

Jonah “Mercy for Runaways”

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Date: 26 October 2025

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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.

Kids, love for you to come up here on the stairs with me this morning. We're going to talk a little bit more about God's love.

I don't know if you all know which story we're talking about this morning. But this might be a hint. Jonah. Oh, more excitement than that.

Jonah. Jonah, that's right. Eleven years ago, I preached on the book of Jonah for several weeks. Do you all remember that? Yeah? You don't remember that?

All of them remember that. That's an orca. It may be. We're not really sure exactly what kind of fish it was, are we? This is Hanaj, okay?

[1 : 03] This is my friend Hanaj. That's Jonah spelled backwards, okay? You think about that. Yes. And he helped us learn back then that Jonah wasn't really about Jonah.

The story of Jonah wasn't even about the fish that swallowed Jonah. The story of Jonah is really about God, okay?

It's about God's love for us, what we were just singing about. Now, does getting swallowed by a fish sound like love to you? It doesn't really seem like that, does it?

But this is very important to Hanaj, okay? He was helping God out. He was actually helping God rescue Jonah, okay? He wasn't doing something mean to Jonah.

He was helping God rescue Jonah. Why did God have to rescue Jonah? Because he was swallowed. Okay, even before that, why did God need to send the whale?

[2 : 03] Did God tell Jonah to go somewhere? And which way did Jonah go? He ran the other way, didn't he? When God told him to go somewhere and he went, have you ever run the other way?

When like maybe your parents have told you to clean your room or eat broccoli or be nice to a kid who's mean to you?

Have you ever run the other way? We all have, haven't we? And when, when we run away from God, we really need to be rescued, don't we?

When we're running away from God. This reminded me, I was talking with Hanaj this week about another animal. Do you know this book? No. Has anybody ever seen this book?

It's called The Runaway Bunny. If you've never read it before, I'm going to tell you what happens and I'll show you some of the pictures. Some of you have read this one before, okay? And I'll show you the pictures of the big book.

[3 : 03] But this, there's this little bunny and he decides that he wants to run away from his mother. He tries becoming all sorts of different things to get away from her, like a rock.

He tries becoming a boat. He tries becoming a little boy. All things that a little bunny is not supposed to be, right? Who does that sound like?

Does that sound like Jonah to you? Well, here's the best part of this story. I'll show you the pictures. No matter what he does, his mother always comes to find him.

So when he becomes a rock on a mountain, she becomes a mountain climber and climbs up to find him on the mountainside. And then when he becomes a boat, his mother becomes the wind and blows him right back to her.

And then he becomes a little boy. And she becomes a mother and catches him in her arms and hugs him.

[4 : 10] That's how the story goes. No matter what he does, the mother bunny always finds him and always loves him. You know, that's what Jonah's story is about too.

We're going to talk about it this morning. And what you're going to see is no matter how Jonah runs away, and he does it some different ways, God never stops loving Jonah, does he? God even sends a whale to rescue Jonah because he loves him so much to keep him from drowning in the sea. Even when we disobey and run away from God, do you think he stops loving us?

He doesn't, does he? Never stops. And Hanaj reminds us that even if God has to send a whale, even if God has to send his own son, Jesus, to die, he will never stop loving us.

We remember that? Let's pray for just a minute, and then you can go back to your seats. Jesus, we're so thankful that no matter what we do, you come after us and you don't stop loving us.

[5 : 23] Would you teach us that this morning? Would these kids know more of your love today? Would you make us people who so are grateful for how you love us, that we love others that way?

Teach us now as we look at your word, in Jesus' name, amen. All right, you can go back to your seats, or some of you are going to kids' worship with Miss Afton right back there.

Hey, Aaliyah, will you hold on to Hanaj for me during the sermon? Make sure he doesn't get out of control, okay? I have that exact whale, but a smaller one. Oh, you got a smaller one? It's a good one.

Thank you. We are skipping forward about a hundred years this morning as we've been walking through the Old Testament and God's stories and what he's doing.

We're moving all the way from the prophet Elijah, who's calling God's people back from idols into relationship with the one true God, to the prophet Jonah, serving in the rebellious kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC.

[6 : 44] And he's calling God's people back to him again. Like all of the prophets, this is what they do. God sends them to say, come back, come back. You're running away.

You've forgotten who you are and who I am. But this time, God sends Jonah to another kingdom, to the Assyrian kingdom, to their capital, Nineveh.

He sends them to Nineveh to call them to repentance from their evil ways. And Jonah famously says, no, to God.

This is how it starts. 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 rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa, found a ship going to Tarshish, so he paid the fare and went on board to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

[7 : 52] You get the point, don't you? Away from the presence of the Lord. We'll see later, Jonah didn't want these enemies of Israel to repent, to experience the mercy and forgiveness of God.

Jonah wanted to get away from God's command, yes, but even more from God's presence altogether. He didn't want to be around him anymore, so he runs away.

But it's not just ancient prophets or modern kids who run away from God, is it? You know, you don't have to board a ship and sail the opposite direction God sends you in order to run away from him.

Many, of course, run away from God in just licentious living, living however they want, not how God wants. Living for self, not for others.

No care about anything else, just whatever feels good. But, you know, closer to a parallel with Jonah's running away, you can run away from God even by running into church.

[9 : 07] Where I'm going to look and feel religious, but I won't have to deal with God personally. I can just kind of be there and look the part.

Sometimes we fool even ourselves, don't we? Or we can run away from God in our relationships. I think if you're in a relationship like this, where you're refusing to forgive a family member, where you're refusing to reconcile with a friend who has hurt you, where you're refusing to love an enemy, yeah, that's so old-fashioned.

That's not how we do it anymore. We just argue online, and we just, if we don't agree with them, we don't like them. Love your enemy, that's so out of date. Well, we may go to church on Sunday and celebrate and sing about God's heart full of mercy.

I need that for me, right? He forgives my sins. But then we refuse to consider whether our hearts have the same shape as his Monday through Saturday, or whether there's perhaps unforgiveness still lurking there.

It's imprisoning us in anger. It shows up like that. It shows up as bitterness sometimes. Because that's what happens in our hearts, the book of Jonah is written to God's people.

[10:38] It's written to really do two things. First, to show us God's heart. What's he like? How does his heart beat? What does he love? And to help us run, as it were, a heart cath on ourselves.

Does my heart beat like God's? Have I been so overwhelmed by his mercy that I've personally begun to share it?

Or am I actually living distant from God, focused only on myself, freezing out others? Commentator Colin Smith writes, Jonah is about the disturbing possibility that having pledged our life to God, we could end up spending much of that life avoiding the God we set out to serve.

You may have already discovered this strange contradiction that lies at the heart of all Christian experience. While loving Christ, you find yourself turning from him.

While trusting Christ, you often battle fear and anxiety. While serving Christ, you sometimes struggle with disappointment about certain events in your life.

[11:53] You are not alone. So did Jonah. Okay, we're going to start with God's heart.

Jonah, prophet Jonah, show us God's heart. What do we learn about him? Just look through this story at all the people God's mercy chases after.

In the first chapter, God, of course, has to chase after his runaway prophet. But while so doing, we see his mercy to some sailors. These sailors were pagans with a variety of gods, we find out.

Even these sailors seem to reflect God's heart more than Jonah. They are more concerned about the welfare of this prophet they've never met than he is about theirs.

They try hard not to throw him overboard, don't they? They row hard, but to no avail. And so even when they do have to throw Jonah over, they cry out to Yahweh, to Jonah's God.

[13:00] Please don't hold it against us. Verse 14. They called out to Yahweh, O Yahweh, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood.

For you, O Yahweh, have done as it pleased you. So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

Then the men feared Yahweh exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows. How do they respond?

When the storms calmed down, they worship, sacrifices, vows to the one true God.

I mean, here these men were, just minding their own business, just sailing to Tarshish again, got to do some business, make a little money, living their lives with no consideration of the one true God.

[13:59] God. And all of a sudden, God's mercy boards their boat through this prophet. This is what happens, by the way, people of God, wherever He sends you.

Even when you're not in a good place with Him, He's using you. His mercy's flowing. His mercy just starts sloshing over the sides of their boat, so to speak, doesn't it? God really does love to rescue people, doesn't He?

In spite of us, sometimes. Remember, we keep seeing through this big story in the Old Testament how God is restoring people to relationship with Him because that's what He made them for, and His love is so big.

Even when you think He's just going after Nineveh, He's got sailors He's going to save along the way. The sailors' lives are changed forever. But God is specifically pursuing His runaway prophet, isn't He?

This is the fish part. This is the part you know. End of the chapter, verse 17. And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah.

[15:16] And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. I think most of us hear the story of Jonah and assume that getting eaten by a fish is punishment for his runaway disobedience.

That seems to make sense, right? And they are certainly connected. But the storm that God sends because He controls all of creation, and then the fish that He sovereignly directs to swallow Jonah aren't so much painful punishment to get back at Jonah, but painful providence to get Jonah back, to bring him home.

God's discipline in our lives, it's often painful. But those hardships are crafted by Him to track down our runaway hearts, to remind us of our absolute dependence upon Him.

You can't go anywhere, Jonah. What were you thinking? God's coming to get you back. Jonah actually sees this. That's one of the reasons we know it's what's happening. In fact, Jonah has the

clearest vision that he gets in the whole story.

When? When he's in the belly of a whale. Something about difficult circumstances, isn't there? It helps us see more clearly.

[16:37] Have you had that happen in your life? Oh, it's reminding me what really matters. Who's really in charge and in control?

Where's life really found? Oh, I'm starting to see it. I'd lost sight of it. And it's these hard things that come into my life that God uses to show me that.

How far will this crazy, merciful God go to make sure that just one of His chosen people sees and shares His heart? I mean, we've seen God do all sorts of things to rescue in all sorts of situations. Bringing Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea. That was amazing. Gentile Rahab in Jericho. Little David before the giant Goliath.

God keeps rescuing, bringing people into relationship with Him. But we've never seen someone rescued with a whale until now. God can use anything.

[17:37] And He does. Doesn't He? I've talked to some of you lately. I know He uses shutdowns to slow us down.

To call our hearts back to Himself. He uses illness to remind us of dependence on Him.

Of how every breath we have comes from Him. To call our hearts back. to remind us that we need His people around us. He uses even death.

The great enemy that He hates. But He uses it to give us a clear vision of eternity. Doesn't He?

The relative brevity of life here where we so often try to find meaning and purpose and hope. And He reminds us there's only one secure place to find hope.

[18:41] What a great mercy. Even when it hurts as it does. See Jonah cries out from the depths of despair.

You've never been in the belly of a fish but can you imagine it's not an encouraging place to be.

He's as low as he could go and watch what happens with Jonah's prayer.

Chapter 2 verse 7. When my life was fainting away barely, barely alive I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you into your holy temple.

What he's saying through this prayer is that from the furthest possible distance from God Jonah's been intentionally going there hasn't he? Running away. Jonah's prayer does what?

It walks right into the throne room of God into the holy throne room of God in His holy presence.

Y'all prayer is amazing.

[19:46] No matter how far you've gone this doesn't happen because Jonah is good. He's not. He hasn't been. This is because Jonah is God's and God is good.

And so when he cries out from the worst place, the furthest possible place away his prayer comes into the presence of God. That's what happens when you pray.

Jonah realizes for himself as that happens salvation belongs to the Lord. It is Yahweh's to bestow on anyone even the most desperate, even the most undeserving.

Salvation is something Jonah realizes I am desperate to receive because I don't own it. I don't have it on my own. And as he realizes that the great fish which has saved Jonah physically and it seems possibly spiritually restored him releases him back to the land at God's command.

hand. So this time Jonah decides to obey. He doesn't really want, I mean as helpful as the belly of the whale was, once was enough.

[21:07] I'll go to Nineveh chapter 3 verse 3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh this time according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city three days journey in breadth.

Jonah began to go in the city going just a day's journey and he called out yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown. That ought to convert him, right? And the people of Nineveh believed God.

They called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them. Nineveh the capital city of the Assyrian empire full of people but full of wickedness.

They were famous for that. They were ignoring God. You can count on it. This is exactly the kind of people Jonah couldn't stand. Those people who ignore God. There's a lot of irony there.

He wasn't interested in seeing them receive forgiveness, get mercy. But somebody was. Who was? God was.

[22:17] Remember for God the recipients of his mercy are not winners of awards for good performance. They are humble repenters.

That's what happens throughout Nineveh from the king to all the people. It's humble repentance. They're desperate. And God responds well with mercy.

Verse 10 When God saw what they did how they turned from their evil way God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them and he did not do it.

I hope that's a reminder to all of us this is not just for some crazy Nineveh out there in Iraq somewhere hundreds of years ago.

This is about the nature of relationship with God. Your relationship with God should feature repentance. Maybe that's not a real popular word but repentance regularly specifically desperately it's not a one time thing that happens in your life and then you move on you don't need to repent anymore.

[23 : 31] No to speak of Martin Luther on this nearly Reformation Day he said the whole lifestyle of a Christian should be one of repentance.

That's what it means that relationship with God comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone that it's not about your performance it's about your repentance your dependence upon him we never get over our need for Jesus and so we regularly what do I mean by that I mean like more than once a week when we do it together in church and that is a great time to remember how you talk to God all the time but more often than the 60 seconds that Derek gave us this morning of silence in that prayer to say come up with a sin tell God something you need him for that should be every day and through the day we live in dependence upon him like that tell God specific reasons in our hearts and lives for which we need him that's repentance okay if you need a short definition it is turning from self sufficiency to Jesus sufficiency

I'm not enough God I need you Jesus is what I need repentance is what Jesus was talking to God's people in his generation about when he referenced the sign of Jonah the crowds were increasing and Jesus began to say this generation is an evil generation it seeks for a sign but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah for as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh so will the son of man be to this generation it's one of a couple places where Jesus speaks of the sign of Jonah and there's a lot of discussion of what he's talking about but what's really clear here is that it's Jonah himself who became a sign to the people of Nineveh Jonah didn't perform a sign he himself was the sign so what was Jonah a sign of might seem kind of hard to understand the point Matthew's account helps us a little as he talks about the sign of Jonah involving being in the belly of the whale the sign of Jonah his personal life story what did it show them it showed the Ninevites their need for repentance and rescue didn't it it showed them that running from Yahweh was serious and dangerous no other gods who when you run the other way you end up in the belly of a whale and also what had they ever met anybody who'd spent three days and nights in a whale it was a sign that there was hope for life even at the very doors of death that they could that they could repent and cry out and he would hear them it was amazing I don't know if they'd seen him vomited up or they'd heard it from somebody who did but this Jonah who was surely going to die all of a sudden here he is standing before us even with judgment looming in 40 days perhaps there's hope in turning to God perhaps he would spare them as he spared

Jonah and he did God's heart is like that he's so eager to forgive he's so full of mercy already here in Jonah's day for even the worst sinners in the world who repents y'all how much more so is that true now that Jesus the one greater than Jonah has come he is here he has not only come he has not only gone to this earth and to things like a whale he has gone to death and risen conquering sin and death once and for all how eager should we be to repent to that kind of life-giving God how eager should we be to call others to repent and find mercy with this God well Jonah gets to do it he leads a revival in Nineveh it's pretty amazing right if you're if you're a prophet what could be better than this preacher of the year

[28 : 12] Jonah and that's the end of the story most of us think right let's end on a high note celebration repentance forgiveness everyone's happy certainly well except one guy chapter 4 gets at the heart of the book it shows God's merciful heart even more beautifully than so far because it turns out that God is still chasing runaway Jonah in fact he's a harder case than some pagan sailors or some wicked gentiles God's own prophet the one who sits in synagogue more than any of the rest of them he's the hard case but don't miss this the fact that there's a chapter 4 if God cared only about the big show the big party saving Nineveh and he was just using

Jonah to do something really cool then the story ends in chapter 3 that's where it happens but even after Jonah has done great things for God God is not through with him he wants his heart doesn't

he did you hear that long time church leader generous giver passionate evangelist God has a chapter 4 where he cares more about who you are in your relationship with him than he does about what you've done in your religion for him he does in your life he cares more about your relationship with him than he does about what you've done for him he won't settle for your long record of religious performance he's coming even today perhaps through this word for your heart Jonah's heart is once again in God's crosshairs God has just saved thousands but he's not overlooking the one is he the one who is angry angry it displeased Jonah exceedingly he was angry and then here's what he says oh Lord is this not what I said when I was yet in my country I knew what you were going to do that's why I made haste to flee to Tarshish I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful slow to anger abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster what a beautiful statement of God's character that's a biblical statement isn't it Jonah has read his Bible he's a prophet Jonah's theology is strong Jonah knew God was going to forgive Nineveh and it made him angry so God says Jonah do you do well to be angry do you see how God's giving Jonah gently a spiritual heart calf it's a model for you to use on yourself if you'd like this morning should you be angry at the blessing in the life of the one who hurt you should you remain callous in unforgiveness should you care more about your own temporal life than others eternal life then in pursuit of Jonah's heart God sends a plant to grow up and give Jonah shade while he sits under the Middle Eastern sun overlooking Nineveh and then he sends a worm to take it away and Jonah is guess what angry again and God uses this not to make fun of him God's after his heart God asks Jonah do you do well to be angry and Jonah says what yes yes I do but God says this is the end of the story you pity the plant for which you did not labor nor did you make it grow which came into being in a night and perished in a night now he's going to contrast that should not I pity Nineveh that great city which God has labored for which he has created which he has called into being in which there are more than 120,000 persons made in his image who do not know their right hand from their left and their wickedness and also much cattle look at my heart

[33 : 29] God says there are people there they're lost they're confused they're hopeless Jonah these are the kinds of people I love the people like you Jonah who care more about a plant than about people who care more about shade than souls I want you Jonah to share my heart for them and we don't get to hear how Jonah responds I think probably because in God's merciful pursuit of Jonah's heart he's actually after even more than that because this story is in the word of God it's written for God's people Israel right this is their prophet reflecting their heart he's sharing his own story with them so that they are pressed to answer the questions do you do well to be angry are you being the light to the nations that I called you to be as my special people have you left your first love forgotten the merciful heart of God to forgive it's a chance for him to say look

Israel how long and wide and high and deep is the love of God the God who goes to such great lengths for Jonah doesn't stop with a storm and a whale and a plant and a worm he sends his son for runaway prophets for all his people so that we today can know that there is hope for us even if our spiritual heart cath is not going well this morning even if you are sure that you're failing the exam because you are seeing the one who passed it who came full of grace and truth who forgave even his enemies who killed him who perfectly shared the heart of God overflowing with mercy all the way to the cross see it's our God the hero of all of these stories he's a God who rescues and restores specifically here a God who runs after runaways runaways of all sorts the pagans and the prophets the godless and the godly no matter how you're running away he wants you to know this morning what the runaway bunny learned that no matter what you may become no matter where you think you may go to find life no matter how you'll need to reinvent yourself life will always be where he catches you in his arms and hugs you shucks said the little bunny I guess I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny and when you start to realize that let's put it in better terms for us when you start to realize there's life in his love for me it's where my joy is found it's where my purpose is found it's where my hope is found that starts to change your heart it then sends you you will go anywhere at all you'll go to anyone at all to tell them about the home where life is found won't you to show them the forgiveness that you've received to point them to the God who runs faster after runaways that's what will happen in your life years ago a friend of mine was at the beach with his family and as they were down near the water he realized he'd forgotten something and went back to his car to drive off and get it while his family stayed at the beach unbeknownst to him his three-year-old son decided he wanted to go with dad and so he

began running towards the highway the child's mother noticed started yelling after him to come back but this was a fast three-year-old who was at his fastest when when running away from a parent you've experienced that he sped up speeding toward the highway and the speeding vehicles there the boy got right near certain harm but thankfully as fast as he could run his mom ran faster she understood the danger that he failed to appreciate she rushed after him she ran barefoot across the rocky ground leading up to the highway caused herself no small pain to wrap her arms around her son and keep him alive and so has your savior done for you because he delights to forgive because he is rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loves you love love that that couldn't be contained by by skies or oceans love that overflowed from his heart as he gave his very life in order to preserve yours so what he was explaining to his disciples the night that he was betrayed the night before the cross when he took bread and broke it and he gave it to them as I'm ministering in his name give this bread to you and he said take eat this is my body given for you do this in remembrance of me and in the same way he took the cup and said this cup is the new covenant in my blood

shed for many for the forgiveness of sins drink from it all of you for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes if you are a runaway who has repented who repents even today of looking for life anywhere apart from God who's a baptized member of any church that preaches Jesus as the savior of sinners then come and eat with us and with him if you're not sure what to believe about Jesus or if you're sure that you don't believe in Jesus I've actually got good news for you he is even more merciful and loving than you can imagine even more merciful and loving than any of his people that you've met if you meet him his love for you his death on the cross means that you can run back to him right now without having to get yourself cleaned up first without having to make up for your past performance you can just run back to him don't come to these elements this morning that are a sign that point to him when you can actually let them point you to his boundless love for people like us the kind of love that those of us who know him and believe in him need and are called to share see his love trust his love come and meet him let me pray

Jesus we ask that that you would overwhelm every single one of us with your love your mercy your kindness your grace we come easily being able to name our sin there's so many examples and yet you tell us where sin increases your grace increases all the more you you know it's no match for you and you've come to be with us and remind us that no matter where we go you'll always scoop us up in your arms and love us and so as we take bread and wine would you use them for something so much deeper in our hearts that we might trust you and run back to you even today we ask it in your name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org