

Running from God

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[0 : 00] We will be reading Jonah chapter 1, verse 1 to 16. And if you're following along in the Church Bible, you will find this on page 726.

Jonah chapter 1, verses 1 to 16. 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 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.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his God. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship, and had lain down. Perhaps the God will give a thought to us that we may not perish.

[1 : 30] And they said to one another, Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah.

Then they said to him, Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation, and where do you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you? And he said to them, I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, What is this that you have done?

For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. Then they said to him, What shall we do to you that the sea may quiet down for us?

For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, Pick me up and hurl me into the sea. Then the sea will quiet down for you.

[2 : 32] For I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you. Nevertheless, the men rode hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them.

Therefore they called out to the Lord, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood. For you, O Lord, 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 the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

This is the word of God. Great. Thanks, Zoe, for reading. Well, once again, welcome. If you are new, my name is Kevin, and great to have you with us this morning.

If you are visiting and I haven't met you, come and say hi to me afterwards. I'd love to meet you and get to know you a little bit, but great to have you with us this morning. Now, as you heard, we are spending the next few weeks looking at the book of the Bible, Jonah, this very well-known story.

[3 : 38] And, of course, many of us would have heard the story of Jonah and the big fish. And yet, in some ways, that's the challenge because we've probably, many of us have heard of it, and we're so familiar with it that we can miss its message.

I find the story of Jonah actually one of the most challenging and provocative books in the Old Testament, books of the Bible. I find it deeply, deeply challenging. And so I'm looking forward to us diving into this together.

We often reduce the story of Jonah just to a grumpy old man and a big fish, kind of like a kid's story tale. But actually, its message is very deep and profound. And if you know the story of Jonah, right at the end, the way the book ends is the last verse is God asks Jonah a question, and then that's

the end of the book.

And we don't know how Jonah answers. No answer is given. And the book ends on a cliffhanger, and the reason for that is because throughout the book of Jonah, Jonah's life is going to be asking us questions, asking lots of questions of us, and it's challenging us the whole way through.

But we're going to get there in the coming weeks. Now, the big idea for today, some ways are simple, is don't run from God. Rather, trust Him. Fear Him.

[4 : 54] Even when His ways don't make sense to us. Because He's infinitely wiser, greater, and more gracious than you can imagine. Don't run from God. Trust Him.

Fear Him. Even when His ways don't make sense to us. Because He's infinitely wiser, greater, and more gracious than we can imagine. So, let's dive in and look at it.

We've got a couple of things we're going to see in this passage. So, firstly, let's look at Jonah's foolish run from the Lord. Jonah's foolish run. Now, the story begins with, very famously, with Jonah running from God.

Right? Verse 1, the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Verse 3, But Jonah ran from the presence of the Lord. And this is well known to us, but it's shocking to anybody that reads the Bible for the first time.

Why? Because a prophet is somebody who's meant to stand before God, stand in God's presence, represent God, speak for God, on behalf of God. But Jonah, rather than standing before God, is running from Him.

[5 : 54] Verse 3 tells us, twice, Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. Again, he paid the fare and went to Tarshish away from the presence of the Lord.

Now, why would Jonah do this? This sounds like a very foolish thing to do. But actually, we should have a little bit of sympathy for Jonah. Maybe he shouldn't be so high and mighty. Because, what is the task that Jonah's being asked to do?

Well, verse 2 tells us, look at what it says, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, call out against it, for their evil has come up before me. Now, in order to understand this, we should understand a little bit about Nineveh.

Who were the Ninevites? Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. Assyria was the world's superpower of the day. At the time, they kind of controlled the whole of the kind of known Middle Eastern world of that day and age.

But the Assyrians were known as probably the most vicious, violent, and sadistic empire of the ancient world. They were extremely, extremely violent.

[7 : 00] Historians have described them as one of the most gory and blood-curling histories that we know of. One of the emperors, a guy called Shalmanessi III, he used to commission for artworks to be made throughout his palace and his empire.

Stone reliefs would be carved and artworks made depicting people being tortured, decapitated, or dismembered. This is the artwork around his palace that he decorated his palace with and his empire.

Assyrian soldiers would sometimes, in battle, they wouldn't kill their enemies, but they'd cut off their legs, cut off one of their arms, and leave one arm still in place so that they could shake the hand of their victims as they left them to bleed to death.

Other accounts tell us of sometimes, one author describes the way that the Assyrians would force family members to march through the streets of the city with poles, with the decapitated heads of their loved ones, through the streets, parading their defeat.

Other records have spoken about them skinning their enemies alive, throwing salt on the wounds, and then leaving them to dry and die in the sun. This is one of the cruelest, most violent empires of the ancient world, and what is Jonah being asked to do?

[8 : 17] Go to their streets and tell them that they are bad people and that they should stop their ways. One commentator said, this is like a rabbi standing in the streets of Berlin, Germany, in the 1940s, crying out against the Nazi empire.

How long do you think he's going to last? And yet this is what God is asking Jonah to do. And so Jonah's response is to run. And so instead of going east to Nineveh, he gets on a ship to go west of the land, of the seas, to Tarshish, as far away as he can from Nineveh.

But as the author wants us to see, Jonah is not just running away from Nineveh, he's running away from God. Twice the verse tells us, verse 3, Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the

Lord.

But of course, running doesn't solve Jonah's problems, does it? No more than running solves our problems. Jeremiah the prophet said this, Can a man hide himself in secret places that I cannot see him?

Do I not fill heaven and earth, declares the Lord? Or think of the famous Psalm 139 that Jonah probably would have known about. Psalm 139, David writes, O Lord, you have searched me and you know me.

[9 : 30] You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You search out my path and my lying down. You are acquainted with all of my ways. Where shall I go from your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence?

And yet despite all this, Jonah tries to run from the God that he claims to believe in. Now, before we move on to the story, three very brief implications, a quick implications for us is this.

Firstly, if you are a follower of Jesus or if you're considering becoming a follower of Jesus, when God calls us, He calls us to difficult things. God often calls us to difficult things.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this, when God calls a man or woman to Himself, He bids Him to come and die, to lay down our lives, to pick up our cross and to follow Him, to die to our selfish dreams, to die to the idea of being our own Lord and King and Master, to die to the life of comfort and convenience and ease.

Jesus' call to follow Him is not a call to comfort and convenience. It's a call to follow Him. And as we heard last week, where did Jesus go? He went to the cross.

[10 : 42] Jesus, when speaking to His disciples, He reveals Himself as the Messiah King and then His very next line is, If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself, pick up His cross and follow Me.

And friends, because we live in a therapeutic age, what that means is we tend to think that what feels good must be good or what feels right must be right and what feels uncomfortable or difficult or hard must be wrong and certainly not God's will.

But Jonah reminds us, as does the whole of Scripture, that when God calls us, He calls us to difficult things. He calls us to live by faith, to trust Him, despite the difficulty to which He calls us.

And that leads to the second implication, which is that God's call is not just that God wants to work through us, but God wants to work in us. When God calls us, He wants to change us.

The story of Jonah, as we're going to see over the next couple of weeks, is God is going to change Jonah in the process. Jonah needs to hear the message of God's transforming and redeeming grace just as much as the Ninevites do himself.

[11 : 49] To Jonah's great surprise, God will work through him, but what the book of Jonah wants to show us is how much Jonah himself needs to change. When God calls us, He's also to call to transformation.

Friends, isn't that true of all of us? When God calls you to serve or lead, we're not just called to carry His message, but to be changed by it ourselves. And then here's the third brief implication. In running from God's word, Jonah is running from God Himself. You notice verse 1 says, the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Jonah doesn't like the word, so he runs away. But what does verse 3 say?

Jonah is running from God's presence. Throughout the Bible, we see these interconnected things. You can't reject God's word without rejecting God Himself. You cannot run away from God's command without also running away from relationship with Him.

Jonah runs from God's word, and he ends up running away from the presence of the Lord. And so, Jonah's not convinced, and so he runs from God, which is a very foolish thing to do, because in running from God, Jonah runs into a storm.

[12 : 52] Look at verse 4 with me. It says, the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. The mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his God.

They hurled the cargo that was on the ship into the sea to lighten it. But Jonah had gone down into the inner parts of the ship, and laid down and was fast asleep. Friends, here we see, in a very vivid way, the foolishness of sin.

And one of the lessons we want to see here is what Tim Keller says, that all sin has a storm attached to it. All sin has a storm attached to it. And the reason for this is actually quite intuitive.

If you think about it, in any area of life, when we go against something's purpose or its design, that thing strikes back at you, right? If you are indifferent about your health, your health is going to strike back at you, right?

You can't be indifferent about your health and your physical well-being and still live a healthy life and expect to be well and healthy. Friends, we can't be indifferent towards our financial lives and expect to be financially healthy.

[14:00] Friends, you can't take a relationship with your spouse for granted and expect a happy and healthy marriage. In the same ways, we can't take a relationship with the sovereign God for granted, be indifferent towards Him and expect to still flourish in the world that He's made and He's created.

And so the God of all creation says, if you're indifferent and reject me, it does bite back. There's a storm attached to every sin. One of the literary features in the book of Jonah, Jonah is a literary masterpiece.

It's unbelievable and I hope you get to enjoy it as you read it. But one of the literary features here that commentators often point out is that in this chapter it begins off with God saying, arise, go to Nineveh.

Nineveh is in the north east of Jerusalem. Arise, go to Nineveh. And yet the story tells us that Jonah goes down, down, down, down to Joppa, down to a ship, down into the ship, down into the hell and ultimately down into the sea.

And it's almost like the author is wanting us to see that Jonah's life is spiraling downhill as he runs away from God. Because this is how life in God's creation work.

[15:13] All sin has a storm attached to it. Now of course we need to be careful here because this doesn't mean that every time we are in a storm it's necessarily because of a sin. Life is sometimes hard.

We are born into a difficult world. Life will, storms will come our way. We have to live by faith in the midst of hardship. Sometimes God calls us to difficult and challenging things and we feel like we've walked into a storm.

And yet, that doesn't negate what the Bible clearly says, that while not all difficulties are a result of sin, all sin will bring us into immense difficulty. That running from God means running into a storm of our own making.

And in Jonah's account here, the storm is dramatic and it's immediate. It's almost within a couple of hours the storm comes up. In our lives, often the storm is slow and we don't realize it.

And Jonah here, it seems like he goes into the boat and goes to sleep. And while he's asleep, he's oblivious to the fact that a storm is brewing. It comes upon him. Isn't that so often like our lives?

[16:18] We run from God and before we realize it, we wake up and a storm is upon us. A storm of our own making. Jonah's foolish run from God. But also we see in this passage, Jonah's empty declaration, his hollow declaration.

Now, we've seen Jonah's been running from God and a storm has come upon him. But why is that? We still haven't got to why. Now, as I said earlier, Jonah is a literary masterpiece.

It's beautifully constructed. And I want you to look at the slide, the structure of Jonah chapter 1. This is called a chiasm where the first sentence and the last sentence mirror each other and the second part and the second last part mirror each other.

And it mirrors in a kind of arrow-shaped direction. And then the central part of the chapter is what the author wants us to take note of. This is a literary device that writers in the ancient world used. And here, there's the beautiful chiasm in Jonah chapter 1. So look at verse 4, the Lord hurls a storm in the sea. Verse 15, the sailors hurl Jonah into the sea.

[17:28] In verse 5, the sailors pray and act. In verse 13 and 14, the sailors act and pray. In verse 6, the sailors question Jonah. In verse 10, the sailors question Jonah again.

So there's this mirroring that happens. And right in the center, in verse 9, is Jonah's words. And the author has structured it like this because the author wants us to take note of Jonah's words.

What he says here. The sailors, look at verse 9, the sailors try to save themselves, they can't, they draw lots and they find out Jonah's the one at fault. And so they ask him what he's done. They say, tell us on whose account has this evil come?

What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? What people are you? And verse 9 is the key. Jonah says, I am a Hebrew. I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made

the sea and the dry land.

Now, as we're going to see in coming weeks, the book of Jonah is full of irony. Almost every chapter, there are these amazing ironies. God calls Jonah to rise, and he goes down, down, down. [18:33] God tells Jonah to go east, and he goes west. God tells Jonah to tell the Ninevites to repent, they do, and then he's bit and angry that they listen to him. There are all these ironies, right?

But here in verse 9, is a dramatic irony once again. Jonah gives this remarkable declaration of his faith, and yet it's deeply ironic, and for two reasons.

Look at this. Firstly, he says, I'm a follower of the Lord, Yahweh, the God of heaven, the maker of the sea and the dry land. Jonah says that he follows the God who is sovereign over everything. There is no part of creation over which God is not sovereign and in charge, and yet where is Jonah running away? Out of the land into the sea, right? In the ancient world, all nations believed in a buffet of gods.

So there's the God of the sea, the God of the land, the God of the crops, the God of the stars, the God of the weather, and you would worship the different gods. And Jonah says, that's not my God. The God I believe in is the Lord of everything, the maker of heaven and earth, the land and the sea, everything in it.

[19:38] Jonah says, my God is the creator and sustainer of everyone and everything. He is eternal, infinite, and unchangeable, and his power and perfection, his goodness and grace, his justice, mercy, and truth.

Does that sound familiar? That's the catechism we said earlier. Okay? So Jonah's confessing, my God is Lord of everything, and yet when God says, go here, he says, I think I'm going to run away by the sea and God won't find me.

Jonah makes a declaration of his faith, but he doesn't really believe it, does it? His declaration is actually empty. It's hollow. In his heart of hearts, he doesn't believe what he professes with his mouth.

Jonah says he believes in the sovereign God, but he's running away from him. But here's the second irony. In many ways, this is the heart of chapter one, that while Jonah confesses to fearing God, it's actually the unbelieving sailors who truly fear God and fear him more than Jonah.

Jonah says in verse nine, I am a Hebrew. I fear the God of all creation. But look at verse 14 with me. Jonah tells him that the storm is because of him.

[20:52] The only way to calm the storm is to hurl them in the sea. Verse 14, then they called out to the Lord and they said, O Lord, do not let us perish for this man's life. Lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as you pleased.

Verse 16, they throw him into the sea. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly. Literally, it says, they feared with great fear. And they offered sacrifices to the Lord and they made vows.

Friends, here we get to the heart of Jonah's problem, but also the heart of our problem. It's the same reason why we run from the Lord. Jonah does not fear the Lord anything like what he claims to.

He does not believe that the sovereign God is actually sovereign at all. Friends, if you're a Christian this morning, would you say that you fear God? What might that look like in your life?

What does it mean to fear God? One of the best descriptions is a quote by the name of a guy by the name of Martin Buber. Listen to what he says here. Martin Buber was an Austrian philosopher.

[21:54] He says this, to fear God does not mean to be afraid of God, but that trembling, one is aware of his incomprehensibility. It is the dark gate through which one must pass if he is to enter into the love of God.

He who wishes to avoid passing through this gate, who begins to provide or create for himself a safe and comprehensible God, constructed like this and not otherwise, runs the risk of having to despair of God in view of the realities of life or falling into inner falsehood.

Only through the fear of God does one enter so deep into the love of God that he cannot again be cast out of it. That's pretty wordy, but you see what Martin Buber is saying? He's saying to fear God is not just a creed or a confession, it's to come face to face with the incomprehensibility, the mystery of the God that cannot be managed, manipulated, contained, or controlled.

And having come face to face to him, accepting him on his terms, we find that we enter into his love. It's the only way to truly know him. It's the only way to truly experience him, to encounter him, to willingly come to the scary yet liberating realization that he is God and we are not.

And entering into that counterintuitively is the way of entering into his love, the way of entering into relationship, the way of entering into friendship. One of my favorite verses in the Bible, Psalm 25, says this, the friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him.

[23 : 30] The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him. Friends, those who come to him and say, you are God and I am not, are drawn through this dark gate into the incomprehensibility of God and discover on the other side, there is a God who loves us and who wants to know us and extend the friendship of the Lord for him.

And here, friends, is the difficult but wonderful teaching of the fear of God, that the God that we've come to sing and worship and pray to and listen to this morning is not containable. He is not managed. He is not controlled. He is not manipulated. He is awesome and awful and terrifying and dangerous and unsafe and yet glorious and he makes himself known and he draws us into his love.

Friends, is there any part of your life you've been running away from this God? Can you see how foolish that is? Not only for Jonah, but for all of us who like Jonah, think that we can control God and run away from him.

And friends, there are many ways to run away from God. One is obviously rebellious, to run as far away as you can and live contrary to him. But another way to run away from God is to try and be good and control him and manipulate him through our good deeds and our devotion.

[24 : 51] Another way to run away from God is to externally look like we've got it all together, but to keep a secret part of our life hidden that we keep to ourselves, an area that we don't want God to touch.

Just this week, I heard the news of a very famous, very well-respected Christian leader who just this week admitted to an eight-year affair with another married woman, all while writing Christian books, speaking at Christian churches, speaking at Christian conferences, going about his Christian life, and yet there was a secret part of his life that was running away from God that he would not let God touch.

And friends, as the news broke this week, the storm that has erupted in his life, in his family, in his marriage, is unfathomable. For eight years, no one knew a thing.

For eight years, going to church, speaking at churches, writing books, and having an empty profession declaration of faith, all while running from God in one of the most important areas of his life.

Friends, are there any areas of our life where we are running from God? This is the question I've been asking myself this week. God, are there any areas of my life that I'm keeping off from you? God, come in your incomprehensible, unsafe, awesome area.

[26 : 07] Come and have your way. As we come to a close, we see here not only Jonah's foolish run, Jonah's empty declaration, but also Jonah's only hope. The message of this chapter is don't run from God, fear him, trust him, even when you can't understand his ways and his declarations don't make sense to you.

Trust him. But the reality is that there's probably a fair bit of Jonah inside of all of us, probably more than we like to admit, more than we like to realize. And so friends, where does Jonah find hope? Where do I find hope? Where do we find hope? Ironically, it's in the message that Jonah was running away from. Because look at verse 2 with me. If you've got your Bible, what does verse 2 say?

God says to Jonah, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me. Why would God send Jonah to Nineveh to tell them about their evil?

If God just wants to smite them, why doesn't he just smite them? Why doesn't he just destroy them? Why would God send a prophet to tell them that the Lord has seen their evil? Friends, the only reason why God would do this is if there is a chance, a possibility, that they can turn from their ways and find healing and find redemption.

[27 : 27] Only if there's a chance of forgiveness. Friends, why would God send a prophet to Assyria, whose wicked and godless people don't fear God at all? Because this God is so unlike us.

And if there is any hope for them, there is hope for us. Friends, contained within the message that Jonah was meant to take the Assyrians was the message that Jonah himself needed to hear, which is that the sovereign God, the Lord of heaven and earth, the land and seas, the God who can turn godless women around and give them a second chance.

The Bible says in Isaiah 53 that we all have gone astray. We have all turned and gone our own way, which means, friends, that there is more of Jonah inside of us that we realize.

But just like God sent a man with a message to Nineveh, so God sent a man with a message to us. A message about our sin, a message about evil, and a message about a way to find peace and redemption.

Friends, all sin will be punished. All sin will meet justice. It will either meet justice on that last day, or it will meet justice that Jesus paid on the cross.

[28 : 39] Like Jonah, Jesus' calling was extremely dangerous, going to a dangerous and wicked people who did not want to receive his message. Jonah probably thought that if he went to Nineveh, he'd be arrested, killed, and put to death.

Jesus came to us knowing that that would happen to him. Friends, unlike Jonah, Jesus didn't run away. Jesus didn't flee. Jesus came to us and he went to the cross and he entered into the storm of God's wrath and judgment, the ultimate storm, the storm that our sin has generated, the storm of our evil and rebellion.

Jesus went into that storm so that you and I don't need to die, that he can pull us out of the storm of our sin and our rebellion and give us new life. Friends, we're going to see God wants to rescue pagan Nineveh, but before he gets to do that, he has to rescue his prodigal prophet.

Friends, maybe today God wants to rescue you prodigal sons and daughters like me, like you.

Friends, are you running from God? Is there any area of your life that you've kept off from God and you don't want God's word to come there?

By running from God's word, you're running from God's presence. You're running from God himself. Friends, this is the God that you're running from, the one who's perfectly obedient, perfectly faithful, perfectly just, perfect in love, the God who came to you and for you to rescue you and save you.

[30 : 08] He, this gracious God, is the one that we run from. Friends, are there any areas of our lives we're trying to avoid his sovereign rule, shouting out his voice? How's that working for you?

Don't run from him. Don't flee from him. Bow down and fear him. Trust him and obey him. Surrender to his sovereign rule, even when it's difficult and it doesn't make sense.

Bow down before the one that you cannot comprehend, the one you cannot manage, the one you cannot contain, the one you cannot control, the one you cannot outrun. Enter trembling into his incomprehensibility and enter into his love.

The God of all creation could have grace and mercy on the people of Nineveh, on the sailors. This God can have grace and mercy for people like you and me. Let's come to him in prayer now.

Lord Jesus, we are deeply challenged by the life of Jonah because we see so much of Jonah in us. God have mercy on us, we pray. God, many of us in this room have discovered your mercy.

[31 : 11] Some of us maybe a few weeks and months ago, some of us many years ago, some of us, God, are still on the journey towards discovering it. Lord, I pray for every single one of us and I pray, God, start with me.

Start with me. God, won't you break into the areas of my life where I don't want you to be there, where I want to run from your voice and run from your command. God, let your incomprehensible power but also love break in and let me discover your grace.

Jesus, we need you. I need you. This city needs you. Come and show us yourself, we pray. In your great and wonderful name, amen. Amen.