

RUF Bible Study – The Minor Prophets
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Jonah – Can You Run From God?

I haven't been doing very much of it lately, but I love running. I didn't used to. I used to hate it. I was a jumper – long jump, high jump and triple jump, but I wasn't very good at any of them. I was scarred for life when my track coach put me into the mile (which I had never trained for), and I came in dead last.

So I stayed away from any running. Until about five years ago, I decided to give it a try. I started running around the track, listening to sermons and music for miles and miles. I've run a few marathons and other races, and love it and hope to continue low level running.

But why? Why do we do it? If you talk to runners, there just has to be something there, something deeper. Running for 4-5 hours seems a little crazy – seems really crazy. And it is. Some speculate that this is what we're made for. That we are biologically and evolutionarily engineered for long running as a way to hunt (this is called persistence hunting – read *Born to Run*, my favorite book to read in a long time).

Most people aren't running for that reason much these days. Maybe a few people in Africa somewhere. People run for causes all the time. To beat cancer. For a lost loved one. To lose weight. To qualify for the Boston Marathon.

Aren't there also deeper reasons? To be someone. To control something. To distract us from something. To quell something within. In *Chariots of Fire*, runner Harold Abrahams says, "I will raise my eyes and look down that corridor; 4 feet wide, with 10 lonely seconds to justify my whole existence. But WILL I?"

There is something behind the running, something down there deeper.

What about you? Some of you are runners to be sure. But all of us are running, aren't we? We're trying to prove ourselves. We're running away from something in our past. We're trying to *not* be defined by something. Or to get something – an award or a position or a spouse or a spot on the podium if not the gold medal.

What if all that running turned into rest?

We're looking at the book of Jonah tonight and seeing what Jonah tells us about running from God. Jonah is perhaps the most famous of the minor prophets. You've probably heard of him. You may have seen Veggie Tales. You have probably heard that Jonah must be some sort of parable – people don't get swallowed by fish, at least not whole, and they certainly don't live to tell the tale.

Sure, this is hard to believe if you don't believe in the supernatural. But if God can raise Jesus from the dead, and Jesus himself could do miracles, then it doesn't seem too hard to believe that something miraculous could happen in other situations. Besides, this just doesn't seem like a parable. There are too many specifics. Specific time, place, people, conversations. And Jesus didn't use this as a parable. He referenced it as a reality and then applied it to his own situation. That should give you confidence. If we can believe in Jesus, then we can believe in something as strange and unusual as a man being swallowed by a big huge fish and living in there for three days.

Jonah is also interesting because here we have one of God's own prophets running away from him. We sometimes hold the idea that God's people are always confident and bold. Reading the Bible should dispel you of that idea. God's people are actually broken and rather bad people. Jonah is no exception. Here is someone tasked to preach the gospel who instead wants nothing to do with it. Let's see how it plays out.

How we run from God

Jonah is a prophet of God told to go preach to the city of Nineveh. We don't know who wrote this book, but its central figure certainly is Jonah. Jonah is referenced in 2 Kings 14:25, and he is one of the northerners we've been talking about (from the tribe of Israel). Judging from external things and events, it appears this book was written in the 780s to 750s B.C. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the major player in the region in that time. It would be in what is modern day Iraq. Nineveh was a huge, bustling, important city.

God speaks to Jonah, saying, "*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.*" Nineveh wasn't just an important city. It was also a wicked one, and it was time for God to speak to them. Jonah has a commission to do so.

But in verse 3 Jonah does the opposite. He flees this call of God and goes the other way, trying to get as far away from Nineveh as he can get. The action moves pretty quickly from here, so let's follow along.

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For this series, I used commentaries by McComiskey, Boice and Dever, and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Jeff Ferguson. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

Jonah is on this boat trying to get as far away from the presence of the Lord as he can get. But God sends a huge storm on them, a mighty tempest on the sea, and people starting getting really worried. Apparently the seasoned veterans were wondering if something special might be happening because this storm was a doozy. It's that episode of the Deadliest Catch, the one where everyone just really might die as the waves crash over the boat again and again.

Jonah's just chilling below deck taking a nap. The sailors think Jonah might have some ideas about what is up, so they ask him. They seem pretty interested in his god, hoping that one of the gods represented on the ship might be able to save them. Jonah gets picked out even further, and then they start to interrogate him. He comes out with his story; that he's Hebrew, that he fears Yahweh, the God of heaven, the one who made the seas and the storms.

"What have you done?!" they ask him. Dude, cmon, something is up with you. Out with it. Jonah calmly instructs them in how to solve this problem. He tells them to throw him into the sea. He's willing to die. He really does not want to go to Nineveh, does he?

The men valiantly try to row back to shore in order to spare his life, but to no avail. So *they* pray to Yahweh, for Yahweh to forgive them for what they have to do. And they pitch Jonah over to the side. Then these men worshipped God.

So there's Jonah flailing around in the water, drowning, drowning, dying, dying. And he gets swallowed up by a great fish. The text doesn't say it's a whale, and we can get bogged down in technicalities. A great fish swallowed up Jonah and he lived inside there for three days and three nights.

Now, I'm not the biggest fan of fish. Salmon is good. I like salmon fine, but it's the least fishy of the fish. I love scallop and other shellfish. I was watching an episode of Bizarre Foods with my kids. I think they were somewhere in India and they were in a fishing village where every part of every fish was used. One woman was making her very famous very special fermented fish stomach sauce. It was nasty.

So I can only imagine Jonah's time inside this fish would have been disgusting and foul. But it was there, in that disgusting and foul moment, that something happened inside of Jonah and his heart moved. It was there that Jonah remembered the temple of God and the sacrifices made on his behalf and he vows and he prays and he says, "Salvation belongs to the Lord."

At that moment, Jonah gets barfed onto dry land, he gets vomited out onto the beach. That would have been a pretty cool thing to have seen if you had been there walking on the pier with an ice cream cone in your hand talking about the beautiful sunset. "Hey there's a whale, no not a whale, a big fish! It's getting closer. What's it doing? It's in trouble. It's puking. What is that? Ew. It's a man. Hey buddy, are you okay?"

So Jonah is there, happy to breathe real air and see real sky, and God speaks to him a second time, "Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and call out against it the message I tell you." This time Jonah obeys and he walks into the city and starts to preach. His message isn't the most eloquent or fullest I've ever heard. He says, "*Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown!*" Maybe he made that into three points and had some good illustrations. I'm not sure about his powerpoint slides.

Regardless, the peoples' hearts had been prepared so they responded in repentance and God spared the city in a great and powerful deliverance. 3:10 says, "*When God saw what they had did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.*"

Wow. That is awesome. Nineveh, the capital city of the enemies of God, was saved and spared. We've been hearing about all of this judgment and the enemies of God and here is God specifically sparing his enemies. It warms the soul, truly.

The only weird thing is that the story doesn't end at this point. There is this addendum tack on of chapter four. It appears that Jonah now sits outside of Nineveh surveying their repentance and how God has saved them, but he's still not very happy about it. So God has to teach him a few more lessons along the way, lessons about Jonah's heart that he still hasn't figured out. And the book of Jonah ends with a question – *And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?*"

God does care. Does Jonah? Do we?

This is how Jonah ran from God. He was serious about his running. He was passionate about his running. He was ultimately unsuccessful in his running. So why did he run?

What about you? Where are you in your running? Are you running from God? I doubt that you've been in the belly of a great fish lately, but maybe you have metaphorically? Maybe there is something God wants you to do that you just won't do? There is some place you just can't go? Are you running from God? Are you scared of God? Why are you running from God?

Why we run from God²

Why do we run from God? We're looking at Jonah for a reason. Here is a man who is supposed to love God and serve him. He's a preacher. He's required to follow God and tell others about him. Yet even he is not very excited about God at all, and even Jonah runs from God.

That reminds of something very, very important – there are no good people. Not even good people are good people. Many people will say that they like RUF and the church and many things about it, but they really don't like the message that God only saves some. They will say, that *their* God saves all the good people, regardless of if they've heard of God or not. But

² A lot of this is from Keller's sermon from Jonah 3 found at redeemer.com.

there it was, the problem – you just squeezed me out. You just squeezed everyone out. How good do you have to be? Are there really any good people? In the end, your method for choosing who is in and who is out is actually far tougher and less gracious than God's, not more.

Even the “good” people aren't good. I hope you don't think I'm good. I'm struggling just like you are. For example, I lied last week in order to do something I wanted to do.

Some of us grew up in moralistic, conservative households. We were taught that we shouldn't lie or cheat or steal or chew tobacco or smoke or have sex or do anything disrespectful. The people who obeyed these rules were “good people” and those who disobeyed were “bad people.” Many of us still think this way and live this way and treat others this way.

Some of us have rebelled against that. We now say that it's okay to sleep around and have multiple partners, smoke, get tattoos, or do whatever we want. But it's not okay to emit carbons into the atmosphere or kill animals for their furs or carry handguns. Those are the “bad people” but we're now the “good people,” the liberal ones.

It's different categories to be sure, but it's still classifying people into two groups, the good and the bad.

Let's see how it looked for Jonah, and then you can understand him as an example for what you can see in your own life. Jonah is one of the conservative preachers whose life starts to unravel in the tabloids, a familiar story.

God told Jonah that he was going to have a message of judgment for the city of Nineveh. Tim Keller's sermon was helpful for me to think about how Jonah must have reacted to that. We know what Jonah did – he ran away from God. Why?

The outer message to Nineveh was judgment. The Ninevites weren't going to like it because it would get in their way, tell them to do something different, that their life shouldn't go the way it was going. That judgment was coming.

But think about it. If God wanted to just judge, then why send a message at all? Doesn't sending a message about judgment imply that there is also caring and the possibility of change and repentance? Jonah knew that although the outer message was one of judgment, the inner message was an offer of grace and forgiveness.

Jonah didn't want that to happen. These were the enemies of his people. He wanted only judgment. He didn't want the opportunity for grace and mercy for these people, so he was committed to not going. Going would have been a hardship to his family, to his reputation, to his people. He would have to give up a lot in order to serve God this way.

Jonah loved his people. He loved his nation. But we can see now that that love had become another god for him. It had taken the place of God himself. As long as serving his nation and serving God worked together, he was fine. But when God asked him to do something that jeopardized his national god, then he was in trouble.

He started thinking just like we all do – God doesn't love me. God doesn't want the best for me. I can't trust God at all. He cannot be trusted. I must trust my other god and ditch God.

If we dig a little deeper into that, we realize that often our love for God isn't really for him and for his sake, but for what he gives us. Is that love? No way.

Tim Keller is strong on this point. We just had Valentine's Day. Did any of you get into the trap of this question: “Why do you love me?” Be very careful about answering that question. It cannot turn out good for you. If you're honest, you might answer some sweeter version of:

- I love you because you're hot and we have great sex together.
- I love you because I love our double incomes. That increases my standard of living.
- I love you because I want to have a family and I need a member of the opposite sex to do that.
- I love you because we watch movies together and I love your company to do fun things.
- I love you because you cook and clean for me and make my life easier.

Of course, I have never said any of these things! You have your own versions of the reasons you love someone. But if you're honest, when you hear this your heart really sinks. Because if you think even for a second, you know that the person doesn't love you after all. He loves sex. He loves his standard of living. He loves family. He loves movies and togetherness. He loves not having to cook or clean and an easy life. What if you get not hot? Will he still love you? What if you get an arm or a breast amputated? Will he still love you?

You want him to love you for you, and not for the things you do for him. Guys, you want the same. You want her to love you for you and not for the income you provide for her.

Do you think God is any different? Do you really expect to have a standard for other people and think that God wouldn't and couldn't have that same way of relating? He wants to be loved for himself, not just for the things he does for you. This throws off all of the rule-breaking and obedience following and puts us more in the realm of knowing and loving God.

Do you know and love God? Do you follow him and what he says because you love him? Or do you cast off his desires the minute they conflict with something else? Do you actually love your sexuality more than God? Do you love your ideas of God and humanity more than God himself? God is a complicated person, but you often pigeonhole him and will not allow him to do or say the unexpected. That isn't love.

Are you filled with wonder by him? Does being with him thrill you? Do you worship and adore him? Those are feelings and actions of love.

Jonah doesn't love God after all. He's committed to God. He's a monotheist for sure. He testifies about God. But he would rather die than have God save his real idol, his nationalistic view of who is most important and worthy to be saved.

What about you? What comes into conflict between you and God? It can be anything. *24* often exploits these places and issues in our lives.

You will be faced between saving your country – millions of people – or saving your wife. Which will you choose? We can sympathize with these people and these choices because we don't know what we'd choose.

What will you choose? Why don't you trust God? Where do you see your lack of trust for him coming out?

What does God do about it?

So here we have this good religious person who is willing to die for his country and his people but not willing to serve God. What does God do?

God first sends a storm. We have Jonah sleeping somewhere in the berth of this ship. He is perfectly happy to resign a hundred thousand people to death. He's not going to save them. All he has to do is stay away from Nineveh for 40 days and it's basically like dropping a nuclear bomb on them. Fine with him. Let 'em burn, is his philosophy. He sleeps content at night. He's not worried about it at all.

God whips up this storm to get things off of Jonah's plan and to carry on his plan. So Jonah's thrust into this new side crisis that he didn't expect at all. The storm is something perfectly natural in the course of the world, but God is sovereignly using it and has planned it for a totally different reason.

Isn't that how he works? He sends natural events into our lives that throw us off our own courses. You get caught. You get pregnant. You get an F. You don't get accepted. You get broken up with. You get engaged. You get fired. You get moved. You get dumped. You lose unexpectedly.

These are the storms of life, aren't they? Do you understand and see them when they come? I have to tell you that your life is not going to be just smooth sailing from here on out. There are going to be rough patches and storms ahead.

If you are trusting in things other than God than they will fail you. Loving your family is good, but your family and friends move away and die eventually. Loving sex and your body are good things, but you will grow old and flabby, and you'll need Viagra. You'll get into a job you can't do. You'll have a child you can't manage.

There are storms in life and these storms will point out that you have built your life on the sand. Your family was never meant to be the foundation of your life. Your body and your sex weren't meant to be your identity. Your job and your grades, your position, your prestige – none of these are firm. They are sand. The storms will knock them away and they'll teeter. You can spend a lot of time continuing to prop them up, to keep the sandcastles strong in appearance, to be out there at work the next day, working, working, working, working.

Or you can realize you need a new foundation, a new base, a new underneath.

You need a miracle. If the storms of life are perfectly natural in their judgment and exposure, there are also miracles of lie where God saves. This is the second thing God sends to Jonah. Not just a storm, but also a miracle.

God sent a great fish to snatch up Jonah from the storm, from the depths of woe. Whatever we have to say about this, it misses the point to say that it is a parable. It was a miracle!

Miracles come in the storms. That's where we see that we've been using God and only loving him for what he gives us. He has every reason to reject us. You would reject someone who loved you like that, I think. But God loves you. He sends miracles into your life to save you.

As Jonah sat in the belly of this great fish, he thought of how he didn't deserve grace at all but was receiving it. He was not a good person after all, but was someone who deserved just as much wrath as the Ninevites. But he received mercy in the fish and in the sacrifices of the temple.

Jesus connected himself to this book and to this story, so it's not a stretch for us at all to do the same. He said in *Matthew 12, 38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." 39 But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. 41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*

Jesus is saying that Jonah is connected to and pointing to him. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish so Jesus would be three days and three nights in a place far worse.

Why was Jonah saved? He wasn't a good person. He didn't do what he was supposed to. He had other gods in his life. Why was he not drowned in the waves?

Jonah was spared because Jesus was drowned. Jesus went under and God did not relent to let him up. Jesus suffered even though he hadn't done anything wrong so that those who had could be saved. Jonah only suffered some of the winds and the waves and the storm, but we are told that Jesus suffered ALL of God's wrath, the full weight of everything God had stored up for all people. Jonah got roughed up but he was shown the miraculous love of mercy. Jesus was tortured and it did not relent even though he was innocent.

Do you see this incredible gospel? Do you hear the gospel for you, the great exchange, the love God has for his people by placing his wrath on his very own son? Do you know a love like that?

What would it do for us if we believed this?

It would give us a tremendous humility. We can stop categorizing people into good and bad to make ourselves feel better. We would know that we are bad, and we don't deserve God's love – no one does. That would humble us to walk less proudly with God. Maybe we could and would stop being such hypocrites and instead plead on and talk about the grace of God.

But it would also make us more confident. It would give us an assurance that we would know that our lives would be built on solid rock and not on sinking sand. We could move out into even hard situations and storms in our lives with the confidence of God's love and his care for us, because we would know that it's not dependant on our performance at all. It is merely out of his saving sovereign grace. That would be a different, confident way to live.

And it would propel us. 2 Corinthians says that Christ's love propels us. It throws us out into the world. Jonah was thrown out into Nineveh, a people he personally didn't care about. But God did. God used Jonah to preach the message that led to their repentance. God cares about Nineveh! God cares about your dorm, your hall, your sorority, your friends, your campus, your city. He actually cares more about it than you do. Do you see that? Are you in your little bubble running from God? Are you shrinking back from engaging in this community with the message of repent and believe because you don't believe God would save or you don't want God to save?

I'll bet you are and you do. I am. I do. I want to believe. I want the gospel to work in my heart and work it's way out into our world for it is the power of God for the salvation for everyone who believes. Not for the good people. God came to seek and to save sinners like you and me.

It's like Finding Nemo. Nemo takes off. He's trying to get away and get out and get going. Nemo has a lot of adventures of course, but eventually his dad finds him and brings him home.

Can you run from God? Sure you can try, and he'll let you. But he'll send you storms and miracles. He will find you one way or the other. He's pretty good at it. Let your running turn into resting in him. β

*O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.*

*O light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.*

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.*

*O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.*