

Runaway Prophet

Jonah 1:1-17

Introduction

Cinema: Jackson **preschool graduation**. What do you want to be when you grow up? The Dark Knight (but he was thinking Lego Batman, maybe the best Batman; “children can be cruel,” “pew, pew, pew”). He comes by it honestly; I’m a cinephile (cinema, not sin).

Lessons from the Bad Guy: When you watch movies (Star Wars, Lion King, etc., who do you identify with? If you pick Scar, Maleficent, or Darth, then we need to have a conversation (I know they make bad guys look so cool, but stop).

- How do you read the Bible? e.g., Judas, Disciples, Jesus, Pharisees, etc. Why I hate my kids sin so much (because I really hate my own). “If Scripture confirms your view of others more than it changes your view of yourself, you’re not reading it correctly” (Coley).
- The Bible is meant to tell us about God and his work in the world, but as it does, it reveals to us our need for him. The Bible is a mirror meant to aid us in the transformation to become like Christ. If amusement parks have proven anything, it’s that there is a shortage of mirrors in America. Look in the mirror and change your clothes! **Look in the Bible and change your heart.** See the depth of your sin and the grace of your Savior.

Never Really Got It: Jonah is a famous and possibly familiar story, but you may have missed the point. **Jonah is the bad guy.** Turn of the century theologians, VeggieTales, memorably sang: “Jonah was a prophet (oo-ooh!) but he never really got it (sad but true!). We give your generation a hard time, but we had to learn theology from animated vegetables (so maybe TikTok isn’t the end of the world).

- **Jonah is a negative example.** Wisdom from a wayward prophet (what *not* to do!). Jonah is a **curveball among the minor prophets**.
 - 11 of the 12 books (Book of the Twelve) are mainly prophecy (oracles) with little or *no* biography about the prophet. We know almost nothing about Obadiah, Malachi, Joel, Habakkuk, or Nahum (It’s gonna be real awkward for some of you when you get to heaven. “Hi, I’m Nahum.” “Na-who?” “Exactly. Maybe you should have read my book!”). We don’t know their locations, families, dates, etc. Yet for Jonah, we know about his ministry (2 Kgs 14), his family, his location, and more.
 - Yet Jonah contains almost *no* prophecy. Only 5 Hebrew words of 1,082 (.46%; less than half a percent) are prophecy in the whole book.
- This book is less about the **message** and more about the **messenger**. Jonah is about the prophet even more than it’s about the prophecy (one of the most memorable OT stories, popular in the early church, VBS, etc.).
- Jonah was a prophet during Amaziah's high priesthood and Jeroboam II's reign (2 Kings 14). While Amos was calling them to repent, Jonah was the mouthpiece of the wicked regime. Israel was prosperous economically but falling apart morally and spiritually. As

long as things were going well, no one cared that they were far from God. He's telling the wicked people they're good. I can't be clearer: Jonah is the bad guy.

Running in the Wrong Direction: The book of Jonah has **four** scenes in **four** chapters.

Chapter One starts off with Jonah **running in the wrong direction**.

- Because I have four kids, I go to a lot of mediocre soccer games. Especially with my 6-year-old, there's always a moment when some kid breaks away from the cluster of grapes and heads down the field **in the wrong direction**. The goalie (at this age not usually the best on the team) is picking flowers or their nose, or their nose with flowers, and the kid shoots and scores **on the wrong goal**.
- I don't have room to talk. In two years of JJV basketball, I scored -1 points.
- The book of Jonah is trying to get your attention if you're **running in the wrong direction**. Turn around before it's too late! Running from God only hurts you and others. **You can run, but you can't hide.**

¹ Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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 and was fast asleep. ⁶ So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish." ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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?" ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." ¹³ Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows. ¹⁷ And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

1. You Can Run... (vv. 1-3)

Word Came: ¹ Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”

- Exactly what we want to happen, happens: **God speaks** (word of the LORD came). But **what he said** was not what Jonah **wanted to hear** (go to Nineveh).
- Do you only follow God when he tells you what you want to hear? Do you know how many people come to me for “my opinion” but what they really want is **their opinion from my mouth?!** If you only follow God when he agrees with what you already think then you are not worshipping him, you are worshipping yourself.
- When God’s word comes, you don’t need to pray about it, strategize, or weigh your options; you simply need to **obey** it (e.g., EG “But what if he’s nice, or I really love him, etc.”).

Inconvenient Word: Why did Jonah reject this word of the LORD?

- **(1) Reluctant to Share “Bad News”:** He was a “good news” prophet. He loved to tell the people of Israel that they would be healthy, wealthy, and wise. He loved to dispense divine blessings to eager crowds.
 - But the good news of the gospel doesn’t take hold of your affections until you feel the bad news. If sin is someone else’s problem, Jesus will remain someone else’s Savior. But the more deeply we feel sin’s sting, the more consciously we feel the gospel’s healing power (McCullough, *adapted*).
- **(2) Prejudice toward “Bad People”:** He was not only a “good news” prophet, but he was a “good news” prophet for the people of Israel. He told the people of Israel what they wanted to hear, whether it was true or not. He told them that God would “Make Israel Great Again.” He preached a nationalistic gospel that was good news for his people and no one else (“good for him, not for them”).
 - This was especially pertinent to **Ninevah**. Nineveh was the capital of the **Assyrian Empire**, the largest city of the day, with huge walls, palaces, libraries, etc.
 - One historian calls the Assyrians the “Lords of Torture” because they not only mastered warfare (building the biggest empire of their day) but they “intentionally advertised their brutality as part of psychological warfare” (e.g., cut off limbs, gouged out eyes, impaling victims on large stakes).
 - This brutal and expanding empire would eventually destroy and enslave the northern kingdom of Israel (i.e., Jonah’s people).
- It wasn’t just the message but who the message was for. These are Jonah’s enemies! God is calling Jonah to go on a mission to a difficult and dangerous place and to a people he hates. Deep down, Jonah knows this and hates it. If God did not love these people, he wouldn’t send his prophet to them.
 - God doesn’t just love Jonah or Israel, but Ninevah. God doesn’t just love well-behaved, religious, worship-song-singing people. He loves evil, God-hating, Ninevites too.

- **(3) Ignoring His “Bad Heart”:** You could argue that God called Jonah to something he would fail at. The success of this mission is impossible apart from God (“We want to be part of something that can only be explained by the power of God”).
 - You cannot run your life until you admit you’re not competent. God revealed a flaw in Jonah’s soul as much as in the Ninevites. Jonah must see how wicked, stupid, weak, and rebellious he is before telling others of God’s grace.
 - All sin is not the same (e.g., burglary vs. murder; I’d rather be burgled than murdered), but all sin completely separates us from an **infinitely** perfect God (btw, it’s not that God can’t be in the presence of sin, it’s that sin can’t be in the presence of God). Until you **admit** you’re a sinner and that your sin separates you from God, you can’t experience God’s grace (regardless of whether it is as heinous in your opinion, as someone else’s).
- “It is natural to see other people’s sins, it is grace to see my own” (Kell).
- “People give as much grace as they think they need” (Christina Edmondson).
- For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:6, 8).
- “Christians have nothing to be smug about; we are not righteous people trying to correct the unrighteous, just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread” (Sproul).

Jonah’s Sin (Running): ³ 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.

- “I was running” (Gump). Bad but(t)s of the Bible. Jonah doesn’t just **ignore** the word of God, he **runs the opposite direction**.
- **Sin is running away from God.** Sin is saying “no” to God and doing what I want instead of what God wants. Cf. Grace is God chasing us down in love.
- “One of the main reasons that we trust God too little is because we trust our own wisdom too much” (Keller). We think we know better than God. We think he should do things differently. Our actions and attitudes often communicate that we believe God doesn’t *really* know what he’s doing (let me fix that for you God; “I can’t believe in a God who”).

Jonah’s Fear (The Presence of God): Where does Jonah go? Tarshish. Tarshish is a real place¹ in Southern Spain, but it is so far from Israel that it might as well be Wakanda or Asgard (e.g., Timbuktu, is a real place, but is synonymous with a far-off, hard-to-reach, inaccessible location). He wasn’t just running away from God’s commands but God’s very presence. When you flee God’s commands, you flee God. Jonah has a big problem with the job he’s been given, which means he has a bigger problem with the God who gave it. When you reject God’s word and reject God’s plan, then you reject God!

- Tarshish symbolizes anywhere that is not the presence of the Lord. Sin isolates you from the presence of God and his people (e.g., Adam and Eve “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God” after they sinned, Gen. 3:8).
 - When you sin, you avoid going to church, reading your Bible, etc. (e.g., KS).

¹ Cf. Gen 10:4, 1 Kgs 10:22, 1 Kgs 22:48, 2 Chron 9:21, 2 Chron 20:36-67, Esth 1:14, Ps 48:7, Ps 72:10, Is 2:16, Is 23:1-14, Is 60:9, Is 66:19, Jer 10:9, Ez 27:12, Ez 27:25, Ez 38:13

- The parts of you that are most broken need God's healing grace the most, but often, those are the parts of you we hold back from surrendering to God (e.g., do you wait until you're healthy to go to the doctor?).
- Not only is it idiotic to run from God (duh, he's everywhere; and Jonah knows this) but it's deadly. God is life; without him is death. Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the **life**" (Jn 14:6). "In him [is] life" (Jn 1:4). "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 Jn 5:12).
 - Running from God is like a baby trying to escape their mother's womb too early. The baby is alive because of her connection to her mother. In the same way, I am truly alive and free because I am with Jesus. If the baby tried to escape, she wouldn't live but would die. Similarly, if I try to escape from Jesus, I won't find life or freedom but death (McLoughlin, inspired).

2. ...But You Can't Hide (vv. 4-17)

Great Storm: ⁴ 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.

- Jonah's best attempts at escaping God are puny compared to the Lord. He "hurled" (threw!) a "great wind," so great that the ship was going to break up. Jonah's out here buying cruise ship tickets and God's throwing hurricanes (we're not the same).
- We see the word "great" repeatedly: Nineveh is a **great city** (1:2), and here there is a **great wind** (1:4), a **great tempest** (1:12), and a **great fish** (1:17). **Everything God does is great! God is going to great lengths to pursue Jonah.** God *could* let Jonah die in the sea and get another prophet. He doesn't *need* Jonah, but he wants Jonah.
- The storm is sent to get Jonah's attention. God's intervention often takes the form of a storm. When we're comfortable, God is far from our minds. But when we're desperate, we'll try anything. The storm is **no guarantee** that you'll "get it." It's an **opportunity**. Storms can make you wise, or they can make you bitter. **How you respond to the storm is the key.** Will you let the storms of life take you to God in dependence or push you away from God in bitterness?
- We see two unexpected responses: **unexpected repentance** from the **pagan sailors** and **surprising stubbornness** from the prophet Jonah, who should know better.

Sailors: The mariners (not the Seattle baseball team) were afraid, and each cried out to his god. There's a famous Jelly Roll song, "Need a Favor" that says: I only talk to God when I need a favor, and I only pray when I ain't got a prayer, so, who the hell am I, who the hell am I, to expect a Savior, if I only talk to God when I need a favor?

- "Everyone's an atheist until they clog a toilet in someone else's house."
- The only thing worse than waiting to go to God when you have no other options, is not going to God when you have no other options.
- ^{*Sidenote*} Sin is not a victimless crime. The storm of Jonah's sin has caught the sailors in its wake. The storm of other people's sins has broken on many of you.

Jonah: But Jonah had gone **down** into the inner part of the ship and had lain **down** and was fast asleep. Jonah's direction is **down**. He had gone down to Joppa (1:3), then down into the ship to lay down (1:5).

- Just how far down will Jonah's sin take him? We'll see in ch. 2 that it takes him to death! Jonah is descending into a tomb of his own making: **the wages of sin is death** (Rom 6:23). The path of **sin** ends in **death**. The gift of **Jesus** is **life**! The gospel assures us that even death can't separate us from God.² He goes into the valley of deep darkness, into the tomb, into the jaws of death, and snatches us from it.³

Theology vs. Truth: The ship's **captain confronts** Jonah (vv. 6-8). **Why aren't you more upset? Why aren't you praying? Who are?** Jonah's response is ironic: ⁹ 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."

- These are Jonah's **first words** in the entire book. Talking about how he "fears God?!" **Could've fooled me!** It's okay to laugh when the Bible's funny. Every aspect of his behavior has been the opposite of what he says right now. **What he confesses with his mouth is not true of his life.**⁴ Some of you are like Jonah. You have all the right answers. You wear the Christian t-shirts. You attend Christian clubs. You are VBS Veterans™ and Youth Group Certified™. But the gospel has never made it from your **head** to your **heart**.
- Public profession is important⁵ **but public profession is not the same as genuine transformation.** "It is much easier a thing to walk an aisle than to take up a cross" (Mark Dever). Remember that "Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss, [so] someone's public affection for Jesus might not be telling the whole story" (Onwuchekwa).
- Jonah had the prophetic resumé and theological acumen but not a real relationship with God. **I don't want you to look Christian; I want you to be Christian. I don't want you to look good; I want you to be saved** (e.g., Roy "Big Country" Nelson vs. Cheick Kongo; Congo as a 6'4" 242lb, shredded Adonis; Nelson mullet, belly, etc.; Nelson flatlined Congo because **looking good isn't enough**. "Show muscles vs. go muscles"). It is possible to know the right answers, do the right Bible studies, go to the right camps, sing the right worship songs, and never receive the rest, welcome, and life in Jesus they point to. These songs, sermons, Bible studies, and theology "are a map," but not the actual trip. They point you to Jesus, but you still have to go to him, surrender to him, and follow him (e.g., it is possible for you to memorize the streets of Philadelphia and "know" it better than me; but you haven't experienced. You might "know" 🧠 it, but you don't *know* ❤️ it).
- **Some of you are filled with knowledge about Jesus but not a relationship with him.**

Rather Die: ¹¹ Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?"⁶ For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. ¹² He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl

² Rom 8:38

³ Ps 23:4, Is 9:2, Matt 12:40, Jn 11:25-26,

⁴ Theological truth is of no value if it doesn't impact the way you think and behave.

⁵ It's biblical, and God calls us to unashamedly live for him

⁶ It's not enough to just get out of your mess, but it's not a bad place to start. Just don't stop at escape, make sure you continue until you get to worship (i.e., v. 16).

me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.”⁷

- **This is not the gospel!** Jonah is making this up. We don't throw virgins into volcanoes to assuage the wrath of a capricious God. We have a God who **died** for us, in our place. Death is the only way out, but it doesn't have to be Jonah's death. And he knows it because he knows if the Ninevites would repent God would spare them (the same offer exists for him). Some of us *know* God's grace but haven't experienced it!⁸
- He'd rather talk *about* God than talk *to* God. He'd rather die than surrender. He still wants to be in control. This is the definition of **stubbornness** (pouty lip, plant your feet, cross your arms). Your pride will cause you to drown in sin and misery rather than admit you are wrong and receive the life and grace of God in Christ.
- ¹⁵ So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.⁹ **His rebellion has come to an end.** God wins.
- ¹⁷ And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. The miracle of this man-eating fish isn't the big miracle. If we have a God who can raise Jesus from the dead, then we have a God who can turn fish guts into Air BnBs.

The point of the story isn't the great city, the great storm, or the great fish, but the great God who loves the wrong kind of people (like wicked Ninevites and rebellious prophets). He loves them enough to chase them down, rather than let them drown.

- Jonah thinks he can die in the ocean, that way he doesn't have to go to Nineveh, and the Ninevites won't get to hear God's warning of judgment. He is **obstinate**. So are some of us (e.g., "anything but that"). And God in his **severe mercy** is harming him to heal us. Like an **expert surgeon**, he's cutting away our pride and excuses so that all we have left to trust is him!

Unlikely Disciples: ¹⁶ Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows.

- The **pagan sailors** do the thing the **privileged prophet** should have done! Jonah says he fears YHWH but these men actually *act* like it. **The pagans recognize God more than Jonah does.** This is shocking because of the reputation of sailors (there's a reason we say "cuss like a sailor" not a schoolteacher). For all Jonah's attempts to keep the nations from following God, his own disobedience is used as an opportunity to make the **least likely disciples**.
- Ironically, Jonah ran from God to *not* reach pagans (Ninevah) and reached pagans on this ship!
- **God saves the least likely people!** If you think you're the wrong kind of person for God to save, then you are in the right spot for God to surprise you!

Conclusion

⁷ Keller sees Jonah as truly repenting when he admits he is the problem and worships YHWH. Meeks, for example, sees Jonah as still not getting it, only wanting to die. Jonah appears to have theological truth but not functional trust. The book, as a whole, leans to the latter (especially with Jonah's continued recalcitrance in chapter 4).

⁸ He's also a coward! He makes the sailors throw him in rather than jump in himself.

⁹ God hurled a wind (1:4), the sailors hurled cargo (1:5), and now they hurled Jonah into the sea (1:12, 15).

Stop Running: You can't experience revival while running from God; **stop running**. You can't experience revival while running your own life; **surrender control**. Turn from yourself and your sin, and place your faith in Christ.

- **Faith** is not merely an intellectual exercise. Jonah knew God's truth. Faith is **trust** that God is right and good and knows best. He knows what is better for me than I know myself. "When you come to Christ, you drop your conditions. You give up the right to say, 'I will obey if...'. That is not obedience at all because you are saying [to God]: 'You are my advisor, not my Lord.'" I'll consider your recommendations but I am still in charge (Keller *adapted*). If you are still in charge then you are the god of your life, and what a weak god you will be. You can't save yourself, much less others. **Only God is great enough to be God, so let him**. As long as you are running your life, you will eventually run yourself into the ocean of despair.

Running?: Why are you running from God?

- Are you running from God because you want to **sin**? Sin leads to death, Jesus gives life.
- Are you running from God's call to **share the gospel** with others? There is no greater joy than joining God in his mission to save, especially the least likely.
- Are you running from God's **control** of your life? You want to control everything? He knows what is best, trust him.

Tired?: Aren't you tired of running from God? You don't have to run **from** him, you can run **to** him! "Come to [Jesus]... and [he] will give you rest" (Matt 11:28). 🙏 Who is ready to stop running **from** God and run **to** God? 🙏