

- This morning we begin a journey through the Old Testament Book of Jonah. It is one of the most well-known books of the Bible. But is it well understood?
- On the surface, the Book of Jonah is a story about an ancient prophet, a violent civilization, an insane storm, and a giant fish. Beneath the surface, however, it's a story about the nature of the human heart and the true character of God.
- It is a book that will help us see God rightly, and as a result, see ourselves and the world rightly. In these crazy times, this is so important. So, turn to Jonah chapter 1 (NIV, 32nd book!)

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

³ But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

- The twenty-six-mile-long Boston Marathon is a well-known endurance course, and on April 21, 1980, race history was made. A twenty-six-year-old New Yorker crossed the finish line with a record-breaking time of two hours and thirty-one minutes. There was only one problem. **She didn't actually run the race.** As she accepted the winner's wreath on the podium, people quickly began to notice her lack of sweat, and race officials struggled to recognize her face. The truth is, she actually jumped in on the final half-mile, decked out in all the official race apparel. But she never admitted to cheating.
- Though personally pressed with accusations, she insisted that she did not cheat, believing that she had legitimately run and won. She even stated she would do another marathon as proof. **She never did.**
- She had created a race of her own making. It just wasn't the Boston Marathon.
- This story is often told to make a point about religiosity; it's like running a race we haven't really entered. We can be wearing the right uniform, create a course of our own making, and yet not actually be in the race at all. Could that be me?
- In many ways, this could be the story of Jonah. He is a prophet in ancient Israel. His job is to be a messenger, a representative of God. He has the uniform. But as the story ends, we find out that Jonah had a different idea of God, a god of his own making. It's just not the God of the Bible. And yet he insists that he is still running the race.
- And through the 4 chapters of this book, we see Jonah confronted by who God truly is... and in the process Jonah is confronted with who he is.
- So, the book really does two things: the book reveals God, and as it does, it reveals not only this prophet, but the heart of every person
- **So, what is Jonah about? Hint: It's not about the fish...**
 - There are two things I want to say about the great fish.
 - First, if you are skeptical, please remember this... if God exists, then he is able to do the miraculous. And if Jesus was raised

from the dead, then there should be nothing surprising about other miracles. This account is history and does not present the story as made up or anything like that. In fact, usually if people do make up wild details, its usually to add spectacle or grab your attention! But the writer doesn't do this. In fact, the great fish is mentioned in only two sentences!

- Which leads to my second point: to make it about the fish is to mistake it for the climax of the story! But it's not. A lot of the kid's versions you here are basically "Jonah gets swallowed by the fish but repents and does God's will." But that leaves out the whole ending of the story! So, what is this book about?

- **This Book is About... Jonah**

- This is the usual way of beginning an account about prophets in the Bible, probably around the 8th century BC. And the book follows a particular moment when God gave him a mission!
- But by the time you get to verse 2, the original readers would have raised their eyebrows!
- First, because God was calling Jonah to go to Nineveh, a non-Jewish city (IRAQ). Typically, the prophets were sent to their own people, but surprisingly, here is a WORD to the gentiles.
- Eyebrows would also raise when you saw that it was Nineveh! An oppressive, violent city at the heart of the Assyrian empire, which some historians describe as a "terrorist state" in the ancient world (The gates at the British museum!)
- And what makes it more surprising is that Jonah, you discover in 1 Kings, is an intense nationalist who was known for supporting one of Israel's terrible Kings Jeroboam for aggressive military campaign to extend Israel's power.
- The Book is about Jonah, the most unlikely candidate who is asked to share a message with people he seemed to fear and hate. But that why the book is more than about Jonah.

- **This Book is About God**

- Why would God reach out to the enemies of His people?

- Well, that's one of the reasons why this book is here in the Bible. Through its pages and paragraphs, we find revelations and insights into the character and heart of God both for the community of believers and the people beyond. The outsiders the enemies. We learn God's heart for sinners.
- Does that mean that God approves of what they do? How can God be both just and merciful? And how does this shape how we relate to God and the world? This book is, at its heart, theological, revealing the character of God.

- **This Book is About Us**

- Many writers have pointed out that the Book of Jonah is like a mirror – we *will* see ourselves in it. But what will we resemble most? The brokenness of Jonah? Or the beauty of God? How do we view our neighbors, those who are different from us and even against us? How do we view God? As God reveals himself to us, who he truly is, not a god of our own making, are we running towards him? Or are we running towards him?
- And that is where we begin. Right at the start, the Book of Jonah reveals a tendency that we all have to run from God. And I want us to ask three questions: When we run from God, where do we run? Why do we run? And what turns us around?

- 1. **Where Do We Run?**

- a. In many ways, Jonah is a story about running from God.

Jonah 1:3 But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

- b. But what this book teaches us is there are actually two ways we try to flee from God – We go to lawlessness and legalism

- c. **Do We Run to Lawlessness?**

- i. Up until this point in time, Jonah appears to be content with how things were and what he was doing in Israel. It's not as if he had an Airbnb booked for Tarshish and was just waiting for the middle east travel restrictions to lift.

No, it was when God called him to go to Nineveh, that he flees in the opposite direction.

- ii. Jonah, in his rejecting of God here at the beginning, goes as far in the opposite direction as possible. If you look on the map, Tarshish is literally on the opposite side of the known world from Nineveh. One way to run from God is through direct disobedience. But there is a second way...

d. Do We Run to Legalism? (Religiosity)

- i. This is what we see in the second half of this Book. As a result of his episode with the fish, Jonah does eventually go to Nineveh. But, unlike many of the children's versions, the story doesn't end there! This book reveals that Jonah, even when he did what he was asked, he is furious with God and still despises his neighbor.
 - ii. So, you can try to flee from God by running into lawlessness, but you can also run from him by being religious yet trusting in your own righteousness and moral behaviour to make you right. It's like wearing the runner's outfit without really being in the race.
- e. And that is why many students of this book have noted the similarities to the Prodigal Son story that Jesus tells in the New Testament. In the first half Jonah, he is essentially the "prodigal son" of Jesus's famous parable (Luke 15) who ran from his father into a far country to do as he pleases. Also, the Ninevites, like that first son, lived in reckless behaviour. But in the second half of the book, however, Jonah is like the "older brother" who obeys his father but becomes angry with him for his graciousness to repentant sinners. The parable ends with a question from the father to the Pharisaical son, just as the book of Jonah ends with a question to the Pharisaical prophet."
- f. Friends, this is so important. See, many people think that sin is only about the bad things we do. And of course, it includes this.

But, we can also try to hide from God through good deeds, but done through sinful attitudes and motives.

- g. We use our moral record to put God and others in our debt to control them and get them to do what he wants.
- h. The pharisees in the Bible did all the right things, and from an outward perspective, were more obedient than the rest! And yet they were completely blinded by religiosity and self-righteousness and through it, rejected Jesus. They had the uniform, but deceived themselves about the race while insisting they won it.
- i. Both reflect the problem of sin. And until we recognize this, we won't be healed and see God rightly or other people rightly!
- j. So, you are meant to ask: When I am tempted to run from God, is it into lawlessness or legalism? Irreligion or religiosity?
- k. And to get to the heart of this, we must ask a second question

2. Why Do We Run?

- a. So, Jonah runs away. But *why* did he run away?
- b. Often times, the way this book related to children, is that Jonah was scared. And of course, there were a lot of reasons to be!
- c. After all, Nineveh was the center of Assyrian military might and oppression, it would be insane to go there and preach!
- d. It would be like a Jewish rabbi in 1941 being dropped into the streets of Berlin and calling Nazi Germany to stop.
- e. Not exactly an appealing mission. Fear could be one reason he ran from God. And it may be for us as well (Explain.)
- f. But fear is NOT the primary reason Jonah ran from God. How do we know that? The Book actually tells us. Jonah himself tells us! Later on, in the book, God sees the repentance of the wicked people of Nineveh and does not destroy them. And Jonah flips out and lays his cards on the table:

Jonah 4:1-3 This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. ²So he complained to the Lord about it: "Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you

are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. ³Just kill me now, Lord! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen."

g. At the heart of our running *from* God... is the mistrust of God.

h. Jonah mistrusted God. He did not trust God's mission nor the reason for the mission. He doubted the goodness and rightness of God. When God's desire clashed with his desire, who made the tiebreaking decision? Jonah.

i. And when we mistrust God, we view ourselves as the authority.

j. Sadly, the same is often true for us, even if in different ways. Even in the church! We tend to cherry pick aspects of the Christian life that most suit our natural desires and dismiss or altogether ignore the other parts.

i. Maybe you like the call to be distinct and separate from the world, but you don't like the call to love the world!

ii. Or, by contrast, maybe you like the love your neighbour part, but you don't like the holiness part!

iii. For example, some Christians will gladly hold to a Christian sex ethic of purity in singleness and fidelity in marriage, but they don't like talking about serving the poor, living justly and serving your neighbour.

iv. Or you love the justice part, caring for the poor, but you laugh at the call to sexual purity.

k. See, no matter who you are, or how you were raised, there is always going to be an aspect of God that will challenge you. Why? Because he is perfect, and we are flawed and sinful.

l. When we run from God, it is because we trust in *our* authority and mistrust *his*. We must call it what it is!

Augustine "If you believe what you like in the Gospel, and reject what you don't like, it is not the Gospel you believe, but yourself."

m. You end up creating a god in your own image.

n. But listen, a God of your own making, a God that cannot correct, or challenge you is a God that cannot change you.

- o. So, when the call of God challenges you, who wins?
 - i. It may not be a wholesale “I’m fleeing from everything in the Christian life!” But maybe it’s in certain areas!
 - ii. When there is disagreement between you and the Bible... who wins? Your answer shows where your trust truly lies
- p. See, mistrust lies at the heart of our running from God. We wrestle with him or reject his commands because we do not think he has our best interests in mind.
 - i. When he asks you to abstain from sexual immorality, you think he is trying to make you miserable!
 - ii. When he asks you to be radically generous with your time and money, you think he may not care about your own practical needs!
 - iii. When he asks you to love your enemy, you might assume that God doesn't care about the wicked things they do!
- q. So, where are we mistrusting God? Where are we believing that he does not have our best interest at heart?
- r. We need to be honest and confess any mistrust we have in our hearts. But how do we change? Final question:

3. What Turns Us Around?

- a. Jonah simply cannot see how God could be both just + merciful. He can't reconcile it in his heart. He won't believe that God would be gracious to sinners. Perhaps he thought that God's mercy on them meant his approval of what they did!
- b. But God's offer of forgiveness to you **and** the world is not his approval of what we do! He does not offer mercy because of our deeds but in spite of our deeds, whether good or bad!
- c. What Jonah needed to see, and what God was determined to show him, was that the same mercy extended to the Ninevites, was the same mercy extended to him. He must confess, just like the Ninevites, that sin blinded him to the truth about God just as it blinded the Ninevites to the truth of God, though it looked very different on the outside.

- d. Both Jonah and Nineveh had run from God, both were in need of mercy. Nineveh had run from God through lawlessness and Jonah through legalism. They **both** needed to turn to God.
- e. Just like the younger brother and the older brother in Jesus' parable, there are two ways to run from God: You can run from him through directly disobeying him. But you can also run from him by being religious yet trusting in your own righteousness and moral behaviour to make you right. Both need to be saved.
- f. And the good news is, both CAN be saved. God pursues both
- g. And the one who saves us is the one who resolves the tension of this book and the tension in our hearts. How can God both love sinners and hate sin? How can God be both just and merciful? Through his son Jesus Christ. For when he came, he showed us how bad our sin is that he had to die on a cross to pay for it on our behalf in our place. But the fact that he was willing shows his great love. He pursued you. He ran after you! Not to approve of everything in you, but to save you.
- h. And so, **Jonah** shows us: There is no one so *bad* who *cannot* be saved, and no one so *good* who doesn't need to be saved!
- i. **What turns you around from running from God is to see how Jesus Christ ran after you**, even when you were dead in your sin. It's when we all see our sin for what it is, and then see our savior for who he is, that we are turned around and changed from the inside out all because of his grace towards us.
- j. Our struggle to trust is resolved when we see what he has done
- k. No more making a god in our own image who can't change us. No more creating our own race according to our own rules but accepting God for who he is and receiving the grace he has extended to us in Christ. And his grace is what causes us to run towards him and not away from. To love his presence and not flee from his presence. And today, he calls you near!