

On the Run

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[0 : 00] Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amitai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish, so he paid the fare and went on board to go with them to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his God, and they hurled the cargo that was on the ship into the sea to lighten it for them.

But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship, and had lain down and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, What do you mean you sleeper? Arise, call out to your God. But perhaps God will give a thought to us that we may not perish. And they said to one another, Come, let us cast lots that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.

[1 : 07] So they cast lots, and the Lord fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation, and where do you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you?

And he said to them, I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, What is this that you have done?

For the man knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord because he had told them. Amen, this is the word of God.

And we will look at this tonight, and we will look at this in the next six weeks, because we will take some time to go through the book of Jonah.

It's not a big book for chapters, but I hope to go through it with you and to help you learn from it and see God's character in it.

[2 : 09] Because it's a book that shows us the nature of God, the character of God, how he is merciful and how he has grace, undeserving grace that we get, and it shows us how we are sinners in need of grace, how we run away from God and how God chases after us.

And that is what I want to talk about tonight. Today we are just looking at the first 10 verses that we just read, and it almost feels like we stop in the middle of the story, right?

Jonah flees from God, he goes on a boat to Tarshish, and we haven't heard the end of the story today, and I did that on purpose because I'm going to preach on that next week again.

Today we have to do some groundwork first. We will talk about the first few verses about how God calls Jonah and about Jonah running away.

And the reason why I do that is because this book is carefully constructed. If you study Jonah, you will see there are a lot of parallels, there is a lot of irony going on, that there are a lot of things that actually hint at the meaning of the text.

[3 : 31] And we are thrown right into the book of Jonah when we start reading it. We don't know much of the context, and the reason for this is because the book wants to get a reaction out of you.

So if I can just ask you this week at some point, if you have some time, take your Bible and read through the book of Jonah. It's only four chapters, it'll take you about 10 minutes, 20 minutes if you're a slow reader, without trying to be offensive here.

And the first thing I would like to talk about is that this book is constructed in a way that it makes us identify with Jonah.

Why am I saying this? The thing is, we don't know who Jonah is in this book. He doesn't really give us much information about himself.

So we have to go looking at other places in the Bible. One of those is 2 Kings chapter 14, where we learn that Jonah is a prophet. He was active around the time in context of Jerobim II, when Jerobim II was king in Israel.

[4 : 40] And we also know that Jonah is the son of Amityi, and that he is from a place called Gath Hefeir. And that's almost about it. We don't get much more information about Jonah.

We know he was serving Jerobim II. He lived at the same time as Hosea and Amos, but unlike them, he actually never called out the sin that was committed in Israel at that time.

He actually never criticized the king, which could imply that Jonah was fine with the king, advancing Israel's power and influence, although it was against God's will.

So one commentator suggests that maybe Jonah was a patriot. He was a highly partisan nationalist.

Now, people like that exist in our time too. People who care a lot about their faith and about politics, and it gets mingled and ends up being the same thing.

[5 : 42] And it's not a great thing, is it? So if we know that about Jonah and keep that in the back of our minds, that makes it more ironic that God comes to this person and says, Jonah, arise, get up, go to Nineveh.

Now, the way this book is written is that Jonah introduces himself in verse 9. He says, I'm a Hebrew. I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea in the dry land.

And that's not very precise. I mean, there would have been hundreds and thousands of Jews who would have said, well, I'm a Hebrew and I fear the Lord. And all of this is done so that you, well, the reader back then who would have been a Jew, reads this book and identifies automatically with Jonah.

He is a Jew of that time. So if you ask yourself, what is this book about? Who is this book about? It's actually not an easy question.

Is this book about the Ninevites? Is this book about Jonah? Is this book about God? The answer is about all of them probably, but it's also about you.

[7 : 00] When you pick up this book, you're supposed to identify with Jonah and the Ninevites and how God is bringing things to a purpose. He's driving things in his sovereignty.

And the first thing that I want to point out in this whole series is that like Jonah, you and I, all of us here tonight, we are running away from God.

What do I mean by that? We only have to look at the first few verses. Now, the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amitai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

So far, so good. That's a fairly straightforward command I hear you say. But then we read, and Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord.

So I'm saying today we're all a bit like Jonah in the way we have been running away from God and how on a daily basis we are still running away from God.

[8 : 08] Some of you will sit here tonight and you will think, well, actually, I'm not running away from God. I'm all right. I'm here at church. I mean, put my smile on and everything, and I've got the small talk ready for after the service when we have teas and coffees.

But to be honest, it's easy to think that, right? That everything's good, that everything's fine. But I think in Jonah we can learn that it's possible to fear God and yet to attempt to flee the presence of the Lord.

And there are generally two ways of doing that. The first one's quite obvious. We can run away from God by openly rebelling against Him, by living in sin, by ignoring God, by going against His commands, by living a life that doesn't please Him.

You deny perhaps even that God exists and you just don't care. Now, the second way of running away from God is a bit more tricky.

The second way of running away from God is by pretending that you're morally upright, you're living a good life, but actually deep inside, you're self-righteous and you're thinking of yourself higher than of others.

[9 : 24] You go to church every Sunday, you read your Bible, you pray, but in your heart there is coldness, there is darkness, and there is no love for God or for your neighbor.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Some commentators have pointed out that the book of Jonah mirrors the parable of the prodigal son, because you have one son who openly rebels

against his father and who runs away and wastes all the money and then you've got one brother who stays at home and thinks of himself better than the other one.

In the book of Jonah we get both. We get the sailors, we get the Ninevites, who are pagans who don't know God and they live lives that don't honor God.

And then we have Jonah who doesn't think that it's a good idea to trust God in that. He is rejecting the call on his life to love the Ninevites, to go there and preach to them.

And we are a little bit like that. So often, practically, we fail that calling that we have on our lives to be holy, to love God, to love others well.

[10 : 38] We all have specific callings on our lives and in our lives. For some of you, it might be that you're called to be a father or a mother or a husband or a wife or a daughter and a son.

For all of us, we are called to be holy. We are called to love others. We are called to share the gospel with other people.

Yet, we are falling short. We fail that calling so often. And the proof of that is obvious. We can just look at our own lives. We can see the sinfulness.

We can see how often we avoid other people or do things that we know God doesn't approve of.

Romans 3.23 says, we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

So let me ask you two questions tonight. What are some of the things God has called you to do?

Who in your life, more specifically, is God calling you to love?

[11 : 38] I'm not talking about the people you naturally like, but the ones that make you want to avoid them. The ones when you see them, you want to go the other way.

That person that annoys you maybe or that you disagree with, the person who has this wrong political view that you just can't agree with or who views maybe scripture in a way that you think is just wrong.

Who is that person in your life? Because the thing is, it's easy to avoid the things and the calling that God has put on your heart. You see, Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh.

And conveniently, there was a ship to take him to Tarshish, to take him into the other direction. And the truth is, there's always a ship going to Tarshish.

What is your ship going to Tarshish? What's your boat to Tarshish? There always is a good excuse. There always is a comfortable alternative that allows us to avoid God's calling, to flee from His presence.

[12 : 45] And it could be anything, really. It could be that you never have time to meet others, that you're always busy. It could be that you have a lot of people you know, but you actually never let anyone really know you.

And really, you never have any meaningful conversation with them. You're always small talk, you always guard yourself, perhaps with sarcasm.

You're never serious. There's never anything meaningful. It never goes any deeper. And we do that all the time, right? That was just a couple of examples. But think about that.

What is your calling? What's your boat to Tarshish? Okay, secondly, so firstly, we're all running away from God. Secondly, why are we all running away from God?

Let's look at why Jonah is running away from God. Have you ever asked yourself why Jonah is running away from God? Because I did ask myself that in preparation for this sermon. And the problem is that the mission that is given to Jonah is quite unusual.

[13 : 49] Why? Because it's the first mission of its kind. What do I mean by that? Usually, Israelite prophets, they were called to preach to their own people, to the Israelites, but never to the Gentiles, never to the people outside of Israel.

Usually, they would have gone and given the word of God to fellow Jews, but never to any other people.

For those of you who don't know yet, Nineveh is not in Israel. It's the capital of the Assyrian Empire at that point. And it's not in Israel. And at no point in the history so far has a prophet ever been sent to the Gentiles to preach to them.

Almost nobody. Elijah, one time in 1 Kings 17, went to a Gentile widow and helped her. And we get glimpses of God's love for the Gentiles there.

And maybe I wonder if Jonah knew about that, and he thought about that and knew that God wanted to save the Ninevites. But apart from that, that has never happened.

[14:59] And Jonah knows that if he is being sent to the Ninevites, that might mean that it will be a warning for them to repent. It might give them a second chance. And if you then go on and read commentaries and history books on Nineveh, on the Assyrian Empire, you will find out what kind of people they are.

And to say the least, they are a nasty piece of work. They are violent, brutal people. I have read some of the accounts. And I wish I could share them with you.

No, I don't wish I could share them with you, because they are too brutal. They are really, really bad. There are children here tonight. I can't really tell you what they did to their enemies. But if you go and read about it, you will understand that they are almost a bit like a modern day terrorist state. They operate by making people fear them. And then suddenly you think, well, OK, maybe it was fair enough for Jonah to run away, right? Maybe he got scared.

I can understand that. If God would tell me to go to the Kremlin and preach the gospel to Putin tomorrow, I would say, no, thank you. I'm not interested in that.

[16:13] But it's understandable that Jonah doesn't want to go there. I think nobody in this room would be keen to do that.

So you understand Jonah a little bit more when you know that the Syrian Empire was a threat on Israel, when you know that they were not nice people, that they did not deserve to be saved.

And now Jonah is to give them a warning. And he might wonder, why don't you destroy them already, God? Why don't you just bring judgment upon them and the whole thing's over?

But that's not what God does. God tells Jonah to go there and to preach. So is that why Jonah ran away?

He got scared? Well, actually, if we look at the end of the story, we have to do a little peek to the end of the story, chapter 4.

[17:15] We learn that that is not why Jonah ran away. Because Jonah ends up going to Nineveh, and he goes and preaches, and they repent and God has mercy on them.

God does not destroy them. And then Jonah says, this is the reason why I went to Tashish. For I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

And suddenly you realize, so Jonah wasn't scared. That was not the reason why he went. There's no evidence in the book of Jonah that he was scared.

And he left because he hated the Ninevites. It stood for everything he hated. And he hated the fact that God loved the Ninevites.

So let's come back to our questions. Why did Jonah run away? There are probably a lot of factors we could talk about. Racism, xenophobia, self-righteousness, anxiety might be a part of it.

[18:20] But at the root of all of this lies a distorted view of God's character. You see, Jonah is a prophet. He makes us living by telling people the Word of God.

He tells the sailors in verse 9 that he's a God-fearing Jew. He knows God. He knows the Scriptures very well. But he doesn't realize that it's possible to know God, but not to love God.

So my question tonight is simple. Maybe you know about God. You have a lot of information about God. You know the Scriptures well. But do you know God personally?

Do you love God? Can you honestly say tonight, I love God? Because Jonah didn't really get what God was about. He didn't understand God's character.

His view of God's character is distorted and blinded by self-righteousness and pride. Do we have a distorted view of God's character? Do you love some parts of the Bible, but not other parts?

[19:23] That's very common. Do you overemphasize judgment over love and grace? Or maybe the other way around, do you overemphasize love over the reality of judgment and the reality and the need for justice?

Because that is just picking passages in the Bible that you think are true and more important than others. And that will ultimately distort God's character and the way you view him.

The early church father Augustine says this. He says, if you believe what you like in the Gospel and you reject what you don't like, it's not the Gospel you believe, but yourself.

And that's a difficult thing to hear. And I think everyone struggles with this. All of us here tonight. We try to preach from all of Scripture. That's why we try to preach Christ in all of Scripture because we want to get a view of God that is faithful to His Word, faithful to the way He reveals Himself.

Maybe you struggle with that. Maybe you struggle with the fact that God loves your enemies. Maybe you struggle with the fact that God loves those who are so different to you.

[20 : 41] Those who live far away from God. Those who are political enemies of you. Those who just do things that you think are stupid. But God loves them.

And do you realize that by not accepting that, by not loving them, you are like Jonah? You are a sinner like they are? Do you think you deserve to be saved but not them?

Or maybe you're here and struggle with the fact that God is a God who brings judgment upon people. God revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament we read about Jesus and He says, anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father. In Jesus you see the character of God. He loves sinners. He ate with them.

He met them. He healed them. He talked to them. In Jesus we see God's judgment and His love and mercy at the cross. As Jesus bears the judgment that we would have deserved.

[21 : 46] And through His death offers us forgiveness. Because you did not deserve it. I did not deserve it, but we were given it freely. And the only reason that could happen was because there was one who was not like Jonah, who wasn't disobedient, but who went and who preached and who died.

So, is that it? Are we just running away and we're hopelessly lost forever? No, I just mentioned Jesus. He died for us.

And in the story of Jonah, that was obviously before Jesus lived on this earth, we find a very particular way of God chasing after Jonah and bringing him back on the right path.

Jonah doesn't just go away and that's the end of the story. No, God sends a storm. We've just heard about storms. We've heard it here tonight. We've seen it in the news in the United States. Hurricanes, how much power nature can accumulate. And we get this little scene in the end of this passage where Jonah is on a ship, on the ship to Tarshish, and he's there with experienced sailors and they get scared.

[23 : 03] Imagine you're on the ocean and a small little boat and the waves and the winds are raging around you. I don't know if I'm the only one who gets these videos recommended online of the North Sea and how scary that looks.

But that's what it probably was like. Jonah, God sent a storm. Why? Jonah was fleeing the presence of the Lord and God is not just letting him get away with it.

He uses the sailors to wake him up and they say the same thing that God said to him right in the beginning. Arise. Up. And that's pretty ironic, isn't it?

You see, God is sending Jonah a storm to tell him, you can run from me but I will always chase after you. You can try to get away but you never will. It's like a toddler screaming at his mother and then tries to run away.

There's just no realistic chance that the toddler actually escapes because he's got really short legs and the mom can just chase after him, pick it up and put it in bed or whatever.

[24 : 09] That's a picture we have here. You can't just run away from God. And God sends the storm to pick him up. Why? Because he loves Jonah.

And we must not read that in a negative way but in a way that reminds us of God chasing after the one and leaving the 99. Which is something that makes no sense at all until you are the one that God is chasing after.

You see, everyone around us tells us do whatever you like. You can flee God, you can run away, you can be your own master. Just be who you want to be. Fulfill yourself.

We all call that expressive individualism. But God says, listen to what I want you to do. Listen to who I say that you are.

Because God loves you, he will send a storm to turn you back to the right path. Because he loves you, sometimes he will make your life uncomfortable. And I'm not saying that that's the explanation for all the suffering in the world because it isn't.

[25 : 15] And I don't want you to think that. But think like that. If God would never try to wake you up, maybe you would just sail on your boat to Tarshish and never look back.

Tim Keller puts it like this. He says, if you are far away from God, the forces of darkness will likely keep you in comfort. God, by putting things in your way, is trying to wake you up to your dependence on Him.

Sometimes the storms in our lives are sent for a reason. Sometimes the reason is to wake us up, to tell us we're headed in the wrong direction. It's like a nurse trying to give medicine to a patient who's trying to avoid it and who's fighting back.

But he needs it, but he doesn't know it. If you feel superior to others, then you haven't understood grace. It means you're on the run. If you don't feel compassion for others, it might be because your pride has blocked it.

If you don't feel like God is for you and wants you to be happy and fulfilled, it might be because your view of God is distorted. It might be because you mistrust God's plan. And unless you can see your own sin in the way Jonah can see his own sin, you might be blind to the grace of God that he has extended to you and to the Ninevites.

[26 : 32] But you see, God is both too holy and too loving to either destroy Jonah or to allow Jonah to remain as he is. And God is also too holy and too loving to allow us to remain as we are.

So thanks be to the one who never ran away, even when all his friends and disciples did. It's because of Jesus Christ that we can gather here tonight, that we can celebrate the Lord's Supper here tonight.

It's because Jesus went after you to bring you back, that you are here tonight. So let us pray. Lord, I pray for us here tonight that you would help us to understand your character better, to help us to run to you rather than away from you.

And I pray for those here tonight who have been running for a long time and are exhausted. Bring them back to you, Father. Give them peace and give them rest. Forgive us all our sins in Jesus' name we ask. Amen.