

A Different Kind of Life
Running from God
Jonah 1:1-3

My cousin's daughter, Katie was a wife and mother of three children, 12, 7 & 5, fought an inoperable brain tumor for 27 months years and lost that battle last week. In 2017, Hurricane Harvey confined her and her family to the upper floors of a hotel, only blocks from the help she sought at MD Anderson Hospital in Houston. Her loss compounds the heartbreak of my aunt, her grandmother, who has already lost two husbands to death. It grieves her parents and her only sister. For the rest of their lives, her husband, children, parents, sister and other family members will lead a different kind of life than they had hoped when Katie was born 37 years ago.

Either through day-by-day, small occurrences or in a large, monumental and singular event, we often find ourselves living a different kind of life than we imagined. Even if we haven't had a plan for life, God regularly interrupts, redirects and rearranges our lives according to his grand design. And we, like Jonah, find ourselves perplexed with God's sovereignty and providence.

But, of course, what mattered most of all was my deep-seated hatred of authority, my monstrous individualism, my lawlessness. No word in my vocabulary expressed deeper hatred than the word INTERFERENCE. But Christianity placed at the centre what then seemed to me a transcendental Interferer. If its picture were true then no sort of 'treaty with reality' could ever be possible. There was no region even in the innermost depth of one's soul (nay, there least of all) which one could surround with a barbed wire fence and guard with a notice No Admittance. And that was what I wanted; some area, however small, of which I could say to all other beings, 'This is my business and mine only.'

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C.S. Lewis in *Surprised by Joy*

Even after our salvation, God's interference is a major impediment to life as we want it. This is how it happened in Jonah's life.

First: God's Word. 1:1-2

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."

The first words or sentence and the opening scene of any story is crucial and this one opens like the author is announcing the fighters in a boxing match.

"In this corner, Jonah, a well-known servant and much respected prophet of Israel. In this corner, Nineveh, I'll say, 'e,' you say 'vil.' Let's say it together: EVIL. And now, let's get ready to RUMBLE!!!!!!!!!"

It's a David and Goliath story. It's an Israel versus the world scenario. Nothing to a Hebrew could be of greater consequence or more certain outcome.

Israel = good guys.
Nineveh = bad guys.

Israel 1.
Nineveh 0.

But you and I both know that's not the way it happened.

And yet, even before the contenders are announced, the story of Jonah begins with a word from God. This is appropriate because he is a prophet and his primary job is to relay God's word to God's people.

The phrase "the word of the Lord" is used over 100 times in the OT in connection with God's prophets.

"...it was a sword in their spirits, a burden on their shoulders, a hammer breaking their rocky hearts, a fire raging within them. It was bitter to taste. It came. It could not be halted, and it forced itself on them unbidden. It gripped their minds and touched their consciences. It impelled their emotions. They could not escape the certain assurance that the voice of God was sounding in their hearts and must now sound to others through their lips."

- Sinclair Ferguson

Did Jonah not receive the message? Did he not understand it?

Matthew 13:19 – *When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.*

Understanding was not Jonah's problem. The word of the Lord came to Jonah with

- Clarity – *Arise, go to Nineveh*
- Reality – *That great city*
- Responsibility – *Call out against it*

Jonah's problem was not that he didn't understand God's word but that he did understand it.

God has one thing and one thing only for Jonah to do: Get up and go! Instead, Jonah got up and went.

What is amazing for both Jonah, Israel and the original audience reading this account, is that the word is not for Israel but Israel's worst enemy, Assyria.

- a) A word from God through a Hebrew prophet, for a Gentile nation, is unique at this point in the Old Testament.

Jeremiah, Isaiah and Amos had all prophesied about pagan nations, but this is the first time a Hebrew prophet has been commissioned by God to leave Israel for the benefit of a pagan nation.

- b) It was even more shocking that the message was a warning of impending doom.

Assyria was the cruelest nation of Jonah's day.

They had begun exacting tribute from Israel in the last century.

There was no reason to warn Assyria of God's judgement unless the possibility of mercy was also part of the message

Why, Jonah and his audience want to know, is God helping Israel's enemies?

Nothing about what God is saying or what God is asking Jonah to do makes any sense to the prophet or Israel.

Jonah's problem is not one of intellect but of the heart. God's will and his will collided. Jonah has his own day-planner, his own dreams and desires. Nineveh is not in his vacation brochure.

Oh no! At his core, Jonah is a Ninevite. His disobedience versus that of Nineveh, is just a matter of degree. In fact, as an Israelite and a prophet, Jonah's disobedience is worse than that of his pagan enemies. We know this because of....

Second: Jonah's Response v 3

But 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.

Verse 3 is Jonah's declaration of independence.

One day, Jonah is famous in Israel and happy about it. The next, he anticipates infamy in Nineveh, and he is unhappy about it.

Joppa is modern day Jaffa. It's where we spend our first night in Israel when visiting there.

SHOW MAP

God called Jonah to go northeast to what is now northern Iraq. He travelled first south and then west, intending to go to what the Israelites considered the city on the edge of the world.

a) The practical level

Jonah must have thought he misheard God and if not, it made no sense to obey God.

ILL - What if God had called a Jewish rabbi to stand on the streets of Berlin during World War II and called Germany to repentance? The chances of success would have been slim, and the chances of death would have been high.

b) The theological level

Wasn't Israel God's *segullah*? *treasure*.

Wasn't Assyria *shedim*? = *no gods*

Weren't Israel and Assyria on a fatal collision course? Years earlier, Nahum prophesied that Assyria would destroy Israel.

The book of Nahum is a collection of poems announcing the downfall of Assyria, one of Israel's worst oppressors. Referencing Daniel, Exodus, Isaiah and Babylon, Nahum shows us that the destruction of Nineveh and Assyria are examples of how God works in history in every age.

Nahum 2:8-13 - *Nineveh is like a pool whose waters run away. "Halt! Halt!" they cry, but none turns back. ⁹ Plunder the silver, plunder the gold! There is no end of the treasure or of the wealth of all precious things. ¹⁰ Desolate! Desolation and ruin! Hearts melt and knees tremble; anguish is in all loins; all faces grow pale! ¹¹ Where is the lions' den, the feeding place of the young lions, where the lion and lioness went, where his cubs were, with none to disturb? ¹² The lion tore enough for his cubs and strangled prey for his lionesses; he filled his caves with prey and his dens with torn flesh. ¹³ Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts, and I will burn your chariots in smoke, and the sword shall devour your young lions. I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the voice of your messengers shall no longer be heard.*

Of course, God would destroy Assyria. That was only practical and theological. Wouldn't Jonah's mission to Assyria undo Nahum's prophecy and place God's promises to Israel in jeopardy?

Perhaps equally to the point, wouldn't it also sacrifice Jonah's¹ hard-earned reputation in Israel?

What Jonah wanted most was the life he designed for himself. After all, why else did we become Christians except for God to give us our happiest, most fulfilled life now?

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

- C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*

When our desired life is different from God’s designed life, we are disappointed with God.

Third: Our Mistrust

The ‘why’ of Jonah’s rebellion is not found in these verses but he does explain it in 4:2 - *That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.*

Jonah’s biggest problem isn’t with the Assyrians or the mission, it’s with God.

And it isn’t God’s anger or wrath that most disturbs the prophet, it’s God’s grace and mercy, love and forgiveness. This, of course, highlights the irrationality of his thinking.

Jonah assumed, like many of us, that if we can’t see a good reason for something, or one that we approve of, it shouldn’t be.

Genesis 2:16b-17 - *“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”*

Genesis 3:6 - *So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.*

Why not? The prohibition doesn’t make sense. But don’t make Jonah the sole anti-hero of this story. You and I have both felt this way –

We wonder

- *Marriage is good. Why did it end?
- *Life is sacred. Why is it over too soon?
- *Friendships are divine. Why were we betrayed?
- *Home is the center of God’s plan. Why don’t we have one?

My life is different because _____. What's in your blank?

The default position of the unaided human heart is unbelief.

But.....our biggest problem isn't with the different kind of life we are living. It is with God.

In this story, Jonah represents all rebellious, disobedient and running Israel. Jonah demonstrates how Israel had failed as God's national servant, as God's corporate prophet to the nations. This is because what God is doing is bigger than Jonah or Israel or you and me.

And he, the Hebrew believer, reflects all that is wrong, sinful and horrid about Nineveh.

What makes you distrust God? What makes you run from God? What makes you angry with God?

"But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD" is better translated, "from the face of the Lord."

But we are called to live *Coram Deo* because we are always before God's face. (The father wasn't surprised or dismayed by the elder prodigal's accusation against his younger brother because he was already fully aware of the younger sibling's sin).

Psalm 139:7-12 - *Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? ⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! ⁹ If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, ¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. ¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," ¹² even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.*

What is the bottom line for us? It's that we think we know best and if God would just get in line, life would be better.

And yet, *"we are his workmanship..." (Eph 2:10)* and that sometimes irks us, especially when it interferes with something important to us.

*The one principle of hell is — "I am my own."
— George MacDonald*

Conclusion:

1 - Until Jonah sees himself as God sees him; as sinful as a Ninevite and equally in need of mercy, he will never understand the life God has divinely designed for him.

Romans 12:3 - *For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment*

Jonah's name = Dove, the symbol of peace. After an excruciating search and review of too many names to remember, his father and mother gave him that name in the hope it would be the vibe of his life. They didn't name him 'sinner' or 'rebel' or 'storm chaser' or 'whale food.' Yet, Jonah lacks peace at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the book.

It won't be until we see ourselves in Jonah, as Jonah came to see himself in the Ninevites, that we will have the peace God intends for us to have in this all-too-different life we are living.

“Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began. Consider all this; and then turn to the green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!”

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

2 – Until we remember that God is the hero of our life story, we will never be at peace with anything. Could we rename the book, “God?” The title of the book focuses our attention on Jonah when we need to remember that all of life is God's story. “Salvation is of God” (2:10) and we are in daily need of rescuing from a call we refuse to obey or a big fish that makes us too uncomfortable or a plant that makes us too comfortable.

Contrary to what we sometimes think,

Life is God's rescue.

3 - It is, in fact, God's interference in Jonah's life that gives his life the significance worth discussing today. Except for his call to Nineveh, Jonan merits one verse in 2 Kings 14 that you would never read with any sense of importance and perhaps never read, unless you are reading the Bible through in a year.

Community Groups:

1. What do we know about Jonah?
2. What do we know about Assyria?
3. How do the first three verses tell us everything we need to know about this book?
4. What do we know about Jonah's rationale for disobedience?

5. What is the bottom line for Jonah? (He knows what is best for his life, Israel and the Ninevites).
6. Note some places in Scripture where God 'interfered' with someone's life.
7. What gives God the right to interfere in our lives?
8. What other word, from God's perspective, might he use, other than 'interference,' for his will in the world and in our lives?
9. Why is it hard to distinguish between 'good' people and 'bad' people?
10. How is God's mercy to Nineveh consistent with God's plan?
11. In your own words, rephrase the Lewis quote about God building a house and discuss.
12. What do you put in the blank that has made your life different?
13. Has time given you another perspective on that blank?
14. What makes you distrust God?
15. What did George MacDonald mean?
16. How is life, all of life, God's rescue plan from the fall?

Jonah runs!



