

Two Ways to Run

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Preacher: Nick Freestone

[0 : 0 0] Friends, we are kicking off a new series in a book of the Bible called Jonah. And if you've never read Jonah before, you've definitely heard about it. People have heard about the story of Jonah, normally when they were a kid.

And I had an interesting experience as a kid with the book of Jonah. I was talking to a friend of mine this week who was interested in why we were doing the book of Jonah as a church.

Why are we exploring it? And I mentioned to him that as a kid, I grew up in a place called Eden.

That's Eden there. Well, I grew up nearby at least, 10 minutes away in the country.

And you'll see on your right there that that's the harbour in Eden. There's a huge, big harbour where ships can sail in. And that's where, if people get hit by a storm during the Sydney to Hobart, where everyone retreats before going across Bass Strait.

It's a beautiful part of the world that if there's ever a sunny day, it's a lovely place. Now, historically, Eden was a whaling town.

[1 : 0 5] They would hunt whales there. There's this story that I was told every year when I went on a school excursion to the museum, the Eden Whaling Museum.

There was a man who fell into the sea during a hunt. They would go on these boats. They were incredibly dangerous. They would all be standing up throwing harpoons. No one could swim. People drowned all the time. And a man fell in and was assumed drowned. But two days later, they found something in the belly of a whale that they'd caught.

It was a person. It was this man. He'd been bleached completely white. He'd either lost or had all his hair bleached as well.

And he completely lost his mind. Now, this friend I was talking to about my experience of thinking about this story from where I grew up, and Jonah said, look, you've got this wrong.

[2 : 0 8] That man was swallowed by a whale. Jonah was swallowed by a fish, and a whale is not a fish. And I thought, is that really what Jonah's about? Is it just for a historical verification of the kind of sea creature that could inhale a human hole?

No. That's not what it's about at all. This book isn't a fairy tale or fable. It's actually history, and it's not even about Jonah.

It's about God. This book reveals the depth and waywardness of humanity's sin. This book is about God's heart toward all those who run away from him.

See, God longs to save people who are nearest to him and furthest away by gifting them his unearned grace and love. So as I set up Jonah for us for this next season as a church, I'm going to ask God for his help as he speaks through his word.

Let's pray. Lord God, would you please make your words loud and clear from the pages of our Bible? Deliver to us a great message from your prophet, so we might turn to you and receive your grace.

[3 : 3 6] Amen. Now, you might have had some trouble finding Jonah in your Bible, because it's hard to find. It's somewhere just past the middle in the Minor Prophets.

It's in the Old Testament. And this bit of history is recorded from a unique time in Israel's history. It's around about 780 BC.

Israel was a divided nation. The glorious reign of King Solomon, the wonderful riches and majesty of his reign, had come to an end, and he had sons, at least two of whom wanted to be king.

And the kingdom couldn't agree on who was going to be their king, so they split in two. There was a northern kingdom who retained the name Israel, and a southern kingdom who had the name Judah.

The kingdoms from then on jostled in this uneasy brotherhood. They were sandwiched between nations who hated them, and they hated, all around them.

[4 : 46] And Jonah was a northern kingdom Israelite. And he was a prophet. Prophets were how God had chosen to communicate to his people since the time of Moses.

He had chosen people, raised them up. They didn't go to uni and become a prophet. But he called them, literally spoke to them, gave them a message, and then they would pass it on to the people and their leaders.

And God gave Israel simple tests to check who the chosen prophet was and who was not. So here's one from Deuteronomy chapter 18.

You may say to yourselves, how can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord? If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken.

The prophet has spoken presumptuously, and so do not be alarmed. And therefore, or if what the prophet says comes true, then they are a prophet from the Lord.

[6 : 04] That's the level of confidence we should have if someone says, God has said to you, blank, and then prove whether it's true.

We're to listen to a prophet if God is speaking through them. Jonah's credentials as a prophet, his resume, was read out by Helen just before in Two Kings.

Jonah had spoken God's message in 780 BC to the then king called Jeroboam II. Jeroboam was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea in accordance with the word of God, the Lord God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-Hefer.

God had spoken to Jonah, he'd spoken to the king, the king had obeyed and done what Jonah had said from God, and a great victory was won.

So Jonah truly was God's prophet. Israel would have been eager to hear what Jonah had to say next. He would have been a celebrity.

[7 : 23] He would have been the, not just lifestyle guru, but lifestyle guru for the nation that everyone had listened to and they'd had their boundaries restored.

Did you hear Helen read that verse where it said, from the free to the slave, everyone was in bitterness and God heard them. Jonah had done a wonderful thing by sharing God's word here.

So imagine their excitement when God speaks to Jonah again in Jonah 1 verse 1. Would God help them win another victory against their enemies?

But as we heard this morning, God's second message from Jonah, through Jonah, was not for Israel, it was for Nineveh.

Nineveh. Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me. There were prophets during this season of Israel being a divided nation that went from one brother kingdom to another, but never outside Israel's borders.

[8 : 38] No prophet had ever been asked to leave Israel to speak a message to an enemy. And the enemy God chose for Jonah to go to was the worst one.

Nineveh was a capital city in Assyria. Assyria was this fearsome, the words today would be terrorist state. Ruthless killers in battle and in politics.

Nineveh was known as great for its force and power over the world around it, for its great evil, but also because of its vast size.

Apparently, it would take three days to travel from one edge of the city through the middle and out the other side. It's a huge place full of tens of thousands of people, at least.

Israel had already paid huge tributes to Assyria and Nineveh was the seat of power for that world power.

[9 : 47] It was utterly unthinkable that any prophet of God would go leave Israel to warn an enemy of God about God's coming judgment.

The first prophet to go beyond Israel on a mission of mercy was Jonah. So Jonah had a choice. He could obey and go, leave his land, go warn his worst enemy, or not. So have a look at verse 3. What does Jonah do?

Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa. He found a ship bound for that port and paying the fare, he went aboard, sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

Jonah chose to run away. Now, if Jonah had, press play on this, Wendy, if Jonah had had a phone at the time, he would have looked up Google Maps and he would have just checked how far Nineveh is away.

[10 : 49] As you can see here, that's round about where he was and there's Nineveh in the northeast, about 1,200 kilometers away. It's a long way. It's an intimidating walk.

But Jonah instead decides to check his local travel guide and jump on a boat and head completely the other direction.

Go to the opposite end of the Mediterranean Sea, to the edge of the known world, away from the will of God. It looks like Jonah was scared, like an angry, worried kid throwing a temper tantrum. But his choice has at least three reasons that Jonah thinks are very good behind it. God was asking Jonah, a national hero, to help save an enemy.

And the word in his country in Israel would have been treason. A treasonous request from God. Jonah was running away from the shame of becoming a national disgrace.

[12 : 02] It also would have been a suicide mission. Jonah walking into Nineveh with God's message would have been like a Jewish rabbi stepping up to a microphone at a public rally in Berlin in 1940.

Jonah was running from danger. And if Jonah had been bold enough to risk treason and the dangers of Assyrian hatred toward Israel, would have expected Nineveh to ignore him anyway and for God to destroy them?

Jonah ran, actually, because he knew what God was like. He'd seen God's words prove miraculously true. He knew that God would relent and show grace to Nineveh if they listened to his message.

He was running away from God's grace to Nineveh. He even expected that God would save them. Jonah doubted what God was doing was good, offering mercy and warning to sinners like the Ninevites.

And so he ran. So the book of Jonah answers for us this question. How does God respond to people who are running away from him?

[13 : 34] All people running from God like Jonah need an answer to that question. In the book of Jonah, we see him run from the will of God in two ways.

First, in chapters one and two, he runs away in open disobedience. And then in chapters three and four, from God's will, Jonah runs away internally, revealing a hidden distrust.

In the first half, Jonah runs away. He's on a boat that hits a storm. He's thrown overboard. No more storm. He didn't drown.

He was eaten by a fish. He survived three days and was spat up on land. That's his disobedient running away that you've heard about. It's out in the open.

Everyone's heard that story. But the second half of the book, Jonah gets a second chance from God to carry the message to Nineveh. He obeys.

[14 : 40] Nineveh, listen, repent, fast, pray, and God relents from bringing the disaster. And Jonah is devastated.

Jonah reveals his hidden distrust of God in an outburst of anger. He just pours out his hatred of God's gracious heart. Jonah was running from God even as he obeyed, but on the inside.

So he sat and watched this city from afar, hoping against hope that God might still destroy it.

And as he sat there, God was gracious and caring toward him. And the book ends with God still with Jonah offering him his grace.

And we're left with this question. What will Jonah do? Will he accept God's grace to him? And that's it.

[15 : 46] We don't get an answer. Series over. We're done. Well, at least that's what we might think. There's a striking similarity to this abruptly ending story.

To a teaching story or a parable that Jesus tells. In Luke 15 in verses 1 and 2 we get this scene where Jesus is standing up in front of a crowd and in front of him there are tax collectors and sinners.

Now those two words aren't used very often today, but if you can imagine anyone or group of people or job that people do that people don't think highly of or even hate, people who've done things that make society think that they're not worthy or even that they hate, they're all around Jesus' feet, they're closest, they're listening in.

They were hated openly by the respected religious leaders of Israel, the Pharisees. Jesus knew their hatred and so he told a parable about the grace of God to all sinners, the most rebellious, open sinners who were sitting at his feet and to the most religious shaking their heads in the back.

And this story is about a family, a father and two sons. Another story you might have heard of before. Jesus' story starts with the younger son rebelling openly against his father.

[17 : 34] He demands his inheritance early. He shames his family and leaves. He leaves lavishly, that squanders all his wealth and nearing death, he desperately turns and goes back to his father, hoping to be accepted as just a lowly slave.

But the father, seizing coming from a long way away, runs to him, embraces him and restores this rebel son to his former honour as a son.

All the son did was return and he received grace from his loving father. And upon hearing about this, the older brother who's been working out in the field is furious.

He'd stayed. He'd worked at his father's business and done the right thing. He feels that his father's mercy is against his rights to his father's inheritance as the good son.

he feels owed for his obedience, not thankful for his father's love and generosity. The father replies with an offer of the same grace that the younger brother has already received.

[19 : 02] Will the older brother accept God's grace to him? But just like Jonah, the story ends there. It's on a cliffhanger.

Jonah is structured in the same way each brother ran from their father. How every human runs two ways from God's will in our lives.

Since Adam and Eve, all people have doubted that God's will is good. every person does this. We measure what God says against our own will and we usually win.

We each run two ways away from God. Firstly, we run openly away like Jonah, like a Ninevite, like the younger son.

with open rebellion against God. If you've ever heard the phrase follow your heart or you do you, that's our society affirming running away from God like this.

[20 : 19] What evils we commit following the desires of our nature in direct conflict with the will of our creator. These actions are what we think of when we're confronted by the word sin.

But secondly, we can do openly good works, good things, but with religious motives to try and earn our right to God's favor.

again, like Jonah, but also like the older prodigal son. This is an internal rebellion against the will of God to save us, not by what we do, but by his grace.

That's his heart, that's his intention, but instead our internal rebellion is to trust our own perspective and our own strength of will over God's.

The better we are at being good Christian people, the less we allow ourselves to feel that we need God at all. The more we expect life to turn out how we want, because after all, we've obeyed.

[21 : 45] we believe God owes us for our allegiance to him. This too is running from God.

It's not a virtue, it's not a lesser sin, it is sin. Be confronted by this as it confronts me.

Imagine someone who is more of a sinner than you. Who is more far gone than you? Are you imagining a person or a group of people?

Be honest. Romans 3.23 says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Many other scriptures say likewise.

If no human gets themselves any closer to God by anything that they do, how dare I look at another human as more in need of God than me or as less worthy of God than me?

[23 : 02] Lifting ourselves up as better than those people or those sinners reveals our hidden running away from God's grace.

And if we are honest with ourselves we will only see our desperate need to embrace God's grace.

There is good news for anyone who runs these two ways from God because God shows grace to Jonah after he runs both ways.

Cliffhanger endings are written into songs poems stories hopefully not movies because those are terrible movies when you don't get an ending that's terrible but they're written for the audience to respond they're written for the person reading to do something with something happened next to Jonah we don't know we don't know what he chose to do we don't know if his heart turned but our knowledge of history ending right there is a message for you all of us who run two ways from God like Jonah will you accept God's grace to you we need a prophet to be sent out of Israel again a prophet who obeys a prophet who shares

God's grace with the rebel and the religious and the good news is there is a prophet like that who did not run from God's will despite the great cost one midnight that prophet was in a garden and he

knew that when the sun came up he would be falsely charged with treason for sharing God's message to sinners he faced danger violent torture and even death all while his followers abandoned him in fear and doubt this prophet cried out to God as he sweated blood in the dark father if you are willing take this cup from me yet not my will but yours be done two things this prophet says there a hope for runaway sinners first he yielded to God's will when Jonah did not not my will but yours he said that is his surrender to this hopeless looking mission and trusting God's will the rebels to Israel the rebels of Israel and to all the nations of the world every human as we run two ways from God's will God had one final message for his prophet to share and that was death on a cross that message that ultimate message of grace to all people was that this prophet himself would drink down number two the full cup of judgment the cup that belonged to me to you to all runaway sinners this prophet completed God's mission and died also sinners like us could live that is how

[27 : 03] God justly fairly forgave a generation of repentant Ninevite sinners that whole city that were living on in front of Jonah's angry gaze this book Jonah points all sinners and all foreigners all rebels all religious runaways from God to long for this prophet who did not run away from the will of God and the prophet who does not run is Jesus Christ Jesus did not run from God and he will not stop running to us that 1200 kilometers to Nineveh not intimidating at all it's not 28 days on foot it's worth it so this prophet says to all those running from

God in open rebellion who are hearing this message today repent of your sins turn to Jesus and surrender your life to God's will receive his forgiveness by his grace turn and follow him today no matter how far gone you feel or how far you have run from God Jesus runs toward you to declare himself to be your salvation and to all those running from God in religious rejection of his grace repent of your pride filled religious behavior turn from your distrust and surrender your life and receive his perfect life in place of your own rest from your striving you never stop needing God's grace hear Jesus voice in the pages of the Bible accept God's grace from the mouth of the prophet Jesus we all run away from God without his help so he sent Jesus after us Jesus our great prophet runs to us and stays alongside us will you accept God's message from the mouth of the prophet Jesus all you need to do is turn and receive the grace of the father and no matter how far you run God's grace will always always always overtake you God God