

Running Away from God

Jonah 1

Remember those simple playground games we used to play as kids? Games like, Catch One, Catch All, Kick the Can, Keep-Away, and, of course, dodgeball. You may or may not be familiar with all of those.

But here's how dodgeball works: Your opponent would grab a big rubber ball, hurl it hard at you, and your job was to **dodge** it, twist, jump, or duck out of the way so it wouldn't hit you. If it did hit you before hitting the ground, you were out. But here's the best part: if you **catch the** ball cleanly in the air before it touches the ground the person who threw it was out. In some more official games, if you catch the ball, one of your own teammates who had already been eliminated could also come back into the game. Catching didn't just save you — it could bring someone back to life in the game.

Maybe some of you still remember the thrill — or the sting — of that big rubber ball coming straight at you.

But the reality is, many of us never really stopped playing dodgeball. We just changed what we're dodging. As adults — especially us guys — we dodge hard conversations with our spouse when tension rises. We dodge confronting a child who's heading the wrong way because it feels awkward or exhausting. We dodge areas where we don't feel competent or comfortable. And sometimes... we even dodge God's clear call when it feels too difficult, too costly, or too uncomfortable.

Ron Hutchcraft has a great devotional called "Men Who Run," and he points out that as we grow up, we trade in those simple games for more complicated ones — but a lot of us never stopped playing dodgeball.

It's interesting that in Jonah chapter 1 the word "hurled" is used four times. God **hurled** a great wind upon the sea. Later the sailors **hurled** cargo overboard. And when they finally threw Jonah into the sea, they **hurled** him overboard too. The repetition is striking. When we refuse to willingly and gratefully catch whatever God sends our way — His

word, His direction, His warning — consequences will be **hurled** at us that we will be unable to dodge, no matter how hard we try.

That's exactly where we meet our main character today. His name is Jonah, and he is a **man on the run**.

Main Theme: Running from what we must face or embrace brings unnecessary storms, but God's pursuing grace offers a way back. Will you keep dodging, or will you turn and run with Him?

Let's walk through Jonah chapter 1 and see this unfold in three stages.

1. Jonah's Willful Disobedience

Notice first Jonah's willful disobedience. Beginning in verse one we read: *"Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.' ³ But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD."* Jonah 1:1-3

To understand how shocking this command was, we need a little background. The events of Jonah take place around 760 BC during the long and outwardly prosperous reign of King Jeroboam II in the northern kingdom of Israel. This was a time of economic growth and territorial expansion for Israel, but it was also a time of deep moral and spiritual corruption. The northern tribes (the ten tribes that made up the kingdom of Israel) were not yet in captivity, but they were living on the edge of disaster. The Assyrian empire to the northeast was growing stronger and more brutal, and within about forty years (by 722 BC) Assyria would completely destroy the northern kingdom, deport its people, and scatter them across the empire.

Against that backdrop, God's call to Jonah was explosive. Nineveh was the capital of that same rising Assyrian threat — a city infamous

for its violence and cruelty. To Jonah and every Israelite, these were not just foreigners; they were the violent oppressors who had already raided and threatened God's people. Jonah wanted God to judge them swiftly and completely, not to offer them a chance to repent and be spared.

Yet God told His prophet to go preach a message of warning. Jonah knew exactly what this meant. He had already served faithfully as a prophet under King Jeroboam (2 Kings 14:25), announcing God's blessing on Israel. So this was not his first time hearing from the Lord — but it was the first time God's will clashed so violently with his own desires and national loyalties.

Why did Jonah run? I want to suggest at least three reasons.

- First, he ran because of fear — fear of what the assignment would cost him: his reputation, his safety, and his standing among his own people.
- Second, he ran because of prejudice and a lack of compassion for the people God was sending him to. Nineveh wasn't just far away; they were the enemy. Jonah wanted God to destroy them, not save them.
- Third, he ran because of his desire to stay in control and protect his own comfort.

But at the root, Jonah's flight revealed something even deeper: he lacked not only compassion for Nineveh, but a warm, relational love for God Himself. He had religion — he knew the right theology, but he didn't delight in the God who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Timothy Keller, in his book, *The Prodigal Prophet*, captures this powerfully: "Jonah plays the prodigal son in Jesus' New Testament parable in the first half of the book]...who ran from his father." At the same time, Jonah also acts like the elder brother in Jesus' parable in the second half of the book — outwardly religious and still "in the

house,” yet inwardly self-righteous, angry at God’s mercy, and distant from the Father’s heart.

Keller adds, “As long as there is something more important than God to your heart, you will be, like Jonah, both fragile and self-righteous.” Jonah made an idol out of his own ethnicity and national loyalty. He put his cultural and political allegiances above God’s Word and God’s mission. He let his hatred for Assyria override God’s heart for the nations. He was more committed to his own worldview than to the God who called him.

Again, this can be true of us. Think about it: like the elder brother in Jesus’ parable who was physically near his father but whose heart was far away, we can be sitting in a church building Sunday after Sunday while our hearts are actually farther from God than people outside the church. Jonah had the title “prophet,” but his heart was cold towards people and the merciful God he claimed to serve.

As Pastor Jasper Williams reminds us, “The path across the forest is only [too] long if we do not love the person we’re going to see.” Jonah’s heart was far from God’s heart. He did not love the people of Nineveh, and ultimately he did not love the merciful God who wanted to warn them.

Hearing God’s call is one thing. Fulfilling it is another. The gap is bridged by love.

When love is present, even long years can feel like a few days. But when love is missing — as it was in Jonah’s heart toward Nineveh and toward God — the path feels endless and the price feels too high.

Like Adam hiding in the garden after they sinned (Genesis 3:8-10), Jonah played dodgeball with the Lord. He saw the ball coming — God’s clear call, but instead of catching it and stepping forward in faith, he dodged and ran.

Contrast that with Nehemiah, who God called to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in a time of exile. He surrendered to that call even though

He did not know how it all was going to work out. Later, when enemies used threats, lies, and even a false prophet to try to pull him off the wall, Nehemiah refused to run. He looked the temptation in the eye and said, “Should such a man as I run away? ... I am doing a great work and I cannot come down” (Nehemiah 6:3, 11).

Nehemiah didn't run because he knew God intimately through prayer. He trusted God's heart even when the path was dangerous and the cost was high. Jonah, on the other hand, chose control and comfort. Nehemiah chose obedience and courage. One ran from God's mission; the other stayed on the wall for God's glory and the good of God's people.

Church, where are you tempted to run today? What “ship to “Tarshish” are you boarding, (that comfortable escape, that distraction, or that safe detour), to avoid what God has clearly called you to do? What ball are you dropping or dodging right now that you know you should be catching?

2. Jonah's Woeful Indifference

Now the second stage to Jonah running from God is his **woeful indifference**. Continuing in verse four:

“But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo... But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.” Jonah 1:4-5

While the ship is about to break apart and the pagan sailors are desperately praying and throwing cargo overboard to lighten the load, Jonah is sound asleep below deck. He is not only running from God — he is asleep to the very storm God hurled at him to get his attention. Rather than recognizing the storm as a merciful warning from the hand of God and turning back to Him, Jonah tried to dodge it by slipping down into the hold of the ship and falling asleep.

This is woeful indifference. His willful disobedience had hardened his heart. He was no longer enjoying God's presence, so he became spiritually numb — asleep while lives hung in the balance. As Keller writes in *The Prodigal Prophet*, "The Bible does not say that every difficulty is the result of sin—but it does teach that every sin will bring you into difficulty...All sin has a mighty storm attached to it."

Church, both unbelievers and believers live in a fallen world and experience the consequences of sin. But believers who know God have something unbelievers don't: the Father's loving discipline. The author of Hebrews reminds us, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (Hebrews 12:5-6).

God loves His children too much to let us stay comfortable on a path that leads us away from Him. So He allows — and sometimes hurls — storms into our lives, not to destroy us, but as merciful warnings to wake us up and turn us back to Him.

That's exactly what was happening with Jonah. But instead of facing it, he ran from it. And even when the captain found him below deck and cried, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god!" Jonah showed no urgency to pray. The only true prophet on board — the one who knew the living God — stayed silent while pagans cried out. And the same thing can happen to us.

How does this happen? When we sit week after week under faithful preaching but do nothing with it — when we hear God's Word but refuse to act, refuse to witness, refuse to serve sacrificially, refuse to make things right in relationships — our hearts grow cold and indifferent. We become spiritually asleep at the wheel.

Prolonged disobedience leads to spiritual stupor. We stop praying with urgency. We stop caring about the lost. We stop feeling the weight of the storms around us.

But even then — even in his hardness and indifference — God loved His runaway prophet, and He loves us, far too much to leave us there. Because Jonah wouldn't turn back to Him but kept on running, God would mercifully turn up the storm. The same God who called him in love now pursued him in love.

And that brings us to the third stage of Jonah running from God:

3. God's Wonderful Intervention

As the storm raged and the sailors desperately cried out to their gods, they finally turned to Jonah. He openly confessed that he was fleeing from the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. But after they learned this, we read in verse 13: "Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them" Jonah 1:13

So, knowing they couldn't prevail against God, they cry out to Him for mercy. In fear and faith they throw Jonah overboard. And instantly, the sea grows calm.

But even then God does not give up on Jonah. He doesn't let him drown in the sea or send a Great White Shark to devour Him. Rather He did something incredibly surprising and beautiful that points us to Jesus:

"And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." Jonah 1:17

This was God's wonderful intervention. The violent storm was never meant to destroy Jonah—it was sent to wake him up. The great fish was not punishment; it was a merciful rescue and a sovereign redirection. Even in the middle of his rebellion, God was still pursuing Jonah with relentless grace.

Beloved, how do we respond to the storms of life? Are we running from it, fighting against it, or letting God shape us through it?

This brings me to an old fairy tale that can help us see the storm through a divine lens:

A wicked witch lived in a remote cottage deep in the forest. When weary travelers came through looking for lodging, she offered them a meal and the most wonderfully comfortable bed any of them had ever felt. But it was a bed full of dark magic. If you were asleep in it when the sun came up, you would turn to stone and become a figure in the witch's statuary, trapped until the end of time.

This witch forced a young girl to serve her. Though the girl had no power to resist the witch, she grew increasingly filled with pity for the victims. One day a kind young man came looking for bed and board and was taken in. The servant girl could not bear to see him turned to stone. So, she threw sticks, stones, and thistles into his bed. It made the bed horribly uncomfortable. Every time he turned he felt a new painful object under him. Though he cast each one out, there was always a new one to dig into his flesh. He slept only sporadically and finally rose, feeling weary and worn, long before dawn.

As he walked out the front door, the servant girl met him, and he berated her cruelly: "How could you give a traveler such a terrible bed full of sticks and stones?" he cried and went on his way. "Ah," she said under her breath, "the misery you know now is nothing like the infinitely greater misery a comfortable sleep would have brought upon you! Those were my sticks and stones of love."

Beloved, God puts sticks and stones of love in our beds to wake us up — to bring us to rely on Him before it's too late, lest the end of history or of life overtake us without the Lord in our hearts, and we be turned to stone. Indeed, the Bible speaks of salvation like this: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone..." (From Tim Keller's, *The Prodigal Prophet*).

Again, Jonah's three days and three nights in the belly of the fish point forward to something far greater. Jesus Himself called it "the sign of Jonah" (Matthew 12:40; 16:4). While Jonah ran from God's mission because he didn't want to see his enemies saved, Jesus—the greater

Jonah—willingly descended into death itself for His enemies, including you and me. He entered the grave so that we could be rescued from judgment and brought into new life.

Conclusion

Beloved, don't fall asleep at the wheel of your life while the storm rages. The same God who sent the storm also sent the fish. He is running after you right now with grace, not wrath. The question is: Will you keep dodging Him, or will you wake up, pray, repent, and start running *to* Him instead of away from Him

Take a moment and ask yourself honestly:

- Where am I currently running from God's clear call? Am I dodging a difficult conversation or a relationship that needs mending with my spouse, child, or friend?
- Am I avoiding a ministry opportunity or an act of service because it feels too costly, inconvenient, or uncomfortable?
- Have I been postponing repentance in an area where I know the Holy Spirit has been speaking to me?
- Have I grown indifferent—sitting under solid preaching week after week but letting it change very little in how I live? Am I hearing the Word but not obeying it—failing to witness to my neighbor, serve sacrificially, or make things right in broken relationships?
- Have I allowed cultural or political allegiances to quietly become bigger than God's mission? Am I more passionate about my "side" winning than about people from every side coming to know Christ?

What "ship to Tarshish" are you boarding right now? Is it a distraction, a comfort zone, an escape route, or some form of control that lets you avoid what God has clearly called you to do?

Perhaps right now, some of us need to pray a simple but honest prayer: “Lord, show me where I’ve been dodging Your call. Wake up my indifferent heart. Help me stop running away. Give me the courage to say, like Nehemiah did on the wall of his divine assignment, ‘I will not run away.’”

When we make that choice, we can trust that the Lord will be with us to run the race He has set before us—to the glory of His name.