

Jonah's Mission (1): Jonah Runs Away

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[0 : 00] Jonah chapter 1. For the next six or seven weeks, I want to talk to you about the mission of the church. I want to get away from that comfortable and urbane image of an evangelistic model that doesn't really cost us anything or demand a radical change of priorities on our part.

I want to talk rather about a model of mission different from anything we will have been taught before. You see, we've always been taught that the biggest problem with mission is the world outside the church.

It's hardness. It's blindness. It's rebellion. But the model of mission that I want to talk about confronts us with the reality that the biggest problem of mission is the world inside the church. Our hardness, our blindness, and our rebellion as supposedly grace-filled Christians. Now, you might suppose that I would take as my texts for the next few Sunday evenings the evangelistic imperatives of the Gospels or perhaps the mission-focused studies of the Apostle Paul. But I'm not going to because through my study of God's Word, I can't see many better places in Scripture that lay down for us a model of costly and effective mission than the Old Testament book of Jonah.

[1 : 33] This whole book is about the mission of the people of God and has been given to us by the Holy Spirit to instruct our evangelism.

Now, thankfully, large parts of the church today get it, especially in the developing world, in Asia, Africa, South America. They get it. To be effective. Mission needs to cost us something.

Perhaps the reason that our mission in Scotland is so ineffective today is that really and truly we haven't got to grips with Jonah and the lessons of his life.

Now, we've all known the story of Jonah since we were small. Perhaps some of us had children's books with a picture of Jonah and the whale. But if our understanding of Jonah, rather, up to this point has been superficial, if it has not been focused upon the radical and costly nature of mission described in this book.

Because, you see, Jonah is all about mission. The theology, psychology, and philosophy of mission. The message to be preached.

[2 : 52] The method to be employed. And, most of all, who God is calling to be messengers of his word. And who God calls us to reach with that word.

Well, tonight, from these verses, Jonah 1, 1 through 3, I want to discuss two things with you. First of all, this passage teaches us about the God of mission. And secondly, this passage teaches us about the us, the we who do mission.

And as we go through this passage this evening, we're going to realize that though we are no longer in 9th century BC Israel, but in 21st century Glasgow, God is still calling us to proclaim the gospel of his son in a costly and radical fashion.

First of all, then, these verses tell us about the God of mission. They tell us about the God of mission. Now, if the mission of God has, until our day, been misrepresented as one of conquest and violence, the Old Testament mission of God, rather, as one of conquest and violence, then the character and the actions of God have been even more misrepresented.

Because the God of the Old Testament is often described, is he not, as vengeful, as angry. He carries the sword of war in his hand, not the branch of peace.

[4 : 22] Is this not the standard talk of the new atheism of Richard Dawkins? The Old Testament God is angry and vengeful. The New Testament God is loving and compassionate.

But you see, a wrong view of God will inevitably spawn a wrong view of mission. In Jonah 1, 1 and 2, we learn the following three things about God.

The God of the Old Testament. This so-called angry and vengeful God. First of all, he speaks. Then he sees.

Then he cares. He speaks, first of all. He speaks. From the very first, God shows himself altogether different from all the other gods human beings worship.

In that we read, The word of Yahweh came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying. Think about these words for a second.

[5 : 24] The Lord speaks. He is different from all the other gods human beings worship. In that, while they are made, And therefore lack the ability to talk or communicate, Our God speaks.

In Psalm 115, The psalmist is sarcastically taunting the nations on account of the gods they worship. And he says of them, Their idols are silver and gold.

The work of human hands. Think of an idol right here. It's a work of silver or gold, The work of men's hands. It's got a mouth, But doesn't speak.

They do not make a sound in their throat. Bowing down before an idol of silver or gold, Your own hands have made. Laying before it your petitions.

What do you expect to hear in return? You made the idol with your own hands. What advice do you expect it to give you? It cannot answer you.

[6 : 32] It's just a piece of painted metal. Or stained wood. That's all it is. By contrast, Our God speaks.

Sudhaj, Our missionary in Nepal, Recently told me that In the Hindu religion, There are an estimated 300 million gods. And every one of them is silent.

We serve only one God. And he speaks. He spoke directly to the prophet Jonah All those years ago. He speaks directly to us, Even more directly, Through the word of his son, Jesus Christ today.

He speaks no less directly to us Than he did to Jonah. Every time the Holy Spirit speaks to the Bible, You're hearing God's voice in your ears. Your mind, Your conscience, Your heart.

It is speech. No less powerful. God speaks. That's part and parcel of the message we proclaim. And the reason we proclaim it.

[7 : 40] God speaks in the story of Christ's incarnation. His birth, His life, His death, His resurrection. God has spoken words of judgment and warning. God has spoken words of love and invitation To faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

The Thessalonian Christians were commended Because they turned from idols. These idols of wood and stone and metal. To serve the living and true God.

These idols were dumb. But the God to whom they turned was alive. And He spoke to them the words of truth. Tell me something.

Has the bottom of an empty pint glass Ever spoken back to you? Has your bank statement Which you get now electronically Rather than by paper Has it ever spoken to you?

Has your career Ever spoken to you? We can say the same for all the other idols That we kind of like to worship. Security, Status, Happiness, Relationship, Prosperity, Pleasure, Etc.

[8 : 57] We pour our lives into them. But they say nothing in return. God commanded Jonah to go to Nunavut, The capital city of the Assyrian Empire.

The empire with its own great pantheon of gods. Adults, Who the worshipped by millions, Heard no one Because they had no ears to hear And said nothing Because they're dumb and dead.

Just because we can't see our idols in the west Doesn't mean to say that we don't have them. And in the same way Jonah Was called to confront the idolatry of his day, We're called to confront it in ours With a message of the God who is alive And who speech invites and commands us To come to know Jesus Christ as Lord.

This is the voice of evangelism. God speaking to us And through us. Second truth about God, This passage tells us, He sees.

He sees. There's another way in which God shows himself From being different from all the other gods of Jonah's day. At that time, And still today, you know, In many cultures, Gods only had a local focus.

[10 : 17] So a local tribe Would worship a God Whose influence stretched no further Than the valley in which that local tribe lived. If you want proof of this, Look at the book Martin Horst, Wonderful book, Smoking the Mango Trees, About tribal religion in the Philippines.

They worship a God Whose influence stretches no further Than the valley in which the tribe is located. Even the mighty empires of Jonah's day Did not believe That their gods had any power

Outside the borders of their empire.

But what you have in the God we worship is different. He is the God who's focused on local issues. Yes, even issues focused with individuals. But as Stephen reminded us in his prayer, He's the God who's also focused on the whole universe.

There is nothing And nowhere And no one He can't see And doesn't know. As we'll see, Jonah tried to run away from God, Thinking that somehow If he made it far enough away From the land of Israel, God would not be able to see him anymore.

But no matter where he goes, God sees Jonah. But more pointedly, God can see what's happening in Nineveh, The capital of the Assyrian Empire.

[11:36] It's hundreds of miles away from the temple in Jerusalem. It's located on the modern site of Mosul In northern Iraq. But God sees its idolatry and immorality, Its hopelessness, And its guilt.

He sees Nineveh Not for what it pretends to be, But for what it really is. Think about it.

God sees all the businesses and homes in Nineveh, And he sees all the princes, And he sees all the beggars in Nineveh. Nothing is hidden from the view of God.

You'll probably have heard that According to the Open Doors organization, Afghanistan, is now the most dangerous place in the world, To be a Christian. Western intelligence agencies, For all our technological advance, Cannot see into every house, Every tunnel, Every cave, Every district, Where our brothers and sisters in Christ, Are being tortured, And executed by the Taliban. And they are. But God sees, What our satellites can't. God hears, What our listening devices, Cannot penetrate.

[12:59] Now you know and I know, It's a natural human thing to do, To try and hide our sinful behavior. We close the curtains, We dim the lights, We hide.

But do you honestly think, That any of us can hide from God? If Jonah ever knew that, He'd forgotten it.

And that's another reason, We want to take the gospel to our world. God takes note of everything, That's being done either secretly, Or openly, In the darkness, And in the light.

Nothing escapes his notice, Not even, The whimpering cries, Of persecuted Christians, In Kandahar, In Afghanistan. God sees, Their love for him.

And God sees, The hatred, Of their persecutors, For him. God speaks, God sees, God cares, God cares, There's one other way, From these verses, In which God shows himself, Different from all the other gods, Of Jonah's day, Not only does he speak, And see, He cares, He cares, Not just about, His own tribe, In that valley, He cares about, The whole world, And in this case, He cares even about, His enemies, Nineveh was the capital city, Of an empire, Which would go on, To terrorize, God's people, The Assyrians, Were enemies, But God cared for them, It's ultimately, Why he called Jonah to go, To bring, His enemies, To repentance, Now perhaps, It doesn't seem like that, From verse 2, Their evil, Has come up, Against me,

[14:50] But when you take, The whole of the book of Jonah, Which is what we should do, There's no question, But that what motivated, God, To send Jonah, To Nineveh, Was his care for them, Yes, Even for, His enemies, When questioned, In chapter 4, As to why he sent, Jonah to Nineveh, God replies, Should I not, Pity Nineveh, That great city, In which there are, Over 120,000 persons, Who don't know, Their right hand, From their left, And also much cattle, It was pity, Mercy, Care, Which moved, God to send Jonah, Now Jesus, Jesus expands on that, In John 3, 16, The most famous verse, In the Bible, God so loved the world, That He gave us, One and only Son, So that whoever, Should believe in Him, Should not perish, But have everlasting life, The world, Stands against God,

And yet God still loves, The world, And sends His Son, More pointedly, In the Sermon on the Mount, In Matthew 5, As we saw this morning, Jesus says, You've heard it was said, You shall love your neighbor, And hate your enemy, But I say to you, Love your enemies, And pray for those, Who persecute you, So you may be, Sons of your father, Who's in heaven, You're never more like God, You know, Than when you're loving your enemies, Never more like God, So in the context of Jonah, The motivation for mission, Is God's love for His enemies, For those who don't know Him, Is that not our mission, Our motive for mission as well, Thousands of people in Glasgow tonight, Who don't know their right hand, From their left spiritually, They might, Be able to negotiate, Facebook, And technology, Things that would lead Jonah,

Absolutely cold, But they don't know this, They're deeply loved by God, But accountable to Him, They don't know that Jesus died on a cross, To give eternal life to any, Who have faith in Him, This

is the mission of Old and New Testaments, To make disciples of all nations, Because first and foremost, Christ Jesus, Has authority over all the nations, He speaks to every nation, He sees every nation, And He cares for every nation, This is the God of mission, A God to be loved and worshipped, A Christ to be followed and served, So these verses in the first instance, Tell us about, The God of mission, But in the second instance, These verses tell us, About the us, Or the we, Who do mission, The us or the we, Who do mission, Because this book as I see it, Is the story of how, The biggest problem with mission today, Is not the message of the gospel, That we preach, Nor is it even, The hardness of those, To whom we preach, That message, It's our own hardness, Our own blindness, Our own rebellion, The tragedy of mission, Is the church, Which though it professes, To believe the gospel, Doesn't want to, And doesn't see the need to, Go out of its way, To proclaim it, To the nations, And so, The book of Jonah, Confronts us, Not merely with the God of mission, But this great challenge, To us as the church, You won't have heard this before, But this is the truth, In a, In a biblical, Theological context, The prophet Jonah, Is to be understood, As a representative, Of the nation, Of Israel, An Israel, Which having been blessed, Beyond measure, By the grace of God, With its own land, And its own people, Was commanded by God, To be a light to the nations, And to spread the message, Of God's love and law, To all the peoples of the earth, But instead of doing, What God commanded Israel to do, It turned in upon itself, It became isolationist, It became xenophobic, Israel should have loved the nations, But Israel hated the nations, And so Jonah is to be understood by us, Not in some pious way, But as, As a representative, Of the nation of Israel, And by extension, A challenge to the Christian church, Not to become isolationist, And turn it upon ourselves, To use New Testament language, God has called us, To be a kingdom of priests, Mediating the grace of the gospel, To a needy and darkened world, Among all the man-made theological reasons,

[19 : 58] That we construct, To keep us from engaging in mission, And there are many, These verses in Jonah, Teach us two things about our blindness, Our hardness and rebellion, Verse three, Teaches us about evangelism, That we obey only when we agree, We obey only when we agree, And second, We try to run away from God, We obey first of all, Only when we agree, We obey only when we agree, I've often found this to be true, In my wider Christian life, Not just in my approach, To mission and evangelism, If the gospel confronts an area of my life, I'm comfortable with, And rather enjoy, And tells me that I need to change, I am sure like many of you, Kick against it, We obey God, When it's easy to obey him, When we agree with the change, God is calling us to make in our lives,

But when it's hard, When it's costly to obey God, We don't really like, What we've been called to change about ourselves, That's another matter, Now we first meet Jonah the prophet, In 2nd Kings 14, He was a prophet, From the northern kingdom of Israel, The ten tribes, That made up Israel, God had given him a message, To proclaim to the people of Israel, That he would save them from their enemies, And restore their freedoms, Now Jonah had no problems, Preaching such a message, After all, What preacher doesn't want to preach such a message, To his own people, A message of comfort, And victory, But now, God is calling Jonah to go, And proclaim a message, Of repentance, To his enemies, Remember, Jonah is the representative of Israel, And Israel which, Having been graced, By the blessing of God,

Did not really want to share it with anyone else, And the last thing Jonah wanted, Was for his enemies, To experience the same grace, Blessing and salvation, As he had, He didn't agree with God, So while he was happy, In 2nd Kings 14, To proclaim to the nation of Israel, The message of comfort and safety, He was very opposed, To the idea of going to Nineveh, And preach a message of repentance, He was so unhappy with it, He unilaterally decided, I'm not going to do it, I don't agree, Therefore I won't obey, I don't like God's plan, Therefore I don't want any part of it, Now this was a huge problem, For the early church, The church in Acts, As you read through the earlier chapters, In the Acts of the Apostles, You realize the tremendous struggle, That Paul and Peter, And the other apostles had, To convince the church, That Gentile mission, Was part of God's plan for them, Many of the early Christians,

Thought that the gospel of Jesus Christ, Was just for the Jew, And not for the Gentile at all, Well perhaps we're not quite as blatant, As these early Jews, Quite so mistaken, But perhaps in our heart of hearts, We would rather God, Drop his care and concern, For those outside the church, And just focus on us, We don't like being shaken, Out of our comfort zones, We don't like being challenged, To do the unexpected, We don't agree, And therefore like stubborn mules, Stand our

ground, We won't move, We'll try and excuse, Our lack of action, But at root, It's just an excuse, We'll excuse ourselves, By saying, Well we're not very good at mission, It's just an excuse, A hyper-Calvinist, Once criticized,

The methods, Employed here in Glasgow, By the American evangelist, D.L. Moody, Who is linked with Horatius Boner, From this morning, Ian, You can think of the link, Between D.L. Moody, And Horatius Boner, Hyper-Calvinist, Once criticized, The methods, Of the American evangelist, D.L. Moody, D.L. Moody replied, I prefer the way, I evangelize badly, To the way, That you don't evangelize at all, I prefer the way, That I evangelize badly, To the way, That you don't evangelize at all, We only obey, If we agree, But then second, We try to run away from God, And here we are, Right at the heart, Of the message this evening, So listen up, This is the heart, Of the message this evening, In the word of the day, It was thought that, Once you had passed, The pillars of Hercules, The modern day, Straits of Gibraltar, And into the Atlantic Ocean,

[25 : 06] You were outside the influence, Of even the most powerful of gods, That the site of Tarshish, To which Jonah runs, Is disputed, But most scholars today believe, That it corresponds, To the Spanish seaport, Of Cadiz, On Spain's Atlantic coast, Jonah thought, If I can make it beyond, The pillars of Hercules, The Straits of Gibraltar, God will no longer see me, He genuinely thought, He could run away from God, Now, As we'll see, Time, A storm, And a big fish, Proved him wrong, But this is why Jonah ran, Look at verse 3, Very carefully with me, Away from the presence of the Lord, 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 to it, To go with them to Tarshish, Away from the presence of the Lord, The emphasis here,

Is on Jonah running away, From the presence of the Lord, The emphasis is on the personal nature, Of Jonah running, One could almost imagine, God saying to Jonah, Why are you running away, And Jonah replying, I'm trying to get away from you, It's not just that Jonah's trying to run away, From what God has told him to do, But Jonah is running away, From the kind of God, Who would want to extend love and grace, To his enemies, I hope you get the point, It's not so much that Jonah's running away, From the mission of the Lord, He's running away from the Lord of mission, The kind of God, Who doesn't just love his own people, But who loves a rebellious world, And offers peace to them, Through repentance and faith, He is running away, From the grace of God, Which justifies sinful men and women,

On the basis of their faith, And not their works, And you know, When it comes to mission, I'm convinced that we, Run away from God, Not in the dramatic way, That Jonah did, By getting on a plane, And flying to Australia, I think we all, Are big enough and ugly enough, To know that there's nowhere, In this universe, We can run away, To get away from God, What I think, I suspect, What I think, Tell me if I'm wrong, Is that we try, To run away from a God of all grace, By turning to a God of law, To a God of legalism, To a God of rights and wrongs, To a God of blacks and whites, We run away from the security, Of knowing God as our father, To the insecurity, Of God as our judge, It's not that we physically run away,

None of us physically run away from God, We don't, It's a spiritual movement, It's that resentment, Against a God, Who offers peace and forgiveness, To our enemies, Make no mistake, The real reason, That we shun mission, Is not because of the mission itself, But we haven't, Grasped the grace of God, In mission, Well either, We haven't grasped it, Or we have, And we just plain don't like it, So we run away from his presence, The God who speaks, And the God who sees, And the God who cares, Our lack of missions, No the world's fault, It's our fault, None of us did not reject, God's call to repent, If it had been up to Jonah, None of us would never, Have heard God's call, To repent, In fact, As we close, Perhaps Jonah chapter 1, Verses 1 through 3, Teaches us more than anything else, That before we go proclaiming, The grace of the gospel, To the world around us, We need to believe it ourselves, Really believe, The grace of the gospel, Ourselves, Turn away from the God of legalism, And embrace the God of grace, Turn away from the insecurity, Of living with God as judge, To the security of living with God as father, That before we call this world to repentance, Before we call Glasgow to repentance, We ourselves repent, For in our ears tonight, Here, In this place, And for all those watching by Zoom, And for all those who would be with us tonight, But they're on holiday, Because it's half term, The word of the Lord says to us,

[30 : 11] Without any ambiguity, Whatsoever, Arise, All of you, Go to Glasgow, That great city, Call out against it, For its evil has come up, Before me, Let us pray, Lord, We recognize ourselves all too easily in this story, Not in terms of thinking that somehow we can run away from you, That

somehow if we get ourselves beyond the pillars of Hercules, At the streets of Gibraltar, That somehow we'll manage to escape from your presence, We all know that there's nowhere we can go to escape from your presence, Not even a darkened room with the door locked in the window, The curtains closed, Sometimes, Lord, We have to admit, That we find it difficult to embrace your grace, That we find it truly difficult to understand how it is,

That though we may have done all the works, Demanded of a Christian over decades, And though we may have said all the right things, Yet it's not by our works and our words that we're saved, And we receive Christian salvation, It is through faith, And so someone hearing the word for the first ever time, Someone who's perhaps very different from us, Someone who's perhaps lived a dissolute and immoral life, Or someone from another part of the world, Who's embraced another religion his whole life through, The first time they hear that word, They come to faith in Jesus Christ, And are justified in your sight, We resent that, Or we resent that, Father, We repent of our legalism, And we repent of our wrong views of you, Help us to embrace you as the God of all grace, Who loves the world so much that he gave his one and only son, So that whoever should believe in him should not perish, But have everlasting life, Forgive us for becoming ingrown, An isolationist, Help us, O Lord, To be, Well, In the best sense of the word, Inclusive, Although we wouldn't want to use that sense of the word like it's used today in many places, We want to introduce people to Jesus Christ, Now we ask all these things in his name, Amen.
Amen.