

# Jonah 1:1-3 “A Call to Love”

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[ 0 : 00 ] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Well, Will, you managed to both embarrass me and get me teary before I even came up here. We all have a way of dealing with our insecurities.

So if you think I'm cool or fashionable, just remember that I had adult braces and I wore a headgear when I was in college and slept with it.

And Bill Herrett and others used to make fun of me about it in high life when I would volunteer. And there's plenty more to go around. So we all have a way of compensating. As Will mentioned, my name is Chase and my wife Holly and I have been married for 12 years.

We have three wonderful little boys, Gabe, Bo, and Griffey. They are seven, five, and two respectively. And I'm currently the RUF campus minister at Vanderbilt and previously served at UC Berkeley as RUF campus minister for five years.

[ 1 : 04 ] And I'm going to repeat a lot of what Will has already said, but I just have to do this. Before all of that, I was a spiritual child of Southwood. I became a Christian in college. I went to UAH. After my freshman year, I became a Christian.

My wife became a Christian through the ministry of high life as a middle schooler, one of the OG. People liked me a little bit here at Southwood, but then when they heard that I was dating Holly, they looked at me like, if you mess this up, dude.

Because Holly, like, she was beloved by this place. And this place has left an indelible mark on our lives. And we're so, so grateful. And this, you know, typically, especially in Presbyterian circles, you don't want to specify people by names.

But I'm going to a little bit right now. There are so many people that I could say that have blessed us. But just a few of those are folks like Bill Nash, who used to meet with me early on in coffee shops here in town.

Will Spink, I took his membership class here. Todd and Amy Gandy. Mickey Plott. Mark Kent. The Mahesh's. Jim and Caroline Hess. Ken Leggett.

[ 2 : 04 ] Bill Harrett. Mike Honeycutt. And I'd be amiss if I didn't mention Tommy and Robin McMurtry, who are like my parents functionally. I love them dearly. There's so many names that I'm not mentioning, but I'm so thankful for.

You've blessed us. And as the name of this conference would suggest, you've expressed grace upon grace to our family. And so we're very thankful for that.

This weekend, this is your annual Express Grace Conference, and we're focusing on equipping the next generation.

And at the expense of being too reductionistic, I want to offer one strategy for equipping the next generation.

Really just one word. We could talk about generational distinctives, what's unique about current Gen Z demographics.

[ 3 : 04 ] We could talk about apologetics and about combating secular narratives that vie for our heart's affection and allegiance. All of that is fair. All of that's worthy. We need to talk about that stuff and figure it out.

But I want to offer one word to you this morning. The best way to equip the next generation is through love.

The best way to equip the next generation is through love. But if you're here and you're alive this morning, you know that love is not always what we think it is.

Am I right? Can I get amen? Love is not always what we think it is. Not to brag on myself, but I use myself as an example for this. This past Wednesday, Wednesday night, we have large group where I preach at Vanderbilt each week.

And so Wednesday is a really busy day for me. I'm doing a lot of sermon prep. So I'm prepping my sermon all day. And then mid-afternoon, I get a call from my wife. She's just picked up our boys from school. And she's driving down Green Hills, this bougie area of Nashville.

[ 4 : 09 ] And she all of a sudden starts to feel sick. And literally, I'm about to get gross here for a minute. So just bear with me. She has to open the door. And she throws up right in the middle of the road. And thankfully, we had a friend in the car with her.

She's walking around the van, throwing up around the van. The friend goes to the other side. They swap. Friend gets her home. Holly calls me, tells me what's up.

Plans change. I prep as much as I can. But then I get home, help get the boys settled. Holly settled. Put the boys down for bed. Get back to campus. Finish up the sermon.

Go preach it. 10 p.m. rolls around. Holly texts me. Gabe is down. Bo is down. I was like, what do you mean by down? And she's like, they're throwing up too.

So I go back. It's 10 p.m. I go back to my house. They're throwing up. So from 10 p.m. until 3 a.m., I'm like nursing them. Holly's sick. Gabe and Bo are sick. And I'm just all-star dad.

[ 5 : 06 ] Exhausted. Taking care of them. 3 a.m. rolls around. They settle down. And I'm like, okay, now I can get some rest. Then what do you know? I start throwing up. 3 a.m. to 7 a.m., Chase is throwing up.

And on and on it goes. And it almost meant that I wasn't going to be here this weekend. And so when I ask you this, do you know what that is? Do you know what Wednesday was for me? Love. And it was terrible. I hate love, you know. I hate it. Love is not always what we think it is. Well, we're going to be in the book of Jonah this morning. And broadly speaking, Jonah is a book about calling. It's a book about calling. But more specifically, Jonah is about the call to love. And even more importantly, Jonah is about the God who is love. Jonah is about the God who is love. So with that, let us direct our attention to the book of Jonah.

[ 6 : 12 ] I'm going to read from chapter 1, verses 1 through 3. I'm going to read that. And then I'll pray for us as we get started. This is Jonah chapter 1, verses 1 through 3.

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.

But Jonah, 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. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Let me pray for us really quick before we get started. Jesus, this is church.

[ 7 : 15 ] And there's a lot of things that we do at church. But you know more than anybody else, the thing that we do best at church is pretend. We're really good at pretending.

And we walk through these doors coming from all different walks of life, different socioeconomic standings, different levels of education, different degrees of success, different careers, different ethnicities even.

And especially we come in here limping, probably most of us struggling to believe in you. Limping by what we even did last night.

And Lord, you know that. So this morning, no matter where we're at, would you please meet us?

Would you draw near and would you be the great friend and the good shepherd that you are to us?

And we trust that you will do that as you always have. We pray this in your name. Amen. So one of the beautiful things about God's mission in the world is that he actually invites us, if you're a Christian, he invites you into that mission.

[ 8 : 27 ] He calls you into it. And so the first question that I have for us this morning is, where is God calling you? Where is God calling you?

Now this word calling, it can be kind of Christianese sometimes. We throw this word around maybe a bit too much. So it's a word that we often struggle with. And we can get caught up on like our vocational calling.

Like what job does God want me to do? Or maybe it's geographical calling. Where am I supposed to live? Where do I want to live? And I particularly wrestled with this when I was in college.

And often that really came out in some outlandish ways. And I had some outlandish conclusions as to what God was actually calling me to. So much so that one night at midnight when I was in college, me and my roommates and our zeal as new Christians, we felt that God was actually calling us in that moment to walk from our house by UAH all across Huntsville, down South Parkway, behind Little Rosies, all the way there.

And anybody that we encountered, we were just going to share the gospel with. And anytime there was a turn to take, there was a decision to make that would still get us to the right destination, we would just flip a coin.

[ 9 : 45 ] And if it was heads, we would go one way and tails, we would go another way. And we would just trust that that was God's call, right? His will. And we did it. In the middle of the night, it was like 30-something degrees.

And again, another terrible idea. We had blisters all over our feet. That was us trying to figure out what was God calling us to. This is where I think that Jonah is actually really helpful for us because believe it or not, we share the same calling as Jonah.

It's not so much the same geographical location as Jonah, but it is the same heart location as Jonah. God calls Jonah and God calls you and God calls me to love.

God calls us to love. He calls us to love your people and he calls us to love our place and he even calls us to love our enemies. He calls us to love.

Now, we don't actually know a lot about Jonah other than this book, but Jonah only appears in two other places in Scripture. He's mentioned later in the New Testament in the Gospels in Matthew and Luke.

[ 11 : 03 ] And then he's mentioned in 2 Kings 14 where we find out that Jonah is actually a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II who ruled over the northern kingdom of Israel during the 8th century.

And in that passage, all we know is that the Lord showed compassion or showed love to Israel through this prophet Jonah. And he was showing love and compassion to them despite their rebellion.

That's really important. Because here's what's important for us to know. Jonah was familiar with the love of God extending to people that didn't deserve it.

Jonah was familiar with God extending love to people who didn't deserve it. And so even though Israel was technically God's covenant people, they had lived in rebellion for as long as Jonah had been alive.

And in fact, God had been sending prophets for over 150 years to no avail. And yet God is still consistently and relentlessly extending his love and his compassion to his people.

[ 12 : 11 ] That's the backdrop here of Jonah. Jonah knows that God is in the business of loving unruly people.

That God is in the business of loving real rebellious people. Disobedient people, chronic backsliders, the unimpressive, even his enemies.

I'm going to point out Bill Herrett again. I was in college. I was in a bad situation. I'll keep the details limited. Bill, I don't even know if you remember this. We were sitting on his front porch in this little shack, awesome shack that he lived in that has since been destroyed, which is a shame.

It was a beautiful, awesome little place. And I remember Bill telling me, he said, you know, sometimes a Christian comes to realize that Jesus died for real sins that are ongoing right now, not just the sins that you committed before conversion.

And that stuck with me. That was almost 20 years ago. Jonah knew that God was in the business of loving that way.

[ 13 : 20 ] But what Jonah didn't know is that God was going to call him to extend that same kind of love to the same kinds of people.

God was going to call him to this really weird foreign place called Nineveh. And here's what you need to know about Nineveh. If there ever was a hideous, ruthless enemy of God's people and God himself, enemies of people like Jonah, it was Nineveh.

One commentator puts it this way. He says, Nineveh was one of the cruelest and most violent empires. It's part of the Assyrian Empire. Violent empires of ancient times. After capturing enemies, they would typically cut off their legs and one arm, leaving the other arm in hand so that they could shake the victim's hand in mockery as he was dying.

They forced friends and family members to parade with the decapitated heads of their loved ones on elevated poles and on and on and on and on and on. It is very safe to say that Nineveh was a terrorist state.

Like they were wretched. But what I want us to realize is that it is that city. It is that city that God turns his heart to.

[14:51] All of the wretchedness. All of the attempted genocide. All of the cruelty. God sees that city. And I point that out because if we're going to love, and especially if we're going to love our enemies, we have to see Nineveh how God sees Nineveh.

If you're going to love your enemies, and that doesn't just include other people, right? That actually includes ourselves because sometimes we're our greatest enemies.

If you're going to love it all, you have to see how God sees. And you know what the first thing that God sees in his enemies? You know what that is?

It's dignity. The first thing that God sees in his enemies is dignity. That's the first thing that he sees in Nineveh.

One of the most important verses in this entire book is found in verse 2. God calls Jonah and he says, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city.

[15:57] That great city. Now, as you read the book of Jonah, you realize that this isn't simply referring to demographics or to military might.

He's not just saying that Nineveh is a big old city full of liberals that needs a saving. It's not some metroplex full of those people that need saving.

It's not a trope. By using great, God actually means that meaningful city. That important city. It doesn't simply just hold power.

It has significance and value and dignity. It is that great city where so many great things exist. From people to places to even animals and art and culture and commerce.

It is full of dignity. And in fact, in the original here, it's translated the great city of God. God or the great city to God. Which indicates that everything belongs to God, whether we want it or not.

[17:04] God owns it. It's his. Because before Genesis 3 ever happens, we have Genesis 1 and 2. And God created it and he said it was good.

And he looks at Nineveh and he looks at you. He looks at Huntsville. He looks at me and he says, you are good. You are mine. And I'm going to make you great. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Why this is so important and why I think we need to hear this is because rarely with ever, and sadly, especially in the church, do we describe our enemies, those we have conflict with, do we describe our enemies first and foremost by the dignity that they possess?

I think it's important that we define, if it's helpful, right? I think it's important that we define our enemies as really just anything that feels other. Anything that feels different from you.

So I hear this all the time, especially now that I'm in college ministry. There's a lot of fear as it relates to the university and then older generations. There's always kind of this us versus them.

I hear it at Vandy and I certainly heard it when I was at Berkeley. You know, there's this idea, you know, if you're from Berkeley, you go to school there, you're from there. You think that the problem with the world is people from Alabama.

[18:32] And if you're from Alabama, or in some cases anywhere else in the world, if you're from Alabama, you think, you know what, the problem with the world is people from Berkeley.

Or the problem with the world is, are these university professors? Or these protesting and woke students that are on the university campus? But I want you to know, God does not see Berkeley that way.

God does not see Vanderbilt that way, the way that you and I do. God does not see Huntsville that way. God does not see Alabama that way. We are not the savior of the world, he is.

We do this with respectability. We do politics. Right? You know, there's this whole, especially when you're a pastor, man, you feel this shame all the time. Like, their kids don't really have good manners. Like, they don't really behave that well in church.

And like, y'all, raising kids is hard. It's hard for me. It's hard. And if Jesus' death doesn't cover bad manners, then we are all doomed. We are wasting our time right now.

[19:35] Right? We do it with our swimming pools to get a little bit more serious here. We do it with our swimming pools. During desegregation, right, public pools in many places were often filled in with concrete.

And private pools and country clubs arose in their place with exclusive membership, of course. us versus them. If you're not like me, you might as well be my enemy.

And as we know, among many other things, that's where racism starts. That's where hatred starts. But if you see others how God sees them, if you see even your enemies how God sees them, then the first thing that you'll notice is their dignity.

You'll see their dignity. That's the first thing that God sees, right? He sees our dignity. But God also, God's full of truth.

So he doesn't just see our dignity. He sees the whole picture. He also sees our danger. He sees our danger. The second thing that God sees in Nineveh is their danger. Because after all, after he calls Nineveh that great city, what does he go on to say?

[ 20 : 58 ] He tells Jonah, call out against it. Protest that city. Because their evil has come up before me. So there's both of them, right? There's dignity and there's danger.

And this means that no matter where God calls you, it will always be full of dignity and danger. No matter where God calls you, it will always be full of dignity and danger.

Every place and every person is a part of God's good creation. And therefore, without exception, is full of dignity. The arts, medicine, architecture, computer science, law, engineering, cities, states, nations, classmates, neighbors, girlfriends, boyfriends, wives, husbands, ex-wives, ex-husbands, parents, cousins, strangers.

Everybody has dignity. Every place has dignity. But every place and every person is also cursed by the fall and infected with sin.

And so it's full of danger. The world is a dangerous place. You are a dangerous person. You cannot escape the possibility of royally screwing up in life.

[ 22 : 27 ] It is always a threat. It's always a possibility. Because until Jesus returns, sin's corrosive effects are at work.

It's always a possibility. So before we go any further, let's just answer our question. Where is God calling you?

Where is God calling you? And the answer is that God is calling you to the same place he called Jonah.

To love places and to love people that are full of both dignity and danger. To love places and to love people that are full of both dignity and danger.

And it is hard to maintain both, but you have to. Because if you don't, you'll either lapse into some sort of mythological nostalgia or a fatalistic apathy.

[ 23 : 27 ] And we feel the pressure to go with either extreme. With dignity, for example, we all feel, especially on the college campus, we all feel the enormous pressure of secularism and pluralism to affirm the dignity in everything.

We have to affirm everything around us. And we feel like that is love and compassion. We feel the pressure of that. And then yet for many of us, we feel the pressures of danger.

Especially those of us who grew up in the church. We feel the pressure to retreat and to distance ourselves from a world full of danger and evil and sin.

We're suspicious of culture. And so we just dismiss it as just another corrosive form of secularism. And it's meant that for some time now, Christians have lost any faithful presence that they might have had in the world.

Because the world was too dangerous and we had to retreat. We feel the pressure. But as one of my favorite theologians says, both of these are saying something true, but neither of them say the truth fully.

[ 24 : 41 ] Because the God of the Bible is neither the therapeutic God of modern liberalism, who lives simply to cheer us on, nor is he the resentful God of modern fundamentalism that exists only to chastise us.

He is the God who loves people and places full of dignity and full of danger.

And he is calling us to live that life of love as well. That is where he is calling you. That is where he is calling us.

We share that calling with Jonah, but that is not the only thing that we share with Jonah. We also share the same problem that Jonah has.

Because like Jonah, when God calls, we run. When God calls us, we tend to run the other direction.

[ 25 : 50 ] So the second question that I have for us this morning is, why are you running? Why are you running? If you look at how Jonah responds in verse 3, look at what he does.

Not only does he run, but the consequence of his running is he's actually away from the presence of the Lord. He loses the very face of God. A child finds their identity in the face of their mom and dad. We find our very purpose in the face of God, and yet Jonah runs away from it. And why do you think Jonah's running? Why do you think he's running away?

I actually think this is where Jonah gets a bad rap. Sometimes we can baptize our reading of Scripture, but if we just take a second and understand what's going on here, sometimes we can, you know, we might be on Jonah's side or someone else's side.

I think if you really understand what's going on here, every single one of us would have expected him to run. We might have even encouraged him to run because this did not make practical sense.

[ 27 : 05 ] This didn't make ethical sense. This didn't make theological sense. I want you to think about it, right? As I mentioned earlier, Nineveh was known for its gruesome treatment of Israelites.

Jonah was an Israelite. Why on earth would Jonah step foot there? It is a virtual death sentence. And then secondly, Jonah's an Israelite, right? Jonah knew what these people had been doing to his people for generations. And so why on earth would he want to go and extend mercy to a group of terrorists?

Jonah wants justice, not mercy. And we would all want the same thing if we were Jonah. Uh-uh. No way.

These people deserve justice, not mercy. I hesitate to use this analogy because there are some real differences and some very important ways.

[ 28 : 16 ] It's not my story and I am part of the guilty party, historically speaking. But I think it illustrates the severity of this situation pretty well.

I actually think this would be like Mamie Till being called back to Mississippi to offer immunity to white Southerners who murdered her son Emmett Till.

Like this kind of call is a real shock to Jonah. Jonah. And so it makes sense. Jonah runs.

Jonah runs. And Jonah goes all the way to Tarshish, the outermost western rim of the world known to the Israelites at the time.

He did the exact opposite of what God told him to do. And he had good reasons for it. Jonah ran. Called to the east, Jonah went west. Directed to travel by land, Jonah went by sea.

[ 29 : 25 ] Sent to the big city with all the big bad people, Jonah bought a one-way ticket to the end of the world. Jonah ran. So why did Jonah run? Why do we run?

Jonah ran because God's call for him to love and for us to love often goes against our very will to survive.

It is like a threat. And sometimes, you know, sometimes it threatens our comforts. And it may mean that you don't you don't get the best.

You don't get the best for your children. You don't get the best house or the best school for your kids or the best president that you think would be for this country.

It means sometimes it threatens our fond memories of a golden age that has now passed as we finally tell the truth about ourselves individually and collectively and realize that that so-called golden age was really just about me and what benefited me.

[ 30 : 36 ] And sometimes, like Jonah, it threatens our very lives. sometimes the call to love like it did with Jonah threatens our very lives.

And so, here's my question for you today. Why are you running? How does God's call on your life feel like a threat to your life?

And I use that word threat very intentionally because I want you to think with me for a moment. what if in order to love someone enough to change their life, what if the only way love could change the world or someone's life was that it actually meant that you had to lose your life?

What if it meant that true love, right, this term that we're always and endlessly trying to define actually means a true death love? What if that's what love means?

Well, it turns out that that's true. That's absolutely true. And if you keep reading Jonah, you'll see that Jonah was not up to the task.

[ 32 : 05 ] Jonah failed to love his enemies and he kept his life intact though alone and isolated under a bush.

But something that you should always know basically about every book of the Bible but certainly about the book of Jonah, the book of Jonah is not about Jonah.

The book of Jonah is about Jesus. The book of Jonah is not about Jonah. The book of Jonah is about Jesus. And where Jonah has failed to love his enemies and where you have failed to love your enemies and where I have failed to love my enemies, Jesus has not failed to love his enemies even when it was a threat to his own life.

Listen to this. Jesus did not run from death. Jesus ran to death in the greatest act of love the world has ever seen.

That is the depth of his love for this great city and this great people. That is the depth of his love for this church Southwood and for you and for me.

[ 33 : 35 ] He is the greater Jonah and we were his enemies but we're now his friends because Jesus accepted the call to love us.

And get this because it gets better. He sees you fully just like God sees us. Jesus sees us fully. He sees the dignity that we all possess as image bearers of God and he sees the danger that we all possess as products of sin's destruction.

And you know what? Once he sees us, once he sees you, he doesn't run from you. He doesn't run. He redeems. That's what Jesus does. He is the word of the Lord who has come to us.

By taking on flesh, he affirms our dignity, the beauty of our very bodies. And by taking on sin, he destroys our danger that threatened our very lives with him.

[ 34 : 43 ] That threatened to keep us from the love that we were made to bask in. Do you know that's what you were made for? You were made for someone to look at you and to say, you're okay and I love you and that is Jesus and you were meant to bask in that.

And in order for Jesus to do that, in order for Jesus to love, Jesus had to die. Love is not always what you think it is.

And love love is how we reach the next generation, even when there are enemies. And if you want to love like that, if you want to love even your enemies like that, then as Paul says in the book of Romans, you must first be loved by your enemy.

And God was our enemy, enemy. But he has made us friends through the death of Jesus. Amen? Let's pray. Jesus, even as we hear it and even as we read it, we struggle to believe it.

[ 36 : 11 ] So we ask, even now, would you help us to believe that your love is the love that conquers all things, even death, even the grave, so that we may not face the grave, that we would be resurrected to eternal life, that we would never be separated from your faith but would live eternally before your faith.

With one another, we pray that you would bless us and keep us in that love this day and forevermore. Amen. For more information, visit us online at [sapwa.org](http://sapwa.org).