

**Sermon Response Guide - October 8, 2023**  
**“Running From God” Jonah 1:1-3**  
**Pastor Phil Rushton**

**Sermon Overview:**

The book of Jonah opens in a surprising way. Jonah is called by God to be a missionary to the despised Ninevites. He responds by running in the opposite direction.

While we may be quick to pass judgement on Jonah, a deeper reading of the story helps us understand why Jonah is resistant to this call. Nineveh had a reputation for being a brutal regime. Jim Bruckner writes, “Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, was Israel’s worst enemy and the bane of the ancient world. They were a powerful and well-developed civilization, known for their brutal and grisly treatment of their enemies.”

God is not saying that this brutality and evil is ok. He asks Jonah to call the Ninevites to repent from their wickedness. Jonah’s concern, however, is that they might actually repent and that God might actually forgive and have mercy on them. In fact, this is what is revealed to us at the end of the story. In Jonah 4:2 we read “That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” Jonah finds it a scandal that God would even give Nineveh a chance to repent.

With this background information we can begin to see why Jonah is running from this call. Jonah is likely fearful of going to Nineveh. There would be great risk for him to simply show up in the capital and call the leaders of Nineveh to repent. It would be like asking a prominent rabbi to show up on the streets of Berlin at the height of the Third Reich.

Jonah deeply distrusts God. This call is confronting his worldview and his theological perspective. We know from an earlier encounter with Jonah that he was very passionate about his people and his country. Jonah shows up in 2 Kings 14. This is during the reign of a king named Jeroboam II. Jeroboam is described as a rebellious and wicked king. Whereas Amos and Hosea confronted Jeroboam, Jonah speaks in favor of Jeroboam’s aggressive military campaign to extend the borders of Israel. Timothy Keller writes: “The original readers of the book of Jonah would have remembered him as intensely patriotic, a highly partisan nationalist. And they would have been amazed that God would send a man like that to preach to the very people he most feared and hated.”

Jonah may also be concerned about his reputation among his own people. What would people think of him preaching and ministering to their enemies?

The first question that this opening scene poses to us is this - why do we run away from God.?

Like Jonah, fear can often get in the way of stepping out in faith. We may fear failure, the opinions of others, or fear the challenges that come with change or growth. The psychologist Abraham Maslow coined the term the “Jonah Syndrome.” He describes the “Jonah Syndrome” as our tendency to avoid the necessary obstacles, challenges, and responsibilities that we face on the path towards growth.

Christianity is often marketed as a means towards a life full of freedom, purpose and joy. There is truth to this. What sometimes gets left out is that the journey toward freedom, purpose, and joy often comes through hard things. Jesus himself says that if we are to gain life we must first lose life. David Foster Wallace once paraphrased Jesus' saying "The truth will set you free, but not until it is done with you." On route to following Christ and realizing our vocation, we often experience struggle and hardship. The hard things we face on the spiritual journey can easily derail us. It is helpful to remember that when our vocation causes us pain or struggle, it doesn't mean we have missed our calling.

Like Jonah, perhaps we are fearful of letting God expand our theology and worldview. Fundamentalism or black and white thinking thrive in a context of fear. Simple categories of who is in and out, what is true and what is false, can allow us to feel in control when we are afraid and disoriented.

Like Jonah, perhaps we feel reluctant to pursue reconciliation with our enemies. I wonder if you have a Nineveh? Is there a person, or a people group that you are reluctant to reach out to or seek reconciliation? Is God calling you to love an estranged family member, a difficult co-worker, a republican a democrat, a refugee or migrant worker?

Like Jonah, I wonder if we prefer the safety of sitting in the church pew rather than engaging with the community around us. Are we out of balance in our spiritual life? Are we well connected at church, but disengaged from the needs of those outside the walls? The story of Jonah reminds us that God's is calling us to bless the nations. The Christian gospel is not simply an American dream, it is a global dream.

Jonah, fearful for his well-being, reluctant to change his mind, and distrustful of God's intentions, decides to run. While other prophets debate God, Jonah doesn't even bother. It is radio silent. While God calls Jonah to arise and go to Nineveh, Jonah goes the opposite direction. Instead of going east he goes west. Instead of going up he goes down — down to Joppa, down into a boat, down below the deck of the boat, and eventually down to the bottom of the sea.

In the Hebrew language, the location Tarshish is emphasized. It is repeated 3 times in verse 3. "But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

Dr. Tim Mackie, who heads up the Bible Project, says that this word repetition functions like a hyperlink. When you are surfing a webpage and a word highlighted and underlined, you can click on it and it takes you another page that explains the word or idea. This is a hyperlink. Mackie, argues that this repetition of the word Tarshish is glowing hyperlink. This writer is trying to get our attention. The writer is saying, notice this geographical location.

When you do a quick search for Tarshish, you discover the phrase "ships from Tarshish" shows up a lot in scripture. 1 Kings 10:22 tells us that Solomon receives gold and exotic animals from ships of Tarshish. This location not only represents one of the most remote places in the ancient world, it represents a place of great wealth and idolatry. In Psalm 48, we read that Yahweh brings down his justice on these ships coming from Tarshish, presumably, because they are a source of idolotry, wealth and pagan influence. Psalm 48:7 reads, "You destroyed them like

ships of Tarshish shattered by an east wind.” Sounds an awful lot like what is going to happen to Jonah in the next scene!

What’s the point of all this? Tim Mackie summarizes these references like this. “Tarshish is a pseudo-Eden that appears throughout the Bible as a source of wealth and resources that people use to create their own versions of Eden, which then subjects them to judgment.”

In order to flee from God, Jonah puts his hope in the false idols of this world. He tries to supplant Yahweh by turning towards the pseudo-Eden of Tarshish. He seeks to drown out the voice of God by distracting himself with the luxuries and idols of this world.

Which poses yet another question to us. What do we turn to in place of God? What is our Tarshish?

Perhaps some of us come today and we feel like Jonah. Rather than rising up to a life of purpose and meaning with God, we find ourselves in a downward trajectory. Maybe some of us even feel like we are drowning today. Maybe the promises of Tarshish are coming up short for us. If that is the case, I want to leave you with some hope. The story of Jonah reminds us that we have a God who does not give up on us. We have a God who is full of mercy. We are going to encounter a God that offers a second chance for the terrible city of Nineveh. We are going to encounter a God who offers a second chance for Jonah. For while Jonah tries to flee from the presence of God. He will discover the truth of Psalm 139. He will discover that even when he dwells in the remotest part of the sea, even there God’s hand will lead him.

The hope I want to proclaim to you today is this. If you have turned away from God, if you feel like you are on a downward trajectory, if you are drowning, even then God’s hand reaches out to you. It’s never too late to grab on!

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. What stood out to you in the sermon or text today?
2. Why do you sometimes run away from God?
3. Do you have a Nineveh right now? A place, person, calling, that you are avoiding or resistant to move toward?
4. How do you run away from God? What is your Tarshish - the place where you try and supplant God with the things of this world?
5. Have you ever encountered God reaching out to you while you were running away from God, or headed in a downward trajectory?