

# (Jonah) No Place to Hide - Part 2

by John Vissers

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*The story of Jonah teaches us about the importance of acknowledging responsibility for our actions and the principle of substitution, where one person takes the place of another to save them from harm or punishment.*

**Duration:** 39:18

**Scripture:** Jonah 1:11

**Topics:** "Jonah", "Grace", "Responsibility"

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## Description

John Vissers explores the story of Jonah, emphasizing the theme of personal responsibility and the consequences of running from God's call. Jonah's admission of guilt leads to a turning point where he acknowledges that his actions have caused turmoil for others, ultimately becoming a vessel of salvation for the sailors. The sermon highlights the grace of God, which pursues Jonah even in his rebellion, culminating in his miraculous preservation by the great fish. Vissers draws parallels between Jonah's experience and the redemptive work of Christ, illustrating the principle of substitution and the transformative power of acknowledging one's sin. The message encourages listeners to confront their own flight from God and embrace His grace.

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## Transcript

Our scripture tonight is taken from the book of Jonah as we continue tonight in our studies in this prophet, this book of the prophet in the Old Testament, the book of Jonah, tonight reading chapter 1 as we come to a conclusion in the first chapter this evening at verse 11 through to the end of the chapter at verse 17. So let us hear the word of God to us this evening, Jonah chapter 1 at verse 11. The sea was getting rougher and rougher.

So they asked him, what should we do to you to make the sea calm for us? 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. Instead, the men did their best to row back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.

Then they cried to the Lord, O Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man for you, O Lord, have done as you pleased. Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.

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. Amen.

May God bless to us this reading from his word this evening. Let's pray together as we prepare our hearts and our minds for receiving his word. Let's bow together.

Father, we thank you this evening for your word. We pray that you would speak to us through it, that you would calm our minds and our hearts, and by your spirit make us open to what you would teach us through this chapter, through this message this evening. We pray for the one who seems to be troubled this evening, who's left our midst, and our Father, we pray that you would surround him with your grace as well at this time.

In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen. Abraham Maslow once said that most of us suffer from the Jonah complex at one time or another in our lives.

There comes a time in all of our lives when we sometimes run away from God's commission to us, from God's call, and we turn our back on the great challenge that God has for us, that God has lined up for us. The Jonah complex, according to Maslow, means the evasion of our greatest opportunities and our greatest responsibilities. We run, he says, not because we fear the worst, but sometimes we run because we fear the best.

We're intimidated by the possibilities. We recoil from what life offers us because we are afraid of the struggle and we don't want to risk failure. We pack up our faith and we pack up our confidence and we head in the opposite direction until something happens to trip us up and to bring us back to reality, to bring us back to our senses.

Well, tonight we meet Jonah himself at particularly this point in his life. He's on the deck of the ship now. His flight from God, as you will realize, has been interrupted by a storm.

Jonah had refused the great commission which had been given to him to go to evangelize Nineveh. His narrow-minded nationalism, you will remember, and his truncated worldview, which we saw a couple of weeks ago, led him to refuse the commission that God gave him, and he wouldn't go to preach the gospel, to preach God's judgment to a people that, in fact, he despised. So he sinks down for a long snooze in the bottom of a ship headed in the opposite direction for Tarsus, and he's oblivious to the events that seem to be unfolding about him and around him until he's awakened in the lower hold by the captain who comes to wake him up.

And the sailors, you'll remember, want to know why this storm has been unleashed upon them. They want to know its cause. They want to know who Jonah is.

They want to know where Jonah has come from. They want to know what Jonah does. And confronted now by the sailors and their penetrating questions, Jonah is struggling to come to some answer as to what he can possibly tell them.

Confronted by the penetrating questions of these sailors who are struggling for survival, Jonah now has to come clean. Jonah is confronted with reality. And so he admits, as we saw in verse 10 last week, that he's a Hebrew prophet.

He admits that he's on the run from God, that he's a fugitive, and he admits that he's the reason for the mess that they all find themselves in, in the midst of this storm. Now verses 11 to 17 of the first chapter, which we've read this evening, are really the end of the beginning of this story, and in a very real sense, they're also the of the end. Because in a very real sense, this is now the turning point in this story.

Jonah runs headlong into the sovereign power and into the sovereign grace of God, and what it means for him is a Copernican revolution in his thinking. A kind of 180 degree turn. He's going in one direction, opposite from the way that God wants him to go, and now he has to deal with the reality that God has caught up with him, and he has to face that reality, and something has to be done about it.

And so it's really the turning point, in a sense, of the story. But it's also a low point in the story, because at this point, Jonah faces death, and Jonah faces despair. And it's not at all clear that he's going to get out of this alive.

Either he goes down with the ship, and all of the sailors who go to their death, or else he's tossed overboard and drowns in the sea. Either way, the end seems imminent for Jonah. Either way, the end seems to have come.

Either way, the end of the story seems to be upon him. Running from God has led him into a dead end. So what happens? What happens at this point, as Jonah's in this situation, faced with these realities? What does he do, and how is it handled? Well, the first thing I want us to notice as we come to this text tonight, in verses 11 to 17, is that Jonah acknowledges his responsibility.

And this is a change now. It already started in verse 10, as we saw last week, but in verses 11 and 12, we read, the sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, what should we do to you to make the sea calm for us? And he says, pick me up and throw me into the sea.

I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you. The jig is now up for this fugitive prophet, because the sailors now know that this storm has been sent from God by God because of Jonah's actions. But I want you to notice that the ship's crew, in fact, is not a lynching party.

They're not anxious to do away with Jonah. They're not anxious to immediately get rid of him to solve their own problems. They had determined the cause of this catastrophe, but they don't immediately run to Jonah and seize him and toss him overboard.

Rather, they put the matter to Jonah. And I think this is a very interesting part of the story. They ask Jonah what ought to be done.

They put the question to him. And now Jonah has the question put back to him. What will he say in response to this? What should be done? And Jonah now stands face to face with reality.

He is the one who has to make the call. It would have been a lot easier if the sailors had simply decided themselves to toss Jonah overboard. If they hadn't really involved him in the decision, it would have made so much more sense if they had just taken him and pitched him into the sea without any questions asked at all.

It would have been much easier, so much easier, had they decided to just be done away with him. But you see, their question to him forces Jonah out into the open. He has to become his own judge and jury at this point.

He not only has to acknowledge that his flight from God has caused this storm, but he also has to prescribe the solution. He also has to tell them what needs to be done in order for this storm to stop. He has to face the awful fact that his death will bring calm to the sea and bring life and survival to the sailors.

He has to own not only his own sin in fleeing from God, but in fact he also has to own now his own judgment. His personal rebellion is broken at this point, and he's forced to make a courageous confession. And he says, the only way out of this is for me to bear the punishment.

The only way out of this is for you to throw me overboard. The only way out of this is for me to come clean and to acknowledge that I'm the one who has caused the storm to come upon us all. And so Jonah, in a rather poignant moment, sentences himself to death.

In his book, *The Judgment of Jonah*, Jacques Allul, the French writer whom I quoted last week, says at this point that Jonah lets himself be put into question in the totality of his life. It is for him now a matter of life and of death. He is ready to be condemned for his unfaithfulness and to lose his life to save the others.

And Allul says at this moment, Jonah makes the move from being a fugitive running away from God to once again being a witness and ultimately a martyr. With these words, he becomes again a true prophet of the living God. Now I want us to think about this and to reflect on this in terms of our own lives a little bit, because it does seem to me that when we find ourselves in flight from God, there always comes a moment in which reality has to be faced, in which the truth has to be confronted, in which we come face to face with what we've done.

We may have to deal with the consequences of certain actions that we've taken. We may have to deal with the fallout from certain decisions that we've made. We may have to deal with the realities which thrust themselves upon us as a result of a whole number of things which we might have done, but particularly in our flight from God.

You see, the first step in returning to God when we're on the run is to acknowledge our responsibility, to acknowledge our sin, to acknowledge in fact our culpability to admit our flight from God. You become a Christian. You take the steps to becoming a Christian when you acknowledge that your sin has contributed to the chaos of the world and to the storms of life.

You begin to become a child of God when you own the fact that the judgment born by Christ on the cross in fact is your judgment. That's what's happening here with Jonah. He begins to acknowledge his own responsibility.

He begins to admit his own culpability. He begins to acknowledge that maybe in fact there's something that he's done that's created and caused all of this. Last Monday evening, my wife Lynn and I watched a video, a movie at home called *Dead Man Walking* starring Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon.

Some of you may have seen this movie. We usually don't watch very many movies in our house because and if we do they're usually children's movies. But last Monday we went out and got one.

There's a video store in our community where you can get videos for 96 cents on Monday nights. And since Monday is my day off, sometimes in the evening we watch a movie. Well we watched this movie and found it to be a very powerful movie and it's not a movie I would recommend unless you're prepared for a rather intense experience.

It's a powerful story about a man named Matthew Poncelet who is sentenced to death for the rape and for the murder of a young couple deep in the south of the United States. And the movie, the entire movie revolves around the relationship which develops between this man who's on death row and a Roman Catholic nun who's assigned to be his spiritual advisor, his spiritual counselor as he faces death. And throughout the movie Poncelet absolutely refuses to acknowledge his guilt, his culpability, his responsibility in any way.

He admits that he was there when these events occurred but he tries to download the blame first of all on his accomplice and says that it was all his doing. He then begins to blame the drugs and the alcohol which have ravaged his mind and he says he really wasn't responsible for any actions that he might have done. He blames the fact that he never experienced any love in his life as he was growing up.

He never was accepted and at every turn he tries to evade responsibility. He tries to portray himself as the victim rather than as the victimizer. But this Roman Catholic nun will not let him off the hook.

She's gentle, she's kind, but she's persistent and she will not let him evade the fact that he is responsible for his actions. And in the hours just before his execution he finally comes to terms with the fact that he is being executed for something that he in fact did. And when he admits it, when he comes to terms with that reality as evil as it is, it becomes for him a transforming moment of love and grace at the end of his life in the midst of death.

And I want to suggest to you that that's what's going on here in the life of Jonah and that's what goes on in the lives of all of us as we run from God. There comes a point when we need to admit our responsibility. In the Bible this is always the beginning of salvation because you see the Bible does not paper over the awful reality that we in fact are accountable for our decisions, for our actions, for that which in fact we undertake to do in the midst of life.

The Bible realizes and teaches that the awful reality of sin must be dealt with. It refuses to let us get from out underneath our responsibility. Now we're living in a culture of course where this kind of talk is not very well understood.

Where talk about sin and personal responsibility is not popular. But we need to understand that in Scripture there can be no personal salvation where there is no personal acknowledgement of sin. We're all more than victims but in fact many of us all of us are implicated in sin in one way or another.

It's not enough to claim that we are victimized although in fact sin often does victimize other people. But in fact it's also true that all of us are implicated in the evil which ravages our souls. No one gets out of this untouched and Jonah admits his responsibility.

Secondly then I want us to notice as we look at this text that in a very interesting way I think Jonah then becomes the instrument of salvation as the story moves on particularly in verses 13 to 16. Notice that the sailors at first recoil at the thought of throwing Jonah overboard. Instead they do their best it says to row back to land and to safety but they discover that it's no use.

The harder that they row the harder that they try to save themselves the more difficult it becomes the rougher the sea is and so having explored every avenue they finally finally cast Jonah into the sea. Having tried everything else they finally give in to Jonah's instruction but they do it reluctantly and notice that they cry out to God to forgive them should they be taking the life of an innocent man. They cry out to God for

forgiveness in the taking of a human life but nevertheless they put him over and notice what happens then the sea becomes calm and it says that as the sea became calm this greatly greatly put fear into the sailors.

It offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. The sailors are converted. They are made to believe in the Lord the God of the sea the God of the land the God who made all that is all that exists and they are converted from the worship of their own gods upon whom they called earlier in the story now to realize that the God of Jonah the God for whom Jonah is a prophet is indeed the true God who is to be worshipped.

Now do you see what's going on here and I want us to notice this because I think it's a very powerful and a very profound part of the story. The sailors become the instrument of God's judgment in the execution of Jonah and Jonah becomes the instrument of God's salvation for the sailors. Now let me say that again the sailors become the instrument of God's judgment in the execution of Jonah and Jonah becomes the instrument of God's salvation for the sailors and I want to suggest to you my friends that here at the heart of this story we bump into the New Testament gospel at the very heart of the Old Testament.

Here is an a gospel principle which will be extended and which will be fulfilled in the New Testament in the one who is greater than Jonah the one who is yet to come. Jacques Ellul puts it this way if it is true that the sacrifice of a man who takes his condemnation can save others around him that is Jonah then this is far more true when the one who is sacrificed is the very son of God the eternal son of God. You see there's a principle of solidarity here there is a principle of representation here there is a principle of substitution going on here which is at the very heart of the gospel of the New Testament because on the cross Jesus bore sin and judgment it is not his own sin for he had no sin it is not his own judgment because in fact he deserved no judgment this makes it different from Jonah who bore his own judgment because of his own sin but remember the words of the apostle Paul in 2nd Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God.

You see what's going on in the New Testament is that Jesus owns our sin. Jesus embraces our judgment and takes it upon himself he is the one rightly who is in a position to judge but he becomes the judge judged in our place by bearing the sin of the world in his death on the cross Jesus becomes the instrument of salvation for the very world which has executed the judgment of death upon him. Jesus becomes the instrument of peace in a stormy sinful world and already here we have this principle of solidarity this principle of representation this principle of substitution of one giving up his life so that others might be saved and so Jonah has a lot to do with Jesus and Jesus of course pointed to Jonah as a witness as a forerunner of in fact what he himself had come to do.

Many of you will have read Charles Dickens novels A Tale of Two Cities or perhaps you've seen the movie I think a couple of movies have been made of this novel you'll know that it's the story of a young French aristocrat who was condemned to die by the guillotine during the bloody French revolution and his punishment of course was based solely on the crimes that his family had perpetrated as nobles upon the peasantry.

Just hours before his execution he's visited by a young English friend of his named Cartwright who could have passed for his twin who could have passed for his double and this friend had largely wasted his life he had largely not done very much with his life not done very much of significance with his life and after the guard had left them alone the friend overpowers the doomed man with an anesthetic and he changes

clothes with him and then pretending to be the one who's condemned to die he calls the jailer and he asks that the body of his unconscious visitor supposedly this visitor who's overcome with grief be removed and returned to his home and of course what happens is the guards carry out this French young French aristocrat whom they think is the visitor and they carry him off back

to his home and he's free and then left in the prison is this young English man this friend condemned to die in the place of his friend and on his way to the guillotine the young Englishman spoke these final words and they're words that I'm sure many of you have read he said it is a far far better thing that I do than I have ever done it is a far far better thing that I do than I have ever done he was substituting his life for the life of a friend his largely wasted life so that a friend of his might be set free the principle of substitution the principle of representation the principle of solidarity and Jonah realizes too that it's this principle which is at work the principle of substitution excuse me atonement which we find here in Jonah now Jonah realizes that it's too late to change

his mind it's too late perhaps for him to go to Nineveh the least he can do is to offer himself as a sacrifice in an effort to avert the danger that he's brought upon the others in one sense it's an act of desperation in one sense it's an act of despair it's the act of a man who realizes that he's come to the end he no longer sees his life as having any value or meaning but on the other hand he realizes that it would be a far far better thing for him to die in the sea than for all of the sailors to die and for the ship to go down so he dies he's prepared to die so that the ship will be saved and so that the sailors will live and then thirdly and finally notice that Jonah experiences the providence and the saving hand of God in verse 17 it says but the Lord provided a great fish to swallow

Jonah and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights now some people will look at this verse this final verse of the first chapter and in fact see it as an example of further judgment Jonah gets thrown overboard and then he's followed by swallowed by a great fish that'll teach him he finally gets what he deserves but I want to suggest to you this evening that this in fact is the beginning of Jonah's salvation think about it Jonah's tossed overboard he begins to sink into the seaweed as he struggles for life as he struggles for survival trying to come to terms with the fact that his life is over he struggles to swim and catches his breath he's at the mercy of the wind and the waves going down for the last time and what happens God sends a submarine in the form of a big fish that

comes along and that swallows Jonah and Jonah survives inside the fish three days and three nights what's going on here yes this is the judgment of God but I want to suggest to you at the same time that it's the mercy of God it's wrath tempered with mercy it's judgment filled with grace and with providence because you see this is a story of salvation God is prepared even in the midst of death to rescue Jonah out of the depths why because God intends to display his mercy and his grace to Jonah and to do it in such a way that he will again later do to the people of Nineveh and God isn't finished with Jonah yet God has a task for Jonah to complete God will see to it that the people of Nineveh will be preached to that the gospel will be proclaimed to them that they will be given an

opportunity to hear the saving message of God you see Jonah can't even escape from God in the face of death at this point Jonah's plucked from the grave and given a second chance given an other opportunity to fulfill the commission that God has for him now the New Testament interprets this part of the story in a very interesting way it's interpreted in the New Testament as a witness to the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and that's how our Lord himself in fact interprets this part of the story and into chapter 2 in Matthew chapter 12 and verse 40 Jesus says as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a

huge fish so the son of man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth but in the resurrection of Jesus of course one greater than Jonah again has

appeared just as in the substitutionary element of this story there is one greater who comes in Jesus so now in the resurrection there is one greater who has come Jonah was saved from a certain death and restored to life but Christ was actually crucified dead and buried before he rose from the grave the third day nevertheless Jonah's life and death experience points to the cross and to the resurrection of Jesus Jonah experiences the grace of God the life-giving grace of God the saving grace of God in the midst of what would have been otherwise a certain death and he's given new life and so I want to suggest to you that even when you run from God God's grace can force you to confront reality God's grace is greater than our sin God's grace is greater than our rebellion this is how C.S.

Lewis whom I mentioned briefly last Sunday evening described his conversion in his autobiography surprised by joy he says you must picture me alone in that room in Magdalene which is a college at Oxford night after night feeling whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work the study steady unrelenting approach of him I so earnestly desired not to meet that which I greatly feared had at last come upon me he says in the Trinity term of 1929 I gave in and admitted that God was God and Nelson prayed perhaps that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing the divine humility will which will accept a convert on even such terms the prodigal son he says at least walked home on his own feet but who is brought kicking struggling resentful and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape the words compel them to come in have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them but properly understood they plumb the depth of the divine mercy the hardness of God C.S.

Lewis says is kinder than the softness of men and his compulsion his compulsion is our liberation he says I never had the experience of looking for God it was the other way around he was the hunter or so it seemed to me and I was the deer he stalked me took unerring aim and fired and I am thankful that this is how the first conscious meeting occurred it forearms one against subsequent fears that the whole thing was only wish fulfillment something one didn't wish for can hardly be that you see C.S.

Lewis came to the reality that the sovereign God was invading his life and he could no longer run and he could not escape Jonah a prophet of God realized that the sovereign grace of God had caught up with him and he could no longer run and he turns in despair and realizes and acknowledges that he has to come clean he becomes the instrument of salvation for the sailors and he himself in the end experiences the providential saving grace of God when you run from God the sovereign grace of God will eventually catch up with you you can run but you cannot hide is it the case that tonight perhaps the sovereign grace of God is bumping up against your life not willing to let you go not willing to let you run but rather wanting desiring calling compelling you to not only come to yourself to not only come to reality to not only face reality as it is but in fact to come and to bow in humility before the God who is the God of all creation the God who made heaven and earth the land and the sea the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ let us pray gracious God our father we confess that in your sovereignty you are lord that your ways are mysterious to us but that you work and move in our lives and in the lives of those around us and we acknowledge before you tonight our need of you and if it is the case our father that some of us are on the run tonight help us to come clean before you help us to acknowledge our need of you and help us to give in to your sovereign grace and to the pursuit of your love for the sake of Jesus we ask it amen

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