

Jonah 1:1-3
God's Runaway Prophet

Introduction

Good morning church! My name is John. I'm one of the pastors at GCF. If you're visiting with us, thank you for being here. We typically preach through books of the Bible. This morning we begin a four-week series in the book of Jonah. Jonah is found in what we call the OT. The book of Jonah is one of twelve books known as the "minor prophets." Not because they are less important but because they are shorter in length. For those familiar with book, it's known for – what's it known for? A fish. A big fish. But that's not what the book of Jonah is about.

Before preaching through any book of the Bible, it's helpful to remember that the purpose of Scripture is to reveal the character and purposes of God and his Christ. Jesus of Nazareth is that Christ. Jesus himself, when talking to some guys who knew the OT Scriptures really well, said: **"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."** All that to say, Jonah is not about a fish. Jonah is about the character and purposes of God and Jesus – the Christ.

Jonah is also about God's people. The writer sees Jonah as a representative of God's people. In Jonah's day, God's people are the nation of Israel. In our day, God's people are the church. Us. Jonah is about us. I heard it described like this:

It's about the worst tendencies that form within God's people: pride, hard-heartedness, self-centeredness, tribalism, small-mindedness, and a refusal to let God's relentless mercy, grace, and compassion change us and grow us.

Just a warning, we're headed for some painful truth. Seems like a good time to remind you I'm only the messenger. Our time in Jonah will be challenging. But God means it to be challenging in a good way and for a good purpose.

So, before we begin, let me pray for us.

Jonah 1:1-3
God's Runaway Prophet

1. God's prophet commissioned (v. 1-2)

Jonah's story begins with a commission.

"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai..." (Jon. 1:1)

It's an abrupt beginning. But in OT prophetic works, it's a familiar formula. The "word of the Lord comes" to the prophet. Prophets speak God's Word to the people. So, we expect Jonah to say, "Now hear this...God says..." But that's not what happens. Jonah is unique among prophetic works. Instead of "God says" we get a story about the prophet Jonah.

The name 'Jonah' means 'dove.' A dove symbolized innocence and purity. Jonah is further identified as 'son of Ammitai.' Ammitai means 'faithfulness.' So, we're told that the word of the Lord came to this 'dove, a son of faithfulness.' It's meant to make us laugh. It's a point of irony.

It's also a point of history. God had commissioned Jonah before. In 2 Kings 14 we read that God spoke to Israel through Jonah son of Ammitai. It was during the reign of king Jeroboam II. Jeroboam II ruled over the northern kingdom of Israel for 41 years. From **793 to 752 BC**. Jeroboam II was a bad guy. He was named after the Jeroboam I. Jeroboam I built golden calves in Bethel and Dan so that people would go to these instead of the temple at Jerusalem. Thus, he caused a civil war and broke the nation Israel into two. A northern kingdom, Israel; and a southern kingdom, Judah. Both Jeroboams were really bad guys. 2 Kings 14 tells us,

...Jeroboam the son of Joash [Jeroboam II], king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat [Jeroboam I], which he made Israel to sin. (2 Kings 14:23b-24)

You get the picture. Bad king. Bad nation. Both king and nation did what was evil in God's eyes. They deserve God's judgment. But God gives them mercy. God

Jonah 1:1-3
God's Runaway Prophet

commissions Jonah to tell Jeroboam II that God will use him to expand Israel's borders.

He [Jeroboam II] restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. (2 Kings 14:23b-25)

Israel's borders had continually shrunk since it was divided in two. In an incredible act of grace and mercy, God commissions Jonah to speak this good news to Israel. And he does.

Now, God commissions Jonah again.

"Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." (Jon. 1:2)

It's a shocking commission.

First, it's a shocking commission because God had never sent a Hebrew prophet to a foreign city. Sure, the prophets Elijah and Elisha had blessed individual foreigners. But this was different. God commissions Jonah to a foreign city.

Second, it's a shocking commission because it's Nineveh. Nineveh was the greatest city of the Assyrian empire. One of the greatest cities of the ancient world. Located 600 miles northeast of Israel, it endured for over a thousand years. It was huge by ancient standards. Nineveh was representative of the Assyrian empire. Assyria was one of the cruelest, most violent empires in human history. Here's a sample...

Assyrian kings often recorded the results of their military victories, gloating of whole plains littered with corpses and of cities burned completely to the ground. The emperor Shalmaneser III is well known for depicting torture, dismembering, and decapitations of enemies on large stone relief panels...

After capturing enemies, the Assyrians would typically cut off their legs and one arm, leaving the other arm and hand so they could shake the victim's hand in

Jonah 1:1-3
God's Runaway Prophet

mockery as he was dying. They forced friends and family members to parade with the decapitated heads of their loved ones on elevated poles. They pulled out prisoners' tongues and stretched their bodies with ropes so they could be flayed alive and their skins displayed on city walls.¹

One historian called Assyria "biblical era Nazis." Assyria's policy of terrorism sowed extreme hatred among their neighbors. Israel being one of them. In fact, prior to Jeroboam II, Assyria required Israel to pay money to keep them from invading. It was only because Assyria was distracted with other problems that Jeroboam II was able to briefly expand Israel's borders. 30 years after Jeroboam II, Assyria would invade and destroy the northern kingdom of Israel (722 BC).

So, God's commission was shocking because he was sending a prophet to a foreign city. And not just any foreign city, Nineveh.

Third, it was a shocking commission because it was a mission of mercy. Jonah is commissioned to "**call out against Nineveh, for their evil has come before me.**" Nineveh deserves judgment. God commissions Jonah to warn Nineveh that judgment is coming. The warning implies that if they repent God will relent. If Nineveh turns from their evil, God will turn from judgment.

God's prophet is commissioned on a mission of mercy to these hated foreigners.

¹ From Tim Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet*, 10-11.

Jonah 1:1-3
God's Runaway Prophet

2. God's prophet runs (v. 3)

It's a unique commission. And it's a unique response. When God says, "Get up and go" we typically read that the prophet, "Got up and went." Instead verse 3 says,

"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." (Jon. 1:3)

God's prophet runs away. It's a surprising twist. Jonah's disobedience is unique among the prophets in Scripture. Jonah gets up and runs to Tarshish. In effect, God calls Jonah to go east. Jonah goes west.

SHOW MAP

Nineveh was located in modern-day Iraq near the city of Mosul. Tarshish is as far from Nineveh as you could go. It was the western edge of the known world. It would be like God telling you to go to Billings, MT and you hop in your car, race to Seattle, and catch the first boat to Japan.

Jonah runs away. Specifically, Jonah runs away from God. Twice in verse 3, the author tells us that Jonah went to Tarshish **"away from the presence of the Lord."** It's weird. Jonah knows that God is everywhere present. He would have been familiar with Psalm 139 where David says, "where shall I flee from your presence?" The answer is: nowhere.

Jonah doesn't deny that God is everywhere present. He's got good theology in his head. But his heart is far from God. By running from the Lord's presence, Jonah says, "Not your will be done but my will be done."

Which raises the question of why? Why does Jonah run from God's commission? We're not told why in chapter 1. Based on Assyria's reputation, fear would be the

Jonah 1:1-3
God's Runaway Prophet

most obvious reason. Someone said it would be like one of us going to Iraq preaching Jesus wearing a "Make America Great Again" hat and a Bruce Springsteen "Born in the USA" T-shirt. Few of us sign up for that mission trip. Fear would make sense. Jonah's afraid. So, he runs. But that's not the reason. Jonah reveals the reason in chapter 4. Jonah tells God,

That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. (Jon. 4:2b)

Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh because he's convinced that if he goes, God will find a way to extend grace and mercy to Jonah's enemies. Jonah doesn't want God to give Nineveh mercy, he wants God to give Nineveh justice!

Let's pause for a second and acknowledge what Jonah can teach us positively. If you were to ask Jonah, "what is God like?" he would answer – without hesitation: "gracious and merciful." That's actually a remarkable – and biblical – instinct. My experience is that's not how Christians tend to answer this question. Those of us who say we believe that God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us. Here's what I mean. At a recent home group meeting, we were sitting at the table sharing a meal. I asked the question, "how do you think God feels about you?" One by one, the answers were: disappointed, frustrated, irritated, annoyed. You get the idea. How would you answer that question, "how do you think God feels about you?" If we're honest, many of us think that God is just waiting for us to mess up so that he can bring the hammer down. That's what made one response so memorable. When it was his turn, Noah answered: compassion. I think God feels compassion for me. I learned a lesson from Noah that night that has stuck with me. The book of Jonah teaches the same lesson: God is gracious, compassionate, and merciful. That's what he's like. Even to people like the Assyrians. Even to people like the Israelites. Even to people like you and me.

Here's the thing. Jonah had no problem speaking God's mercy to his own people. Clearly, God considered Israel evil. Jonah says, sign me up to preach mercy for me

Jonah 1:1-3
God's Runaway Prophet

and my people. I'm happy to be God's prophet of mercy for Israel. But for Nineveh? No way. I'm out.

So, why did Jonah run? Jonah has a vision of what God should do and a vision for how his life should go. He wanted Nineveh destroyed because they were a chief threat to the nation he loved. And the life he loved. God's vision clashes with Jonah's vision. Jonah says with his actions, "Not your will but my will be done."

I can relate to Jonah. And I know you can too. We all have a vision of what God should or shouldn't do. We all have a vision for how our life should go. We can do all the church activities and still have a heart that is on the run. **A heart that limits what God can do with us.** God, you can do this, this, and this. But not that. You can give me blessings but don't call me to suffer. You can give me what's familiar and comfortable but don't call me to something difficult.

A heart on the run also limits what God can do in us. God you can talk to me about this, this, and this. But not that. You can talk to me about church attendance but don't talk to me about my finances. You can talk to me about serving in the church but don't talk to me about serving my wife. You can talk to me about reading the Bible and praying but don't talk to me about my boyfriend. You can talk to me about serving at the Union Gospel Mission but don't talk to me about my sexuality. You can talk to me about eschatology but don't talk to me about forgiving my spouse.

Jonah runs because he's committed to *his* vision of what God should do and how his life should go.

Here's the really sad thing. As one pastor said so well, "**Jonah thinks he's running for his life. But he's actually running away from life.**"

Jonah thinks his vision for his life will bring him life, but it takes him from the One who is life. His sin and rebellion results in a spiritual descent. The writer highlights this fact by emphasizing that Jonah went down. It's a euphemism for death.

Jonah 1:1-3
God's Runaway Prophet

“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.” (Jon. 1:3)

Jonah's running from God results in spiritual death. Jonah thinks he's running for his life. But he's actually running away from life.

I know what that's like. Maybe you do too. I spent years running. I ran to romantic relationships for life. I ran to tennis for life. I ran to good grades for life. I ran to weightlifting for life. I ran to career for life. I ran to marriage and family for life. These are great gifts but never intended to be the source of life. God has made us for himself. True life is found in knowing him. That's why these other things never truly satisfied. They were never enough.

We think we're running for life but we're actually running from life. Just like Jonah.

God commissions Jonah. Jonah runs. But in mercy, God pursues his runaway prophet.

Jonah 1:1-3
God's Runaway Prophet

3. God's prophet pursued (v. 4a)

Look at the beginning of verse 4,

"But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea..." (Jon. 1:4a)

It's a severe mercy. Through the storm God works to bring his runaway prophet back to himself. God pursues Jonah. God pursues us. Only he doesn't pursue us through a storm, but through his Son. And the good news is that Jesus is a better prophet than Jonah. Where Jonah says "no" to God's mission of mercy, Jesus says "yes."

I like how one writer put it.

Jonah was in a good place, doing good work, enjoying a good life. Then, God said, "Jonah, I want you to go to another place, and do a different work for the sake of the people I love; people who are facing imminent judgment." Jonah said "No."

Jesus was in heaven, ruling the universe by the word of his power. Adored by angels, he was in the best place, doing the best work, and enjoying the best life. Then, the Father said, "Go to another place, where you will be utterly rejected. You will live a life that will lead to torture, crucifixion, and death. You will become an atoning sacrifice for people I love, who are facing an eternal judgment." Jesus said "Yes."

Jesus said "yes" to God's mission of mercy to bring rebels and runners back to himself. He was willing to die so that you might live.

Today, Jesus invites you to come to him for life. He says, "Follow me!" When you respond to Jesus, you'll find the true life you're looking for.

You'll also find that your competing visions of life need to die. I was a newish Christian in my early thirties. Stacy and I had four sons under 6 years old. I had a wonderful vision for my life: Quit my job. Sell our home. Go to seminary. There was

Jonah 1:1-3
God's Runaway Prophet

only one problem. Stacy didn't share my vision. Actually, there were two problems: God didn't share my vision either. I just didn't know it then. I wanted my vision for my life so bad. It felt like my life couldn't be good unless I had my vision for my life. It took fifteen years until I was able to give thanks that I didn't get my vision for my life. Fifteen years later I could see he had good purposes. I still have competing visions of life that need to die.

And so do you. Christian, every day Jesus says, "Follow me!" To follow Jesus is to lay down our vision of what God should do. To follow Jesus is to lay down our vision for how our life should go. It's not easy because so many things look and feel like life; and suffering looks and feels like death. But God has good purposes even when he calls us to hard things. He means to give us life. He means to give us himself. He means to change us and grow us. He means to use us in his mission of mercy to the people around us.

As the hymn says so well, "**prone to wander Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.**" So, every day we turn from our vision and find life in Jesus. We find our life in his life, his purposes, and his goals.

Jonah 1:1-3
God's Runaway Prophet

Conclusion

The book of Jonah begins with a commission. Jonah responds by running.

Jesus commissions each of us today. He says, "Follow me!"

To every non-Christian here Jesus says, "Follow me!"

To every Christian here Jesus says, "Follow me!"

How will you respond?