

The Book of Jonah
Lessons from a Runaway #1
Jonah Chapter 1

Hi there. My name is Jonah but you can call me Joe. Now I know what you're thinking. What kind of parents would call their child Jonah? That spells "bad luck" in every language! But it wasn't always that way. When I was born in the 8th century BC my name actually meant "Dove". Maybe that's why I took flight when God asked me to do something I didn't want to do.

You see, I'm a prophet by occupation. That means God uses me to speak His Word to people. Did you know there's a whole book in the Bible named after me?

I come from the village of Gath-Hepher, just a couple of miles from Nazareth, where Jesus was to grow up. Now some people say that I was never a real person. That my story is a parable. It seems they can't believe that God can make a big fish that can swallow a human being for three days and then spit him back out alive.

I sometimes wonder though whether those folk have the same problem with Jesus being crucified, dying, being buried for three days, and then coming back to life? Speaking of Jesus, did you know that he mentions me? When the people of his time wanted a miraculous sign to prove who he was, he said the only sign they were going to get was the "**sign of the prophet Jonah.**" He tells people to pay attention to my experience! So let me tell you my story.

We prophets were always waiting for God to give us our assignments, to tell us where to go and what to say. One day God told me to go the great city of Nineveh, which was the capital of the mighty Assyrian Empire. God wanted me to tell the people there that he had seen their wickedness and they were doomed.

Now you have to understand. These Assyrians were known for their brutality and I did not have a death wish. So I decided I needed a vacation instead. I'm sure vacation time was in my prophetic job description somewhere! So I immediately packed my bags, went to the seaport of Joppa, and took the first ship that was going as far away from Nineveh was possible.

(Jonah puts on a bright yellow rain jacket)

Joppa to Nineveh was 900 kilometres away. Joppa to Tarshish in southern Spain where I was heading for my "vacation" was 3500 kilometers away. Let's just say I was taking the "scenic route" to Nineveh! But, of course, I wasn't. I was running away. I was running away from God and from his calling on my life. It made sense to me at the time but deep down I know you can't run away from God. He always knows where you are. He can always find you. And as a prophet, I also knew that if you disobey God there are consequences. After all, that's the message God wanted me to give to the people of Nineveh.

Nineveh. The word still strikes fear into my heart. It was a huge city, situated along the banks of the Tigris River. It was as evil a city as has ever existed. I wasn't surprised that God wanted me to go there and tell them they were doomed. But God, why not just destroy the city with an earthquake or a plague or rain down fire from heaven. You're good at that kind of stuff.

But for me to go and tell them, face to face, that they were wicked. I knew what they'd do. History is full of prophets being killed. I had no death wish. But I did have a ticket on a boat to the beaches of Spain.

By the way, the Assyrians were the great enemies of Israel. Deep down I knew that IF I went there and preached and IF they repented, God would forgive them. But just like you, sometimes my hatred for others is greater than my love for God. I say I want everyone to repent and return to God, but I don't always act that way. In fact, I wanted to see those Ninevites roast in hell for what they had done to my people. So I ran. Booked passage on a boat. And, honestly, I hate boats and water because I can't swim.

(Jonah puts on a life jacket)

And that's when things got complicated. A really bad storm hit us. Even the veteran sailors knew it was only a matter of time until the boat broke up, so they threw the ship's cargo overboard to lighten the ship so it would ride higher out of the water. And they prayed to their gods. Honestly, I think those sailors knew more about the inside of a brothel than they did a Temple, but my how they prayed. Isn't it funny how disaster or fear can make people really religious all of a sudden?

Where was I during all this activity? I was asleep. Yup, I'm the person who can sleep through anything except meal times and Rev. Neal's sermons!

The captain even came down to the lower deck to wake me up and to tell me to pray to my God that he might have mercy on the ship's company and keep us from drowning.

Now I may not be the brightest prophet to walk the face of the earth, but when I heard the wind howl, and saw the waves breaking over the ship, and heard the sounds of the ship beginning to break up, I knew 'someone' had got God really angry. And I knew who that "Someone" was, but I decided that for now I would keep their identity a secret. But the sailors had come to their own conclusion. Someone on board was to blame for the storm. So they started to draw lots to find out who it was, and I lost! Suddenly I was the center of attention. They asked me questions faster than they do on your T.V. show Jeopardy.

Who are you?

What is your line of work?

What country are you from?

What is your nationality?"

I had to yell above the noise of the storm.

"I am a Hebrew, and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land."

Then I let it all out. "I'm on your ship because I am running away from God."

They were distraught. I was the cause of their impending deaths. "*Oh, why did you do it?*" they groaned. Funny thing is, in that moment I was asking myself the same question! "*What should we do to you to stop this storm?*" they asked. I gulped hard and yelled, "*Throw me overboard.*" I meant it. It was my disobedience that had caused this situation, not theirs. Let God punish me, not them. But these sailors were more merciful than I was. They tried to row the boat to shore, but the storm kept getting worse and frustrated their efforts.

Finally, they prayed to my God, and yours. "*O Lord, don't make us die for this man's sin. And don't hold us responsible for his death. O Lord, you have sent this storm upon him for your own good reasons.*" I still had my eyes closed waiting for them all to say "Amen", when suddenly they grabbed me and threw me overboard. How rude! They never even asked me if I could swim!

I went under the water and doggy paddled to the surface. I saw the boat was already moving away but then a miraculous thing happened. The wind dropped. The sea became calm. The dark clouds disappeared and the sun came out. But the ship never came back for me. I can't really say I blame them! Suddenly, something under the water grabbed me and pulled me under. Then things got very dark. I think I must have passed out because when I came toobut I'll tell you that part of my story next week because I'm out of time and it's a whale of a story!

I've spend a lot of years thinking about the things God taught me that day. Let me share them with you so you can learn from my mistakes.

First, always obey God. When you know he wants you to do something, just do it. Even if it means you have to take a risk, swallow your pride, forgive someone who has hurt you, change your way of living, or go out of your way to help someone, even one of your enemies. Just trust God. Do what he says. Sometimes you'll need lots of faith to do what he asks, but ask him for that as well and he'll give it to you.

Second. You can't escape from God. You can run from him, but you can't hide. Don't the Psalms say that there is nowhere you can go to escape from God's Spirit? Go the ends of the earth, change your name, your identity, get yourself swallowed by a whale, or hide in the darkness. It doesn't matter. God always knows where you are, and what you are doing. So you need to live your life remembering that.

Third, and this is a hard one. Obeying or Disobeying God is always a choice, with consequences. Remember Joshua. He told the people of Israel. "*Then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*" (Joshua 24:15) Obedience is always a choice, but there are consequences in making the wrong choice. I learned that the hard way. You can learn from my mistake. Or you can see what your sin and disobedience cost God. You can look at Jesus hanging on the cross, dying in your place, paying the penalty for your disobedience in order to reconcile you to God.

Finally, always remember that our God is a God of second chances. He loves us even when we disobey him. He is always a God of mercy. Always ready to forgive. Do you remember Psalm 103?

*The Lord is compassionate and merciful,
slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.*

*He will not constantly accuse us,
nor remain angry forever.*

*He does not punish us for all our sins;
he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve.*

*For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of
the heavens above the earth.*

*He has removed our sins as far from us
as the east is from the west.*

*The Lord is like a father to his children,
tender and compassionate to those who fear him.*

*For he knows how weak we are;
he remembers we are only dust.*

So never give up on yourself because God hasn't given up on you. And always accept the second chances he gives you. You'll discover how life changing that can be when I tell you more of my story next week!

Reflection Time

Let's reflect on today's message as we listen to the words of the song "Lighthouse" by Rend Collective, a Christian group from Northern Ireland.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itiB52mVJ9Y>

Pastoral Prayer

Almighty God, Creator, Saviour and Spirit,
You are our rock and our refuge,
our strength and our deliverer
and the Light of the World.

Guide us we pray through the storms of our life and bring us safely through them.

Teach us the importance of obedience that we might love you with all our heart, soul and mind.

Be with all those who face difficult choices or decisions today and may your Spirit help them to choose wisely.

Be with those who feel that they are drowning under the troubles of this life:

Those trapped in war zones with no way of escape.

Those grieving the loss of a loved one.

Those struggling to find a job, or to feed their family.

Those unable to find an affordable place to live.

Those who are victims of abuse or bullying.

Those trying to cope with serious health issues.

Merciful God, hear our prayers in Jesus Name. Amen.