

Message Series: **Unrelenting Love**

God's Relentless Pursuit of Rebels | The Story of Jonah

Message Title: **You Can Run But You Can't Hide**

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Scripture Reference: **Jonah Chapter 1**

Imagine the following scenario! Your parents were in the second twin tower on Sept 11th, 2001 and both perished when Al-Qaeda struck those towers with two jumbo jets. As a result, you have grown up without parents. Naturally, you develop a deep hatred for the radical Islamists in Al-Qaeda who killed your parents. Not surprisingly, you have become very nationalistic. You love your country deeply. You watched with joy as the US military pounded the Taliban in Afghanistan who gave safe haven to the terrorists. Sometime in the last few years since 9/11 you got saved. And not only got saved, God called you to be a prophet. You become a very well-known and trusted national prophet. Some of your prophecies have actually had an impact on the nation for the good.

One day when you are at prayer, you sense God speaking to you something so strange you can't process it. He says, "*Arise; Go to Afghanistan, to Al Queda, and cry out against them and tell them that their evil has come up before Me.*" At first, you're excited because it could be that God will judge them for their evil that they have done. But the more you think about it, the more you realize that there is another possibility. You know God well enough to know that He is a gracious and forgiving God, a God who delights in mercy. Therefore, if you go to them and cry out against them it could be that they will repent and God will forgive them. As long as that possibility exists, you're not even going to risk it. So instead of obeying the word to go to Afghanistan, you get on a cruise ship and get as far away as you can from Afghanistan—you head to Hawaii! Fantastic? Not really because that is exactly what happened to an 8th Century B.C. prophet named Jonah, the son of Amittai.

We are beginning four messages today from the book that carries his name in a series called ***Unrelenting Love: God's Relentless Pursuit of Rebels***. For several decades I have wanted to preach through this book. Jonah was a prophet who prophesied to the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th century B.C. We can surmise that he was a very well-known prophet who loved his nation for he prophesied in II Kings 14:25, that the king at the time (Jeroboam II) would successfully extend Israel's borders and regain lost territory. Extending Israel's borders was necessary in order to strengthen them from any attacks from other nations. That's important, especially since there is a certain people in the North that constitute a growing threat. They are the Assyrians and they are a brutal, godless people who had no regard for human life and carried out barbarous practices.

We have unearthed some Assyrian monuments and one was from a military ruler who tells of what he did to a people he had conquered:

I destroyed, I demolished, I burned, I took their warriors prisoners and impaled them on stakes before their cities....flayed the nobles, as many as had rebelled, and spread their skins out on the piles of the dead corpses....many captive I burned in a fire. Many I took alive;

from some I cut off their hands to the wrist' from others I cut off noses, ears and fingers; I put out the eyes of many of the soldiers.

In lieu of this threat, enlarging Israel's borders was a necessity if they are going to be able to protect themselves from this growing menace in the North. And Jonah's prophetic ministry is a major part of making that happen. That's why it was nothing short of scandalous when the word of the Lord came to Jonah recorded in the opening verse, "*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.*" God is calling Jonah to go to the capital city of Israel's worst enemy and announce to them that God was calling their sin to account. Never had God asked a prophet in Israel to do such a thing.

Some people expressed excitement when they heard I was teaching through Jonah. Of course, everyone has heard about Jonah (even unbelievers). He is the man who was swallowed by a fish for three days and nights and survived. But how do we relate to this book? (None of us have been eaten by a fish and survived). This book has a unique place in the Minor Prophets. This is the only prophetic book that is a narrative. There are no prophetic utterances (except five words spoken to Nineveh in chapter 3). So why is this short strange book that is narrative and contains no real prophecies in the Bible? The real question we should ask is, '*What is this book really about?*' Is it about the fish? About the sailors? About the Ninevites? Or even Jonah? *We are going to discover that the story is not about the fish or sailors or the Ninevites or even Jonah—it is about God!*

He is the main character in this book. In the story, the fish is mentioned 4 times, the city of Nineveh 9 times, Jonah himself is mentioned 18 times, but God is mentioned 38 times. So God is the main character in this story. *And may I say that what it says about God is quite shocking.* If you are a Jewish prophet living in the 8th century B.C. who loves his country fiercely and wants them to prosper, you are not prepared to deal with a God who cares deeply about your enemies and wants to reach them! *God calls Jonah to accompany him on a mission of showing compassion and mercy to those who despise him.*

There are three things we learn in this book about God and they are revealed specifically in chapter one.

First, is God's Compassionate Disposition towards Sinners

In the Old Testament, God is often sending prophets to warn the covenant people (Repent, and I will have mercy on you according to my covenant-love) But here, God is sending a prophet to warn a wicked nation, a godless nation, a nation bent on destroying Israel. Jonah doesn't like the mission or even agree with the mission. In fact, let's be honest. Jonah knows God, but he doesn't like God. He has issues with what God does. One of the things that this book demonstrates is that it is possible to have good orthodoxy (right views of God) and yet be at variance with God Himself! For example, it is possible to hold biblical views about God's sovereignty, yet despise a sovereign God who does whatever He pleases without consulting you. Jonah (along with everyone here) wants a God he can control, a God who consults with him before asking him to do anything that would make him uncomfortable. As I have been reading Jonah through thoroughly I have had this question running through my mind: "*Are God's people today disobedient to God's mission because we don't understand it or because we don't like it?*"

You see, I think many of us, in our heart of hearts, don't like the fact that we are called to go to godless, God-rejecting people and share the word. We would much rather stay with our own and hang out.

So what does Jonah do when he hears the word? He books a cruise! Notice what the writer says. He went down to Joppa and bought a ticket for Tarshish. Do you know where Tarshish is? It is our modern Spain. In Jonah's day it was literally the end of the world. It was as far West as you could go. God told Jonah to go a few hundred miles northeast to his enemies and Jonah goes as far West as he can. When you read the text in the Hebrew it is very fast moving, piling up verb after verb. It gives the impression of frenzied activity—I gotta get away, gotta get out of here, gotta get as far away as I can. Notice how the writer phrases what Jonah is trying to get away from:

*“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 1:3

Jonah actually thinks that he can run away from God. Actually, he knows better. He knew the words of David. Every Jew did: *“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”* (Psalm 139:7). Jonah reminds me of my pit bull, Oxford. Sometimes when we discipline him he just freezes and gets this look on his face like somehow we can't see him, that he has just faded into the background (75 lb. pit bull). Jonah is running from God, but it is futile. (You can run but you cannot hide!). Remember Francis Thompson's poem, “The Hound of Heaven”. Jonah is about to find out that you cannot hide from God.

We now see the second important thing that this book teaches us about God: **We cannot escape God's sovereign actions.** *“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”* (Jonah 1:4). God is seen throughout this book as controlling the wind, the sea, animals, plants; they are all under his sovereign control. Jonah is the only one who doesn't respond to God at this time. Even the mariners in the boat call on their gods, but look at Jonah. *“But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.”*

Did you notice something about the description of Jonah in this chapter: “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. “But Jonah had gone *down* into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.” Jonah's life is slowly on a downward trajectory: down, down, down. Even the pagan mariners know the gravity of the situation, but the only one unresponsive is the guy who should've known. That's what happens when you try to run from God: everything spins downward. There is something interesting that then happens.

Notice the words God used when he commissioned Jonah: *“Arise, go to Nineveh and “call out” against it (Jonah 1:2).* And notice what happens. Jonah is sleeping in the inner part of the ship. So the captain finds him and look at what he says to Jonah: “So the captain came and said to him, “What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, *call out* to your god! He uses the exact same words that God used when he commissioned Jonah to go to Nineveh.

Jonah ignored God so God now uses a pagan captain to speak to Him (we cannot escape God's sovereign actions). Look at verse 7: these superstitious pagans cast lots and it falls on Jonah. *Jonah should not have been surprised: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD."* They pepper him with questions: Who are you? Who are your people? What is your occupation?

Jonah answers: *"I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land" (Jonah 1:9).* Jonah gave a perfect biblical answer but in actuality he didn't fear the Lord or he wouldn't be in this boat. Do you see the irony in this? *Jonah refused to proclaim God's word to pagans so God arranges things so that Jonah has to proclaim God's word to pagans.* You cannot escape God's sovereign actions! Nor can you thwart his purposes. Do you remember what Borg in Star Trek says: "Resistance is Futile!" So they throw Jonah in the sea and look at the result: the sea and waves cease.

There is a third thing we see in this story: **God's Saving Purposes. When He sovereignly acts; he acts to save.** Notice God wanted Jonah to be a missionary and to take the word to pagans. He wouldn't comply so look what God did. In verse 5 it says, *"Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god."* They're pagans but they are beginning to move towards deities. Then in verse 7, the captain tells Jonah to call out to his God (their gods are not working so they want Jonah to call out to his God). And notice when they asked Jonah what they should do Jonah tells them to throw him in the sea and they refuse.

Instead, they call out to Jonah's God ("Therefore they called out to the LORD, 'O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you'). Then what do we read? *"So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the LORD exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows" (Jonah 1:17).* Jonah doesn't fear the Lord but these pagans fear greatly. These pagan sailors are now all converted and believe in the God of Israel. Jonah, you *will* be my missionary to bring my word to a pagan world. This chapter which began with God commissioning his prophet to bring his word to a pagan nation, ends with God bringing his word to pagan sailors and these pagans being saved.

There's a closing statement that gives greater clarity to God's saving purposes. It shows that *Jonah himself needs to be saved.* *"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."* The fish for Jonah was a picture of deliverance. When this chapter ends, Jonah still doesn't get it but the pagans get it. The question is, "Do we sitting here get it?" We should because we have not only the book of Jonah, we have someone greater who likened Himself to Jonah. In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus likened himself to Jonah, not in character but in the fact that Jonah had received a death sentence. Inside the belly of the fish that swallowed Jonah he was sentenced to death.

But after three days and nights, Jonah would live again to proclaim his word to the pagan world. So it is that the Lord Jesus entered his grave for three days and nights and emerged alive commissioning his own to take his word to pagans. You know what we see in the story of Jesus' three days and nights in a watery grave only to emerge victorious? ***All three of the emphases found in this first chapter of Jonah: God's compassionate disposition towards sinners, God's sovereign actions, and God's saving purposes.*** The only reason God has redeemed is because of his *compassionate* disposition toward sinners (but God, being rich in mercy, even when we were dead in trespasses and sins made us alive) [Ephs. 2:5]. His *sovereign*

actions caused him to send the second Jonah. It was an action which has its origins in God before the foundation of the world...his *saving* purposes. Why did God save you? It is for his own glory and purpose. Ephesians 1: "to the praise of the glory of his grace."

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The questions below are provided by Ed Rosen for you to use in House Church Group Discussions.

1. Neil opened his sermon with an illustration to help us understand what was going through Jonah's mind when God told him to go to Nineveh.
 - a. What was the illustration?
 - b. How does the illustration help us get into the mind of Jonah?
 - c. Why didn't Jonah want to go to Nineveh?
 - d. With regard to relating to unbelievers, how is it possible for us to have the same attitude as Jonah?
2. Who is the main character in the book of Jonah? Explain.
3. Neil said that there are three things that we learn in this book about God and they are revealed specifically in chapter one. The first thing we learn about God is that **He has a Compassionate Disposition towards Sinners.**
 - a. What is the main thing about God that we see in this book?
 - b. Do you think it is possible to know God but not like Him? Explain.
 - c. Are we disobedient to God's mission because we don't understand it or because we don't like it?
 - d. Neil said "it is possible to have good orthodoxy (right views of God) and yet be at variance with God Himself!" How can this be?
4. The second important thing that this book teaches us about God is that **We Cannot Escape God's Sovereign Actions.**
 - a. What are some examples of God's sovereignty in chapter one?
 - b. What is your understanding of God's sovereignty?
 - c. Do you embrace this doctrine or is it something that you have difficulty with? Explain.
 - d. In what way(s) has the doctrine of the sovereignty of God been a source of great comfort in your life?
5. The third thing we learn about God is **God's Saving Purposes. When He sovereignly Acts, He Acts to Save.** What is the main reason that God Acts To Save?
6. Neil said that we should read this book as a personal biography. How so?
7. Have you been reading the book of Jonah in preparation for Neil's current series on the book?