



RUNNING FROM GOD JONAH 1:1-17

Today we're beginning our study on the book of Jonah. Jonah is one of the minor prophets. There are twelve minor prophets in your Bible and they were originally one book. They are called minor because they are shorter, not because they are unimportant. If there is a book in the Bible that's influence on culture is disproportional to its size, it's Jonah. It's only four chapters and yet it seems that so many cultures both now and throughout history have a curious fascination with this story. It's represented over and over again in art, poetry, and music. Even Bruce Springsteen in 2012 came out with "Swallowed Up" (in the belly of a whale).

When most people think of this story, they think of the big fish that swallows Jonah. But this is about so much more than a big fish. This story gives us a peek into some of the deepest crevices of our hearts. In many ways this story acts as a mirror for us and forces us to examine the reality that in many ways we are more like Jonah than we care to admit. And it shows us an incredible picture of both God's sovereignty and mercy—not only to Jonah but to the nations—a pagan city called Nineveh. And in all of it we're pointed toward the greater Jonah, Jesus himself—who is the faithful servant that Jonah fails to be and endures the storm of God's wrath so that you and I live in his peace. **Pray.**

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Ammitai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."

Right at the outset here, we're introduced to a guy named Jonah. Jonah means dove in Hebrew. But we don't get any details who he is other than the fact that he's the son of Ammitai. He's mentioned only one other time in 2 Kgs 14:25 where serving under the wicked king Jeroboam II, he prophesied that God would defeat the nations and restore the borders of Israel—which He did.

But what's interesting is that in this story God is calling Jonah to go across those borders to the nations and call them to repentance. Now this is unprecedented in the prophets. There are moments where Israelite prophets are speaking judgments against the nations, but up to this point, no prophet has actually been sent physically to another nation to call out against it. And not only is this another nation this is one of the key cities of the Assyrian empire, not only one of Israel's enemies but notoriously cruel and brutal. Assyrian kings posted records of their brutality, which ranged from skinning enemies and placing their skins on the city walls, to burning young children, to decapitating people and placing their heads on trees around the city or stacking them on a skewer to make a totem pole (Erika Belibtreu). And God says to Jonah "their evil has come up before me"—I've had had enough—now go preach repentance to them. And Jonah's not having any of it. We learn why later "You are gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster." Jonah is running from God bc he can't stomach the fact that his deepest enemies might become the object of God's deepest mercy.

3 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 down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

Now don't make the mistake, like many do, that Jonah believes that can somehow go somewhere that's outside of God's sovereignty or awareness. He even tells the mariners on board that YHWH is the God of the heaven who made the sea and dry land. He's not fleeing God's omnipresence. He's fleeing God relational intimate presence. Much like Adam and Eve were removed from the presence of the Lord in Eden, not his omnipresence but his presence of blessing. The only difference here is Jonah is doing it voluntarily. "Take me somewhere God hasn't given his word and revealed his glory"—take me to Tarshish a city on the outskirts of known civilization where we're told in Isaiah. "...and I will send survivors to the nations to Tarshish...to the coastlands far away that have not heard my fame or seen my glory." (Isa. 66:19) I don't want to be with you, I don't to know you, I don't to be used by you or serve you, I'm out. One commentator said that Jonah bought a one-way ticket to the end of the world (Keller).

But verse 4 says in response to Jonah's failure to go to the great city, God hurls a great storm; so great that the ship threatened to break. And the pagan sailors on board recognize that this is no ordinary storm; they immediately attribute it to the displeasure of a God with someone on the ship and their first response is to call out to their Gods for help after which they throw the cargo over to lighten the ship. Meanwhile Jonah is underneath in the lit. "bowels" of the ship peacefully sleeping while everyone else is suffering for his sin.

So they cast lots to determine who's to blame for all of this and the lot falls to Jonah. And they respond with a barrage of questions, "8 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?" Now they're not asking about his occupation and where he's from so they can get to know each other better—ok the storm is tearing the ship apart they're not saying "so, tell me about yourself?" They're asking where he's from and what people he belongs to so that they can discern what God is behind this storm. Every city and nation had a God in most cases many gods, and so who you were and where you were from was directly connected to who you worshipped.

9 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." At some point he also confessed that he was running from this God. And it's here that the mariners realize that their in real trouble. This isn't some local deity of a city that they're dealing with. This is a cosmic deity that rules the heavens and the earth and seas...and the object of his judgment is the man standing next to them in boat. vs 10 said these men "were exceedingly afraid and said to him, 'What is this that you have done?'" And 11 "what shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?"

Vs 12 Jonah's answer is pretty straight forward, "12 He said to them, "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." The men don't want to kill this guy, they try to row back to shore, but they can't. They ask God—even using the name YHWH to not hold them guilty for this man's blood—and vs "15 So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

So much here. What kind of significance does this story have for us today? I want to offer 4 observations from this text that are imminently relevant for us today. 4 truths that serve both exhort and encourage us as we seek to love and serve God *not* like Jonah.

Genuine love for God will result in sacrificial obedience to God.

The ultimate rebellion isn't Jonah running away from a location—Nineveh—but from a person—God. Jonah could have stayed put and just not gone to Nineveh. But instead he takes extreme measures—including paying an exorbitant fee to charter a boat with a crew—to distance himself from God's intimate presence of blessing and relationship. And you may ask, "Why would anyone want to distance themselves from that?" And the simple answer is because they love something else more than God. I can think of a variety of things that Jonah was potentially sacrificing if he went Nineveh. **PACE...**

Emotional Comfort—Assyrians were brutal, it reasonable to believe that he knew people they had killed maybe they were friends or family. And by going to Nineveh God was calling him to move into a situation where he would have face deep emotional pain, complex feelings, and speak grace and love to people I hate and upon whom I only want vengeance. Perhaps he valued emotional safety over obedience to God.

Safety—God gave Jonah no promise that this would go well; that he would be successful, or that he would even live to tell about it. Going to a sworn enemy known for brutality and telling them that they are going to be destroyed doesn't bode well for your safety. Perhaps he wasn't willing to risk save for the cause of God's grace extending to those who didn't deserve it.

Reputation—Perhaps others would think of Jonah as the traitor prophet who went to a ruthless nation and prevented their destruction. "Whose side are you on man?"

Personal Dreams—I've got plans and goals. And really this just doesn't fit into it—so I'm going to do something else something easier something more comfortable. One author said it this way, "When calls you to Nineveh there will always be a ship ready to take you to Tarshish." I wonder how many of us are there. We know what God has called us to, but Tarshish without God sounds better than Nineveh with him. But friends I hope you don't buy that lie—which is exactly what it is which leads us to exhortation #2

See the death and deceitfulness caused by sin.

There is a reason that Romans 8 tells us not to manage our sin but to put it to death. Sin in the life of a Christian is always an emergency because it aggressively infects every aspect of our existence. And in just a few verses here we see how widespread sin's damage is. I'll just name a few.

Sin affects our perception of God—He doesn't say it but you can almost hear him think it, "If you were truly for my joy and well-being you wouldn't ask me to do this. You would ask to risk this kind of pain or inconvenience—hard talk, deep sacrifice. I know you mean well but my life would be better if I charted the course. I know you've called me to Nineveh, but Tarshish is the better deal, I'm at a point in my life where I just have to do me." Ps. 16:11 says that in God's presence there is fullness of joy and at his right hand there are pleasures forevermore and Jonah has convinced himself that the best way to move away from it.

Sin distorts our self-perception—Did you catch the part in vs 9 where he tells the crew that he fears the Lord while he's running from him? Like I'm in the processes of total rebellion but yea I fear God. No dude, you don't. You used to. I think Jonah is doing what sin often tempts us to do and that is give himself credit in the present, for faithfulness in the past. There was a season of faithfulness in his life...but it's not now. And rather than owning it, he's deceived himself into thinking fruitfulness back then can substitute for obedience now—oh yea I fear God; that the former version of himself can somehow count for today.

And there is a word here for us. I know a lot of folks who are dulled to the effects of sin in their lives or just coasting because they're sort of living off a spiritual record in the past. Bible. Service "Did my time" Sinclair Ferguson: Are you walking in obedience today or "Are you living with only the memories of obedience... Are you substituting your past spiritual record for the responsibility of present submission to God?" Because sin will tell you otherwise. Sin distorts our perception of God and self...

Hurts Those Around Me—I'll just quickly point out that Jonah's decision about how to live his personal life endangered the lives of entire crew of people. We're often tempted to think of sin is simply between us and God but it's not. Private sin always has public consequences. While everyone is suffering for Jonah's sin, he's asleep underneath. When the captain wakes him up, and tells him to call upon his God like the other pagan sailors, does he? No. He comes up with a plan to save them, presumably because he has a guilty conscience about them suffering for his disobedience, but there is not one word of repentance toward God. Not one hint of sorrow for his sin. In fact it's about to hit it's climax.

See how gripped this man is by his sin, in a final act of disobedience, Jonah attempts to checkmate God. I'll just die. It's by poetic design that went God said to arise that he went down to Joppa, the text says in the Hebrew he went down in the boat, we later find him down in the lower level, and it ends with Jonah sinking down to the bottom of the Mediterranean. Every step of away from God leading down into deeper darkness until the prophet chooses death itself over submission to God.

You may say well that's horrible—not really the pick me up I was looking for this Sunday. But that's not the end of the story. Verse 16 isn't the end of the chapter... **17 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.** Ohhh ok this changes everything. You see if you were listening to this story, especially if you a pagan, you'd think that YHWH was like the other Gods who were given to explosive anger—and almost threw a divine fit—and decided to get even to take revenge on an unfaithful subject. But when you get to verse 17, you see that's not the case at all. You learn that God wasn't punishing Jonah with the storm as much as he was pursuing Jonah in the storm. It here that you realize that God hasn't responded this way because he hates Jonah and wants revenge. He's gone to incredible lengths because he loves Jonah and wants to Rescue him and use him for his purposes.

Stand in awe of God's meticulous sovereignty.

If you step back and look, you'll realize that every moment in this story is under the sovereign control and command of a infinitely loving God. In just this one chapter, God's sovereignty is on display in a variety of ways. He's sovereign over nature. He commands the winds and the waves and they obey him. He appoints animals to do things. Praise the Lord from the earth you great sea creatures and all ocean depths! He's sovereign over our plans. Don't miss this, he tries to checkmate God by choosing death bc God saves him, brings him back to land and lets him try again. Which means the ship that Jonah meant to take him to Tarshish, God meant to take him to the fish. Praise God that he loves us enough to make sure some of our plans don't work out.

He sovereign over our words. And in brilliant poetic irony, the captain comes down and says "What are you doing sleeping? Arise call out to your God." If you look back at verse 2 Arise and call out are exactly what God told Jonah to do to Nineveh. And so as he opens his crusty eyes from his nap he hears the words of God on the lips of a pagan sailor.

He's sovereign over our worship. I love how God always makes the most of every situation. Even as Jonah runs further and further away from God, God is working to bring the people around him closer to himself!

You remember in vs 16 tells us that these men feared the LORD (YHWH) exceedingly and offered sacrifices and vows. And this isn't in attempt to save themselves. This is after the storm. When then water is calm—they stand in fear. Don't miss the irony. Jonah is running from God because he doesn't want to tell pagans about God; doesn't want them to worship his God. But what has his disobedience produced. He's told pagans about his God and now they are worshipping Him with fear and trembling in a way that puts the Israelite prophet to shame. Jonah's efforts to restrict the worship of God among the nations has only served to advance the worship of God among the nations.

Isn't it comforting to know that the God we worship is graciously coordinating every moment of our lives for our ultimate joy and his ultimate glory? In your pain, in your trial, in your storm God is working in you and in the lives around you to bring rescue and healing...

In the storm, see God's muscular grace to the least deserving.

This entire story changes when you see that God isn't out for revenge, but that he's riding out on the storm clouds to seek and rescue his prodigal prophet. It's true that sin always brings a storm. But the for the believer in every storm, there's a fish—a vessel of mercy. For the believer, God never puts you on the pavement to hurt you but to heal you. Variety of situations in this room—some your fault, others not—in the storm look for the mercy. Scottish Pastor Samuel Rutherford said, "When in the cellar of affliction, I look for God's choicest wines." Why he's because is full of mercy—and whether he leads you by the hand or has to grab you by the scruff of the neck—he shows grace to sinners and brings rescue to the least deserving.

He's bringing it to Jonah here. Brings it to the pagan sailors. He even wants to show grace to Nineveh. To one of the most savage, brutal nations God's sends an agent of rescue to warn them of God's judgment. We're not only supposed to see God's mercy to the least of these but Micah 6:8 tells us that we're supposed to love God's mercy. We should love seeing God rescue the nations. Not only because it displays the scope of his grace but because it's the story that we're apart of!!!

You see when we think of this story, it's easy to think of Nineveh and even Jonah as God's enemies. We're thankful that we're not like that but honest evaluation of ourselves reveals that we are like that. Eph. 2 says that we were objects of wrath, Romans 5 that were enemies of God. And yet, enemies as we were, Someone came to us. For us. To rescue and redeem. Oddly enough we'll find him on a boat asleep during storm, he'll calm the seas, an receive the worship of those on board. Why? Mt 12 that rescuer identifies himself as the greater Jonah. The prophet of God who, unlike Jonah who ran from his enemies, came to die for his enemies.