

(Jonah) the Prophet Who Ran

by John Vissers

The book of Jonah teaches us about the character of God, the call of God, and the consequences of not following through on God's call, and reminds us that God's will comes before our will.

Duration: 39:39

Scripture: Jonah 1:1

Topics: "Jonah", "Obedience to God", "God's Mercy and Grace"

Description

John Vissers explores the story of Jonah, emphasizing the prophet's initial refusal to obey God's command to preach to Nineveh, a city he despised. Jonah's flight to Tarshish symbolizes a deeper struggle with prejudice and the challenge of accepting God's mercy for all, including those we may consider undeserving. The sermon highlights the importance of recognizing God's sovereignty and compassion, urging listeners to confront their own biases and the call to share the gospel with everyone, regardless of their background. Ultimately, Vissers reminds us that God's grace is available to all, and we cannot escape His call.

Transcript

series of the studies on the book of Jonah in the Old Testament, and I would invite you to turn there with me now. Jonah is one of the so-called minor prophets near the end of the Old Testament, and we're going to read this morning, or excuse me, this evening the first chapter, which I'm going to read in its entirety, but we're not going to look at the entire chapter this evening, but focus on the first three verses. So the book of Jonah, reading in the first chapter.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come 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 to flee from the Lord. Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that 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. But Jonah had gone down 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. 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.

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 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 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, and 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. And 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 that the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

Amen, and may God bless to us this reading from his word this evening. Let's pray together, shall we, as we prepare to work into this passage together. Father, we thank you tonight for your word, that it guides us, that it provides light for our darkness, that it provides truth in the midst of life to us.

We pray that you would speak to us through your word this evening, teach us, and take these words and apply them to our hearts and minds, so that even in the week to come we might be found more faithful in the pathway of discipleship, for we ask it in the name of Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen. Many years ago, two men were brought to trial in Chicago for murder, and their lawyer was the well-known defense attorney, Clarence Darrow, who was well known as an atheist, as someone who did not believe in God.

The trial was rather long, and it was rather drawn out, and it at last drew to a close, and Darrow summed up his summed up the evidence, as he saw it, in his closing remarks to the jury in an effort to try to persuade them that, in fact, the defendants, those who he was defending, were in fact innocent. In the testimony of one witness during the case had been particularly damaging, and so Darrow tried to minimize it by saying this, why, a person could as easily believe this man's testimony as he could believe that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Well, obviously, the jury believed that a whale had indeed swallowed Jonah, because they found the two men guilty and convicted them.

But Darrow's phrase, this idea that a person can as easily believe that as a believe that the whale swallowed Jonah, is a phrase that has stuck, and it's become a common phrase in our language. We want to say something is incredible. We want to say something is really rather difficult to believe.

When we want to speak about something unbelievable, this is often the comparison that is drawn. This is the kind of comparison that is used. And tonight, I want us to think together, as we begin in this series on the book of Jonah, I want us to think about the meaning of this book, the meaning of the the prophecy of Jonah.

Now, as we think into it together, we need to be reminded that Jonah is a rather small book in the Bible. In fact, it consists of only four chapters. It consists of only 48 verses, and it takes up only three pages of your

Bible.

And yet, this little book, with its story of the prophet Jonah, is perhaps one of the most well known of all of the Old Testament stories, and perhaps one of the most well known stories in all of the Bible. And so, we come to this rather short book, this short story, this short work of a prophet, and yet in it, we find a great deal of truth. Now, as we enter into the book of Jonah this evening, I'd like to make a few introductory remarks or comments that I hope will set the stage for our study.

The first is this. I think it's important for us to note that often, a great deal of the attention that has been paid to the book of Jonah has been paid to it because it's focused on the question of whether, in fact, the story is true or not. Is it true that there was a real man, a prophet named Jonah, that he was swallowed by a big fish, and that he lived to tell the story? Or is this simply a myth, or some kind of an allegory, or some kind of a fictional story which is intended to give to us a higher truth? Well, to answer this question, I think it's first of all important to notice that, in fact, the fish is mentioned only three times in the book.

The fish is not the central figure in this particular story. The fish occurs in chapter 1, verse 17, if you've got your Bibles open. But the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was inside the fish three days and three nights.

And then again, it's mentioned in chapter 2 and verse 1. From inside the fish, Jonah prayed to the Lord, his God. And then in chapter 2, verse 10, and the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land. And so I want us to notice, in fact, that the fish takes up only three out of the 48 verses in the book of Jonah.

And notice that it's never described as a whale. Now, there may be various reasons for this. It may have been a whale.

It may not have been a whale. There's, in fact, really no Hebrew equivalent to the word whale in the language, so that's sort of an open question. But I think the point is this, that while the fish is an important part of the story, it's not the central figure, nor is it the focus of the book.

The focus of the story is Jonah, and Jonah's call by God to be a prophet, to go to Nineveh, and the relationship which then ensues between Jonah and the people to whom he is called to preach. And so we need to avoid, it seems to me, two extremes in interpreting the book of Jonah. On the one hand, I want to suggest to you tonight that it would be sheer folly, and it would be a sheer lack of faith to dismiss the story as a work of fanciful fiction.

Biblical truth, it seems to me, cannot simply be explained away in terms of myths, or allegories, or stories, or fiction. Some critics see this story as fiction, which is intended to convey a so-called higher truth. But if the Bible is God's word, my question is simply this, who are we to determine, to stand over scripture, and determine the difference between fact and fiction, between truth and falsehood? And of course, we need to be reminded as well, that our Lord quoted from Jonah in Matthew chapter 12, in verses 39 to 40, where Jesus refers to the experience of Jonah as a sign of his own death, and a sign of his own resurrection.

And so while, on the one hand, this story may seem incredible, it may be difficult for some people to accept and believe, the bottom line is this, as Jesus himself points out, that those who accept by faith the bodily, physical resurrection of Jesus will find this story not all that difficult or impossible to accept or believe. But at the same time, let me also suggest, as we enter into this story, into this narrative this

evening, that we shouldn't get caught up in trying to prove that a person can be swallowed by a great fish, or by a whale, or by a sea monster, in order somehow to prove that this story is true. The unfortunate thing is that the book of Jonah has sometimes become a battleground for a debate about marine biology, or a debate about zoology, about what's possible and about what's not possible.

And when that happens, even in the Christian community, what happens is that we in fact neglect what the book is all about. It becomes a kind of scientific and literary curiosity, rather than God's word speaking to us. I don't know if you've ever gone down to Niagara Falls, but in the museum section, there used to be a museum, I think it's still there, a Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum.

And if you treat the book of Jonah in one way, it sort of relegates it to a Ripley's Believe It or Not, or a kind of Guinness Book of World Records. And so let me suggest that as we approach the book of Jonah tonight, and in the weeks to come, that we do so with the following framework before us. That we do so in faith-seeking understanding.

That we thoughtfully seek to discern what the Holy Spirit is saying to us through this story. Let us be open to the truth of the story, and the lessons which the book of Jonah is intended to convey to us as God's people. And may I suggest that we should approach Scripture, we should approach this book, but we should approach all of Scripture humbly, allowing Scripture to interpret us.

Allowing Scripture to stand over us and interpret our lives, rather than we who stand over Scripture and in fact decide in one way or another what is true and what is not true. Now let me offer just another word by way of introduction, and that is to just remind you of the story in its entirety, because in order to really understand the individual parts of Jonah, you need to be reminded of the whole story. So let me just remind you of the entire narrative as it comes in these four chapters.

The call of God comes to a man named Jonah. And Jonah is commissioned to go to a city called Nineveh. A city where he's asked, where he's commanded to proclaim judgment against it for its wickedness.

Jonah doesn't want to go. So instead he buys a ticket to Tarshish, and he hops a ship headed in the opposite direction. And on the way a storm arises, and after trying to save the ship from disaster, the sailors finally decide the only alternative they have is to throw Jonah overboard.

And once in the sea, Jonah is swallowed by this great fish and lives inside of it for three days and three nights. And in the midst of his despair, he cries out to God. He repents, he prays, he asks God to deliver him, and he's thrown up onto dry land.

At the beginning of chapter three, God tells Jonah again to go to Nineveh. This time, Jonah obeys the word, and in fact he goes to Nineveh. He preaches, the people repent, and God's judgment is spared.

Now, you would think that this would make Jonah pretty happy, but it doesn't. Jonah gets mad, Jonah gets angry, Jonah gets disillusioned, and he gets depressed. He's angry about the fact that these people were saved.

So he sits under a tree, and he sulks. He complains to God, and that's how the story ends. It's an interesting, interesting account of the life and the commission of a prophet.

And I want us to have this whole account before us. Just one other introductory comment, and that is to say that this narrative, this story, contains great themes of biblical faith. As I've indicated on the outline for

you tonight, we're confronted in this story by a God who is both sovereign and merciful.

A God who transcends racial and national and ethnic boundaries. And so this story ought to teach us something about the gospel in a pluralistic, in a multicultural, in a multi-ethnic world. We are shown a prophet who receives a missionary mandate to preach the gospel to a great world-class city.

And so we ought to be able to learn something about what it means to preach the gospel in an urban setting, about urban mission. And we're reminded, as I've already said, about the sign of Jonah, that it's a witness to the saving, sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection. And so the story teaches us a great deal about the character of God, about the call of God, about the commission of God to God's people, about the consequences of not following through on God's call, about the meaning of the gospel.

And it confronts us, and this is where I think it begins to have relevance for our own lives, it confronts us and it speaks to us as we deal with the reality of whether or not we feel sometimes like running away and hiding from God. And so tonight then I want us to enter into Jonah's experience as he receives this call, as he hears this commission, and I want us to reflect on our own experience and our own situation and our own lives. Is it the case that sometimes our lives are very much like Jonah's life? Can we identify with him? Is his experience our experience? Can we identify with this word which comes to the prophet Jonah? Well, having made those introductory comments then to the book itself, to set the stage not only for tonight but for the weeks to come, let's look particularly now at verses 1 to 3. The first thing I want us to notice here is simply this, that Jonah hears God's word in the opening verse in verse 1, the opening verse of this book.

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. Now the book opens in a very typical manner. This is the same way that in fact most of the prophetic books in the Old Testament begin.

The true prophet always begins with an acknowledgment of his call by God. You can look at any other number of prophets and see this to be the case. Think of Hosea, for example, Hosea 1.1, the word of the Lord that came to Hosea, son of Berei.

Or Joel 1.1, the word of the Lord that came to Joel, son of Pethuel. Or Micah 1.1, the word of the Lord given to Micah of Moresheth. Or Zephaniah 1.1, the word of the Lord that came to Zephaniah, son of Cushi.

Or if you look at Zechariah, or you look at Jeremiah, or you look at Isaiah, and some of the other prophets, you will always find that they begin with an acknowledgment that the word of the Lord has come to them. And so there's nothing really peculiar here, nothing different from the other prophetic books of the Old Testament. Here we find the word of the Lord that came to Jonah, son of Amittai.

Now this reminds us that the call of a prophet is a call of God. That Jonah is chosen by God to take this word to Nineveh. The text does not tell us what reasons that led God to make this choice.

They were certainly not human reasons. If you look at the rest of the story, Jonah doesn't seem to have the character. He doesn't seem to have the fiber.

He doesn't seem to have really what it takes to be a prophet of God. And so he's not chosen on the basis of the quality of his character, or the power of his piety, or the greatness of his gifts. But the point is that the story begins with God, with his word.

And it begins with the sovereign word of God which comes to Jonah. The fact of the matter is that God has to do with Jonah before Jonah has to do with God. That God's will comes before Jonah's will.

And that's a lesson which already is shown here in the first verse, which comes again and again throughout this book. That Jonah needs to acknowledge the sovereignty of God, that God's will in fact precedes his own will. And he learns this in a rather difficult way.

He learns it through hard, hard, tough experience. And I want to suggest to you that that's where we need to begin in our own lives. We need always to acknowledge that God has to do with us long before we ever have to do with God.

That God's will precedes our will. That God speaks to us before we speak to God. That God invades our lives with his word.

That the reality of God embraces us before we, in fact, embrace God. And notice that the word of God comes to Jonah, and it's a word directed at him personally. The word came to Jonah, son of Amittai.

Now we don't know a lot about Jonah on the basis of what's told us in this book or on the basis of what's told us in the rest of the Old Testament. We know that Jonah was a real historical person. That he was, in fact, a prophet.

He's referred to in 2 Kings chapter 14 and verse 25. We know that he lived in the 8th century during the reign of Jeroboam II. We know that his name means dove, and we know that he was an active prophet among the people of Israel.

And we know that at some point in his life, the word of God came to him. As an individual, that it came to him in the midst of his life. That it invaded his circumstances.

That it invaded his intentions. That it invaded his priorities. We need to recognize that the word of God is not left hanging out there, but it comes to his life and challenges him.

And it creates for him an entirely new situation. It creates a kind of crisis in Jonah's life. When the word of the Lord comes to him, things will never be the same again.

We need to recognize that in the Old Testament, the word of God is powerful. When we think sometimes about the word of God, we think about it as kind of propositions. As the way which God speaks and communicates, and indeed it is that.

But in the Old Testament, the word of God is also God's action. When God speaks, it is done. Genesis 1, God said, let there be light.

And there was light. When God speaks, it is accomplished. God's word is his action.

And so when God's word comes to Jonah and addresses him, it is a powerful word. It is a transforming word. It is the word which created the universe itself.

And it creates a crisis in Jonah's life which he has to deal with. It ultimately transforms him and changes the course of his life. And we need to recognize that this is how God's word functions.

This is how God's word operates. I don't know whether you've ever experienced God's word in your life in this way. Sometimes when God speaks to us through his word, a crisis is created for us.

We are confronted by a new reality. We see things in a way that we've never quite seen them before. And it may make us feel uncomfortable.

But nevertheless, there it is. And we have to deal with it. God's word overturns our lives.

God has come to us. And we cannot escape his call. Well, that's the word that comes to Jonah.

It's a sovereign word which comes from God. Which comes with power to him personally. Creating a crisis, challenging him.

Creating a moment of decision in his life. But then secondly, the word itself is followed by a commission. And the commission, the word itself, is explained in verse 2. Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me.

God doesn't just come to Jonah in a general way. But God has a specific task for Jonah to engage in. Jonah is to go to Nineveh and he's going to preach against the city.

Because, for whatever reason, the wickedness of this city has come up before God. And God now wants to pronounce judgment against this city. Now we need to understand that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria.

We're not sure of its total population. We do know that it had a population of at least 120,000 by what's said later in the book. But it's not clear whether that's the entire population of the city or whether it was greater than that.

It housed kings and princes. It was a city of commerce. A city of trade.

It was a city of tourist attractions. It was a city of monuments. It was a city which we would describe today as a world-class city.

That's what Toronto has been trying to become for the last number of years. A world-class city. In our advertising, in our tourism, we try to attract people here by describing ourselves as a world-class city.

Well, Nineveh, in its day, was a world-class city. The problem was that its moral fabric was being eaten away. The city had no soul.

It was a place of moral decline and spiritual malaise. And God instructs Jonah to preach against it for this reason. And Jonah is to announce the impending judgment of God.

Now this is where, for me at least, and I think it should be true for all of us, this is where the book takes its first interesting turn. Because you see, the prophets of Israel almost always were called to bring the word of God to Israel. To their own people.

And even on those occasions when a prophet of Israel was commissioned to preach against the nations, he almost always did it from within the safety, within the confines of Israel itself. They were never really asked to put in a personal appearance to the nation or to the city against which they were preaching if it was outside of Israel. But not so with Jonah.

Jonah was called, he was being called to speak against the nation outside of Israel, against the city outside of Israel, but he was also being asked to go and do it in person. He actually had to go there and deliver the message in person. And that's the real kicker here.

That's what makes this such an extraordinary commission to Jonah as a prophet. As Eugene Peterson puts it, and Peterson always has a way of turning a phrase, he says, going to Nineveh to preach was not a coveted assignment for a Hebrew prophet with good references. And that's the way it was.

I mean, this is not climbing the prophetic ladder. This was not what Jonah would have had in mind for his vocation. But nevertheless, there it is.

The word of God comes to him and the commission comes to him. And I want to suggest to you that sometimes the word of God challenges our comfort zones. That sometimes the word of God calls us to go beyond our boundaries.

What does the Lord see when he looks down on our city tonight? What does the Lord see as he looks down upon the cities of our world? What does he see here in the heart of Toronto? What is God calling us as a congregation to do? As he sees the corporate towers on Bay Street and the homeless on the streets. As he sees a great center of learning, university, and yet illiterate people. Does God see the idols of our time? Does God see the fabric of our city being eroded away? And what is God calling us to do? What is God's word to us? What is God's commission to us as it came to Jonah so many years ago? And this brings us then finally to the third verse.

Jonah flees God's presence. The text says, 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.

And after paying the fare, he went aboard and he sailed for Tarshish. And it says to flee from the Lord. And notice that's repeated a couple of times.

Jonah ran away from the Lord and in fact he was trying to flee from the Lord. Jonah hears the call of God. The word of God comes to him in this overwhelming, in this moment of crisis.

He receives God's commission. He knows what the task is, but he disobeys. And now we are confronted with an extraordinary prophetic story in all of the literature of the Old Testament.

This is no longer the typical call of a prophet. Jeremiah and Isaiah and Moses and some of the other prophets, they all objected when God called them. They all pleaded, oh find someone else.

They all said, oh I don't have the gifts to be a prophet, or I don't have the knowledge to be a prophet, or there's someone else who can do the job. They all felt inadequate for the task, but when all was said and done, they obeyed. They went.

They received God's commission and they followed through on it. But not Jonah. Jonah turns tail and runs.

And he starts heading in the opposite direction. He starts heading towards Spain. He was asked to go one way, and he turns around and he goes the other way.

Nineveh was east and Tarshish was west. And in his disobedience, Jonah wanted to go as far as possible away from where God was sending him. Now why did Jonah run? That's really the question that we have

to answer tonight.

Why did Jonah run? Well he might have run because of the difficulties that he saw in the task that God was asking him to do. When he considered the city of Nineveh and its size and the number of people in it, the kind of strategy, the kind of energy, the kind of time that it would take to reach the city, he might have just got overwhelmed. He might have had an anxiety attack, and he might have just fled in the opposite direction.

Well, maybe. Jonah might have been afraid of the danger. It was a city of sin.

It was a city of wickedness. He knew that a prophet, particularly a Hebrew prophet, would not likely be welcome, especially when he's there to preach judgment against the city. He might have been afraid of the danger, possibly.

Or perhaps he thought somehow it was beneath his dignity. Somehow he was more gifted than this, that this was really not his calling. Or perhaps, like some of the other prophets, deep down he just didn't think he was up to the task, that he was adequate to do what God was calling him to do.

Or perhaps he just plain doubted God's word. Well, all of those are possibilities, but none of those we find in the text, and they're really all conjecture. I want to suggest to you tonight that the real reason for Jonah's flight is hidden in the text itself, and in fact given to us in the text itself.

And it doesn't come in chapter 1. It comes at the end of the story in chapter 4. Because in chapter 4, Jonah is mad. And what is Jonah mad about? Jonah is mad because God was gracious and compassionate and saved the people of Nineveh. You see, the real reason for Jonah's flight is that Jonah did not want the people of Nineveh to be saved.

Let me say that again. The real reason for Jonah's flight from God is that he did not want the people of Nineveh to be saved. The real reason was, in fact, that he was prejudiced against the Assyrians.

If God saved the Ninevites, this might mean a loss of a privileged position for himself and for his people. The Ninevites were enemies. They were a threat.

They were beyond the pale. They were heathens who ought not to be embraced by God's covenant love. It would be okay if God destroyed them and judged them, but not if God would save them.

And even though Jonah had been sent to preach judgment, Jonah knew God well enough that God might just relent if they repented, and he might spare judgment, and he might save them. And do you know what? He was right. Jonah knew too well the message of salvation, and Jonah knew God too well, because he knew that if he went to Nineveh and preached, God might indeed save them.

And so Jonah doesn't run because of cowardice. He runs, quite frankly, my friends, because of prejudice, because of a narrow view of God's mercy. God may have chosen him, and God may have chosen his people, but God cannot possibly choose the people of Nineveh.

The sovereignty of God is acceptable when it works in your favor, but not when it works in the favor of others. And you see, the real story here is that Jonah is not simply running away from a task, a job that God was asking him to do. Jonah is running away from God himself, from God's compassion, and God's love, and God's desire to save the nations.

And Jonah is running away from the gospel because it pushes him beyond his comfort zone. And Jonah's flight is not a matter of geography. It's a matter of the spirit.

It's a matter of the soul. Jonah wants to turn his back not only on his vocation, but ultimately on the God of his salvation. He cannot stand the thought that God might love and save others.

And I want to suggest to you tonight as we conclude that that's the first message that you and I really need to hear from the book of Jonah as we enter into this marvelous work of this prophet. Because the fact of the matter is that we, all of us, are happy to believe the gospel on our own terms. We're happy to accept the gospel and believe in God's sovereignty when it works to our advantage.

And we are quite contented with the Christian faith if it fits in with our own worldview, which might be shaped by the world in which we live, by our own narrow-minded nationalisms, by our own ideologies, by our own little worlds. But when God breaks through that, and when God breaks into our lives with his word, all of that is called into question. And God often wants us to hear afresh what the gospel is all about, and what the gospel of salvation is intended to mean in our world.

There may be people who we think God will never save, and there may be people who we think God ought not to save. But maybe those are the very people that God is calling you and me to share the gospel with. What is your Nineveh this evening? Is there something that God is calling you to do? Every day I believe God is calling Christian believers to go to Nineveh, and every day Christian believers are buying tickets for Tarshish.

What's confining you? What prejudices are preventing you from doing what God wants? What is your ticket to Tarshish this evening? But the good news of the gospel is simply this, as we conclude this evening. The good news of the gospel is that God is exactly like Jonah knew God to be. Gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

And like Jonah, God may let you run for a while, but you can never ultimately hide. For the God who called Jonah is the God who saved the Ninevites, and the God who saved the Ninevites is the God who sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into this world to find us. This is the God who comes to us in the pages of this book, and this is the God whose grace we are invited to experience.

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