

As you could probably guess, today we're starting a study of what may be the single most ridiculed book in the Bible. Scholars of the highest degree make fun of the story of Jonah and the Big Fish putting it on the same level as "Pinocchio."

I'll agree – if there's any story in the Bible that shows truth is sometimes stranger than fiction, this might be it. Yet there are (4) reasons I choose to believe the story of Jonah.

- (1) I believe the story of Jonah b/c I believe the Bible is the infallible/inerrant Word of God – and it's in there. We know from 2 Kings 14 that Jonah was a real man and that his locations were actual places.
- (2) I believe the story of Jonah b/c there are actual reported cases of people being swallowed by fish and surviving – meaning it is possible.
- (3) I believe the story of Jonah b/c I believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Think about it, if you can believe Jesus was raised from the dead (3) days after He died, then why would you have trouble believing a man could survive in the belly of a fish for (3) days if God has anything to do w/ it?
- (4) The biggest reason I believe the story of Jonah is b/c Jesus believed it. In Mt. 12:40, Jesus said:

*For as Jonah was three days in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days in the heart of the earth.*

Jonah's story wasn't just about Jonah, but a shadow of what God would do in Christ for us. So skeptic or not – Jonah has something for all of us.

I'm reminded of the story of a girl in college who took a class on religious literature. One day, the professor, who was an unbeliever, asked if anyone believed the story of Jonah and the Big Fish. This brave teenager raised her hand and admitted she did. The prof looked at her and w/ a dubious tone asked, "You really believe a man was swallowed by a fish, stayed in his belly for 3 days, was spat out onto dry land and lived to tell about it?" She said, "Absolutely!" He said, "Can you tell me what kind of fish swallowed Jonah?" She said, "No sir. But, I'll tell you what I'll do, when I get to heaven I'll ask Jonah." To which the prof replied, "What if Jonah isn't in heaven?" She said, "Then you can ask him!"

I think the primary reason people get hung up on Jonah is b/c they don't understand what the book is about. Considering the fish is mentioned only (4x) and Jonah is mentioned (18x) times – while God is mentioned (38x) tells us the book is more about God than anything else. This doesn't mean we have little to learn from Jonah – this prophet turned fugitive has much to teach us about running from, to and w/ God.

Have you ever RUN from God? I did when I was a senior in H.S. I started sensing God calling me into the ministry and I ran and my journey took me to some very strange and scary places. But then God confronted me. He put me in isolation; raised up a friend to confront me – and then wrapped His arms around me to assure me of His call on my life.

The simple truth is Jonah was neither the first nor the last to run from God and make a mess of things. In fact, there's a good chance a few people in this room today are living on the run this very moment – then this series is for you.

## I God Extends a CALL

*The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, b/c its wickedness has come up before me.'* Jonah 1:1-2

The story starts out simple enough – God's Word came to Jonah in the form of a command or calling. **God's Word always represents His will, b/c God's Word is God's will.** From Genesis to Revelation God is telling His Will.

We need to understand that God's will always come in the form of a calling/command. Whether we like it or not, God never makes suggestions or request – he doesn't solicit.

**Do you know why?** B/c while we can often make poor and short-sighted decisions – He CAN'T! B/c He is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient – He can't make a wrong decision – His always the best way and the right way.

So when God speaks, He doesn't give us options. For example, God says "Do not marry unbelievers." He doesn't say, "But, if you're going to marry an unbeliever, at least marry a nice one" or "If you're going to marry one at least marry one that'll go to church occasionally." No, He says, "Don't marry an unbeliever." Now He doesn't force us to marry a believer, but He most certainly calls us to a higher and better way – b/c He knows and wants His will for us.

Recently in my QT, I was challenged by a question. **What if there were two doors to choose from. Behind one door was the complete will of God for your life and behind the other door was how life could be according to your own preference.** Which door would you choose?

For most of us, the struggle lies in the desire to follow God w/out having to fully surrender to Him. We desire to follow God, but we're afraid to let go and let God have control. I think it is b/c deep down we question God's love/motives. We don't really believe He loves us to the degree that we're willing to give Him complete permission to do as He wills in us – and this is where we find the Jonah in all of us. **Look what God told Jonah to do,**

*Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, b/c its wickedness has come up before me. Jonah 1:2*

Nineveh was the Capitol of Assyria and the Assyrians were the mortal enemies of Israel. **What God was asking Jonah to do would be like asking a Jew in 1942 to go to Germany to tell Hitler that God loved him and had a plan for his life – or like asking a Rabbi to go to the Gaza Strip today and to preach a message of repentance.**

The Assyrians were vicious. In Nahum 3:1 describes them – *Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder – never w/out victims! The crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots! Charging cavalries, flashing swords and glittering spears! Many casualties, piles of dead bodies w/out number, people stumbling over the corpses all b/c of the wanton lust of a harlot, alluring the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and people by her wickedness.*

It's no wonder Jonah didn't want to go. Not only did they deserve God's wrath, he had good reason to fear for his life.

Nonetheless, God called Jonah to go – and there are times God asks us to do things we don't want to do – and while we might have our reasons for saying “no” – God has His reasons for calling us.

Have you ever done that? You know God is calling you to a specific task, but out of fear or rebellion, you run the opposite direction? The call on your life might not be to a place as dangerous as Nineveh, but it's a call all the same;

- A call to change your behavior – but instead you do everything you can to avoid the topic.
- A call to be more public w/ your faith and go on mission – but instead you keep your light under a bushel.
- A call to forgive someone for the harm they've done to you – but instead you avoid them to hold your grudge.
- A call to quietness and intimacy – but instead you fill your life w/ busyness.
- A call into relationship w/ God through Jesus – but instead you throw yourself into the things of the world

God's single expectation of us when He calls is Obedience.

## II Jonah Made a CHOICE

*But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. Jonah 1:3*

Choice is a powerful and provocative gift. And God gives us choices and opportunities in in the midst of His calling. Ultimately, the choice we face is either to respond or rebel – to receive or to refuse. We can walk w/ or run from.

Here's the thing – **while God calls, He doesn't force us to obey His commands.** In His sovereignty and love He gives us the freedom to make choices. So when we choose His will, He moves in and through our lives for our good and His glory; but when we say “No” that's when the troubles begin.

It is one thing to wrestle God's Will but quite another to reject it. When I was a senior, I wasn't so much running from God as I was wrestling w/ His call. But not Jonah – he was in a flat out sprint headed away from God. **He wasn't just running from the call, he was running from God. He was trying to get as far away from God as he could.**

Let me lend some perspective. Joppa (modern day Jaffa) is a port city on the Mediterranean Sea located about 30 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Nineveh was 600 miles northeast of Joppa while Tarshish was some 2200 miles west on the Atlantic side coast of Spain. It'd be like telling someone to go to New York and instead they go L.A.

While this distance/direction are important, there's an even greater truth found in these (2) cities. **Tarshish represents seeking your will while Nineveh represents submitting to what God wants you to do. Here's the big deal – Every day in every decision of our lives we choose to visit one of those two cities. And every time we choose Tarshish over Nineveh – it is going to cost us something.**

*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**.* Jonah 1:3

**after paying the fare** – Jonah thought by buying a ticket for Tarshish that his “God” problem would go away. *Instead, he learned the hard way that the most expensive thing you will ever purchase in life is a ticket to get away from God.*

**Scary Reality** – God will allow you to run and Satan is more than happy to provide the means for you to get away. Let me put it another way – Just as God will provide the means for you to accomplish His will – Satan will always be there to provide the means for you to run from God’s will.

Look again at vs. 3 – *Jonah ran away from the Lord. He went aboard...to flee from the Lord.* Jonah wasn’t seeking a (7) day cruise of the Mediterranean, He was only interested in getting as free and far from God as possible. **He wanted to escape the PRESENCE and PURPOSES of God.**

### **III God Provided CORRECTION**

*Then the **LORD** sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose the ship threatened to break up. All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.* 1:4-5a

You know it's a bad storm when the sailors are afraid. But when sailors start praying, it's really bad. So you got to feel for these guys. They hadn't done anything wrong, yet they were being tossed by the vortex of Jonah's defiance.

There's a great lesson to learn here. Runners always hurt the people around them. Disobedience/defiance always affects and infects yourself and others. It's a guarantee that others will be hurt by the shrapnel of your life when you're running from God b/c **disobedience always takes you farther than you want to go, keeps you longer than you want to stay, and costs you more than you want to pay.**

*But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. The captain went to him and said, 'How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.'* Jonah 1:5-6

**WHAT?** He was below deck asleep in a storm so violent it threatened to sink ship. Do you think Jonah knew the source

Talk about being hard-hearted and stiff-necked. This was a prophet of God – a man who walked w/ God. He knew God; yet somehow he was now a fugitive from God. Jonah went off the reservation and didn't seem to care. *Folks, even the Godliest people have their moments. We're all capable of making defiant decisions and acting as if God doesn't exist.*

*Then the sailors said to each other, 'Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.' They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. Jonah 1:7*

**REALLY!** They could've cast lots 1,000x and it would've fallen on Jonah b/c when God calls you to do something and you refuse to do it He doesn't just leave you and say, "Oh well, I guess I'll just have to get someone else." ***God will do whatever He must to bring you full circle to Him.***

*So they asked him, 'Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?' He answered, 'I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land.' This terrified them and they asked, 'What have you done?' (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.) The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, 'What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?' Jonah 1:8-11*

At this point, I'm certain if Jonah would've looked up to heaven and said, "Okay, You win. I'll go to Nineveh and do Your will." Do you know what would've ensued? The storm would've stopped and the seas would've calmed everyone would've lived happily ever-after. **Notice Jonah's response.**

*‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea,’ he replied, ‘and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.’* Jonah 1:12

Instead of repenting and doing as God had called him – he continues in his rebellion. **Is this not like us sometimes.** God extends His call and we reject it b/c it doesn't suit us. God sends circumstances into our lives to get our attention, and we ignore him. It is crazy just how stubborn we can be.

*At this the men greatly feared the Lord and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.* Jonah 1:16-17

It went from bad to worse for Jonah. Jonah had hoped to die, but God wasn't about to let Jonah off the hook. We're going to see in the next chapter that Jonah found the same thing in the fish he found on the boat – God had been waiting for him the entire time. **When you run from God, He will never chase after you – b/c He is already there waiting for you.** He waiting to bring you back to Him.

Are you headed in the wrong direction? Have you gotten on the wrong ship sailing away from God's heart for you? Is there any area in your life where you're saying "no" to God when you ought to be saying "yes"?

If you are, then I have some important news for you – there is a loving God waiting there on you. He wants to bring you full-circle back to himself. **That is why God sent Jesus, 2000 years ago, to let every fugitive know there is a way home and He is the way to get there.**

Let me leave you w/ (3) Principles from Jonah 1:

- 1 *God's expectation of us when He calls is obedience.*
- 2 *If you run from God's call it will affect and infect everyone around you.*
- 3 *You can run from God, but you can't hide from God*
- 4 *God will never chase after you b/c He's already there waiting for you*
- 5 *God longs to give you a 2<sup>nd</sup> chance if you'll trust Him*