecuador as missionaries to share Christ with an unreached tribe called the Aucas. This was a fierce group no one had ever met without being killed. After they found this isolated tribe, Jim and four other men entered Auca territory and had an initial friendly encounter. But, when they returned to reconnect with them, Jim and the others were speared to death.

The amazing thing is God called Elizabeth to return to the Aucas two years later with their three-year-old daughter, Valerie. Why would she do that? Because she believed in God's relentless grace. Eventually, she and one of the other widows made contact with the Aucas. They lived with them and shared the gospel. She wrote, "We look forward to the day when they will join us in Christian praise." And many of them will. Elizabeth eventually baptized the man that murdered her husband. When we really come to grips with our need for God's grace, there's no one we'll see who's beyond his grace.

God's Intervention

That's what God was teaching Jonah. But at this point in the story, he's still running from God. God gives us the freedom to

do that. We might even find a ship to sail us away, but sooner or later, a storm will come. Look what happens next: *“Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up”* (v. 4).

Have you ever heard of an intervention? Wasn't there a television show about that? The idea is when someone is out of control, with drugs, alcohol, or shopping, the people who love them decide to surround them and confront them. It's called tough love. Well, this is God's tough love. God is doing an intervention on his prophet. You see, if you're running from God, the good news is you'll always find a ship. The bad news is a storm is coming. Sin will catch up with you, and it won't be pretty. And notice who sends the storm: *“Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea...”* You see, this is also God's grace. It's what we call God's severe mercy. This is God running us down in our rebellion. When we run from God, God will run us down. He'll send a storm. The writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews calls it God's discipline. He says, *“because the Lord disciplines the one he loves...”* (Heb. 12:6). It's been said that God never allows his children to sin successfully. If God has sent a storm into your life, stop running and turn back to him.

Jonah's Confession

Some of us are hardheaded, though, and that was true of Jonah. Let's see how God brought Jonah to his knees. The following few verses bring a new group into view—the sailors on the ship and their captain. Look what happens next.

All 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. The 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.” vv. 5-6

You can see what a panic these sailors are in. If they weren't religious before, they are now! Each of them cries out to their own god. Then they offload the cargo to lighten the ship. And for good reason, they're about to die. Why? Because of Jonah! It's a reminder to us that no one sins alone. The choices we make will impact others.

But what I want you to see is how these sailors impact Jonah. Again, it's quite obvious these guys are pagans. They're not Jews. They don't know the true and living God. They worship idols. Can you see the irony in this? I mean, Jonah is surrounded by pagans here. But wait, isn't that the very thing he's running away from? And now he's stuck on a ship with them! And even more incredible is God will use these sailors in Jonah's life! Don't ever underestimate how God might use even unbelievers in your life to wake you up. Sometimes their words and lives and even their wisdom stand as a rebuke to us.

First, the captain of the ship has to go down and wake Jonah up from his slumber. This is Jonah at his lowest point. It's interesting how the writer puts it: He says Jonah had *“gone below deck.”* So he goes down. The Hebrew word is the same root used up in verse 3 to describe how Jonah *“went down to Joppa.”* And when he falls into a *“deep sleep,”* a similar word is used. Again, Jonah is going down, down, and down. He's now at his lowest point of indifference. He could care less about what happens to him or anyone else. In some ways, he represents God's people living in total apathy towards the pain and lostness of the world around them. And in the end, a pagan has to rouse him from his sleep and plead for him to call on his god.

But God isn't finished using these sailors to wake Jonah up.

Then 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. So 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?” vv. 7-8

So the sailors cast lots to find out who's responsible. Jonah's name comes up. God can use any means he wants to flush us out! Now they know Jonah's the one to blame. So they interrogate him with no less than five questions: *“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?”* These are all good questions! God is using these pagan sailors to wake Jonah up from his spiritual slumber and remember who he is and what he's called to.

Finally, Jonah speaks up and confesses his faith. *“He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land”* (v. 9). This is the beginning of Jonah's repentance, of him reclaiming his identity. He's a Hebrew. He worships Yahweh, the God of heaven. Yahweh made the sea and dry land. In other words, he's in control of all of this.

Interestingly enough, the word worship is the same Hebrew word for fear. Real fear of God leads to real worship. That's what the sailors will soon find out. But if Jonah feared God at the start of all this, he wouldn't be running from God; he'd be in Nineveh. And now he's beginning to see that.

Look at their response. *“This 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.)”* (v. 10). Again, God is using them to rebuke Jonah! It's like, *“Are you crazy? Why would anyone run from a god like that?”* By the way, we don't know when Jonah told them he was running from the Lord, but he had. This was all part of him coming to face his reality. This is all part of God running him down.

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

(v. 11). They're looking to Jonah for answers. He says, "*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*" (v. 12). So now they've gotten Jonah not only to confess his faith but to confess his sin. "It's my fault," he says. "I take responsibility for this. Throw me into the sea." This is a suicidal request. No one would survive being thrown into that raging sea, unless of course... Well, that's for next week.

But these guys are smart. Look what they do.

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Then 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." Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. vv. 13-16

They're not crazy about the idea of throwing God's prophet into the raging sea. They didn't want to be responsible for that. So they try to row out of the storm, but it just got worse. So they prayed. They prayed to Yahweh before they threw Jonah into the sea. Then, after they threw him in, the storm ceased, and the sea grew calm. And then it says these pagan sailors "*greatly feared the Lord*" and made sacrifices and vows to him.

This is amazing! This whole thing has changed their lives. They now worship Yahweh! The very thing Jonah was running from in Nineveh is now happening with these pagan sailors! God has a sense of humor, don't you think? These men who feared the storm now "*greatly fear the Lord.*" This isn't a cowering fear, but rather a reverential fear that leads them to worship, just as Jonah had told them how he worships (fears) the Lord. When you fear the Lord, you don't have to fear anything else!

Jonah's Sacrifice

And there's one thing I want you to notice here, and that's how, in the end, Jonah chose to die instead of having the sailors die with him. He's willing to die so they might live. Does that sound familiar? It's very interesting, Jonah is mentioned several times in the New Testament, and wherever he shows up there, it's always in a positive light. Jesus lifted Jonah up as a faithful prophet (Luke 11:29-32). Jesus even likened Jonah's descent into the sea and the fish's mouth to his own death. He said, "*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of*

Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40).

You see, this is the answer to both irreligion and religion. The answer is that we all need someone to die for us. What Jonah did for the sailors, Jesus did for us. Jesus died for irreligious people who've run from God by throwing off all restraints and indulging the flesh in whatever way they like. But Jesus also died for religious people (like Jonah), who've run away from God and his radical grace by trying to live up to God's standards, becoming self-righteous in their religion, and judging others like the Ninevites. Again, the answer to both irreligion and religion is the gospel, and the gospel is seen in Jonah.

Like Jonah, God is calling each of us to participate in the risky task of proclaiming the radical grace of God to a world that is desperately lost and wicked. Folks, we live in Nineveh. But are we asleep? Are we avoiding our call? Are we on the run? I hear a lot of Christians who just want to get out of here: liberal politics, high taxes, impossible traffic, high cost of living. It's all true. But maybe this is why you're here.

Jonah 1 teaches us that God calls us to go to dark places we really don't want to go. But when we run from God and his call on our lives, whether through irreligion or religion, he'll run us down. Sure, you might find a ship to board, but you'll soon meet up with a storm, and it won't be pretty. So let's stop running and turn back to God and his relentless grace.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2021 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1456-1FC

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, May 2, 2021 at Central Peninsula Church.

www.cpc.org