

Jonah 1:1–3 Fleeing from God

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Hello dear listeners,

This month we will consider together the prophecy of Jonah. If there is one thing that everyone knows about Jonah the prophet, it's that he was swallowed by a great fish, and was spewed out alive by that fish three days later. As it happens, however, the book of Jonah is not all about that great fish, who is mentioned only in two brief verses. The book is about broken people, in need of God's grace, getting mended. That's certainly a reference to the wicked city of Nineveh. And yet the bulk of the book focuses on the interactions between the Lord and his prophet. As we will see, God *is* concerned for the evil of Nineveh, but he's even more concerned about the prophet. God is going to teach Jonah, through painful experience, that *everyone* needs mercy from God. That leads us to consider, in this first meditation, Jonah 1:1–3.

The book begins, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai." Jonah was a prophet, to whom the Lord spoke directly. A prophet was one who stood in the LORD's presence, listened to his voice, and passed on to the people what he heard. Jonah was a preacher of the gospel. His ministry, according to 2 Kings 14, took place in 8th century BC, in the time of Jeroboam II. Jeroboam II was a sinful and idolatrous king in the northern kingdom of Israel. So the Lord had called Jonah to call the king and the nation to repentance. But his message from the Lord was also one of undeserved *grace*. We find that message of good news included in 2 Kings 14, where we read that Jonah announced that God would restore the shrunken borders of Israel to where they were under King Solomon. Jonah, then, was in a remarkable position. He could announce, and *then also witness* the grace of God to Israel.

But *now*, God was calling Jonah to bring God's Word to some surprising recipients. He's not told to visit the unfaithful people of God. Instead, he says, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil its wickedness has come up before me."

Now, why is this so surprising? We need to know a few things about Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. Located in today's northern Iraq. For those days, it was massive; Jonah 4:11 says it had more than 120,000 people. And for an Israelite, the word "Assyria" was a name that brought shivers up the spine. Assyria was one of the cruelest and most violent empires of ancient times. In their writings they depicted in grisly detail their brutal acts to their captives.

They tortured their victims, by dismemberment, decapitation, stretching, or by flaying, all of this while their captives were alive. They burned people alive. For over two hundred and fifty years their enemies, including Israel, feared and hated them immensely.

And now comes Jonah's calling. A surprising calling. Jonah, on Israel's behalf, is called to pack his bags and head to Nineveh. *Israel* had broken God's covenant, yet the Lord doesn't tell Jonah to prophecy against Israel, but Nineveh. And on Israel's behalf, it's to be a message of grace. How can we say that? "Tell the people of Nineveh, 'Your wickedness has been seen by God. He's going to wipe you out.'" Where is grace in that? Well, there's no reason to send a warning to someone unless you want to give them a chance to avoid judgment. God's warning was intended as a call to repentance.

Well, Jonah gets up to go. But he doesn't go where the Lord sends him. Instead of going to Nineveh, he fled the exact opposite direction, to Tarshish. We don't quite know where Tarshish was. It was a port city somewhere on the coastlands in the Mediterranean west of Palestine. Somewhere on the western coast of modern-day Spain. But the fact is, this place was the farthest known geographical point. It was in the complete opposite direction from Nineveh. Called to go east, Jonah goes west.

He abandons his calling. He takes off for the port of Joppa. And he finds there a ship leaving for Tarshish and willing to accept him as passenger. He buys a ticket, and then goes into the boat, to go to Tarshish.

Why? Did he run because he was afraid of being flayed by the Assyrians? I highly doubt it. We don't get the impression that he's a man easily afraid of people. His past obedience saw him bring the word of the Lord faithfully to Israel's unfaithful king. No, Jonah runs not because he is afraid of failure. Instead, we find out later in the book that Jonah ran because he was afraid of *success*. He had a sneaking suspicion that God might pardon that city. Jonah did not want that.

You see, Jonah's problem is *ultimately not with the Assyrians*, but with God. That's what verse 3 is getting at when it says *twice* that he rose to flee "from the presence of the Lord." He did not agree with the Lord's way of dealing with people in the world. And so he resigns from his commission as prophet, and flees from the Lord's presence.

Sound familiar? Is this not why we too so often turn our backs on God? Because the Lord refuses to fit our assumptions of who he ought to be. He does things we don't think he should do and he doesn't do things we think he should do. We come into circumstances that we didn't hope

for. And our reaction is to run away from a real relationship with God. For in a real relationship, we actually have to engage with a God who refuses to conform to our wonderful plan for him.

Are you disappointed with the circumstances of your life right now? God has not given you something you've wanted—could be a job, or a relationship. Or maybe he has given you a job or relationship but they're not living up to your expectations. What do you do with that frustration? You see, typically it's not just your circumstances that you're frustrated with. It's God. God has the power to change your circumstances in a flash. But he has not done so. That's why disappointments so often distance us from God. We become angry because he has not given us what we wanted in life, and we think he doesn't know what is best for us! And yet this very frustration may itself be the means by which the Lord is going to give us what he wants, which is so much better.

Are you going to trust the Lord to be God, even if he asks you to do something that doesn't make any sense to you? If you are not willing to trust that God knows best when he contradicts your desires, then you aren't really fearing the Lord.

But maybe for you it's not so much your circumstances that frustrate you as your sanctification. You struggle with ongoing sin that hurts you and those around you. You've prayed and prayed for the Lord to take it away but so far he's not seen fit to do so. How will you respond? Well again, you struggle not merely with your sin but with God. That's why in the midst of sin we so often distance ourselves from God. The basic problem is that I'm not willing to accept the reality of the God I claim to serve.

This is us. This is Jonah. This is Israel. Not willing to accept the reality of the God whom we claim to serve.

But the nature of God's grace is that it's for him to give as he sees fit. For his will is different from ours. And that means that grace is his to give to whom he wants.

Jonah's selfish response endured into the days of the Lord Jesus. Our chief prophet came to preach the gospel. He preached it to tax-collectors, prostitutes, lepers, sinners. He preached grace, he displayed grace, he shared grace. And Israel rejected him. But he was the *obedient, faithful* prophet, submitting to his Father's will. With joy, even though it would mean a cruel death on the cross. Our Lord did not run from the will of God. He replied, "Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God" (Heb. 10:7). He went to the cross with the message of grace. He obeyed his God, who sent him from heaven with the call,

“Go to my creation and call people to repentance and faith.” Christ obeyed, because he knew that God is faithful and that all his purposes are holy and good. Christ delighted to do his will. That delight in God’s grace put him on the cross. He died for his enemies. For those who rejected his grace. He died for us. So that we could receive heaven’s mercy and grace that we so desperately need.

Marvel at him. Perhaps your heart is hard toward the Lord. Maybe you are frustrated at his refusal to submit his will to yours. Maybe at times you think you know better than he. Consider again how much you have received from the sovereign God, who loves you. Will he not ensure that your circumstances, your relationships, or even your stubborn sins will work for good in your life? Rescue or refuge is found not in running away from the Lord, but crying out to him for the strength to follow his will, as hard or confusing as it may be.

So revel in the beauty of the Lord’s grace and love. And rest assured you can never outrun him or escape his perfect plan for your life. Submit to his will, cherish his grace, and know that it is sufficient for you.