

**Jonah 1**

**SI:** This morning we are beginning a seven-week study of two short books of the Bible. We’re going to study them back to back, a chapter each week.

The two books are Jonah and Nahum.

Why these two books? What’s the connection?

Jonah and Nahum were both prophets. They lived about 150 years apart.

The focus of both their ministries was the city of Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire.

It was the largest city in the world at that time.

The books of Jonah and Nahum are both about the Lord’s dealings with Nineveh.

Jonah and Nahum are helpful to study back to back,

because of what they show us about the character of God.

In the book of Jonah presents the Lord as a God of mercy.

The book of Nahum presents him as a God of wrath.

Some have argued that Jonah is the most vivid depiction of God’s mercy in the Old Testament. It is a marvelous story of grace from beginning to end.

You can’t help being blown away by God’s mercy and grace in Jonah.

You’ll find yourself singing Amazing grace how sweet the sound . . .

But the book of Nahum is about what happens when the day of mercy is past and the patience of God comes to an end.

Even though there are many other Prophets that warn of God’s judgment—there is no book of the Bible more thoroughly devoted to God’s wrath.

This is our God. He’s the God of amazing grace and tender mercy.

A God who loves and pursues sinners, not willing that any should perish.

His heart is so tender, even cares about wellbeing of animals, Jonah tell us. And at the same time, he’s a God of wrath who is jealous for justice.

He’s the judge of all the earth who will not leave the guilty unpunished.

That’s the Lord our God. Let’s learn and worship.

**INTRO:** In the British Museum in London are a number of massive stone carvings, bas-reliefs, that came from the ruins of Nineveh.

Those ruins are near the modern-day Iraqi city of Mosul.

British archaeologists excavated Nineveh in the 1800s and sent all the artifacts back to England.

I've never been to the British Museum, but I've seen pictures of these carvings.

They are 3000 years old, and they portray life in the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. You can tell the Assyrians were sophisticated and wealthy.

The king and queen and nobles are dressed in robes and jewels.

Hair is carefully coiffed. Beards were the style for the men, precisely trimmed.

Surrounded by opulent furnishings, manicured gardens, numerous servants.

Many of the carvings show Assyrian military might—

soldiers marching in ranks, chariots, archers, spearmen, siege machines.

You can tell the Assyrians did not suffer from low self-esteem.

But there is another detail in these carvings that catches your attention.

Amidst all this wealth and power and refinement are scenes of violence.

There are people impaled on stakes. There are people being skinned alive.

In one very famous scene of a garden party with all the Assyrian nobility, there are decapitated human heads hanging in trees for decoration.

That was the Assyrians. They had a reputation in the ancient world

for their love of cruelty. One historian wrote:

“The usual practice after the capture of a hostile city was to burn it, then to mutilate all the grown, male prisoners by cutting off their hands and ears, and putting out their eyes.

Afterwards, they were piled in a great heap to perish in torture from sun, flies, their wounds, and suffocation. The children, both boys and girls, were all burned at the stake, and the chief was carried off to Assyria, to be flayed alive for the king's entertainment.”

This was the evil that had come up before the Lord—this pride and cruelty.

Judgment was hanging over the city of Nineveh.

So God told his prophet Jonah to go to the city and preach against it.

2 Kings 14 tells us that Jonah was from the town of Gath Hopher,

which was in northern Israel, near the city of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up.

2 Kings also tells us that Jonah prophesied during the reign of King Jeroboam II.

Jeroboam II was a very wicked king of Israel, but Jonah came and preached to him a message of God's forgiveness and grace.

God was merciful to Israel. He did bless them in spite of sins.

So Jonah was a prophet who knew God's grace, he had preached it, he had spoken the truth and called people to repent and turn to the Lord. He had not hesitated even to warn powerful people, King Jeroboam. So you would think that when the Lord told him to go and preach against Nineveh, that he would have done so—but he didn't, he ran from God.

He didn't run because he was afraid. He had reason to be afraid, dangerous. But that wasn't the reason. He tells us why in chapter four.

Not because he was afraid of failure, but because he was afraid of success. He was afraid that if he preached God's judgment, the Ninevites would repent.

And if they repented, he knew that God would have mercy on them. But Jonah didn't want that. He wanted them to pay for their cruelty.

He hated and feared them because they were enemies of Israel. Jonah said: I would rather die than see God be merciful to my enemies. So he ran.

There is a play on words that English translations miss. Helps understand book.

The Lord says to Jonah: The evil of Nineveh has come up before me. Then, in chapter four, after the Ninevites have repented, received God's mercy, just as Jonah was afraid they would, it says that God's mercy "displeased Jonah exceedingly." That word "displeased" is very same word evil. God's mercy to Jonah was evil to him. That gives us a glimpse into Jonah's heart. We see that his heart was no different from the Assyrians. In his heart he was impaling, mutilating, and skinning alive.

That's what makes this book so powerful. On one level, it is about the Lord's dealings with evil deeds of unbelievers, and his mercy to them when they repent. But at a deeper level, it's about the Lord's dealings with the evil in the hearts of believers, the evil in Christian hearts—in other words, evil in your heart and mine. It shows how he pursues us in mercy, even when we run from him.

And every one of us has run from him at one time or another, maybe now.

Let's look at chapter one and ask three questions:

1. Why do you run from God?
2. What happens when you run from God?
3. How does the Lord deal with runaways like you and me?

## **MP#1 Why do you run from God?**

Why did Jonah run from God? As I just pointed out, because he was angry at the very possibility Assyria might get off the hook and be forgiven.

Assyria was a threat to Israel. It was the evil empire of the north. Jonah wanted them wiped out. It fit his hopes for the future.

He thought that would be the best and wisest thing for God to do and the very best thing for Israel's future.

So when he thought that God might extend mercy to the Assyrians, and that he might be the instrument of that mercy, he ran.

Jonah's real problem was not with Nineveh, it was with God.

He was angry because the Lord was not acting as he thought the Lord should act.

The Lord was not being as Jonah thought he should be.

Does this sound familiar to you?

Isn't this why you turn your back on God in disappointment or anger?

The Lord refuses to fit your assumptions of who you think he ought to be, or what you think he ought to do.

Or he does things in your life that you think he should not do—  
so you run from him, you turn away from him.

Do you remember a couple years ago we read the book on prayer by Paul Miller? One of the points he made in that book was that in the Christian life there are gaps between our hopes and our experience of reality in the world.

Our hope are often high. Sometimes even based on God's wonderful promises. But our experience of life in this world is often low,  
as we face many problems and disappointments in life.

Paul Miller said that we typically respond to those gaps in one of two ways. Some of us pretend our experience matches our hopes.

We live in a kind of denial about the disappointments and problems of real life.

We put on the happy Christian face and always saying: Praise the Lord. But underneath there is a hollowness to our spiritual experience.

That spiritual act we put on is just a way of avoiding God.

Or, the other response, we bring our hopes down to match reality and give up on expecting God to answer our prayers. We say: This is how life is going to be. Prayer basically ceases. We become fatalistic.

Paul Miller said that in both cases, we are running away from a real walk with God.

We're trying to avoid actually interacting with a living God  
who stubbornly refuses to be our servant,  
who stubbornly refuses to conform to the wonderful plan that we have for his life.  
Because he has a much bigger plan, a much better plan—  
a plan that might involve some short-term pain and confusion on our part.

It's not ultimately circumstances or other people who you are frustrated with—  
it's God. That's the reason disappointments often distance you from him.  
You are angry and in turmoil because he has not given you what you want in life.  
And it's usually some very important thing, tends to be an idol in your life.

Are you going to trust the Lord to be God,  
even when he brings things you would never choose?  
Even when he asked you to do what doesn't make sense?  
Or to do what seems to be contrary to your best interests?  
If not, then he's just an accessory in your life—  
He's a lucky rabbit's foot. He's a bartender listening to you pour out your woes.  
You're not really walking with him as your Lord and God until you humbly  
recognize that he has plans that are not your plans.  
He has a will that often crosses your will.

If the Lord is real, and if it is really possible to know him and walk with him—  
then it couldn't be any other way.  
If you had a spouse who had no plan or will of his or her own,  
if your husband or wife always and only, year after year said  
yes dear, no dear, whatever you say dear—never, ever crossing you.  
That wouldn't be marriage to a real person, just a reflection of yourself.

The Lord is real. He does cross you. He does impose his plans on us you.  
Don't resist the truth the pagan sailors embraced—the Lord does as he pleases.

## **MP#2 So what happens when you run away from God?**

Jonah's example shows us.

When you run from God, you go downward and you go inward.

From the moment Jonah began to run from God, his movement was downward.

He left the beautiful hill country of Israel and went down to the coast, Joppa.

He went down into the ship, into the innermost part of the ship, ultimately, he went down into the depths of the sea.

His physical movements parallel his spiritual journey away from the Lord.

He went inward as well, into deeper isolation, away from people as he ran away from God. He not only cut himself off from family and friends, and from his fellow believers in the land of Israel.

Even on the ship he isolated himself, sleeping alone in his cabin through storm.

Uncaring about the needs of others. Refusing even to pray for them when asked.

When he does speak the truth—Lord of Hebrews is the God of the sea—he does so without any desire for them to believe—just stating a fact.

He was still a believer, but his faith didn't move him.

Isn't that exactly what running from God does to you?

It cuts you off from God, increasingly isolates you from people.

And it never leads to peace and joy, but to greater anger, depression, accusation.

There's a man I know in Cullman. He doesn't go to our church.

He's had a number of blows in life.

He's a believer, but He's mostly responded by running from God.

A number of years ago he came to see me and he said.

I hate my ex-wife and it's killing me.

Went on to tell me about the night, three years before, when he confronted his wife about his suspicions, and she admitted she had been unfaithful to him.

He said that his wife walked out on the front porch and he was alone in the house.

In that moment of turmoil and betrayal he had an impression so strong, it was almost like a voice in his head.

The voice said: If you forgive her, your marriage will be saved.

He told me: I crushed that voice. I know it was the Holy Spirit, but I crushed it.

Because I didn't want to forgive her. I wanted her to pay.

I wanted her to feel the same hurt she had done to me.

Went on to tell me how for the past three years,

even after their divorce, he had tried to make her pay.

Whenever he had to deal with her about their children, he would always remind her she was the one who wrecked marriage. She was the one with bad morals. She was the one responsible for their children living in broken home. She had two failed romances after their divorce.

When he found out she was living with each of these men, he began to hope that the relationship would fail and that she would be dumped and hurt. And that's exactly what happened, and he rejoiced.

He thought, now she's getting just a little taste of what she did to me.

But it didn't satisfy him and he continued to replay her unfaithfulness in his mind. Then he began to recognize that his hatred for her was poisoning him.

His relations with other people, his whole outlook on life. So he told himself, You know what, I'm just going to forget her. She's nothing to me. Who cares what she does with her life. I'm not going to think about her anymore.

But that didn't work, because these grooves of hatred had worn so deep, he just couldn't keep his mind from going down those paths.

He had come to see me because he had finally come to admit that it was not his ex-wife that he had the problem with—it was the Lord.

He thought God had not held up his end of bargain.

He had been regular in church attendance with his wife and children, he had gotten involved in youth ministry in his church.

And then the Lord had allowed him to suffer his wife's unfaithfulness.

Rather than follow the Lord down the difficult path of forgiveness and all the uncertainty and possible humiliation of attempted reconciliation—he had run. He was isolated. Reason he came to me, he didn't even have a church or pastor.

Now that may seem like an extreme case, but I think it is similar to Jonah.

The Assyrians had done cruel things, just as her unfaithfulness was cruel.

He had no problem with Lord's mercy to him, or to other people, just not to her. And the thought that God had orchestrated this terrible event in his life to grow his faith and that he might play a role in extending God's mercy to her—that made him so upset, that he ran.

It's all about our idolatry. It's when things we love or trust more than God get threatened or even demolished, because God wants to do something new.

But we sometime say. God, that's too much. You haven't held up your end. I'm out of here.

Leads us to the last question:

**MP#3 How does the Lord deal with runaways like you and me?**

That's the good news. God extends his sovereign grace to runaways.

He guides and orchestrates even your rebellion against him  
for your ultimate good and for his greater purposes.

The Lord could have stopped Jonah from running. He could have laid him low.

Jonah was able to run from the Lord because the Lord gave him legs to run with.

The Lord could have kept Jonah from getting on that ship.

Jonah was able to book passage to Tarshish because the Lord provided the ship.

And the ship was able to sail, because Lord filled the sails with wind.

Jonah thought he was running from God.

But he really being funneled toward the one place  
where he couldn't get away from God.

It was there, on the ship, in the midst of the storm God had sent,

Jonah was forced by the questions of pagan sailors to acknowledge

that the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, the God he was running from was in fact,  
the God of heaven who made the sea and dry land, and his God.

And even when Jonah tried to kill himself,

even when he attempted to end his life by having the sailors throw him overboard,  
God's sovereign grace intervened.

He couldn't kill himself without God's permission.

God even used Jonah's rebellion to bring salvation to the pagan sailors—

the very sort of people that Jonah didn't care for one bit.

Jonah didn't present the Gospel to these men.

He didn't say: Call on the Lord and he will save you.

Basically, all Jonah said was—

The Lord is the true God and if you disobey him you deserve to die.

And yet somehow the sailors took that truth and clung to the possibility that if  
the Lord is the true God, then he must be a God of mercy.

In that hope they repented and believed and were saved.

If Jonah hadn't rebelled, those pagan sailors would not have experienced  
the power of God in this way.

Most likely, they would never have come to know the Lord.

The Scottish pastor Robert Murray M'Cheyne once said:

“A holy minister is an awesome weapon in the hands of God.”



But God doesn't need your holiness to get his work done.

In his sovereign grace, he can use even your rebellion to accomplish his purposes. Rosemary Garcia is a name I'm sure you don't remember.

She was the second prostitute Jimmy Swaggart was busted with.

That event was the nail in the coffin of his worldwide televangelist ministry. Rosemary Garcia revealed later the turmoil and exposure of that event caused her to examine her life for the first time, and she ended up giving her life to Christ. That's the God of Jonah!

Only a God of sovereign grace could use the humiliating sin of a minister to save a woman's broken and lost soul.

How does God deal with runaways like you and me?

He pursues us by his sovereign grace. He pursues us to bring us to salvation, when we were running away from him with all our might.

And after we become Christians, he continues to pursue us throughout the ups and downs and frequent rebellions and temper tantrums of our sanctification to accomplish his purposes in our lives.

He does so through Jesus Christ. Because when the Father said to the Son in the counsels of heaven—Go and preach my grace to those cruel and evil people, who are going to blaspheme me and crucify you—

Jesus didn't run from that command of the Father, he ran after us.

And he's still doing that today.

There is a famous poem by Francis Thompson titled *The Hound of Heaven*.

The poet imagines his soul is like a rabbit, running from the hound.

The hound is none other than Jesus Christ.

The poem begins:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;

I fled Him, down the arches of the years;

I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears . . .

He goes on to describe all the ways he fled from him—

by sin, by human love, by morality, by rationalizing.

And yet he hears throughout his life, in the quiet moments, the sound of following feet—unhurrying, unperturbed, coming closer and closer with majestic, deliberate speed.

It's the hound of heaven. It's the grace of God in Jesus Christ.  
You can run, little rabbit, but you can't hide.

So why not stop running. Give up today. Let him catch you.  
There is something he wants from you and you know it.  
Some old sin in your life he wants you to keep fighting, and not give up.  
Some new matter of obedience he wants you to pursue.  
Some honest confession he wants you to make.  
Someone he wants you to forgive.

You may have been a Christian for a long time, like Jonah.  
But for some reason, perhaps some disappointments, you've grown cold.  
You've found yourself distant and isolated.  
He's been with you all along,  
but he wants you to come back, for your zeal to be rekindled.

He's the God of Jonah. The God of the storm.  
He's the God of all grace, the God of tender mercy.  
He's Lord Jesus Christ, who pursues sinners—  
not just cruel Assyrians,  
but even proud Israelites.

Not just messed up pagans,  
but messed up Presbyterians as well  
who ought to know better than to run from him.