

*I read a story of a 5-year-old boy who decided to run away from home because he didn't like being told what to do by his parents. The woman who lived next door saw him leave the house as she was cutting her grass. She watched the boy as he walked up and down the sidewalk in front of her house dragging his little suitcase behind him. He would then disappear around the corner and a few minutes later he would reappear and go past her again. After he had gone past her house several times, she finally asked him, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm running away from home." To which she replied, "Well, why do you keep circling the block?" And he said, "Because my Mom and Dad won't let me cross the street by myself."*

This young boy tried to run away – but he isn't getting very far, **is he?** Like this young boy, **have you ever been told to do something you didn't want to do, or maybe the demands of life just seemed too burdensome and too overwhelming, and you just wanted to run away from it all?** Just leave everything – leave the responsibilities, leave the obligations, and leave your problems behind you and go someplace where no one can find you. I have, and I'm not talking about a "Calgon – take me away" moment in the bathtub. Sometimes, you just want to throw your hands up in the air and say "I'm done, I'm out of here." I've been there, and if you've been there, hopefully you will be able to relate to the message this morning.

This morning and for the next several weeks we're going to look at someone who was told to do something he didn't want to do. He was given an assignment, an assignment he felt was just too great, it was asking too much of him, so he refused to obey it, and he ran away from it all – or at least he tried. This morning, we are beginning our study in the book of Jonah.

Most of us have heard the story of "Jonah and the Whale" since we were little children, and because it is so popular, some might mistakenly consider it to be nothing more than a children's fairytale similar to the *Tortoise and the Hare*. Many have doubts it's even in the Bible – to include Christians.

In a Barna Survey among Christians:

- Only 61% knew that Jonah was a book in the Bible
- 27% said it was not in the Bible, it's only a children's story
- 12% had no idea.

And even among those who know that the story of Jonah is in the Bible, some suggest it is only symbolic in nature – it really didn't happen. Some consider this story to be more like a parable that Jesus might tell, whereas others believe the story to be historically accurate and based on real life events. That is what I believe – Jonah is a true biblical account involving a real prophet, with real people

in a real place, at a real time. Jesus Himself pointed to the story of Jonah as an accurate account of history when He stated in **Matthew 12:40**,

*“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”*

Jesus said this, in fact, Jonah is the only Minor Prophet mentioned by Jesus.

Now in regard to Jonah’s identity, there is a Jewish tradition that says he was the son of the widow of Zarephath – the son whom Elijah raised from the dead in **1 Kings 17:8-24**. This is an interesting thought, but it’s unverifiable as far as I can tell.

But if you venture from **1 Kings** to the book of **2 Kings**, you will find that Jonah is mentioned there. In **2 Kings 14:23-27**, Jonah first shows up during the reign of King Jeroboam II who was a wicked king. This is sometime around the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. And due to their idolatry, Israel had suffered attacks and lost a lot of its territory. Then comes Jonah, who was a prophet to the ten northern tribes of Israel. And, Jonah prophesied, according to the word from God, that King Jeroboam II would expand Israel’s territory – and that’s exactly what happened. Just as Jonah had prophesied, King Jeroboam II enlarged the northern borders of Israel to where they had been in the days of King Solomon.

As a result of this expansion, the nation enjoyed a time of relative peace and prosperity, even though they were still morally and spiritually bankrupt and had moved far away from God and into idolatry.

So, Israel starts to think they are something. They’ve expanded their boundaries and they are also experiencing an economic boom. Life is good – there’s a lot of excitement in the air, and I suspect that Jonah had become popular because his prediction came true. He’s probably a celebrity – things are great for everyone.

There was only one little slight problem. Although Israel was a great nation – over to the east, across the desert, another very powerful nation – Assyria, was stretching her wings so to speak and let’s just say they were not the friendliest people you would want to meet. The capital city of Assyria was Nineveh.

Now as to the origin of Nineveh, that is an interesting story. According to **Genesis 10:8-11**, shortly after the Flood, Nimrod built both Babel and Nineveh. Babel became the capital of the Babylonian empire and Nineveh became the capital of the Assyrian empire, both located in modern day Iraq. If you remember, Israel

would later fall to the Assyrians and Jerusalem would fall to the Babylonians after that. So clearly, Jonah saw the Assyrians as a mortal enemy and for very good reason which we will discuss a little later.

Okay, that's enough about Nineveh and the Assyrians for now because the story of Jonah really isn't about them. And it's not about a fish, for the fish is only mentioned four times. Jonah is named 18 times, but the Lord God is mentioned 38 times, and if you eliminated God from this little book – the story wouldn't make any sense. God is the central character in this story. God is the hero in this story, not Jonah. The book of Jonah is about God – the will of God, and how God deals with people who want their own way. Jonah is the story of God's divine plan to reach an ungodly people, and one man's resistance to be part of God's plan.

But that's not all. In the Old Testament, people often see God as being overly harsh and judgmental, but in Jonah we clearly see something entirely different. Jonah is a book about our gracious and loving God who pursues people – people who run from Him – people who throw their hands up in the air and say, *"I'm done, I'm out of here."* He is a pursuing God. That's who God is, and that's who we serve.

So, let's turn to Jonah and we are only going to read the first three verses of **Chapter 1** this morning.

**<sup>1</sup>The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai (Ah-mit-tie) saying, <sup>2</sup>"Arise, go to Nineveh the great city and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." <sup>3</sup>But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So, he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.**

We begin this story with the Lord giving Jonah an unusual job assignment for a prophet. It's unusual because the prophets of Israel and Judah typically spoke to their own people. On occasion, they might be directed to take a message to a ruler or ruler-to-be in a neighboring territory, and they might even write prophetic messages to other nations – but Jonah is the only prophet actually commanded to physically go into foreign land, to enter foreign soil, and preach God's message to a foreign people – an enemy of Israel.

To put you in Jonah's shoes for a moment, let me put this assignment in some perspective. Imagine if God said to you, *"I want you to go to Afghanistan, to the*

*Taliban headquarters, and I want you to share the Gospel to them so they might turn to Me before it's too late.*” **Tough assignment isn't it?**

We are told that Jonah was given this command because God said **“their wickedness has come up before Me.”** Nineveh's sin had become so great that it stunk to high heaven and required God's direct attention, much along the lines of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The people of Nineveh had a vicious reputation – known for a cruelty that is hard to fathom. When I think of cruelty and brutality, I think of the horrible treatment of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps, but they had nothing on the Assyrians when it came to outright viciousness. They were notorious for amputating hands and feet, gouging out eyes, ripping out tongues, and skinning and impaling their captives alive watching them die in agony. They were an idolatrous, wicked and extremely cruel people, and they needed more than a letter – they needed a personal intervention by a prophet sent by God. Now, if that does not speak volumes about God's grace, I don't know what does.

So, Jonah was given clear but uncomfortable marching orders by God and told to travel about 500 miles to the northeast towards Nineveh, but instead he boarded a ship and headed west to Tarshish about 2000 miles in the exact opposite direction. Tarshish was in southern Spain, about as far as one could go in the known civilized world. It's the farthest away he could possibly choose.

I find it interesting that there is no record of Jonah discussing this assignment with God, seeking clarification, or even arguing with God. He simply gets up and heads in the opposite direction – no discussion is necessary. God said *“go this way”* and Jonah went that way. This is the only biblical instance of a prophet concealing a message given to him by God.

**Did you notice all of the verbs in verse 3?**

Jonah rose up, he fled, he went, he found, he paid the fare, and he went down. We all sin, but it seems to me that running from God requires a lot of extra effort. It's a lot of hard work to run away, but surprise, surprise, Jonah found the right ship waiting for him, at the right time, and he had the right amount of money to pay the fare for his long Mediterranean cruise.

*“Wow, God has made a way. He's opened the door for me – it must be God's will that I go to Spain after all.” “I mean, surely the people in Tarshish need to hear a word from God too.”* That's something I might say to rationalize my behavior.

In Jonah's rebellion, things seemed to be working in his favor. I guess when we are running from God, the devil is more than happy to provide you with all the transportation you will need.

So, here's the million-dollar question: **Why did Jonah run away?**

Let's take a sneak peek and turn to **Jonah 4:2**. Here is the main reason. Jonah said,

**"I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity."**

Jonah's reason for running was, quite simply, he hated the Assyrians. Jonah wanted Nineveh to be wiped out and turned into a parking lot. He felt they deserved God's full wrath – you know that "pit of hell" kind of wrath, and Jonah didn't want to see God's grace and mercy extended to them. It was an unbearable thought to Jonah that they could possibly turn from their wicked ways and be forgiven by God. This prophet of God, this man of God, couldn't bear to be an instrument used by God to reach an ungodly people – people he saw as the enemy. He just could bring himself to do it – he had reached his limit – so he ran.

Now go back to **Chapter 1 verse 3**. Let me read it again because I want to show you something.

**<sup>3</sup> But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So, he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.**

**Did you notice that our passage did not say Jonah was trying to flee Nineveh?**

It says twice, he was trying to get away from the **presence of the Lord** just to make sure we understood his real intention. It literally means he was trying to get away from "*the face of the Lord*" which doesn't mean that God couldn't see him but it seems to mean that Jonah wanted to put God's convicting will and God's conflicting desire out of his mind, and he thought he could find refuge some place where God was not present.

So, Jonah essentially handed in his resignation as a prophet because he wanted away from God. He couldn't serve God under God's unreasonable terms. God went too far this time and it was Jonah's way or the highway.

Sadly, we all have been in the position of Jonah at one time or another – our own desires pulling one way and God clearly pulling us another. We know exactly what God wants us to do, but we willingly choose to go our own way or even try to run away like Jonah. But running from God means one simple thing – you are running in the wrong direction, and playing “hide and go seek” with God is a game He is really good at. He has never lost that game, a game which started when Adam and Eve tried hiding from God in garden. Running and hiding from God is an exercise in futility. We are told in **Psalm 139**:

*<sup>7</sup>Where can I go from Your Spirit?  
Or where can I flee from Your presence?  
<sup>8</sup>If I ascend to heaven, You are there;  
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.  
<sup>9</sup>If I take the wings of the dawn,  
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,  
<sup>10</sup>Even there Your hand will lead me,  
And Your right hand will lay hold of me.  
<sup>11</sup>If I say, “Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,  
And the light around me will be night,”  
<sup>12</sup>Even the darkness is not dark to You,  
And the night is as bright as the day.  
Darkness and light are alike to You.*

We cannot hide from God and running from Him is absolute foolishness. You can't outrun God or hide from His presence. God is always present. His presence is continuous. Yes, there may be moments where it seems He is more present than in other moments, and there may be times where His presence is revealed in different or special ways – but we can't forget He is always there. You are never alone. That thought may be comforting for some, but it may also be unnerving to others depending on what you are doing. Running and hiding from God is useless.

When God speaks to us from His word, we may not like what He has to say. It may not seem fair or reasonable. There may be times when God gives us a task that seems just too difficult to swallow – it seems too hard and overly burdensome. But if God has impressed on your heart to do something or to speak to someone, but you refuse and look for an easy way out or try to rationalize your disobedience – then you are just like Jonah.

When God speaks, we may not like what He says, and His direction may not make sense to us – but He is not like you and He is not like me. **You know how I know that?** Because He pursues people I wouldn't pursue if I were God. He blesses

people I wouldn't bless if I were God. He uses people in His service I wouldn't use if I were God. He forgives people I wouldn't forgive if I were God. He loves people I wouldn't love if I were God. He saves people I wouldn't save if I were God. **Aren't you glad I'm not God?** As I have told you on several occasions, God does not see me the way you see me. God does not see you the way I see you. And God does not see you the way you see you. Thank God for that!

I have one last thing to say this morning and it's in the form of a question. **Where or what or who is your Nineveh?** In a nutshell, your Nineveh is that place, that position, or that person that prompts you to say, *"Not that Lord! Anything, but that!"*

- Nineveh is that thing that pulls you completely out of your comfort zone.
- Nineveh is that place God tells you to go where you don't want to go. *"Lord, you can send me anywhere, but please don't send me there!"*
- Nineveh is that calling to the ministry that you are reluctant to answer. *"Lord, send someone else, but not me!" "Let another answer my call."*
- Nineveh is that person who may not share your values and views, but needs to experience the love of God through you. **"Lord, you want me to talk to my neighbor?"** *"But Lord, she is from California and she has a bumper sticker on her car that says, 'Honk if you love Nancy' and I don't think she is referring to Nancy Reagan. And Lord, I think she is into hot yoga." Lord, that ain't right. I just can't do it. You are asking too much of me."* God is not saying you have to agree with them or attend a hot yoga class, but you got to love them. You have to do what love requires of you.
- Nineveh may be the person who has hurt you deeply and God says, forgive them.

If you are running from God – you are going in the wrong direction. Stop it and turn around! If you are hiding from God – you can't. Yes, what God may be asking you to do may not be easy, it may seem completely unreasonable and undoable, but He will never steer you wrong. I pray that you return to Him if you are running and hiding. If God has commanded you to go to your Nineveh – whatever, wherever or whoever that may be, then trust that God knows what He is doing, He has a purpose and a plan, and He asks that you simply obey Him.

Source Material:

Holman Old Testament Commentary – Max Anders  
Exposition Commentary – Warren Wiersbe  
The Bible Knowledge Commentary – Walvoord & Zuck  
Enduring Word – David Guzik