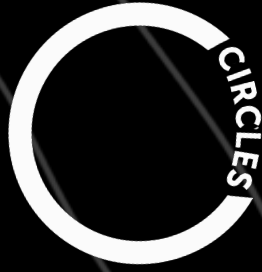


**THE GOD OF SECOND
CHANCES: THE STORY OF
JONAH**



CIRCLE 01/04: **RUNNING FROM GOD**

One day, I approached my mother wearing a tie and carrying a folder full of papers. Most of the documents were silly doodles and arbitrary graphs, but it made me feel like a little lawyer. I slapped the folder onto the kitchen table and invited her to look over the report while I delivered my world class presentation. What was my argument? I wanted her to buy me a four-wheeler. I knew she thought they were dangerous, so I wanted to show her that I meant business. Thus, I pulled out all the business strategies I saw from my dad— the folder, tie around my neck, piles of paperwork, and the confident attitude.

I made a powerful presentation. It was full of emotion, logic, and even a dance move or two. There was no way she'd be able to decline such persistence and pizzazz. Once I made my case, I sat down to get down to the nuts and bolts. "What color do you think is best?" I asked. She gulped and then responded, "You aren't getting a four-wheeler. Sorry, honey." My little heart broke beneath my checkered necktie. What about the report? What about the promise to not die? What about all the chores I agreed to add to my chart? I did what any other sane six year old would do in that position: I packed my bags and walked out the front door.

"I'm leaving forever," I announced with my Rugrats backpack around my shoulder and stuffed Tigger toy under my arm. I strutted down the driveway never to return to my childhood home. My mother stood at the front door waving goodbye. No, she wasn't being heartless; she was just calling my bluff. I made it as far as I could go, which was the little fort forty yards from my house. As I unpacked, I sorted through two days worth of shirts and four weeks worth of Pop-Tarts. Then, I just smiled at my lifeless Tigger doll. "This is going to be great," I muttered to myself.

The calming orange hue of the sun transitioned to a dark red as the sun disappeared from the southern sky. Suddenly, my cozy fort transformed into a full-on haunted death shed. I began hearing spooky noises and started to feel as though there were intruders surrounding me. I abandoned my stuffed animal and Pop-Tarts and ran towards the warm glow of my house. As I darted into the front door, mom welcomed me home and offered to make me some chocolate milk. I accepted the milk but insisted I was still running away again in the morning. It rained the next day, so I stayed home for the next thirteen years.

Have you ever tried to run away? I am not necessarily talking about running away from home. People run away from a broad spectrum of things. They run away from responsibility. They run away from the consequences of their actions. They run away from people. People are even prone to running away from God. In this discussion guide, we are going to explore the experiences of a rebellious prophet who tried to run away from God.

READ: Jonah 1:1-3

“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 up before me.” But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish.”

Jonah’s name means “dove.” I find this very fitting as he was prone to flying away from his responsibilities. Just like when birds freak out before a blizzard, Jonah was prone to freak out whenever God gave him direction. He loved running in the opposite direction, quite frankly. Honestly, there is a little bit of Jonah in all of us. There are things that God has called us to that we want to run away from.

What are you running away from that you should be running towards? Are you running away from the people you need to tell about Jesus or are you running towards them? Are you running away from the changes you need to make in your life or are you running towards them? The story of Jonah is a reminder to run towards all God has for you. Run towards your calling. Run towards your problems. Run towards the dream God gave you. Run towards those things that you think will be challenging because they might actually change you. If God is calling you to something, you had better run towards it.

God was not calling Jonah to something easy. God instructed him to go to the city of Nineveh to preach. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and the people there were world renown for their violence and vengeance. Today, they’d make a Quentin Tarantino movie look like the Mr. Rogers Show. Historically, Assyria was one of the first civilizations to learn how to use iron. However, they didn’t use this gift to make silverware and cool statues. They used iron to make weapons. When you showed up to a battle in Nineveh, you were showing up to a gunfight with a banana. They were gifted at both making weapons and using them.

No one wanted to go there. They tortured people. They killed people. Their children were taught warfare in elementary school. They didn’t use their turn signal. This was a wicked city, but it happened to be where God called Jonah to serve. Sometimes, God’s calling is challenging.

It’s easy for us to give Jonah a hard time for not obeying God, but he was facing a frightening calling. Give Jonah a break because sometimes we are afraid to invite our cousin to church. This forces us to face a critical question. What is God calling you to do that you keep resisting?

Maybe God has called you to start a Bible study in your school, but you keep putting it off. Maybe you know it's time to stop seeing that boy, but you just keep hanging on and thinking he'll change. Maybe God wants you to start taking your health seriously, but it's easier to sit around with a bag of Butterfingers. Maybe God is pushing you towards serving at a summer camp, but you're afraid to give up your break. Whatever it is, it's time you stop resisting.

Delayed obedience is disobedience. Think of your challenging calling. Stop resisting and start obeying. You may not feel like you want to do it now, but the Bible teaches that God will change you along the way. God's will for you may not seem like what you want, but it'll always be what you need. Stop running away from it and start running towards it.



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TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Did you ever try to run away as a kid? Why did you run and how far did you make it?

Q2: What kind of situations, pressures, or callings do your peers tend to run away from? Why do you think that is?

Q3: Have you ever tried to run away from doing the right thing that God was calling you to do? How did it turn out?

Q4: Have you ever followed God's call of doing something right even though it was difficult? How did it turn out?

Q5: What's something you've been running away from that you should be running towards? What can you do this week to take a step of obedience in God's direction?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

1 John 1:12

Hebrews 4:16

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Ephesians 2:8-10

1 Corinthians 15:10

Romans 6:11-14

John 1:16-17

Do the following with each passage:

ASK – God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ – the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT – on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND – to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 02/04: **DISTRACTIONS AND YOUR DESTINY**

For the most part, I am an open book. I tell stories that show my shortcomings, my struggles, and even my strange quirks. That's all second nature for me. I seldom have shame when it comes to sharing a story. However, there is one major milestone in my life that I avoid talking about but not because I am ashamed of it. Honestly, I am quite proud of it. It's just that I am frightened that it's too soon to share. Regardless of my resistance, here we go.

I recently lost 130 pounds. I hear you saying, "Wow! That's like a whole person worth of fat." First of all, rude. Second of all, you're right. For years, I knew that I needed to take my health seriously. I was watching the scale move upwards and my energy levels plummet downwards. It was getting dangerous. Common sense said I needed to take control of my health, but I just didn't know where to start. This led me to start seeing a doctor who specialized in nutrition. My entire world got turned upside down in one session. I remember him looking over my normal weekly diet and saying something to the extent of this: "You need to eat twenty-times more vegetables and stop eating biscuits for breakfast." I cringed at the thought of kale instead of a Chic-fil-a biscuit, but I held onto every word he said. It may sound silly, but I had to learn how to eat healthy. I had no idea how to count my nutrients. I had no idea that some of my favorite foods were basically poison. I also had no idea how difficult this diet was going to be.

Diet is all about discipline. I wasn't able to flip a switch to remove all junk food from the world. How convenient would that be? I simply had to be more focused on my goals than on my favorite flavors. There were dietary distractions around every corner. I still had to drive past fast food restaurants. I still had to go to cookouts and parties. I still had to babysit my nephew and watch him eat pizza while I ate tuna fish over a bed of lettuce. Learning to be healthy was hard. However, it was a life-changing decision.

Distractions desperately tried to get in the way of my decision, though. The same was true for Jonah.

READ: Jonah 1:3-4

"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."

God gave Jonah a big calling, but then, Jonah hopped upon a boat that was heading in the opposite direction. When God's trying to do something big in your life, there is always another boat, and there is always another distraction. This passage says he started going towards Tarshish, which was over a thousand miles away from Nineveh. It was literally the opposite side of the known world. He didn't just try to run from God's calling; he tried to get as far away as humanly possible.

When you set out to make positive change in your life, there is always a distraction. When you go on a diet, donuts show up on your kitchen counter. When you choose to stop gossiping, the juiciest drama seems to happen. When you decide to study scripture daily, Netflix drops a new series. When you are trying to save money, you find a great deal on your dream jacket. The devil wants to destroy you by distracting you. Just like Jonah, if

God is calling you to something big, there will be an option to head in the opposite direction.

From hours of slime videos on Youtube to streamable shows about kids running from evil dragon-creatures to a culture that's obsessed with other's opinions, we live in a world that's addicted to distraction. We are more distracted than ever, and those distractions are keeping us from experiencing our destiny.

What is distracting you from your destiny? Maybe people are pulling you backwards. Maybe every time you make some progress, you get roped back into the same bad habits. Maybe your own obsession with people's perception of you has paralyzed your progress. Whatever the distraction, you must force yourself forward with the help of Jesus.

When you run from your calling, you are also running away from all God has for you. There is an outstanding outcome on the other side of your obedience. Push forward. Run towards your calling. Push past the distractions. You'll never achieve big things when you're easily distracted by small things. Your persistence will pay off.



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TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: What's something you've accomplished that wouldn't have been possible without discipline?

Q2: What are your biggest distractions from using your time productively?

Q3: What are your biggest distractions from moving in the direction God wants for you?

Q4: What are some ways to shift your focus towards the positive things God wants for you?

Q5: What one thing you can do this week to avoid distraction and begin focusing on positive things instead?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Titus 2:11-14

Romans 5:6-20

Psalm 131

Ephesians 2:4-7

Romans 5:20-21

Ephesians 1:3-6

2 Corinthians 8:7-9

Do the following with each passage:

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READ – the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT – on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND – to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 03/04: GOD'S NOT PUNISHING YOU

READ: Jonah 1:4-16

“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 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 so that 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 kind of work 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 dry land.” This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, “What should we do to you to make the sea calm down 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 out to the Lord, “Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man’s life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, 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.”

This passage is perplexing. Jonah set sail to cruise away from God’s goal for his life. I imagine him standing on the upper deck while waving goodbye to all his responsibilities. As the land disappears over the horizon, so do all his perceived problems. He takes a deep breath of salty air, sighs in relief, stretches out his arms, and snuggles up for a much-needed nap. As he’s drifting off into a deep sleep, the boat drifts into a severe storm. Waves toss the little boat back and forth like a ping-pong ball getting paddled across a table. This storm is so strong that all the men aboard assume it has to be a Divine delay. They shake Jonah awake and ask, “What on earth did you do, dude? You show up, and now we are about to get swallowed up by the sea.”

Jonah knows that this storm is proof of God’s pursuit, so he hatches a peculiar plan. “Just throw me overboard,” he announces. Let that sink in (pun intended). Jonah basically tells these guys that they should sacrifice him. Even a skilled sailor would only survive seconds in rough water like this. Naturally, the crew refuses, saying, “There has to be another way.” Seriousness sweeps over his face as the rebellious prophet assures that this is the only path to protection for them. Ironically, this is the first time Jonah starts moving towards God’s calling.

Sometimes, obedience after resistance is far more difficult. If he had just obeyed originally, things would have looked drastically different. There’d have been no storm.

There'd have been no plunge into water. He'd just have to walk on a paved path for a couple of days.

The sails are tearing and the boat is taking on water, so the resistant sailors know that they have to take drastic measures. They agree to send Jonah swimming and toss him overboard. Then, they watch in wonder as the sea goes still. In awe of the outcome, the crew begins to worship the one true God.

God used a storm to stop Jonah. Jonah was delaying God's call, so God chose to intervene. Here is a critical question. What are you supposed to do that you're delaying? Maybe you need to reconnect with a friend. Maybe you need to start being more generous. Maybe you need to initiate forgiveness with someone. Maybe you need to stop returning over and over again to the same sin. Whatever it is, don't delay it any longer. God may send a storm to wake you up. Like Jonah, some of us are sleeping. We are sleeping on our potential. We are sleeping on our calling. God wants to wake us up from our slumber, and He may use a storm to do it.

It's important that we understand that God's original plan had nothing to do with a storm and a dangerous dive into the ocean. Jonah's actions set up the storm. In life, we need to start taking ownership of our bad decisions. Instead of looking to the sky for blame, we may need to look into the mirror. Your own choices likely created some of your worst circumstances. You may have been a bad boyfriend, so that led to the breakup. You may have been lazy, so that put you on academic probation. Maybe you don't have enough money to put gas in your tank because you went on an Amazon shopping spree at two in the morning. When we face the consequences of our actions, we must reflect then redirect.

READ: Jonah 2:1

"Now the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."

Fortunately, the storm is not the end of the story. God did something amazing to protect Jonah. The Bible teaches that God can take all things and work them out for His glory (Romans 8:28). When it says all things, I believe it means that. He can take the disobedience, the struggles, the shortcomings, and the setbacks and transform them for His greater good.

This passage teaches that God "provided" a huge fish to swallow up Jonah. God sent the fish to protect his prophet. Jonah wasn't swallowed by a Four Seasons hotel. He was swallowed up by a fish. I am sure the process was gross, smelly, dark, and disgusting. However, it was exactly what Jonah needed for protection. Sometimes God's provision is a little uncomfortable. Jonah found himself in a mess, but this mess was for his best.

Consequences often feel like discipline, right? We face failure, we get caught, or we lose some friends. Let's strive to view our consequences through the lens of

redemption. It's possible that God is not punishing you. Instead, maybe He's pursuing you. Just like Jonah, the fish was actually God's provision and protection. When I was a kid, my mom once popped the back of my hand as I was about to grab a flaming marshmallow off a stick. She wasn't punishing me; she was protecting me. The same is true in your life. Sometimes, problems that feel like punishments are actually God's provision. Embrace God's correction because it will help you grow. Experience is an amazing educator— especially the hard stuff.

Don't mistake God's protection for punishment.



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TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Q1: Would you rather go sailing or hiking and why?

Q2: Why do you think people tend to blame life's storms on others instead of taking responsibility for their own involvement in causing the issue?

Q3: How can we reflect and redirect a situation towards what God wants for us after we realize we've made a mistake?

Q4: Have you ever experienced growth after making a mistake? How?

Q5: What mistake do think God wants you to begin seeing as an opportunity for growth?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

James 2:14-26

Hebrews 2:9-11

1 Peter 1:13-16

Colossians 1:3-6

Romans 3:22-24

Psalms 139:1-12

PSALM 139: 13-24

Do the following with each passage:

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REFLECT – on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND – to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.

CIRCLE 04/04: **PROGRESSION OVER PERFECTION**

What comes to mind when you think of the story of Jonah? For most people, it's one obvious answer: a fish. We think of this story exclusively as "Jonah and the Whale." That's what kids color during Vacation Bible School. That's the theme of the mural in the church nursery. That's even what some study Bibles site as the subtext of this story. This whole book is often boiled down to a guy and his fish friend. Sure, that's a major theme, but this is far from a fish story.

Jonah's tale is not merely about a whale; it's about God's way being the best way. It's not merely about a sea creature; it's about second chances. Jonah had directly experienced the presence of God, but ignored it. As a matter of fact, he ran from it. He thought that jumping on a boat would help him get away. He assumed that getting thrown in the sea would get him away from his calling. He assumed that he could just force it out of his mind and go on to live his life outside the presence of God. Here is the truth we're all forced to face: God's presence is inescapable. I've heard people ask, "Where is God?" That's like a fish asking, "Where is water?" He's all around you. His presence is as close as the air you breathe. You can run from God, but you can not outrun God.

Jonah's isn't just a story about rebellion. It's about hope. It shows that God will chase us down. No matter how far we go, how rebellious we are, or how much we mess up, God will pursue us. The presence of God is healing when you seek it and haunting when you run from it. God will pick you up, dust you off, and help place you on the right path. There is good news for Jonah, you, and me— God always offers a second chance.

READ: Jonah 3:1-5

"Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you." So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them."

In verse three, we see a single word that packs a serious punch. It says that God came to Jonah a second time. This isn't just about Jonah's circumstances. It's about God's character. It illustrates that God is a God of second chances. Whenever we make a mistake, God extends a second chance to us. It doesn't matter how far we run, how badly we behave, or how many times we make the same mistake, God is ready to give you another shot.

Have you ever stumbled into a totally random section of Youtube? You don't know how you got there, but now you're watching strange videos completely off your original topic. That happened to me recently. I was watching some hockey highlights. Then after a few clicks, I was stumbled upon people making amazing art using an Etch-a-Sketch. It was memorizing. I can only make a line, box, and staircase on mine, but these YouTube personalities were making replicas of Starry Night by Van Gogh.

Have you ever played with an Etch-a-Sketch? It's a red, retro toy where you spin two little knobs that help you draw little lines on the grey screen. In the South, we used to use them

as computers (kidding.) I played with them as a kid, but I could never make more than a straight line or a square. I used to work on writing my name with laser focus just to turn the knob the wrong direction. Suddenly, it was ruined. My beautiful signature had a random line going right through it. What do you do when you make a mistake on an Etch-a-Sketch? You just shake it. In an instant, the screen is clear, and you have a new opportunity to try again.

God is the same way. Whenever you mess up, make a mistake, move the wrong way, or do something that makes zero sense at all, you can have a clean slate instantly. If you messed up and let someone into your life that you know you shouldn't have, Jesus will give you a second chance. If you have gotten yourself caught up in an addiction, turn to Jesus, and He will help make things new for you. If you have gotten carried away with lying and are worried that people will never trust you again, trust in Jesus as He helps you mend those broken relationships.

Some people treat God more like a Magic 8-ball. You think His interactions with you are all a mystery. You pray for forgiveness, but you only receive some vague impersonal message. God is not a Magic 8-ball God; He's an Etch-a-Sketch God! He's ready to make things new for you. It doesn't matter where you've been, what you've done, or how messy things have gotten. God will give you a fresh start.

I know that some of you feel as though you're on your hundredth second chance with God. You'd gotten things back on track, but you're now stuck in the same struggle. There is no threshold to God's forgiveness. No one on Earth is on their first take. We have all fallen short. We have all made mistakes. We have all broken trust. All you have to do is turn back to Jesus, and He will give you a second chance— then another and then another. God will never run out of second chances for you.

Jesus is not calling you to perfection; He's calling you to progression.



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TALK IT OUT

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Q1: What's the biggest takeaway you learned from the story of Jonah?

Q2: When has someone given you a second chance? How did it impact you?

Q3: What does Jonah 3:1-5 teach us about God?

Q4: How does accepting God's forgiveness and second chances help us progress?

Q5: What's one area in life where you're hoping for a fresh start? How can you move forward in faith towards healing?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Ephesians 6:10-20

Psalm 106:19-23

1 Timothy: 1-7

Matthew 5:43-48

Colossians 3:1-17

Colossians 4:2-6

1 Peter 3:8

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