

# *Running from the One We Can't Escape*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

First in a two-part series

November 10, 2013

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*Jonah 1:1–17 (NIV)*

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: <sup>2</sup>“Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

<sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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.”

<sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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?”

<sup>9</sup>He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

<sup>10</sup>This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)

<sup>11</sup>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?”

<sup>12</sup>“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.”

<sup>13</sup>Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. <sup>14</sup>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.” <sup>15</sup>Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. <sup>16</sup>At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

<sup>17</sup>Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

*Ever tried running from God? If you have, you've learned that he is the one from whom we can never truly escape. And thanks be to God for that!*

Imagine that God called on you one day and told you to do something crazy, like building an ark or preaching the Good News in the central square of Pyongyang. What would it take for you to believe it was God? What would it take for you to actually do as God says? God has told us much about how we ought to live, yet we manage to ignore most of it. Why would it be any different if it was a really, really, big command?

I'd like to think that I'd respond in the manner of Noah. God simply laid it all out for him and then “Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him” (Genesis 7:5). However, I fear that I'd be more like Jonah . . . God calls and Jonah runs. God tells Jonah to head east to the great city of Nineveh and Jonah heads west to the Mediterranean hoping to catch a slow boat to, well, anywhere but Nineveh. God wants him to carry a word of warning to Israel's enemies, but Jonah will have none of it.

It wasn't unusual for a prophet to balk when God came calling. Remember Moses who tried several strategies for getting out of the mission God had thrust upon him. I don't speak well enough! Who are you really?! The people won't listen to me! Jeremiah took a similar tack. I'm too young! But, of course, God had made God's pick and I guess that's about it. In the end, these prophets submitted themselves to God's wisdom.

## Nineveh

Nineveh was one of the oldest and greatest cities of ancient Mesopotamia. Sometimes known as the “cradle of civilization,” Mesopotamia is the region bounded by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, lying across a great desert to the east and north of Israel. In Genesis 2, the Garden of Eden is placed in this region. Abraham’s family is from Ur, an ancient city in southern Mesopotamia. During the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (920BC to 587BC), Mesopotamia was dominated by Assyria in the north and Babylonia in the south.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire at its height and also its fall in 612BC. Thus, the city was a symbol of Assyria’s power and its collapse. The book of Nahum (one of the short books of the prophets at the end of your Old Testament) is concerned solely with the coming destruction of Nineveh. For the Israelites, Nineveh was a potent symbol of those who sought Israel’s destruction, making Jonah’s story of Nineveh’s repentance that much more striking and puzzling.

But Jonah didn’t even argue with God about the assignment. He simply ran and kept on running all the way to Joppa, a coastal city on the southern coastline of modern-day Israel. The city is called “Jaffa” today and is the entry port for Tel Aviv. When Jonah arrives he boards a ship headed for Tarshish. We don’t know the location of Tarshish definitively, but a good bet is that it was a city on the eastern coast of southern Spain.

Spain? That seems like a long way to go to try and get away from God. The obvious question is why? Why does Jonah run? Is he afraid of the Assyrians? Does he fear his own inadequacies? Fortunately, we don’t have to speculate as to his motives. In 4:2, Jonah reveals his reason for running; he runs because he knows that God is compassionate! Jonah knows God’s character but simply doesn’t much like it. As Douglas Stuart puts it, “Regardless of any other religious or political notions Jonah may have had, it is evident that he hated the fact that Yahweh was truly consistent in being merciful and patient—that is, consistent *among* the nations as well as *within* Israel. . . [God] is a God of grace of whom it is hopeless -- indeed, hypocritical -- to expect a display of grace only to his own people. It was God’s grace that Jonah resented so violently; except, of course, when he was the recipient.”<sup>1</sup>

It is also worth noting that in the Hebrew, Jonah runs from “the *presence* of Yahweh.” Does he really think that is possible? Can one escape God’s presence? I know there are times when we feel closer to or further from God, but can we really escape God’s presence?

The truth is that “presence” is one of those really beautiful themes in Scripture. Presence is simply delicious.<sup>2</sup> Telephones, e-mail, letters, twitter and all the other ways we have to communicate with one another are wonderful, but nothing is like actually being with someone. The ancient Israelites understood this. They knew that there was only one God, Yahweh, who had saved them from their oppressors and who had led them to a promised land. But God hadn’t just told them what to do or where to go; God had actually and truly dwelt with them. When they were desert nomads, God had given them instructions for building a moveable home for him, a tabernacle. When they had settled into the land they called Israel, God had given them instructions for building his permanent home with them, the temple. Now . . . they weren’t so foolish as to believe that God lived with them and nowhere else. They knew that God could not be confined to any one place, but they also knew that God was present with them in a very special and unique way.

And yet Jonah tried to flee the delicious presence of the Lord God. How desperate he must have been. Jonah was ready to listen to God, so long as God behaved as Jonah thought he should. When God’s way turns out to be the path of amazing grace extended to all, Jonah will have none of it. I suppose Jonah represents some of the worst in all of us, that which

<sup>1</sup>from Stuart’s commentary on Jonah in the Word Biblical Commentary (1998).

<sup>2</sup> I borrowed this wonderful phrase from Gordon Fee, a highly regarded New Testament scholar. He is also a Pentecostal. Pentecostals are keenly aware of the reality and power of the Holy Spirit, who is God’s empowering presence – with Jonah and with you and me. Not surprisingly then, Dr. Fee has devoted considerable efforts to helping the Christian community see that the Holy Spirit is more than just a small, still voice, but is the very presence of God in our lives.

rejects and condemns the “others.” For Jonah and too many of his fellow Jews, the “others” were the Gentiles. Who are the “others” for you and me?

### *Into the water and the whale*

Jonah may have given up on God, but God was relentless in his faithfulness. No matter how far or how fast Jonah ran, he couldn’t escape God’s presence and his outpouring of grace.

When Jonah gets to the Mediterranean he boards a ship, trying to get even further from God. When God makes a terrible storm rise up and threaten the ship, the sailors are thrown into a crisis. In his insightful commentary on the book of Jonah, Paul Mackrell helps us to dig into the storm and the reaction of the sailors and Jonah.

#### *THE REACTION OF RESIGNED DESPAIR*

It is strange to think of an inanimate object like a ship having a response, but the literal reading is that the ship ‘thought to break up’. If the ship imagined she was going to pieces, she was right—she was. With the planks creaking at the force of the pounding waves and with water seeping through the opening timbers, her plight was indeed desperate. The reaction of some people to the storms they face is much the same. They groan with self-pity and imagine they must be falling apart. Like a rudderless ship being tossed to and fro, they are completely at the mercy of the storm. But what may be justified in an unthinking ship is pitiful in a human being. We are not pathetic corks without direction or purpose. We are thinking beings with a degree of control over our reactions and emotions. We know how we ought to behave in the storm and what we should believe through it. It may not be easy, but when the storm arrives we can, at the very least, begin by reminding ourselves who sent it. And then we can ask what we can learn from it and through it.

#### *THE REACTION OF FEAR*

The sailors were petrified (v. 5). They thought they were going to die. Like so many in our own culture, they had no hope of anything beyond the grave. Their faith in their gods was sincere enough, but each one was unable to offer any assurance as to what might await any individual follower when life ended. In short, they were no-gods. Unable to answer prayer in life, what hope was there for the final prayer in death? And so for the sailors it was ultimately the fear of the unknown, and for them nothing was more unknown than death itself.

#### *THE REACTION OF ORGANIZED RELIGION*

In verse 5 each of the sailors cried out to his own god. It was a kind of disorganized and panic-stricken ecumenical service on deck. The sailors were aware that this storm had a divine origin but were struggling to find out which particular deity they ought to be addressing. In plying its trade across the Mediterranean Sea, the ship would routinely lose the odd crew member as she called into port, and a replacement would have to be recruited. This would give a cosmopolitan mix to the ship’s company, which found expression in the many different deities represented. With such an impressive array of idols on display, there was a good chance that the one responsible for the storm would own up and respond to their heartfelt cries. It was important that everyone on board played his part and prayed to the deity to which he owed allegiance. Between them they ought to hit on the right one. But what good is all this organization unless someone engages with the Lord who had sent the storm in the first place? And there was no one.

#### *THE REACTION OF SECULAR COMMON SENSE*

Some people display admirable leadership skills in a crisis. The captain seems to have been just such an example, organizing the men into hurling the cargo overboard—a move designed to help the lightened ship ride over the waves, rather than sinking down into them. The trouble is that it does not work. This storm has been divinely commissioned, and an approach which only addresses the symptoms rather than the cause is doomed to fail. Without grappling with the divine dimension of the problem they faced, a permanent solution would forever elude them.

#### *THE REACTION OF ESCAPISM*

Running away had become a habit with Jonah. Having run from the Lord, he runs from the confusion and turmoil going on all around him and finds a hiding place. Unlike the Lord Jesus who fell asleep in a boat amidst a storm after a weary day’s work, Jonah’s sleep is that of the idle, guilt-ridden escapist. The methods people use to try and blot out life’s problems are many and varied. Virtually anything that can distract will suffice, at least for the time

being. And that is precisely the problem—‘for the time being’ always runs out with at ultimate day of reckoning at the end of it. Sleeping his troubles away would provide a temporary respite for Jonah, but reality is never far away and Jonah is roused by a captain shocked at finding him. He scornfully asks, ‘How can you sleep?’ He might have said: ‘What on earth do you think you’re playing at?’ It is the one question Jonah manages to sidestep throughout this opening chapter.

#### *THE MISSING REACTION*

Having listed negative examples of how not to react in a crisis, we ought to be concluding with a positive example of how it should have been done. But there was no such example. It should have come from Jonah, but his was the worst reaction of all. He alone had someone to pray to and who would listen, but from Jonah there was only silence. Where we should have been reading about courageous faith in action, there was mere selfish withdrawal.<sup>3</sup>

We are all struck by the storms of life from time to time – what is our reaction? Do we respond with courageous faith or with fear and panic. The Bible is filled with lots of “small” stories such as this storm story. If we will take the time to chew over them, we will be richly repaid.

In any event, the sailors cast lots to see who is the problem. For the ancients, calamities arose because one or more of the gods had been displeased. Likewise, the sailors believe the gods will use the dice to reveal the identity of the offender. When the lot falls on Jonah, the crew confronts him and Jonah tells them of his god, the Lord God. He had already told the crew that he was running from this god. As conditions worsen, Jonah tells them to toss him into the sea and they will be saved. At first, the crew refuses to do so – they don’t want to take an innocent life. They make hard for land, but when it becomes clear that they are all about to perish, the sailors throw Jonah overboard, all the while making sacrifices and vows before the Lord God.

When Jonah is tossed into the sea, a whale<sup>4</sup> swallows him so he doesn’t drown. Jonah will survive three days in the belly of the beast before being coughed up on dry land. Only then, does Jonah’s mission really begin. But more of that in next week’s study.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. When have you personally experienced God’s presence with you? How about those times when it seemed that God was somewhere else? Discuss how an affirmative core conviction of God’s presence in the person of the Holy Spirit would help to reassure you that God is always present with you? Can our head really help us to overcome feelings of being separated from God? How do you strive to connect with God?
2. We’ve all been through difficult times and events in our lives. You might share a few stories about your relationship with God in those times. Did you feel like God was near or far? Were you angry with God? What advice would you give another Christian about getting through the storms? In his book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat*, John Ortberg advises Christians to stay focused on Jesus rather than the storm? Does he seem to urge denial of the difficulty or hardship? Have you ever felt like God let you down because you didn’t get the answer to prayer that you wanted or just because it seemed that God should have lifted the burden from you? What are some practical ways you could go about helping yourself to stay more focused upon Jesus?
3. One of the glories of Scripture is its inexhaustibility. I’ve been to the book of Jonah many times, yet each visit yields some fresh insight or new challenge. I guess this shouldn’t surprise me. The Bible is far more than a collection of ancient writings; we Christians proclaim that it is Scripture. As Scripture, the Bible is the product of the community of God’s people and we read it as a believing community. We affirm that God’s Holy Spirit guides and illuminates our reading and understanding. How is your reading of the book of Jonah different from the reading of a non-believer, even if that non-believer is an Old Testament scholar? What might a non-believing scholar learn from you about this story? What might you learn from that same scholar?

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<sup>3</sup> Mackrell, P. (2007). *Opening up Jonah* (pp. 28–31). Leominster: Day One Publications.

<sup>4</sup>Yes, I know that Scripture says it is a great fish. But I’d bet that the ancients figured that a whale was just that – a very large fish. Our taxonomic systems differed from theirs. A whale is a whale by any name.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Exodus 4:1-17</b> Moses tries to get God to choose someone else</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Jeremiah 1</b> God calls Jeremiah, who protests that he is too young a choice for this work.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Psalm 139</b> "Where can I flee from your presence?"</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Mark 4:35-41</b> Jesus calms the sea</p>
<p><b>Friday, Matthew 12:38-45</b> The sign of Jonah – Jonah's three days in the belly of the whale foreshadows Jesus' three days in the tomb after his resurrection.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

