

## "You Can Run, But You Can't Hide"

Jonah 1:1-3

Pastor Dan Erickson

January 10, 2021

"You can run, but you can't hide." That was the message President Ronald Reagan had for the hijackers of the Achille Lauro. October 7, 1985 four members of Palestinian Liberation Front, men from Egypt and Tunisia, had hijacked the Italian cruise ship. They murdered one of the passengers, American, Leon Klinghoffer and then left the boat and were taken to Egypt. On the night of October 10, they boarded an Egyptian commercial flight from Cairo to Tunis, where the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF) were and where they believed they would be safe from arrest. American fighter jets, however, forced the plane to land in Cyprus where the hijackers were taken into custody.

"You can run, but you can't hide." President Reagan meant, "You can try to escape, but you will not succeed." Well, friends, that is true to some extent when it comes to the American Military, but it is completely true when it comes to God.

"You can run, but you can't hide." No matter how hard you try to escape from God, you will never succeed.

Well that is one lesson we learn from the book of Jonah. (in our journey through the Gospel of Luke, we have arrived in chapter 23 which describes Jesus' crucifixion. We will resume that study in March and explore that passage in the weeks before Easter.)

So for the next couple of months we will focus on what is considered one of the minor prophets in the Old Testament. There are only four chapters in Jonah, but I believe the Lord has some major lessons for us through the book. So let's pause and pray that we hear and heed the words God speaks to us today...

**Jonah 1: 1-3 The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Get up! Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because their evil has come up before me." Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from the Lord's presence. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the Lord's presence.**

So what do we know about Jonah? There is one reference to Jonah in the Old Testament outside of this book.

2 Kings 14:25 says, Jeroboam II recovered the territories of Israel between Lebo-hamath and the Dead Sea, just as the Lord the God of Israel, had promised through Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath-hepher.

Thus we know Jonah ministered during the time of Jeroboam II, who ruled over the Northern Kingdom of Israel from 786-746 B.C. Incidentally, archeology recently confirmed that a clay seal of a roaring lion discovered a few years ago in Israel is indeed from the time of Jeroboam II.

Jonah's hometown was in North Israel, just a few miles from Nazareth of Galilee, the hometown of Jesus. Jonah's prophecy about expanded territory was welcomed by the King. This is in contrast to the prophets Hosea and Amos who criticized Jeroboam as a King not faithful to God or fair to his people. So, it is likely Jonah was a popular prophet of Israel.

The Lord has a very unusual assignment for Jonah. Though the Old Testament prophets would sometimes pronounce judgements against other nations, they would do so within the safety of Israel and Judah. Their message was usually intended to encourage people by assuring them their enemies would be defeated.

Jonah's audience is to be completely different. He is to go to "the great city of Nineveh." This was the capital of Assyrian Empire. It was located in what is now northern Iraq, near the modern city Mosul.

Nineveh was considered the largest city in the world at the time of Jonah, with a population of probably 120,000 people. It is about 500 miles Northeast of Israel.

The Assyrians were fierce enemies of Israel. During the reign of King Jehu, the Assyrians begin exacting heavy tribute. That happened off and on for 70 years. Through Jonah's lifetime Israel was under a constant threat from the Assyrians.

In 722 B.C., just 24 years after Jeroboam's reign, Assyria invaded and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. Not only were the Assyrians Israel's enemy, they were a nasty enemy. A lot of cruel things happened in the ancient world, but the Assyrians were guilty of some of the worst atrocities.

Assyrian emperors made large, stone panels that depicted them, in gruesome detail, torturing, dismembering, and decapitating their enemies. In his commentary, Tim Kellor says, "Assyrian history is as gory and bloodcurdling a history as we know."

He notes that after capturing enemies, the Assyrians would typically cut off their legs and one arm, leaving the other arm so they could shake the victim's hand in mockery as he was dying. They were not nice people.

Yet, the Lord commands His prophet Jonah to go to their capital city and preach to the people there. But Jonah doesn't want to do that.

Why not? First, he probably is afraid that people would not listen to him. Jonah's assignment might be similar to a Jewish Rabbi from going to Berlin in 1942 to tell the Nazi's there were bad people. The Rabbi would probably not have had a very long ministry, like considerably less than 24 hours.

Jonah had good reason to be afraid the Ninevites would kill him. They might even shake his one hand before he died. Jonah didn't have a lot of reason to think the people of Nineveh would listen to what he had to say, and had a lot of reason to be afraid he would never leave the city alive.

However, Jonah had a second fear. Maybe the people of Nineveh would listen to him. **Jonah 1:2b**, the Lord says, "**Go... preach against it because their evil has come up before me.**" But why should an Israelite prophet travel 500 miles to tell the Ninevites that they were evil?

There would be no reason to send a warning, unless there was some possibility that judgement could be averted. And that is what Jonah concluded. In chapter 4, he says he knew all along the Lord would not destroy Nineveh if the people there repented.

Yet, having that city destroyed is exactly what Jonah wanted. Those people were the nasty enemies of Israel. A news report that the Assyrian capital had been obliterated would have had Jonah and his friends dancing in the streets. Why in the world would Jonah go to Nineveh and give them a chance to escape God's judgement?

So Jonah chooses to not go where the Lord has told him to go. He decides to run.

**Jonah 1:3a** **Jonah got up to flee to Tarshish from the Lord's presence.**

Biblical scholars are not sure exactly where Tarshish was. It was somewhere in the western Mediterranean, perhaps Spain.

The point is this: It is the opposite directions of Nineveh, where Jonah is supposed to be going and it is a long way from Israel. He pretty much wants to go to the end of the world. He is running from God.

**Jonah 1:3b** **He went down to Joppa** (a port city in Israel, near what is now Tel Aviv) **and found a ship going to Trashish. He paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the Lord's presence.**

So in case we missed it, that is what Jonah is going to try to do: Run from God. We will see how that works in the weeks ahead.

Ok, let's turn our focus now to what the Lord is saying to us today through this portion of His word. Yes, many centuries have passed since the time of the prophet Jonah. Yet, like every part of God's word, it is full of important truths for those of us living the year 2021.

First, like Jonah, we need to hear the word of the Lord. It is very easy to read just these three verses and start thinking about Jonah's disobedience to God, and we should think about that. But first it is important to realize **Jonah 1:1a** **The Word of the Lord came to Jonah.**

We don't know how that happened. It may have been an audible voice, but Jonah knows exactly what the Lord wants him to do. He is to go to Nineveh and proclaim God's impending judgement on that city.

Jonah doesn't want to do that. He does his best to disobey this command. However, he clearly knows

what God wants him to do and Jonah clearly knows he is disobeying God when he decides to head for Tarshish instead of Nineveh.

Friends, I believe that today we often do not hear the word of the Lord. In our culture, and even within the church, there is a lack of clarity and sometimes confusions about what God wants from us. As a result, many folks are disobeying the Lord, without even realizing they are doing so. We are frequently ignorant about actions and attitudes the Lord expects of us.

Why does this happen? Because we don't hear God speaking to us through the Bible as we should. Now, God still can speak to us in an audible voice as He may have to Jonah. But, normally, 99%+ of the time the way the Lord speaks to us is through His Word, the Bible.

The first problem we have is that so many folks simply don't know what the Bible says. For example, outside and even inside the church people are unaware of what the Bible teaches about sexual morality. As a church, we need to make sure we continue to emphasize Bible teaching and Bible reading so people know what the Lord has said to us.

The second reason why we don't hear God speaking is because we distort what the Bible says. It is like we think, "Yes, God seemed to say I should go to Nineveh, but that is not what he really means," and then we decide God is really asking us to do something we would like to do.

Some folks have decided we each should be able to pick and choose what parts of the Bible we have to follow and what parts we don't have to follow. In fact, so called progressive Christians encourage that. Theologian, Rich Rohr, advises "Just interpret Scripture the way that Jesus did! He ignores, denies, or openly opposes his own Scriptures whenever they are imperialistic, punitive, exclusionary or tribal."

Folks, Rohr is simply wrong. Yes, Jesus corrects traditional interpretations of Scripture, but He never ignores, denies or opposes what the Bible teaches.

What Rohr is really saying is just ignore the parts of the Bible that conflict with your views or even

your preferences. Many LGBT advocates, radical feminists and other have done just that.

But it is not just theological "liberals" that are guilty of distorting what God says. For years, more than a few Christians have ignored the Bible's teaching that we are all part of one race, the human race. And have adopted some warped ideas of ethnic superiority.

Some men twist Ephesians 5 and claim it is their role to make their wives submit to them, rather than love their wives as the Lord commands. And many assume Jesus' warning against loving money and the New Testaments instructions about being generous in sharing with other don't really apply to us. Those words are meant for rich people, meaning the people who have more money than we do.

Friends, the bottom line is we need to read and hear what the Bible says. Then interpret those words correctly so we know what attitudes and actions God expect from us. Only then can we live in a way what pleases the Lord.

It is also the only way for us to know if we are failing to do so. Many people, because they are not hearing the word of the Lord, are convinced God is good with them. 70%+ of folks believe they will end up in heaven.

And why not? They have never committed any felonies; they are convinced they are good people. One of the important things the Bible does is help us realize we are not good people. It helps us realize that - **Romans 3:10 There is no one who is righteous, not even one. Romans 3:23 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**

The Apostle Paul explains how the Bible helped him realize he was a sinner. **Romans 7:7 In fact, it was the law** (meaning the Old Testament) **that showed me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "You must not covet."**

Now, you remember what coveting is, right? Desiring something that doesn't belong to you, wanting to have something you should not have. It is one of those sins that is all about attitude.

Even if you never act on a covetous thought, the attitude itself is a sin. Paul is correct. Without the Bible, most of us would not realize that.

One of the important functions of the Bible is that it is a mirror which we can look in that will reveal that we are sinners. Only when we realize that our actions and attitudes are not what God desires, will we turn to the Lord Jesus and experience His magnificent salvation.

The novelist, Flannery O'Connor, describes one of her characters, Hazel Motes, as knowing that "the way to avoid Jesus, was to avoid sin. If you don't sin, you don't need Jesus." And the way people are most often able to convince themselves they don't sin is to never really hear the Word of the Lord.

Jonah heard the work to the Lord. He knew what he was doing was wrong. We need to hear the Word of the Lord so we realize our sin and our need for grace and salvation as well.

Second, unlike Jonah, we should trust and obey the Lord. Jonah's decision to try to run from God, his choice to disobey and go to Tarshish instead of Nineveh, is rooted in a mistrust of God's wisdom and goodness.

Jonah had all sorts of reasons why he didn't think he should go to Nineveh. Remember, very nasty people lived there who were totally undeserving of God's mercy. Why would Jonah go warn them of impending judgement?

Some years earlier the Prophet Nahum had predicted the Lord would destroy Nineveh. God should just let them have it! And going to preach in Nineveh would put Jonah in physical danger. The nasty folks there might kill him, or do something even worse. There was no good reason for Jonah to go and preach in Nineveh.

Except of course, God had told him to do so. And remember, this is Jonah the prophet, no my friend Joe Pagan. When God tell Jonah to do something, he is probably inclined to do it.

Yet, Jonah concludes that because he cannot see any good reason for God to command him to go to Nineveh, there was not any good reason for him to go. This reflects the fact that Jonah really trusts himself more than he trusts the Lord.

Silly Jonah! But we often do the same thing. Some of you remember the old TV show with Robert Young as Jim Anderson (not our Jim Anderson) entitled "Father Knows Best." That folks, is one of the main themes of the Bible – Father Knows Best.

Oh, even the best human fathers make mistakes, but our heavenly father does indeed always know best. However, sometime He asks us to do something which seems contrary to our self-interest, sometime His commands just don't really make sense to us.

Sometimes he allows thing to happen in our lives that are painful and seem contrary to our wellbeing. As Tim Kellor puts is, "When this happens we have to decide – does God know what's best, or do we? And the default mode of the unaided human heart is to always decide that we do. We doubt that God is good, or that he is committed to our happiness, and therefore if we can't see any good reasons for something God says or does, we assume that there aren't any."

Many of you have heard me say that in every situation God works things out for His glory, and for our ultimate good. Often, however, we will think or even say, "Well, I cannot see anyway that this situation will work out for my ultimate good."

Fine...That means you will have to trust God. You maybe cannot see how it will be a good thing for you to follow the Lord and do things His way. But the Lord has told us it is a good thing for us to do that.'

You have to choose. Who do you think sees the big picture, you or the Lord? I think you realize only one answer to that question makes sense. The Lord is the one who sees things more clearly. He is the one we should trust.

Friends, my guess is the Lord is not calling you to go preach in Nineveh this week. But it is possible, maybe even likely, that he wants you to do something you are not real excited about doing or maybe comfortable doing. Or you may even think it would be a little crazy to do it.

Perhaps it involves financial generosity, giving money when you are not sure you have any extra. Maybe it is trying to reconcile with a family member who has wronged and hurt you. The Lord

might want you to volunteer to teach that Sunday School class.

Or maybe he wants you to call up that friend from college and talk to him about trusting in Jesus Christ. Or it could be one of a hundred other things, that you are pretty sure God wants you to do, but you don't really want to do. Maybe you cannot figure out why God would want you to do it.

Yet, if you are fairly certain it is what God wants you to do, it is what, by God's grace, you need to do. You need to trust him and believe that obeying the Lord will enable you to glorify Him, and will be for your ultimate good, and will ultimately make you happier.

You can run, but you can't hide. That means it is foolish to run. In reality, it is foolish to run from God.

A much better choice is to run to the Lord, run into his arms of grace. We need to experience His love and forgiveness.

Friends, may the Lord give you the grace and strength and wisdom you need to honor Him and serve others each day of 2021.