

## Running from God

### Jonah 1

I really appreciate Tim sharing his story this morning. As we have heard, there was a time when he was running from God. The reality is that this desire to run from God has been the Achilles heel of mankind since Adam. We all struggle with it at some level. It's possible that some of you right now are running from God. You are sitting in church, but you're running.

Today, we begin a four week series on the book of Jonah and as we will see Jonah tried to run from God. We are going to look at chapter one of Jonah this morning. Jonah, as a book, is an interesting book because unlike all the other prophets it is primarily about Jonah rather than a recording of what he said.

We don't know a lot about Jonah outside of this book. Jesus refers to Jonah when the religious leaders ask him for a sign. He said this:

*<sup>39</sup> . . . "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; <sup>40</sup> for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. <sup>41</sup> "The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here (Matt 12:39-41).*

Outside of this reference we also find a comment about Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25:

*<sup>25</sup> He [speaking of King Jeroboam II] restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher (2 Kings 14:25).*

King Jeroboam II reigned as king in Israel from 793-753 B.C. Part of Jonah's prophetic ministry took place during the reign of Jeroboam II, because this passage says it was according to the word that God spoke through Jonah that Israel expanded its borders. Now, we don't know for sure if the events in the book of Jonah happened before or after this, but I tend to think they happened after.

And so with that bit of background, let's take a look at this man who sought to run from God:

*<sup>1</sup> The word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, <sup>2</sup> "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me."*

Nineveh was one of the main cities in the nation of Assyria, which was a dominant force in the ancient Near East from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. Assyria was an enemy of Israel having threatened the nation several times. Ultimately, it was at the hands of Assyria that the northern kingdom of Israel fell in 722 BC. And so Nineveh is one of the principle cities of an enemy nation. It is to this city God calls Jonah to go and *cry against it* because their wickedness.

In this assignment for Jonah one of the things it reveals about God is that He is not just the God who reigns over Israel. His sovereignty rules over all nations and He demands righteousness even from Nineveh a city located outside the borders of Israel. And so, He wants to send a prophet to warn of coming judgment.

How does Jonah respond?

*<sup>3</sup> 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.*

Nineveh is to the east. Joppa is to the west. Jonah wants no part of this plan. You might think that as a prophet Jonah would relish the chance to go and pronounce God's coming judgment upon Nineveh. But Jonah knew that to warn was to invite the possibility of repentance and that was the last thing he wanted to offer Nineveh. And so he rises up to *flee to Tarshish*.

We are told twice that he is fleeing *from the presence of the Lord*. David had written in Psalm 139:7, ". . . where can I flee from Thy presence." His point was that he could not flee from God's presence. Most likely Jonah knew he couldn't literally flee from God's presence. Most likely Jonah sought to flee from the land where Yahweh spoke to the prophets. He may have thought that if he could escape from the land of Israel that God would stop speaking to him. At least then, he would not have to have a part in Nineveh being spared if they repented.

So Jonah goes down to Joppa, which was a small harbor town on the coast of Palestine and he finds a ship *going to Tarshish* and he pays the fare and goes down into the ship.

*<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.*

Have you ever exercised your power over an ant? If I want I can simply take a stick and put it in front of an ant and they are forced to change directions. Or I can blow on them and move them away. Or I can scoop up a wall of dirt in front of them that causes them

to change directions. You see, if an ant is heading north and I don't want him to go north, I have the power to stop him. I can change his direction. His attempts to go anywhere are pretty futile if I don't let him.

Jonah's the ant. He is fleeing, but God is not going to allow it and so He *hurl[s] a great wind on the sea* which causes a great storm that threatens to destroy the ship.

We are told that these men who surely had seen many storms in their sailing careers *became afraid*; so much so that *every man cried to his god*. These men were polytheists. Each of them began to cry out to his own god and they also lightened the load by throwing *the cargo into the sea*.

What was Jonah doing? He is asleep. It's not hard to imagine that this was the sleep of a depressed man running from God. Apparently, as the sailors were going down into the ship to retrieve cargo to toss overboard, they saw Jonah sleeping and informed the captain of this fact.

*<sup>6</sup> So the captain approached him and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish."*

The captain did not yet know whom Jonah's god was. He just knew that they needed every man on board to call out to his god to make sure that all the bases were covered.

Verse 7:

*<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> Then they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? [Is it really you?] What is your occupation? [The answer to this question would indeed tell them much, right?] And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"*

Most likely these last three questions were an attempt to figure out which national deity he had offended.

*<sup>9</sup> 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."*

In other words, "My God is not just some national deity. He is the supreme God over all the gods." He is the God who owns the heavens. He is the one *who made the sea and the dry land*. In other words, He is the God who made everything.

It's interesting that Jonah says, *I fear the LORD God* for he had not been living like it. But it is possible that as he has seen the suddenness and the strength of this storm and

as he has seen the lots fall to him that he is realizing that he cannot run from God. It is possible that by this time Jonah is beginning to own what he has done and is beginning to turn in his heart.

Jonah's answer takes the men to a deeper level of fear.

*<sup>10</sup> Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. <sup>11</sup> 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.*

These pagan men who had each been calling on his own god are now confronted with the supreme God - the creator God, the one who made the raging sea - and they ask Jonah what they needed to do so that the sea might become calm.

*<sup>12</sup> And he 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." <sup>13</sup> However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them.*

Jonah tells them that they need to do throw him into the sea, but apparently they preferred to put him ashore and so they *rowed desperately to return to land*. But they could not because God in his power kept increasing the intensity of the storm.

*<sup>14</sup> 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, hast done as Thou hast pleased." <sup>15</sup> So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging.*

These sailors pray to the one true God and they ask that they will not die because of Jonah. And as they prepare to throw him overboard they pray that his "innocent blood" would not be on them. His blood was innocent in that he had not been found guilty by trial. To throw him overboard, which in all likelihood meant to kill him, would have been to execute a judgment that had not been rightfully declared. They may have feared that Jonah's relatives would learn of how he was killed and seek to avenge his death.

They are convinced that God is not letting them get to shore and that they indeed must throw him into the sea and when they do the sea stops its raging.

*<sup>16</sup> Then the men feared the LORD greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.*

We don't know if these men became monotheistic and put away all their other gods, but we do know that they had an encounter with the One true God. And they fear Him greatly and they *offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows*. Most likely this happened when they were back on dry land.

The sailors threw Jonah overboard for dead, but God is not done with Jonah.

*<sup>17</sup> And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.*

God in His grace and mercy provides salvation for Jonah. Some people wonder, "Could this really happen?" Well, as we saw earlier, Jesus affirmed the historicity of this. He believed it happened. In my mind, if God can raise Jesus from the dead then He can send a fish to rescue Jonah. By His grace, God rescues Jonah and as we will see later, He gives him a second chance to obey His calling.

Though he tried to run from God, Jonah found that he could not. God was too great. God was too powerful. God's presence was everywhere. He could not run from God. And the same is true for us. **We cannot run from God . . . successfully.** We may try, but we will never be successful.

It is possible that some of you have been running from God your whole life. You have never submitted your life to God. You may think that you have been successful in running from God. You may think that things are working out pretty well. But the reality is that you cannot run from God successfully.

The Bible in many places affirms that one day all of us will stand before God. 1 Peter 4:5 says:

*<sup>5</sup> but they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.*

You may run from God and resist Him your whole life, but there will be a day when the running will stop and you will not be able to avoid God. You will stand before the holy, sovereign God and be judged. And if you have never yielded to Christ and accepted Him as your Savior, the judgment will be eternal separation from God. You can run from God and you can do it your whole life, but you cannot run from God ultimately.

But here's the deal, just like God in His grace wanted to send Jonah to warn Nineveh of coming judgment, God has warned you. And the good news for you is that you can turn to God. You can stop running. You can call upon Jesus to save you and you will never face this eternal separation from God. God's arms are wide open to you if only you would stop running, turn around and come to Him.

Others here have tasted the love of God and His goodness. You've experienced new life in Christ and yet sometimes you too try to run from God.

It might be that you are running from a career calling; you are simply telling God that you will not follow that path. Or it might be an area of your life where you simply don't want to submit to God's will. Maybe you are in an immoral relationship and you know God wants you to end it, but you won't. Or maybe you've had some conflict with someone else and you know that God is calling you to humble yourself and go to them and say you are sorry and to ask for forgiveness and you are telling God that you will never do that. Or maybe you have sensed God calling you to open your tight grip on your time and your money so that you can live as a giver - someone who serves and someone who is generous with the stuff God has given you - and yet you are saying, I won't. Or maybe like Tim, you've experienced some kind of deep hurt in your life that has caused you to run from God.

You've boarded a ship to Tarshish. You are running from God. But you need to know that you can never run from God successfully. Just like He was in Jonah's life - He is too great; He is sovereign; He is powerful; His presence is everywhere AND He simply loves you too much to let you run.

God threw a literal storm at Jonah to stop his running. In our lives He will often send the "storms" of pain and suffering into our lives to discipline us. Hebrews 12:5-6 says:

*<sup>5</sup> . . . "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; <sup>6</sup> For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives."*

God loves you too much to let you keep running from Him. He will use the pain of discipline you to get your attention. He will use suffering to wake you up. You cannot run from God successfully. You cannot run and have peace. You cannot run and have joy.

I've shared before that when I was in college and I sensed God redirecting my future plans, I resisted what I sensed Him saying to me for a long time. I was running from His plans for me. One of the passages that God used in my life in a very powerful way at that time was Romans 12:2, which says:

*<sup>2</sup> And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

God's will is *good and acceptable and perfect*. It is *good*. This means that it is right, beneficial. It is *acceptable*. The main idea of this is that it is completely well-pleasing. And it is *perfect*. It cannot be improved upon.

Eventually, I simply had to trust that this was true. Eventually, I had to trust that God really loves me and what He wants for me really is good. And I decided to stop resisting God's plans for me. And I've never regretted it.

Are you running from God? Are you running from God in any way or in any area of your life? If you are, you need to know that God loves you. His plans for you really are good. They are pleasing. They are perfect. You also need to know that no matter how far or how long you have been running, God stands here with open arms ready to welcome you home.

If you are running from God, isn't today the day to stop the running? Isn't today the day to get off the boat and run to God?

Amen.