

Running the Wrong Way

by Jim Cymbala

The sermon 'Running the Wrong Way' teaches that running away from God's plan is impossible and will lead to trouble, and that obedience to God's plan is essential for peace and joy.

Duration: 33:44

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-2

Topics: "Direction"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker addresses the common desire to run away from God's plan for our lives when faced with challenges or criticism. He emphasizes that running away from God only robs us of peace and joy. The speaker uses the story of Jonah to illustrate this point, highlighting how Jonah tried to flee from God's command to deliver a message to the cruel empire of Nineveh. Despite Jonah's attempt to escape on a ship, God sent a storm that revealed Jonah as the cause. The sermon concludes with a prayer for the congregation to surrender to God's will and trust in His mercy.

Transcript

How many of you understand the game of American football? Lift your hands. See, but to football, for a lot of you, is not American football. It's what we call soccer, right? Anywhere in the Caribbean, everywhere you go in Africa, every place you go in South America, especially Argentina, it's like a religion there.

Football means soccer. But American football has an infamous moment. So let me just say this much of it.

In American football, this team is going this way, and it's gonna try to carry the ball across into the end zone and score points going that way. And the other team is going that way. And when they're on the defense, they're trying to stop that team from going that way.

And when they have the ball and they're on the offense, they're trying to move the ball according to the rules of American football there. And there's an infamous moment that happened in a Rose Bowl decades and decades ago, where his name became, unfortunately, a household word. His team was going this way.

He doesn't want the ball to go that way. He's trying to move it this way. And he was on defense, and what happened was there was a pileup, and the ball came loose.

And in American football, when the ball gets loose, it's called a fumble, right? And he dove for it, and everybody was jostling, and they picked it, and he's fighting for it, and everyone's hitting each other. And he grabs the ball, but he gets turned around, and he starts to run the wrong way. And he runs 80 yards.

And no one's chasing him because the team is happy. Go, go already, go. And he runs all the way to the end zone, and he looks back to celebrate, and his whole team is just holding their helmets like, you doofus, what did you do here? That was so sad for him.

He ran the wrong way. And there's a man in the Bible who ran the wrong way. But his was a lot more meaningful.

His name was Jonah. And Jonah is called in the Bible, in the Old Testament, a prophet, and it's listed among what is called the minor prophets. The major prophets are longer books, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel is kind of in between, but all the rest of them, Jonah, Haggai, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Malachi, all of those and others are called minor prophets.

And Jonah's unique. It's only a four-chapter book. I'm only gonna read a few verses, and then for those of you who might not know the story, I'll tell it to you.

The guy that ran the wrong way. Or it also could be called, this message is called Running the Wrong Way, it could be called the bigoted prophet, because he was a prophet, but he was a bigot. Let's look.

This is chapter one, verse one. The word of the Lord, that means the prophecy, the burden, the message God wanted him to deliver, came to Jonah, son of Amittai. Go to the great city of Nineveh, that's the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.

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, or Spain, to flee from the Lord.

I'll tell you the story as we go, but let's go to this other passage, chapter two. He's now in the belly of a special fish that the Lord has prepared for him. Some people get a special fish for dinner, he got a special fish as a condo that he could live in for three days.

When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed, I will make good. I will say, salvation comes from the Lord. And the Lord commanded the fish and had vomited Jonah onto dry land.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Go to this great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you. Jonah obeyed that time the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh.

Now, Nineveh was a very large city. It took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, 40 more days and Nineveh will be overthrown, sayeth the Lord.

The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

And that leads us to this. But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong. And he became angry.

He prayed to the Lord. Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? This is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Now, Lord, take away my life, for it's better for me to die than to live. What a mature man of God. So Jonah is this unknown prophet.

We don't know anything about him. We don't exactly know when he prophesied or when he got this message historically. And he got a message, go to the capital of Nineveh.

Now, this is unlike any other prophet in the Bible. Most of the prophets had a message for God's people, for the northern kingdom of Israel or the southern kingdom of Judah. This prophet was told by God, get out of Israel and go to the Assyrian empire.

Well, the Assyrian empire were the most anti-Semitic, conquering, nasty, cruel empire. They're the ones, by the way, the Assyrian empire that invented the idea first of crucifixion, which went on and got refined over the centuries. Then the Romans used it when they killed our Lord.

But they were also the ones that when they conquered a people they cut off like a thousand heads and put all the heads on spikes and put the spikes out around just to let everybody know, yo, we're in town and we don't play. So this was a nasty, cruel empire. And God sends him to go to this land to deliver a message, to try to turn them back from their sin.

He doesn't wanna go. So he gets on a ship and tries to head towards Spain. When he's on the ship, well, just think, he got on it because he wanted to run away from God, it says, he wanted to flee from the Lord.

How could you be a prophet and think you could flee from the Lord? But there's a lesson in that. So he's on the boat and boom, huge storm comes out of nowhere. And these seafaring men, the crew, they know this is no ordinary storm.

This storm has our name on it. They start crying to their gods and looking around, what's the cause of this? So they find Jonah in the bottom part of the ship and they said, come on upstairs on deck because we're gonna draw lots to find out who's the guy. Get it? Who's the guy? Who caused this? They draw lots and it falls on Jonah.

So they say to Jonah, who are you? Where you come from? He says, well, I'm a Hebrew and I serve the true and the living God who made the earth, the dirt, and the sea. And they all got afraid because of the way he said it and the ring of truth in it. So they said, well, what's going on? No, I'm running away from God because he told me to do something I don't wanna do.

I know, so they started throwing now their equipment overboard to make the ship lighter so it could survive the storm. So Jonah said, no, that won't do you any good. The only way to get out of this is throw me overboard.

Because if you throw me overboard, it's gonna get better for you. But these guys are merciful. And they go, no, we can't throw you overboard.

That will kill you. You will die. We can't do it.

So they tried to do something else. And then finally, it's in the book of Jonah, they pray and they say, God, we're gonna throw this guy overboard. But please forgive us.

But he told us to do it. He seems to be the problem. But God, have mercy on us.

You can't make this up, can you? So they throw him overboard. Boom, things get calm. God has prepared a fish.

By the way, several times in history, people have been swallowed by large, large whales, the fish, and survived for days inside the fish until they were vomited out. So this is not something so far-fetched. But this was a special fish that God had prepared.

So in the belly of the fish, he has this prayer and he cries out to God. Usually when you're in the belly of a fish, you will pray rather strong. How many say amen? So he prays and he calls out to God, and God hears him, even though he's rebellious and all of that, and he's vomited back on the land.

So he gets himself together again, and God says to him a second time, go to Nineveh and tell the people there, they got 40 days, 40 days to repent of the evil they're doing. So he goes, it's a huge city for that time, and he's walking, and he begins to preach. You won't believe this.

He preaches with such authority, and God is so with him that the people go, yes, that's right, we're living horrible. To repent of something is to agree with God about it. Not to feel bad about it, but to agree with God that it's wrong.

Nobody truly repents until they say, I agree with what God says about that. I'm not justifying it anymore. Not gonna rationalize it, not gonna say everyone does it.

I agree with God, and that's what they did, and they repented. Even the king, which I didn't read about, he was so moved by it that he made an edict. Everybody fast for three days, including water and food for three days, three nights, because we're in trouble with the Almighty.

Then Jonah goes outside the city to see what God is gonna do, and God does nothing. He lets the city stay, and this does not make him happy, and he says to God, see, God, this is why I didn't come in the first place. I know you.

You're full of mercy. You're full of compassion. I knew that if I preached that, that they could turn to you, and that if they turn to you, even though they're Assyrians, you might hear, and you would then relent and show mercy to them, and then he says, I wanna go outside and die.

The end of the book is, the end of the little short book is weird because he goes out to the east side of the town, and he sits there, and he says, I wanna die. You know, he's having the ultimate pity party. Have you ever had a pity party in your own life? Well, this was a big one.

He sat, and he said, I don't wanna live anymore. Imagine, prophet of God. So it's getting hot, and God sees that he's right in direct rays of the sun.

So God causes a bush to grow supernaturally fast to provide some shade because the Bible says he wanted to give comfort to Jonah. Jonah enjoyed it, and then the next day, God took away that plant. You know, the plant was up, then the plant came down, and then Jonah got so mad, like, where's my shade? And God said to him, Jonah, what's wrong with you? The plant was here.

Now the plant was gone, and you got sad for a plant. Why don't you care as much about the Assyrian people and the great city of Nineveh than you do a plant? And that's how it ends. So what do we get from this? There's obviously many lessons, and commentators have written thick books just about the book of Jonah, but here's what I'd like to present to you.

Number one, it does get very hard in case someone's here. It does get very hard when you're trying to run away from God. You can know about God, but still try to run away from him.

The prophet did. God could put his finger on your life to do something. God could stop you in your tracks because he sees you're involved in something sinful, and it's troubling you inside, but now he's gonna put you into the pressure cooker, and a lot of times we get this crazy idea that when God is dealing with us, even though he's full of mercy and love, he would never hurt us, we're gonna run away from God.

I have news for you and me. Wherever you go, God'll be there. If you go to a different city, a different state, you change your job, God'll still be there, but it's amazing that a man who's a prophet thought, I'll run away from God.

It could be something that he's convicting you about, as I said. It could be a call that's on your life today. You're up in the balcony, and you're a million miles away from where you once were with the Lord, and he showed you what he wanted you to do, to teach, to serve, to be short-term mission trips, I don't know what, to use your voice, your talent for God, to be used somehow through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and now something went bad, something went wrong, someone didn't appreciate you, someone criticized you, and now you just wanna throw it down and run away from God.

It's impossible to run away from God. It'll rob you of all your peace, you won't have any joy. This is why there's so many listless Christians, because in some way, shape, or form, they're trying to run away from God's plan for their life, because somehow they get this idea there's a better plan than God's plan.

How many would agree with me today? Whatever the Lord's plan is for us, it's the best plan we could ever have for our life. I don't care how it looks, I don't care how it feels, I don't care how difficult it seems, I don't care how many adversaries will come against you. When you're doing God's will, it's the most peaceful, joyful, contented life, and when you're running from God, oh my goodness, and where are you gonna run to? You're gonna run into something that God uses often to help us, which is called trouble.

One of the great servants that God has, in case you're in trouble today, he has a servant called trouble. You know, the psalmist says, in the day of trouble, I called upon the Lord. What's he intimating? Before I got in trouble, I didn't have time to call on God.

But how many have found in your own life, you can forget God, run from God, but when you get in enough trouble, it's help me Jesus. How many say amen? Help me, Lord. Lord, I humble myself.

I will not run. I need you, Lord. So he ran into trouble, a storm and then a fish, running the wrong way.

In case you're here today, even though you're in church, because I was running from something in my life when God put his hand on me after I got married, and I felt this, just to me, insane call to be in the ministry. I was in the business world. I didn't go to college to be studying the ministry.

I was there to play basketball. What misery there is when you run from what God wants you to do. I had a beautiful wife and we had a daughter.

11 months after we got married, I couldn't enjoy my wife or my daughter, the truth be told. Because when you're boxing with God, you find out your arms are always too short. In case you're here today, I empathize with you.

I know that empty, annoying feeling, sitting in church and trying to worship, but not go all the way. See, that's the compromise that's so miserable, brings misery. I'm in church.

I don't wanna go crazy and not serve you, but I can't go all the way and obey you. Can't live like that. Say yes to Jesus today.

Say yes to God. Whatever it is, say yes. Just say yes.

But how will I do it? I'm so weak. Just say yes. Just say yes.

God'll take it from there. But don't run. Stop running.

The most important point, though, in this book is this mystery of how you could be a prejudiced bigot and still be a prophet. The reason he didn't wanna go to Nineveh was one reason. Couldn't stand the Assyrians.

He didn't want the Assyrians to be forgiven. He didn't want the Assyrians to be spared. He didn't want God to bless the Assyrians.

End of story. I ain't going. Because I know you.

You might turn and bless those miserable so-and-sos. Is that not what the story tells us? And that's perfect for the day we live in. Because you can have church and Christianity and be the biggest bigot in the world.

You know, people who are other. I want God to bless my folk, not those folk. I don't empathize or feel anything for the minorities who live in the inner city.

I want the blessing on me and my kind. I don't want no white man blessed. White man is nothing but a devil.

I want blessings on my people, the black people. I don't wanna hear about white people getting blessed. Don't laugh.

It's too real. And Latinos and Asians or whatever. I don't want no Muslims blessed.

Excuse my bad English here. I don't wanna hear about Muslims getting forgiven and saved. I want them killed.

They blew up a World Trade Center. They're doing all kinds of crazy terrorist acts. They're killing Christians over there.

I know, but Jesus said, pray for your enemies. I don't wanna hear about that verse. I wanna hear the Old Testament.

Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. You punch me, I'll punch you twice. Am I not talking truth here? I don't want God to bless no Democrats or Republicans.

I don't wanna hear about that. Oh, you're representing Jesus Christ. That's just beautiful.

Well, that's just like the spirit of Christ. And the Christian church has been just sucked into that in the culture. I don't care right, left, liberal, conservative, Democrat, Republican, white, black, whatever this stuff is.

Churches are gonna be now identified by that. Not by Jesus, not by the spirit of love they have, but by their political position. And pastors can play to that.

Trust me, I've been both sides. White pastors can play to that prejudice that's in the white culture. They can play to that.

They do it in such subtle ways, nothing's ever said, but everyone knows what you're talking about. And black ministers play it exactly the same. They appeal to anger and unforgiveness and bitterness, and they can rile people into just a bad place.

Like Jonah. Was God's hand on him? Yes. Was he bigoted? Yep, to the core.

Couldn't just let go of the Assyrian thing. Did you know when Christianity began in Acts chapter two, the only Christians were Jewish. Jesus was Jewish, the 12 apostles were Jewish, everybody's Jewish.

And then God began to show that he wanted the gospel to go to the Gentiles. Ooh. What's a Gentile? Anyone who's a non-Jew.

But the anti-Semitism that had been shown the Jewish people over the centuries, and then the fact that they prided themselves, our father is Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We're special, we're not some like Italian or Polish. We're not from the Caribbean, we're from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob stock.

And that was a crisis in the church because they didn't wanna go to the Gentiles. And even when the Gentiles got the gospel, they tried to mess up the Gentile churches by saying you gotta get circumcised like we, because unless you become like a Jew, you can't really follow Jesus. And look at the book of Acts, there were big controversies about it.

God had to show I am no respecter of anybody. How many are happy God loves everybody, black and white Gentile Jew? But what a terrible testimony it was to the world. What a terrible testimony it was to the world that there was fighting between Jew and Gentile.

Remember, from the very beginning, Jewish leaders, rabbis, called Gentiles dogs, Gentile dogs. It was written by the leading rabbis of that day, you're not to eat with a Gentile. And if you see a woman giving birth in the street and no one to help her, you let the baby die.

Because it'll be just one more child brought up to be an idolater. And I don't have to tell you about the history of anti-Semitism by Gentiles, but God was trying to break that all down so that he could have one people, not Gentile people. Don't ever believe that Jewish people get saved different than Gentile people.

There's only one Lord and Savior of us all, the Lord Jesus Christ. And the way to salvation is the same for Jew, Gentile, whoever, whatever color. And then as time went on, it became the Muslims when they took over Jerusalem and they ruled Israel after they rose to power in the Middle East.

The whole first crusade around the year 1000 was preached up by a guy named Peter the Hermit who stirred people into a frenzy along with the backing of the Pope at that time. And people left all over France and Italy, some parts of Germany and marched all the way down to the Holy Land, so-called Holy Land, to free Jerusalem from the terrible control of the infidel. By the way, on their way down, they stopped in certain places in Germany and stopped in villages and went to the Jewish quarters and killed every Jew because they said those are the guys that crucified Jesus.

And they wore big crosses on their chest to show that this was a holy thing they were doing. And then when they got down there, a lot of the hatred that remains today, especially among Muslims against Christians, it started or it was emphasized back in the time of the crusade because as they went to free Jerusalem, they went to war with the Muslims that were there and no quarter was held on either side. Women were raped, children were thrown up in the air and speared all in the name of the King of Glory, Jesus Christ.

So Jonah predates all that, doesn't he? He's the guy who says I want you to get me out of this fish but don't bless those other people. Is that in you possibly or me today? God bless my family and help me when I'm in trouble but don't bless the people that oppose me, who differ, look different, eat different, talk different, have different political views. I'm telling you now, I am getting so frightened that Christianity is losing its spiritual nature totally and it's becoming just a form of culture.

Black Christianity, white Christianity, Latino, American right-wing, whatever kind of stuff. Is that why Jesus died on the cross? Is that why he prayed, Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing? Is that the life that he wants us to have? So I say to all of us today because we can all be victim of it, we all can be, just let it go, not just stop running from God. If you got rancor inside of you and prejudice against people, don't justify it and say but you don't know our history and you don't know what happened to me.

Listen, Jesus knows everything about you but he loves you. How about that? Wait, can we put our hands together? How about that? He knows everything about you and me and he still loves us. When I think of his mercy toward me, I sat over there today as he's my witness in this meeting and I said, God, they're all praising you but none of them could praise you like me.

That's the truth before God. Never thought I would say this. God, none of them could praise you like me because what you've done for me, I'm the worst of them all and you've been the kindest to me.

Don't you ever feel like that sometimes? Like oh God, you deserve all the praise. Can we just lift our hands and praise him out loud? Could you just open your mouth, don't clap, just open your mouth and say God, I bless you. I praise you, I thank you for your mercy.

We praise you, God. Thank you for loving us. Putting up with so much nonsense, God.

Oh, we love you, we praise you. Look up here for a second. You know why God does that? Is because what Jonah said, I know you.

No, you I know. You I know, that's why I didn't want to go because I knew you're just looking for a way to forgive people. Could some of us learn something new about God that Jonah wants to teach us? God today is just looking for a way to forgive and bless and help somebody in this building.

He's just looking for a way. Would you give him a chance? Look at me, would you just give him a chance? Jonah knew that about God. Now he said that's why I don't want to go.

I don't want those people blessed and I know you. You're the biggest blesser in town. You love to forgive, you love to help people and I don't want these people helped.

But what covers this story for me is just the mercy and the patience of God. He's so patient with Jonah. I would have left Jonah in the fish.

All in favor say aye. Just you know what, rot away there. You don't want to do what I told you, then get lost.

Am I right or wrong? Just in the natural. I'm God, I told you to do something. You don't want to do it and you're running away from me.

Yeah, you know what, I'll find somebody else. Oh, I am so glad God doesn't find somebody else. Can we just put our hands together and say amen? He even puts kindness in the sailors.

They go no, we don't want to throw you overboard. You might die. I would have said toss him over the first time I found out his name.

Get rid of him. No. Then God delivers him and maybe he's telling you for a second time today like he did Jonah.

Stop running. I'm telling you again now. Do what I told you.

Go where I told you. Apologize to who I told you. Change your attitude like I told you.

I'll help you. He asked Jonah a second time and then when Jonah has a pity party, honestly, when you read chapter four, you just want to say God, please be done with this guy. Can't you find somebody else? I'm tired of reading about him.

He's running from you, then he's in a well, then he cries out, then you deliver him. He still doesn't want to go. Then he goes and then he gets mad that the people are blessed.

What kind of, who is this guy? And God looks down and says, I love this about God. Never saw it before this week. He goes, oh, it's hot.

He needs a little shade. Shade? He needs a beating. How many say amen? Talking about shade.

No, it's hot. He's sweating, it's hot. I gotta grow something to cover him.

I mean, who else is like our God? How many can bear witness with this? Listen, how many have been at your worst and you know it's not going good for you in your walk with God and he still shows you some kindness where you almost want to say, oh God, like who are you? If you have ever had an experience like that, just lift up your hand. I mean, like God, what are you talking? God, please just let me rot by myself. God said, no, I gotta take care of you because you're special to me.

Let's close our eyes. Anybody need some help today? You came in here and the bottom fell out or maybe you're running from God in some way. I know you're here and you love the Lord.

You wouldn't be here but maybe you're trying to get away from something he wants you to do, where he wants you to go. Maybe you're a man or a woman and he's called you to the ministry but you say, no, I'm too old to do that and I haven't been trained. And God is saying, don't figure it out, just say yes.

Anybody here just need some help from God? Jesus said, come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden. I'll give you rest. I'll give you peace.

Peace, wonderful peace. If you don't have peace today, God wants you to have peace. He loves you.

What good is living if you don't have peace? If you have no inner tranquility, if you're living with guilt, fear, indecision, pain, bitterness, I'm telling you there's a doctor named Jesus who can help you. No charge. No charge.

Anybody here that I can pray with, just stand right where you are. Just stand. Just stand up right where you are and say, I need Jesus to help me in the present situation I'm in.

Or I wanna talk to Jesus and say yes about something that I know he wants me to do. Just stand up right where you are. Stand up and say, Jesus, tired of running? Wanna say yes? Or just need help? Or you know this bitterness and prejudice I have inside of me? Get rid of it, Jesus.

I can't take it. I hate it. I wanna look at people the way you look at them.

I wanna feel what you feel. Everybody who's standing, come quickly. I wanna pray over you.

Come quickly to the front. Balcony or downstairs if you're standing. Come, no one else move.

I will dismiss you forthrightly. Just let them come. Come on, right to the edge.

Let's all pray this out loud and help our friends in the front, but I think it's for all of us. Dear God, thank you for your love. That you're full of mercy.

That you never give up. I say yes to you. Yes to your mercy.

Yes to Jesus. Yes to the cross of Christ. To the blood that washes me and makes me clean.

I say yes to your will. I don't wanna run the wrong way. I wanna run to you.

You've got my attention. I love you. I praise you.

I trust you. Thank you for your word. Even though it cuts, sometimes it heals.

It's clean, it's pure. Father, I thank you for the people that are here in the front. You know every situation.

I'm just so happy that I know your ear is open to us. No more running away, we're running to you. No more fighting.

We turn ourselves away from all prejudice, hate, anger, resentment, bitterness. We say no in Jesus' name to it. So that you can make us light and salt on the earth.

Help us to represent you in a way that will bring glory to you. Now bless my brothers and sisters. Give us a good rest of the day.

I thank you for this meeting. I thank you that I'm well enough to be here today, God. Again, I thank you.

Restore my strength 100%, Lord. We pray this all in Jesus' name. In everyone's name.

Amen. Turn around and hug about three or four people. Come on, hug.

We have a hug in before we leave. Do it.

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