

Running From God

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, good morning again, and I hope you're having a great 4th of July weekend with your family and your friends. Over the next four weeks, throughout the month of July, we are going to be looking at the story of Jonah, which is a prophet story in the Old Testament.
- And I'm really excited to be looking at this story, to be looking at this book, for a number of reasons. It's an amazing story. It's a story that perhaps many of us may or may not be familiar with us, we may or may not be familiar with.
- But it's an amazing story for a lot of reasons, not only because of the plot and the characters and what happens in the story, but the scholars who have studied this over the years are aware of how sophisticated a story it is in terms of its form, in terms of its structure, in terms of its style.
- Even though it's an incredibly short story, it only takes up about three pages in my Bible. Even though it's a short story, scholars understand that it is a masterful work of Hebrew narrative, of Hebrew language.
- There's irony, there's satire, there's humor, and parallelism and symmetry, and so it's this really amazing story. And I also love this story because Jonah touches on some of the great themes of the entire Bible.
- [1 : 2 9] It touches on some of the most important themes of all of Scripture, things like the core doctrines of sin and grace. What does the Bible teach about what sin is?
- What does the Bible teach about what grace is? Jonah gets right at that. It touches on God's character. It touches on how his justice and his mercy, his holiness and his love and compassion come together.
- Jonah is about the power and the centrality of God's Word and our response to God through his Word. Jonah is about mission. It's about our calling to make disciples of all nations and to take the gospel to the whole world.
- Jonah is also about the sins of racism and nationalism and ethnocentrism and the human tendency to feel superior to other people and other cultures. Jonah is also about cities.
- Jonah is about the importance of cities, not only to humanity, but also to God. So Jonah is about all these amazing themes. And another reason why I love this story and I'm excited to look at it is that even though it's an old story, even though it's an ancient story, millennia old, it addresses modern questions.
- [2 : 5 0] And therefore, it's a really modern story. It addresses questions like how do we live in a society that has deep differences? It addresses questions like how do we become the kind of people who cannot just tolerate but love and live at peace with those who are different from us?
- How do spiritual change and social change go together? How can a city and a society experience both spiritual renewal and cultural renewal? And so it's an old story, but it's a modern story because it addresses a lot of our modern problems and questions.
- And so for all those reasons, I love this story. I'm excited to look at it. But before we dive into it, there's at least a couple things, one thing in particular, that we have to unlearn before we study this book.

And one of the things that we have to unlearn as we come to study Jonah is that Jonah is just a children's story. That it's just a kid's story about Jonah and the fish.

I think it's common for a lot of people to think about it this way. Perhaps that's because of the success of VeggieTales. I was telling Deborah about that this morning. Or perhaps because of the experience in church that we grew up in, that it tends to be a story that kids like.

[4 : 13] And so it tends to be a story that we associate with just telling our children. But for a lot of reasons, for those we already named, it's literary sophistication. It's all the great themes that it touches on.

It's actually way more of an adult story. It's way more of an adult story than a children's story. Although, the beauty of Jonah is that kids, it's a story that kids love too.

It's a story that kids and adults can read together and love. And so that's something that we have to unlearn as we come to this story together. The last thing that I'll say, one final thing I'll say, by means of introduction and orientation to this book, is a word about history.

So because of the nature of the story, because of some of the fantastic or even miraculous things that happen in it, many people are going to read this as just an allegory or as a parable, as just a symbolic story that reveals a bigger truth about God.

That whether or not it happened in history doesn't actually matter. What matters is the bigger spiritual truth. And so that's a question we have to think about. Is Jonah just a symbolic story?

[5 : 27] Is it just an allegory? Or did it actually happen? And that's an important question. And I do want to address that. But for the sake of time, we're actually going to leave that for next week.

We're going to leave that for week two. Just for the sake of time. But I do want to address it because it's an important question. And it's probably a question that many of you all have as you think about the book of Jonah. So we'll touch on that next week.

So let's dive in and let's look at Jonah chapter one. In the first chapter, in the beginning of this story, we're going to see a couple things.

We're going to see Jonah's flight from God and God's grace in the storm. Jonah's flight from God and God's grace in the storm. So first of all, Jonah's flight from God.

So what do we know about Jonah? Well, the Bible actually doesn't give us a ton of background information about him except for 2 Kings chapter 14.

[6 : 29] And in 2 Kings chapter 14, we learn that Jonah was a prophet who lived in the northern kingdom of Israel in around the 8th century BC. And we learn in that passage that God had given Jonah a prophecy.

He'd given Jonah a prophecy that Israel was going to reclaim land. It was going to restore its national borders from land that it had previously lost in previous generations to other powers in the region.

And in 2 Kings chapter 14, we learn that this prophecy comes to pass under King Jeroboam II through various military campaigns. And the northern borders of Israel are expanded and restored.

And the reason why that matters, the reason why that context matters, is because it means that the early days of Jonah's ministry as a prophet were actually a time of national pride for the people of the northern kingdom of Israel.

Despite the fact that Jeroboam II was a bit of a mixed bag and a pretty terrible spiritual leader, God had nonetheless showed favor on his people in this way.

[7 : 45] The national borders of Israel were expanded to a place that had only been matched in the days of King Solomon. And if you know the story of Israel, you know that the days of King Solomon were the glory days of Israel.

They were the glory days of wealth and prosperity and learning and peace. And so you can imagine the kind of pride, the kind of honor that Jonah must have felt as a prophet during this time.

His ministry could be mentioned in the same sentence as King Solomon. He was God's prophet. And he got to preach a message of expansion and glory and victory and success.

And he also got to see it come true. And maybe that meant that in Jonah's days, maybe that meant that the glory days were on their way back.

That the glory days of King Solomon were rolling back. Jonah may have thought to himself, you know, being a prophet in Israel, this is a pretty great gig, you know. I wonder what message of glory, what message of victory, what message of success is God going to ask me to preach next.

[9 : 03] But then we see Jonah chapter 1, verse 1. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it.

For their evil has come up before me. Now given everything that we had just said about the early days of Jonah's ministry, this was not the assignment that Jonah had in mind.

This would have come as a great shock to him for a number of reasons. The Lord had never in history before called a prophet from Israel to go to another nation, to go to a Gentile nation.

He had only sent prophets to Israel and Judah. And so this was completely unprecedented. This would have been completely off the radar for Jonah. And not only was it a Gentile nation that God had called Jonah to go to, but it was the city of Nineveh.

It was the city of Nineveh. Now what do we know about Nineveh? Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, that great and powerful, fearful nation to the north.

[10 : 21] A generation earlier, the Assyrians had forced Israel's king, Jehu, to pay tribute, to pay lots of money and gold. In order to pay tribute to them.

They were a people known for their violence and cruelty. They were an economic rival in the region. They were a constant military threat.

They were constantly trying to expand their own borders. And they had this reputation of being a violent people, of being a cruel people. Both on the military front and in their own society.

But above all, Nineveh represented a society that was a pagan nation, that worshipped pagan gods. That worshipped false gods.

And so Nineveh was a city that embodied everything that Israel was against. Everything that Israel feared. And everything that Israel hated.

[11 : 22] Needless to say, Nineveh was not on Jonah's summer vacation destination list. Nineveh was not on Jonah's bucket list.

It was the last place that he would ever want to go. But God told Jonah, that is exactly where I want you to go.

And so what does Jonah do? He jumps in the car and he heads to Nineveh straight away. No. What does he do? He runs in the complete opposite direction.

Nineveh is to the northeast. And he goes west. Or rather, northeast for you and west over here. And he finds, he goes to a town on the west coast of Israel called Joppa.

And he finds a ship headed to Tarshish. A place that was across the Mediterranean Sea to the west. Jonah goes as far away from Nineveh as he could go in direct disobedience to God's word.

[12 : 25] Direct disobedience to God's word. And so what do we learn from the first part of this story? What do we learn from the opening of the story of Jonah?

Well, we learn that there is more than one way to run from God. That there's more than one way to run from God. If you're here this morning and maybe you would consider yourself more of a secular person, you wouldn't consider yourself a Christian, you wouldn't consider yourself very religious, chances are that when you hear somebody like me, some pastor or a person in a collar, when you hear a person like me talk about running from God, chances are you imagine them to talk about living a life of immorality and sin and self-indulgence, perhaps a life of hedonistic pleasure, apart from church, apart from religion.

And of course, that is for sure one way to run from God, but it's not the only way. And it's not, in fact, the way that Jonah runs from God here in this story.

Jonah's not abandoning his faith. He's not pursuing a life of hedonistic, sinful pleasure and autonomy. So why is he running? Why is Jonah running?

Well, we're going to have to wait for the story to unfold to get a fuller answer to that question. Jonah gives us a more specific answer to why he runs in Jonah chapter 3, but for now, we get a preview of that answer here in chapter 1 by thinking about Jonah as a prophet.

[14 : 03] As a prophet. What would it have meant for a prophet from Israel to go to a city like Nineveh? Well, of course, it would have meant that he would have had to go and confront one of Israel's national enemies in the flesh.

He would have had to go and confront his cultural enemies, people that he feared and hated. But it also meant the possibility that the people in Nineveh would hear a message from God.

Prophets were people who spoke God's word to people. They revealed the truth about who God was. And so if Jonah was going to go and preach a message to the people of Nineveh, it meant that they could hear a message about the truth of God.

And if they could hear a message from God, then it also meant that they could respond to that message. It meant that they could hear the message and that they could also respond to it in ways that involved repentance, in ways that involved change, in ways that involved turning from sin, turning from their wickedness and their evil and their violent ways that they were known for.

It meant the possibility, not the guarantee, but it meant the possibility that those people, those Assyrians, would potentially receive the same mercy and the same compassion from God that Jonah had experienced and that all of Israel had experienced.

[15 : 34] Jonah runs perhaps partially because of fear, but he runs primarily because of his own national and cultural and religious pride. He's not running because he's immoral or because he's deconstructed his faith.

He's running because he cannot imagine those people having the same relationship with God that he has based on grace.

And the Bible teaches that this is the default operating system of every human heart. The human condition is that we all run from God. That we all run from God in disobedience to his word.

That's what sin is. That's sin in a nutshell. All of us run from God. And some people run from God in ways that look more immoral, irreligious.

But others of us run from God in ways that look very moral, very religious. It looks like we're actually being a good person and doing good things. There's a character in one of Flannery O'Connor's novels.

[16 : 43] Flannery O'Connor wrote a novel called *Wise Blood*. And, um, and one of Flannery O'Connor's characters is a man named Hazel Motes in her novel *Wise Blood*.

And, uh, as we read the story, we learn that Hazel, Hazel Motes learns, uh, he learns, he says, that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin.

That the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin. In other words, if we're a moral person, if we're a good religious person, if we've fulfilled our religious obligations, then we've paid our dues. And if we've paid our dues, uh, to God, then, uh, he is obligated to bless us.

He's obligated to answer our prayers. Um, he's obligated to do things for us on the basis of our own, uh, good works. The way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin.

But this is in direct contradiction to what Christianity teaches. It's, uh, at the heart of our faith, uh, we believe that our relationship with God is based on something called grace. It's not based on our own culture, it's not based on our own morality or good works, but it's based on an undeserved gift.

[17 : 54] A gift that he initiates, a gift that he freely offers us, and a gift that he purchases and earns for us. And so even though Jonah is God's prophet, even though he's a religious person, even though he speaks for God for his job, he has a deficient understanding of God's grace.

He has a deficient understanding of God's grace. At his core, he's still, at this point in the story, he still basically believes that it's his culture, it's his morality that allows him to receive God's blessing and approval, and that's why he runs.

Because it's that, it's that belief, it's that orientation to the world that makes him, uh, fearful, it makes him say, I can't imagine that those people might experience the same relationship with God that I have.

And so whether you would consider yourself a secular person or whether you would say that you've been a Christian your whole life, um, wherever you're at on that spectrum, like Jonah, all of us are blind in some way to God's grace.

We're all blind in some way to God's grace. We all have blind spots. Even if your theology of justification is impeccable. Even if you can explain justification clearly and articulately, all of us have blind spots to God's grace.

[19 : 14] If Jonah had blind spots, if a prophet from Israel had blind spots, then we all have blind spots about God's grace. Um, we might be blind to, like Hazel Motes, we might be blind to ways that we see our own spiritual life as a way of paying our dues and getting God to bless us and answer our prayers.

Uh, we might be blind to our, our own patterns of sin, uh, to our own unhealthy ways of relating with other people. Uh, but like Jonah, we might also, uh, be blind to ways that deep down we actually feel superior to other people.

Um, hardly anybody thinks to themselves, hardly anybody says out loud, you know, I'm really better than those people. I'm just so great, I'm so superior, I'm really better than those people.

But if you've ever thought or if you've ever said, uh, things like this, you know, I, I can't believe that those people or that that person would think about politics that way.

I can't believe that he or she would see the issues that way, would see the world that way. I can't believe that they would vote for this person or that person. I can't believe that they would send their kids to that school.

[20 : 34] I can't believe that they would live in that part of the city or live in that neighborhood. I can't believe they would live in the suburbs. If you've ever said something like that or thought about something like that in your heart, that's the, that's the seed of superiority.

It's the seed of pride. And that's a blind spot. That's a blind spot that shows a deficient understanding of God's grace. And one of the secrets of the Christian life, one of the secrets of living as a Christian, as a disciple of Jesus, is learning how to discover your own blind spots.

And none of us can do that by ourselves. But we, whoops, sorry, we all need to discover our own blind spots in ways that are particular to us, particular to our own temperament, our own personality, our own temptations, our own story.

And we do that, we absolutely need other people to help us do that. We need community, we need friendships, we need other people in our life to help point out blind spots that we have.

We also need spiritual disciplines, the regular means of grace, prayer, study of God's word, silence, solitude, and fasting. We need all of these things to help us discover our own blind spots.

[21 : 54] And unless you're actively doing that, unless you're actively uncovering your own blind spots about God's grace, our hearts will start to wander. We'll start believing things that aren't true about God and our hearts will start to wander away from the reality of a relationship with God based on grace.

And if we let our hearts wander for too long, if we let our hearts wander long enough and hard enough, we'll find ourselves running away from God, not running towards Him and His purposes and His call on our lives, but like Jonah, running in the complete opposite direction and direct disobedience.

And that is where Jonah found himself. Even though he was a prophet of Israel, he found himself running from God in direct disobedience to Him. But how does God respond?

How does God respond to Jonah's flight, to his disobedience, to him running? Well, second of all, we see God's grace in the storm. We see God's grace in the storm.

Jonah goes to Joppa and he boards a ship that heads out across the Mediterranean Sea and the ship gets out there in the middle of the sea and suddenly, this violent storm breaks out.

[23 : 15] And it threatens the lives of everybody on board the ship. The sailors, the captain, and panic starts to set in. And the sailors become desperate. They start throwing and heaving stuff overboard, supplies overboard in order to make the ship lighter, to make it more buoyant.

And they start praying and they start crying out to their gods. They start crying out to their pagan gods to save them and rescue them. And meanwhile, what is Jonah doing?

He's sleeping. He's sleeping. And the captain says to Jonah, Jonah, what are you doing? Get up. We are all calling on our gods.

You need to wake up and call upon your God. We're about to go down. We need all the help that we can get. And then verse seven, the sailors said to one another, come, let us cast lots that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.

And they cast lots and the lot fell to Jonah. Now, without explaining the logistics of how lots work, Jonah, as God's prophet, would have been familiar with Proverbs 16.33, which says, the lot is cast into the lap, but it's every decision is from the Lord.

[24 : 36] Jonah knew. The lot fell to him. Jonah knows he's the reason. Jonah knows even without the lot being cast to him. Jonah knows the reason why the storm has come is because of him.

He's the reason. And the sailors say to him, who are you? Where are you from? Why is all this happening to us? What have you done? Verse nine, 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.

And then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, what is this that you have done? And you can't help but notice the incredible irony that's going on in this moment.

You can't help but notice the incredible irony that is happening in this scene. Jonah's a prophet. He's the one who's supposed to reveal the truth about God.

He's the one who's supposed to preach God's word. He's the one who's supposed to tell other people about the truth of who God is. But who is it that's actually revealing the truth about who God is in this situation?

[25 : 46] It's the pagan sailors. The pagan sailors are actually revealing the truth about God. The pagan sailors are more in touch with, they're more consistent with Jonah's theology than Jonah is.

Jonah says, I worship the Lord and yet he runs from him. Jonah says, I worship the God who made all things, the God who made the earth and the sea.

And the sailors say to Jonah, Jonah, if you worship the God who made the sea, then how could you run from him and try to escape from him in the sea?

If your God made the sea, how could you possibly run from God and get away from him in the sea? It's an incredible irony and it shows that it was an illusion for Jonah to think that he could escape from Yahweh, from the one who had made all things.

And the storm and the sailors were showing Jonah that that was an illusion and that illusion was starting to fade. And friends, here is a hard but beautiful truth from the book of Jonah that sometimes the most loving and gracious thing that God can do when we are running from him is to send a storm into our lives, to send difficult circumstances that make us aware that we are fragile, that we're dependent upon him, where the illusion that we are in control is wiped away.

[27 : 35] And perhaps even when our rebellion and our disobedience is unmasked. A few years ago, I was living in Charlottesville, I was working at the University of Virginia and one afternoon I was driving home from campus and I was stopped at a light, I was stopped at an intersection and the car in front of me was about to make a left-hand turn and the light turned green and over to my left there was a man with his son who was about six or seven years old and his son was on a bike and when the crosswalk sign changed, the son started to pedal his bike across the intersection.

Only the car in front of me did not see that this was happening and the car started to turn left and the boy started to pedal his bike across the intersection and the father saw what was happening and he saw the ongoing terror that was about to happen and with his best dad reflexes, he ran after him, he jumped out in the middle of the intersection between his son and between the car and he grabs his son and he grabs his bike and he violently, quickly pulls him back to the sidewalk out of safety.

The father in that moment caused a mini storm in that kid's life. He was thrown off balance, he was jostled around, he was prevented from going in the direction that he wanted to go.

You can imagine that even for the first few seconds he was angry that his dad was pulling him back, that he was preventing him from going where he wanted to go. He didn't understand what was happening, he couldn't see, he had blind spots.

But the father saw that the mini storm that he created in his son's life was ultimately for his good. It was ultimately out of love and it saved him from experiencing a much bigger storm.

- [29 : 41] And sometimes, like with Jonah, that is what God does in our lives. Now let's be crystal clear on this, not every situation of difficulty in our lives is related to us running from God. But sometimes it is. Sometimes it is. The Bible is clear, difficult circumstances happen all the time to people who haven't done anything to deserve it. It's not because of their sin. But the difficult circumstances have happened just because we live in a fallen world. And that's what happens to people who live in a fallen world. We know from Scripture that people who love and trust and worship and obey God can suffer greatly. And it has absolutely nothing to do with their sin. It has absolutely nothing to do with their disobedience. But sometimes, storms in our lives do happen because we are running from God. And rather than allowing us to experience the ultimate storm of death and separation from Him, God sends a mini-storm in our life. He sends a kindness, a mercy, in order to wake us up and to help us see our need for Him.
- [31 : 00] And the reason why we know that is because that is exactly what happened to Jonah. Verse 11, Then they said to Him, What shall we do to you that the sea may quiet down for us? For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. Nothing that they were doing was working. And it's at this moment that Jonah decides to stop running. He realizes he is the reason for the storm. He realizes he cannot outrun God. And he realizes that his decisions have had consequences, that they've put the lives of others in dangers. And he says to the sailors, Pick me up and throw me into the sea. I'm the one to blame. I'm the one who deserves God's judgment. I'll take on the wrath of the storm so you don't have to. I'll die so that you can live. I'm the one to blame. Jonah understands that his running from God wasn't just a momentary lapse in judgment but that it was rebellion against the king of heaven and earth and that what he deserved was death.
- [32 : 10] And so the sailors pick him up and they throw him overboard into the sea. And the sea grows calm. And Jonah goes down to the bottom of the sea. Only Jonah doesn't die. He's rescued. The Lord provides a great fish to swallow Jonah. Was it a whale? Was it some other great fish? Was it some other marine creature? We don't know. But what we do know is that the great fish, the large fish was a refuge amidst a raging storm. It was in the very center of the storm that God revealed his grace, that he revealed his mercy. The same God who caused the wind and the waves to stir up also called the wind and the waves to calm down. The same God who brought the storm also brought the fish. The same God who brought judgment also brought salvation.
- [33 : 19] And this is a shadow of what would happen centuries later through another prophet from Israel. In Matthew chapter 12, Jesus is talking to people who wanted him to perform a miraculous sign. And in the gospel reading we read in Matthew 12, Jesus says, no sign will be given to this generation except the sign of Jonah. 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. What is the story of Jonah about? Well, as we looked at earlier, Jonah is about a number of things. It's about lots of great themes.

But it's mainly about Jesus. It's mainly about Jesus. Jesus Christ is the true and better Jonah. Though we have all run from God, though we have all directly disobeyed his word, though we have all rebelled against his calling on our lives, though we all have blind spots to God's grace, though we all deserve the storm of God's judgment for sin on the cross, Jesus Christ hurled himself into the depths of that storm for you so that you can experience only the peaceful calm of God's love and his grace.

of God's grace. The storm that Jonah's face was because of his sin, but the storm that Jesus Christ faced on the cross was because of our sin.

[34 : 51] Just as Jonah was buried beneath the heart of the sea for three days and three nights, so Jesus Christ was buried beneath the infinite weight of death and hell and evil itself.

And just as Jonah was resurrected symbolically after three days by being put back onto the dry land, so Jesus Christ was resurrected literally in power and victory over death.

And the difference that makes is that all who take refuge in him, all who take refuge in Jesus Christ in the same way that Jonah took refuge in the belly of the fish, all who take refuge in him, can face any storm.

When you see that Jesus Christ faced the ultimate storm of God's wrath and judgment for you, when you see that, you can know that not only is every storm in your life not that ultimate storm, it's not that storm, Jesus Christ already faced it for you, but you can also know that every difficult circumstance within your life is within his sovereign control.

It's within his sovereign care and concern for you and can even be a means of experiencing greater depths of God's love, of his grace, of his presence.

[36 : 19] And it can even be a means of how God wants to work through you in your life in the world. And so friends, we, the human condition is that we can run from God and we can run from him in a thousand different ways.

Some of those ways look quite moral and look quite religious. But the beauty of the gospel, according to Jonah, is that though we run from God, God never stops running after us.

in pursuing the areas of our lives, pursuing the areas of our hearts that are blind to his grace. And the rest of that story, the rest of Jonah chapters two through four is about that reality, the reality of God's grace sinking deep down into Jonah's heart and extending out into Jonah's life, into the world.

Jonah's experience of God's grace in the middle of the storm takes him on both an inward journey and an outward journey. An inward journey and an outward journey.

Chapter two, which we'll look at next week, is about the inward journey. Chapter two is a prayer that Jonah prays from the belly of the fish and we see how Jonah's experience of grace changes him from the inside out.

[37 : 45] It shows him where his blind spots are. It humbles him. It brings about repentance and spiritual renewal. It leads him to greater love for God and greater worship of God.

And then chapters three and four are about how that inward transformation works its way out in Jonah's life. It's about the outward journey that Jonah goes on. We learn how Jonah's experience of grace sends Jonah back out on mission to obey God's calling on his life and to learn more about God's heart for the world, to learn about how God's mercy and his compassion extend even to those people.

And so Jonah's experience of grace in the middle of the storm takes him on this deep inward journey and it takes him on this outward journey to the world. And if we let him, he promises to do the same for us.

But sometimes it takes a storm. But we don't have to fear the storm. And we don't have to fear the storm because the same God who brings the wind and the waves also brings the fish.

The same God who brings the storm also brings the cross. A place of refuge infinitely better than the refuge that Jonah found.

[39 : 11] Let's pray. Our God and Father, we thank you for ways that you run after us even when we run from you.

Lord, help us to see our own blind spots. Help us to experience your grace at a deep level in ways that change us deep down.

Lord, help us to know that you're with us in the midst of the storm because of what Jesus Christ did for us who faced the storm for us.

And it's in his name we pray. Amen.