

“Sailors, Meet Jonah”

Jonah 1

08/14/22

Introduction

Tim. Pastor. **Jonah 1. Pray.**

Steve Callahan. About 40 years ago a guy by the name of Steve Callahan was by himself lost at sea on a little tiny life raft for 76 days. 2 ½ months, alone, in a little life raft, somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. And as the days went on, he lost a ⅓ of his body weight, he started going in and out of consciousness because of starvation and dehydration. But in the midst of all of that, he had the wherewithal to take three pencils, and fashion them together into something called a **sextant** - which is a nautical tool you can use to get your bearings by measuring the distance between the sun and the horizon.

And so it was based on his understanding of these fixed realities in the universe - the sun and the horizon - that he was able to determine what latitudinal line he was on on the globe. He paddled into the right current, and floated into the Caribbean, and had a nice vacation...because it's lovely there...and he wrote a bestselling book and he's doing great.

Now, why do I tell you that story - besides the fact that it has to do with the ocean and we're studying Jonah...

For this reason → **Because it was his understanding of two fixed realities about the universe (the horizon of the sea and the position of the sun) that helped him navigate the uncertain waters where he found himself.**

Cool, but what does that have to do with us?

Well over the course of the next four weeks as we study the book of Jonah together - I want to show us 2 fixed realities about the universe that if you can get your mind and heart around them, will help you navigate your life whatever season you might be in.

The first reality is this → **There is an instinct within us to resist the leadership of God.**

Though we're all made in God's image, though we're all designed to reflect Him, and be with Him and participate with Him in the work He's doing, we still run, we still resist.

And at its core level, this running doesn't make sense. Because we see and experience time and time again in the Scriptures and in our own lives that with Him, the author and creator of life, is true life and joy and flourishing, and we see that and we still go - nope, going this way. There is still this pull within us to want to run from Him and resist His lordship over our lives.

Running away from home. When I was 8 years old, I ran away from home. I won't tell you why, I couldn't live through that embarrassment - it was a really dumb reason, you can come ask me later - my mom's here you can feel free to ask her too. But I ran away from home. About 3:30 in the afternoon one Tuesday, I packed a bookbag, said my goodbyes, and headed off down our country road dead set on making it to the Food Lion about 5 miles away.

And so I walk down the driveway, I'm pacing myself you know, I'm a bigger kid, it's going to take some time, I don't want to get winded. I turn onto our road. Keep going.

Now listen → running away made absolutely no sense. I was 8. My home life was great no reason to run from that. Also, I didn't have any money. Or a phone. I had 2 days worth of clothes. I had no plan post-Food Lion. I was gonna get there, buy some snacks with the money I didn't have, and then just figure it out as a vagabond for the rest of my childhood years I guess, ldk...Plus I was a pretty weak and whiny kid, I'm not making it in the cold dark world, ok?

Absolutely foolish, but I take off. Make it about 4 or 5 houses down - probably like a quarter mile if even at this point, and I notice our van pull up beside me, and it's my mom. And she's just driving along slowly - like a scene out of a movie.

"Where you headed? You tired yet? Want to come home?" Eventually about ½ a mile in, I gave up, got in the van and went home.

**It was crazy to think I should run away.
It was my mom's grace to chase me.**

The first reality is - There is a tendency within all of us to run away from the leadership and Lordship of God.

The Bible calls this pull **sin**.

The second reality is → **There is an instinct within God to chase us.**

And to do whatever it takes to get our attention, and to interrupt our self-destructive behavior and rebellion.

The Bible calls this → **grace**.

Around these two realities orbits the entire universe. It's the theme of the Scriptures, it's the theme of your life and mine. Sin and grace. Running and chasing.

And it is the theme of the book of Jonah. The theme we will keep coming back to in this story over the next four weeks:

Jonah is consistently rebellious (world's worst prophet - on the run from God) **and God is consistently gracious.**

And that is put to the forefront of our minds in the very first chapter. So let's get into the story together. We'll walk through chapter 1 together, I'll pull some stuff out along the way, then we'll apply it into our lives at the end.

Walkthrough of Jonah 1

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."

So first we're introduced to our main character, Jonah. He's a **prophet** - which means his job was to hear *from* God and speak to people *on behalf* of God. And we know from 2 Kings 14, Jonah's not new to this role. He knows - God sends me somewhere with a message, and I go and deliver that message.

God's command seems simple. Go to Nineveh and **preach the words I give you**.

However, things are a bit tricky - God wants Jonah to go to Nineveh. So a question worth asking is **why Nineveh?**

Well, the text says it's a **great city**. Nineveh is the capital of the greatest empire reigning at the time - the Assyrians. They were a people known for their **power** and their **violence**.

- The Ninevites would behead people from cities that they conquered and just leave a pile of people's heads in front of their city gates, as a way of saying "don't challenge us, or this will happen to you."
- They especially had been a BIG pain in the side of the Israelites for years - they're neighbors. And the Assyrians for decades at this point had been constantly threatening them with violence and destruction.

When God says "evil", he's not exaggerating. When God says "great", He's not exaggerating.

So when God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and **preach against it**, Jonah's got some legitimate reasons to say "no thank you", right? They're dangerous. They're his enemies. He hates them.

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.

Now, Jonah is a book full of humor. But, Hebrew humor is a little bit different from American humor. Hebrew humor often comes in a play on words. So the text says:

- God tells Jonah "arise and go to Nineveh"
- So Jonah "arose and (nope) goes to Tarshish..."

Now just so you understand geographically what is happening here, Nineveh is just a few hundred miles **northeast** of where Jonah was (it's in modern day Iraq), and Jonah instead heads to Joppa, which was as far **southwest** as you could go on land, and then gets on a ship headed to Tarshish (modern day Spain) which is the other side of the sea.

So imagine God calls you to go preach the gospel in New York City, and instead you're like - How about Hawaii?

And then notice the phrase that's in there twice in this one verse (nothing is random in the Scriptures) - "from the presence of the Lord." So the author makes it clear for us - Jonah is not just disobeying God. He's not just rebelling. He's trying to get rid of God altogether. He's trying to flee from His presence.

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.

So there's a big storm happening. And the sailors are desperate to figure out something to get it to calm down before the ship is torn apart. So first, they all start playing a random game of divine roulette. Each one of them is calling out to their own god, just hoping that one of them will answer their prayers.

Then they start hurling cargo over the side hoping that if they can lighten up the ship that will save them. Anything to get them through this storm.

And while all this is happening, where is Jonah? Where is the one guy who knows why the storm is happening, knows what to do to stop the storm, and has a relationship with the one true God who can stop it? Where is he? Under the deck, 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."

Hey man, we're all calling out to our gods, we want to make sure we don't miss one of them – you need to call out to yours too.

So here we have the captain who doesn't know God, having to tell God's prophet, to talk to God. Ironic.

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.

So they're crying out to their gods. They're tossing cargo overboard. Now, they decide to cast lots. Think - ancient game of chance to try to figure out - obviously this is someone being punished by their god for their wickedness. The gods will work through this process to point us to the person responsible.

So they cast lots and ***of course it falls 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."

Again irony - Jonah says, "I fear the Lord." Which is Bible language for - I have reverence and awe for God so I follow Him.

Which we're meant as the reader to immediately think - You do Jonah?? You fear the Lord?? You're running from Him, trying to escape his presence. He's told you where to go and what to do - and you headed in the complete opposite direction. You're not taking the scenic route Jonah. You're not slick.

At some point you just have to say - Jonah is one of the most oblivious, in-denial, least self-aware people you'll ever meet.

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.

So immediately, the sailors realize the gravity of what Jonah has done, even if Jonah doesn't: "you're running from the God who controls the sea? On our boat!?" ***These pagan sailors immediately recognize the problem here.***

But Jonah, up to this point, does not. So then the sailors ask another question:

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."

Just so we're clear - ***this is not a noble act of sacrifice or repentance.*** Jonah has been caught. And he knows the character of God - but he doesn't say, hold on, let me go to the back and repent and promise God I'll go to Nineveh so this whole thing blows over.

No. He says - throw me into the sea. He'd rather die.

Maybe he's thinking - there's one guaranteed way I won't have to go to Nineveh - throw me into the ocean and kill me. Then I really can't go preach.

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.

They try vigilantly to save Jonah's life. We'll make it back to shore - we're not throwing you overboard.

But eventually they have no choice. They have to throw him over. **But even as they do - they ask the God of Israel (“O Lord”) to not hold it against us for doing so.**

16 Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

The sailors now “fear the Lord,” which is language deliberately mirroring Jonah saying that he feared the Lord.

Jonah only said he did, but these sailors actually do, as evidenced by the fact that they then offer a sacrifice to the Lord and make vows.

In another bit of comedic irony happening in this story - These sailors worship the God of Israel, not because of the Israelite prophet on their ship, but in spite of him.

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.

God **sends a fish** to swallow Jonah, and rescue him from sure and certain death in the sea. So even Jonah's efforts to run from God via death are thwarted, because remember: he serves the God of the sea and dry land.

That's chapter 1. I told you this story is wild.

SO...what can we learn? Well do you see the two fixed realities come into play here in the life of Jonah?

Fixed Reality #1

There is an instinct within us to resist the leadership of God.

The first thing that just hits you in the face from this story is just how far Jonah will go to get away from God. To drown out God's call and God's voice and God's commands in his life.

- God calls him to go to Nineveh, he goes the complete opposite direction to Tarshish instead.
- God sends a storm, he goes down below deck to sleep. He only wakes up when he's forced to and only admits the storm is his fault when it's exposed by the casted lots.
- Then when faced with the option of either obey God or die, he chooses death - “toss me into the sea!”

Jonah will stop at nothing to drown out the voice of God in his life...constantly on the run from Him.

Now, it's easy to read those parts of the story and just be baffled at how awful and unaware Jonah is. To think to ourselves, “I might not always listen to God, but I would never do something like this. Flee the other way?! Toss myself into the ocean!?”

But while we may not attempt drowning out the voice of God by literally drowning like Jonah, we absolutely all have our ways of rebelling against Him and resisting his commands.

We've all got our proverbial ships to Tarshish we use to run from the voice of God.

And we do this a number of different ways and through a number of different strategies.

Ways we drown out the voice of God:

1. Distraction Strategy

God asks me to do something I don't want to do, and I just distract the voice of God away.

I'm at work and I feel the Spirit prompting me to go engage with my coworker and invite them to church. Oh look, instagram, Tik Tok.

I'm reading God's Word, and I get to 1 Peter 4:9 - "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling." Ooph that hits. Ok God, I hear you I should invite some folks from church over to create space for us to encourage one another, laugh together, build some friendships - but I'm really busy this week and weekend...oh look a work email just came through.

This one is so tempting and easy in 2022 - podcasts, music, tv, social media - we never have to actually sit in silence such that the voice of God would speak. We distract ourselves out of obedience to the voice of God.

That one is more obvious, the next two are a little bit more sneaky...

2. Makeover Strategy

This is the strategy that any time God asks me to do something I don't want to do, I just give God a little bit of a makeover.

- I just change a little bit of what I think about him, or how I think he is,
- Or suddenly my interpretation of the Bible matches exactly what I wanted to believe and do anyways,
- Or I just decide which character trait of God I want to elevate or highlight at the time

It often comes through in statements like "I could never believe in a God who..." or "The God I believe in would never..." or "Well, I just don't think the Bible says that..."

Whatever I need to change about God or my beliefs about Him, not too much to where it's sketchy, but enough to alleviate my conscience without me having to actually obey Him in that specific area.

For instance...

God invites me to be with Him through spiritual practices - Bible reading, prayer, silence + solitude. Yeah God's calling me to that, I know it's good, but I'm really tired and stressed, and God doesn't want to overburden me, his yoke is easy and light after all, I'll get to that stuff once I feel better. Besides, isn't there that verse about God giving Elijah a nap? I like that, not "train yourself for godliness (1 Tim 4 - gross).

Let's say God is trying to tell me to not have sex with someone I'm not married to. I don't like that. That's difficult. That's hard. So instead of blatant disobedience because that urks at my conscience too much, I just change my view of God a little bit → "Well, I don't think God will really care who I sleep with. God is a God of love, He is for me, He wants me to be happy. It's not really about what I do in the bedroom, it's about whether or not I believe in Jesus."

God tells me to forgive someone I don't want to forgive. Well now, all of sudden - God's not a God of love and forgiveness and mercy, he's a God of justice. God would never expect me to forgive them. He knows how much they hurt me. He hates when people hurt other people. He wouldn't want me to put myself in harm's way like that. He cares too much about my mental health.

The basic idea is that we begin to operate from a new, made-over version of God who simply doesn't ever ask us to do things we don't want to do.

3. "Let's Make a Deal" Strategy

God asks me to do something I don't want to do, and I respond by going "Well, God, I'm not gonna do that, but here's what I will do instead..."

So I really don't want to be more flexible with my time to serve and sacrifice, so how about I just give some money instead? That's good enough right?

Or the inverse...

Well I don't really want to be generous with my money - how about I just give my *time* instead? I'll keep my money, you can have my time.

—

Well, I don't really want to go reconcile with my spouse, why don't I just spend a few more minutes reading my Bible this morning instead?

Like my 2 year old who thinks giving me a hug will get her out of having to clean her playroom.

I'm not going to do that act of obedience, but I'll pacify my conscience by doing this for you instead Lord.

Here's my point: **although we may not drown out God's voice in the same ways as Jonah, or as obviously as he does, we absolutely do the same thing.** By any number of different strategies like the one above, we like Jonah often stop at nothing to drown out God's voice, to run from his leadership.

It is the bent of our hearts because of sin apart from the work of the Spirit.

But that's not all chapter 1 or this entire story, or the narrative of our lives, because there is a 2nd fixed reality...

Fixed Reality #2

There is an instinct within God to chase us.

This story is about a man who will stop at nothing to drown out the voice of God. But it's also about the incredible mercy of a God who will stop at nothing to chase him down and wake him up.

You might be tempted to read chapter 1 and think - "ok, I get it. Jonah disobeys God so God makes his life a nightmare. So if I want my life to go easier and be less difficult, I just need to obey God more."

But that's not what's happening.

Let me ask this → Why did God send **JONAH** to Nineveh? We talked about "why Nineveh", but **why Jonah?** Was he just the next prophet in line, the next guy up for the task, the one geographically closest?

We'll see this more in chapter 4, so I won't spoil too much, but we find out at the end of this story God sending Jonah to Nineveh wasn't random at all.

Jonah has in his heart this deeply-rooted hate and disdain towards the Ninevites. They were violent and cruel and wicked - enemies to Jonah and his people. He doesn't want to go preach repentance, **He'd rather see God destroy them.**

His heart towards these people is full of hatred and prejudice and bitterness. **And as many of us know first-hand, hatred and bitterness has this tendency to poison the heart from the inside out.**

God sends Jonah to Nineveh because he sees this hatred in Jonah's heart and knows something has to be done about it.

God sends Jonah to Nineveh as a rescue effort for the Ninevites, but also as a rescue effort for Jonah.

And once you understand that and see that - it changes your perspective on chapter 1. Chapter 1 is not about a grumpy God punishing someone or making sure He gets His way. Chapter 1 is one act of mercy after another after another from God to Jonah in pursuit of his heart.

It's all mercy and grace.

- The ship - a gift of mercy.
- The sailors - a gift of mercy.
- The storm...
- The lot falling on Jonah...
- Being thrown overboard...
- The fish swallowing him whole - a gift of mercy.

God is so committed to saving Jonah from his sin and himself that He will do whatever it takes to get his attention and his obedience.

The events in the story aren't God's wrath—they're his grace. As one theologian puts it - they are his *severe mercies*.

And here's where it really starts to rub:

There's a good chance, because you're here in church, that you really like what I had to say at the beginning about the grace of God chasing us down. We're all onboard with the way that sounds – "YES! God chases me. He pursues me by his grace. I'm in. Love it! Reckless love of God...yes sir!"

Be careful - because while it's God's kindness that leads us to repentance, that kindness doesn't always look how we want, and it doesn't always feel good in the moment.

God loves his people too much to sit by idly while sin destroys us from the inside out. And so, even if he needs to go to extreme measures to do it, even if it must be a severe mercy, He will stop at nothing to chase us down, and bring us back to Himself.

And when those moments come - it will be painful, and we will hate it. We will think it's awful. We will think - how could God let this happen? And it'll be for our good.

So let me ask you - are there severe mercies in your life right now that God might be using to get your heart back to Him?

- **Breakup** - So could it be possible that that break up you experienced, was actually God's grace to you? That it was robbing you of intimacy with Jesus, because you replaced Him as God with that other person, and God was and is trying to get your attention?
- **Fight w/ family member** - Maybe that conflict you can't seem to get away from with a friend or family member, and it's all their fault and you keep trying to reconcile but it feels like it keeps getting worse, is God trying to reveal to you your pride, your lack of forgiveness. You think you don't need God's forgiveness because you're awesome, and so you can't forgive others - so God is bringing conflict into your life as a severe mercy.
- **Financial stress** - Could it be that that financial stress you're under right now, scraping by, feeling like you're barely making ends meet, is actually God's way of painfully pulling your fingers off your control of your life. You trust yourself and your bank account, more than you trust Him. So God brought along that car breakdown, and that unexpected bill, and that cut in hours as a severe mercy to get you more in love with Him.

And listen - this is not to say that every time something bad happens in your life it is God trying to wake you up, get your attention, and get you to obey. Not at all. Sometimes life is just hard because we live in a broken, fallen world.

But this story shows us that there are also times where extremely difficult and painful scenarios are God's grace at work.

Sometimes in our lives, everything might seem horrible, and it might actually be God's grace to stop us from running, and to turn us back to Him. **Just because it doesn't feel like grace, doesn't mean it isn't.**

Are we Listening?

So let me close with this:

For some of us in the room, we're in the severe grace gift of God season. My admonishment and encouragement to you - run to God, not from God. See this as the severe mercy it is. See it as a chance to wake up, turn from your sin, to obey, to repent, to go after God.

But for others of us, my admonition would be this → **Don't wait for the severe mercies for God to get your attention.** For most of us, chances are God is using *normal measures and mercies* right now to get our attention and call us to obedience.

He's speaking to us:

- Through prayer.
- Through His Word.
- Through preaching.
- Through our community of believers.

So please **don't wait for the extreme.** God will get your attention. The question is - are you willing to listen now? Are you willing to listen to that small step of obedience he's calling you into. Are you willing to heed the counsel and direction of His Word and His Spirit and His people.

Or maybe to even back up a step: **are the means there for us to hear what he's saying?**

- Are our Bibles open often enough for us to hear him speak through it?
- Do we talk to him often enough to hear what he's calling our attention to and create space for him to speak?
- Do we have people around us who we allow to speak his words to us, and do we listen when they do?

Are we listening?

That's the question we all have to answer – **We have a merciful God pursuing us as His people, are we listening?**

Gospel Conclusion

That's the story of Jonah...

There is an instinct within the human heart to resist the leadership of God.
There is an instinct with the heart of God to chase us.

And that's what makes God's grace so incredible! He will stop at nothing to save us from ourselves.

So much so that one day, 750 years after Jonah, God would send the ultimate gift of severe mercy.

To a people set on running from God, God sends a savior set on dying for them.

Jonah's story is meant to show us ours. If it's possible to rescue Jonah, it's possible to rescue us.

Just like God sent the fish to rescue Jonah from his sin, God would eventually send Jesus to rescue us from ours.

God will stop at nothing to wake his people up and bring them back to Himself, including sending his son to the cross to pay the penalty, take our sins, die our death and rise again.

Communion.

Pray.