

## Jonah: “Like Me” / 2 Running from God / February 9, 2020

**Key Texts:** Jonah 1.1-3; Genesis 2.16-17; 3.4-7

**Key Words:** Running, Nineveh, Assyrians, Terrorists, Repent, Change mind, Sin, Assassinate, Trust

**Summary:** Although we come up with so many excuses, at heart sin is a refusal to trust God. So, sin starts with an assassination ... of God’s character. So, will you trust him?

So, have you ever run away? I don’t remember ever running away from home when I was a kid, but I do remember my daughter, Alatheia, running away. She was – I don’t know – 4 or 5 maybe. She got mad at something, didn’t get her way about something, so she packed some stuff in her wagon and headed up the road. She tells me now that she was heading to Hildi’s house, because Hildi’s house had a basement full of toys. Anyway, Julie and I weren’t very good parents, so we let her go. Well, actually we were spying on her as she headed up the hill. She got to the top, stopped, looked around ... I guess she figured she’d punished us enough, and then turned around and headed back home. Alatheia was really, really good at getting mad, but she wasn’t very good at running away ... thank God.

So, have you ever run away? Maybe not from home, maybe from some relationship that was hard, or from some responsibility that seemed overwhelming, or from some chore, or some job that seemed too hard, or too tedious, or too mundane (at the time). I know you have. We’re all pretty good at it. And all of us – all of us – are quite skilled at running away from God.

So, can you think of why you run away from God? ... Well, here are a couple of the reasons we give. Sometimes we run away from God because we don’t like what he wants us to do, we just don’t agree with him.

- “Don’t have sex before marriage,” he says, “don’t have sex outside of marriage.” Well, how archaic and prudish is that? Wouldn’t a good God want you to follow your heart? Wouldn’t a good God want you to be happy?
- Or, “Don’t lie, don’t cheat, don’t steal,” he says. Oh, come on! Even a little white lie that doesn’t hurt anyone? A little “spin” is necessary sometimes, isn’t it?
- Or, “Go to church, love your neighbor, respect those in authority over you.” Well, church sometimes just seems like the same old, doesn’t it? And God never met my neighbors! And those in authority over me haven’t earned my respect!

So, have you ever run away from God! I know you have. Sometimes we run away from God because he ... he disappoints us, he fails us, he confuses us ... right?

- You have a miscarriage, and you are furious with God: “Come on God! I thought you were supposed to be there for me!” And then you push him away (which is a way of running from God).
- Or the doctor gives you the test results, and you’re like: “Why God?! What did I do to deserve this?” And you push him away.

- Or you're called into the boss's office, you get that rejection letter, you get that phone call in the middle of the night, and you're thinking: "You're doing it wrong, God!" And you freeze him out.

Now, we're going to talk about running away from God this morning ... something we are all quite experienced at, and ... something always, inevitably ... stupid. And we're going to look at it by digging into the story of Jonah. Here's how the story of Jonah opens. It says, "The Lord gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are.' But (but ...) Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to (run) get away from the Lord. He went down to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to (run away) escape from the Lord by sailing to Tarshish." (Jonah 1.1-3)

So, this message from God somehow comes to this **Jonah, the son of Amittai**. Now his name means nothing to us, but probably meant a lot to them. Apparently most Israelites back then knew about this Jonah, the son of Amittai. And if we had time, I'd take you over to 1 Kings, where we would discover that this Jonah was pretty high up, a trusted adviser to the king: King Jeroboam II, who was ... "making Israel great again." So, Jonah was one of those guys bent on making Israel great again ... you know, running around wearing one of those "Make Israel Great Again" hats. He seems to have been a patriotic, partisan nationalist.

And God says to this Jonah, I want you to "I want you to get up, and I want you to go to the great city of Nineveh, and ... and I want you to preach ... there." In other words, "Get up, Jonah, and go preach to the people you fear most, to the people you hate most. Tell them about God!" ... Say what?! Now, that's over the top, right? That's insane, right?! I'll show you why in a minute. What God was telling him to do was mind blowing, at several levels.

#1: God is telling a Jewish prophet to go preach in a Gentile city. Now other Jewish prophets preached about the Gentiles, but they always did it in Israel. God tells Jonah, "Don't preach about them here, you go preach to them there."

#2: But it's worse than that. What God says is, "Go announce my judgement against them, because I've had enough of their evil!" But what Jonah knew, what Jonah feared, was this: by sending Jonah to preach to them, God was giving them a chance to straighten up! What if they actually listened to his preaching, and what if God's warning scared the bejeezers out of them, and what if they cleaned up their act? Jonah knew, Jonah feared that if they "repented" maybe God would change his mind and not kill them! Because we love grace when God gives it to people who we think deserve it. But grace offends us, sometimes, when God gives it to people we hate. So, Jonah didn't want God to change his mind and forgive the Ninevites. Jonah wanted them dead!

Because, #3: these Ninevites, these Assyrians were flat out evil! Think terrorists on steroids! Think ISIS, or Al-Qaeda – not hiding in the shadows, but as a superpower, no army strong enough to stop them. If you were here last week, you might remember that I showed you some pretty gruesome pictures. I got them from this article from the Biblical Archaeology Review: "Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death." It's about Nineveh, and the

Assyrians who lived there. She opens with these two lines: “Assyrian national history, as it has been preserved for us in inscriptions and pictures, consists almost solely of military campaigns and battles. It is as gory and bloodcurdling a history as we know.”

Their kings would brag about their cruelty in their annals.

- One said, “I flayed (I skinned) as many nobles as had rebelled against me [and] draped their skins over the pile [of corpses]; some I spread out within the pile, some I erected on stakes upon the pile ... I (skinned) flayed many right through my land [and] draped their skins over the walls.”
- He says, “I carried off captives [and] possessions from them. I cut off the heads of their fighters [and] built [therewith] a tower before their city. I burnt their adolescent boys [and] girls.”
- He says, “I captured many troops alive: I cut off of some their arms [and] hands; I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities. I gouged out the eyes of many troops. I made one pile of the living [and] one of heads. I hung their heads on trees around the city.”

They bragged about that stuff in their annals; they carved pictures of it on their stone panels.

- Sometimes they would cut off their captives’ legs, and one arm, leaving the other arm intact so they could shake their hand in mockery as they were dying.
- Sometimes they would force their victim’s friends and families to parade around carrying the decapitated head of their loved one on a pole.

And God says to Jonah, “I want you to go preach to these guys. I don’t want you to preach at them from Israel, I want you to go to their home. I want you to go there, and preach there, and pronounce my judgement on them there. I want you to give them a chance ... to repent.” “I know, they probably won’t listen; and I know, they probably will kill you; and I know, they deserve hell, and I know that the last thing you want is for them to ... taste grace. But get it done!”

But ... instead of getting up and going to Nineveh, Jonah got up and went the other way ... he ran away, from God, from what God wanted. Let me show you a map. Here’s Israel. That little yellow dot in the middle is Jerusalem. Up north there, to the east is Nineveh, in what is now Iraq. Best we can tell Tarshish is over 2000 miles the other way, in what is now Spain -- the other side of their world. Back then that was about as serious as running away physically could get.

By the way, here’s a little sidebar. Did you know that whenever you want to run away from God, you’ll always find a boat ready to help you ... run away from God? There will always be some thing, there will always be some person who will help you run away from God. We live in a world that is at war with God, still profoundly influenced by a spiritual enemy who is at war with God. So, you will always find people encouraging you, helping you to run away from God.

Anyway, why does Jonah run? ... Or maybe we should start here: why do you run ... from God? ... I can think of quite a few reasons we run from God.

- Sometimes it's just plain old pride. "You're not the boss of me, God!" "You can't tell me what to do!" "It's my life! I'll do it my way!" Any of that in you?
- Or, sometimes we just disagree with God, we think God is wrong. "Maybe your way worked back then, God, thousands of years ago; but we're smarter now, right? More sophisticated now. More scientific. More enlightened, open-minded, tolerant, progressive." So, we just ... disagree with God ... old prude! Any of that in you? I'll bet there is.
- Or, sometimes we run from God because we've been hurt by God, or he has failed us ... we think. He didn't answer our prayer, he didn't fix that, he didn't prevent that, he didn't help me ... when he should have. So, we push him away, which is another way of saying, we run away. Ever been there, felt that? I'll bet many of you have.
- Or, sometimes it's shame that causes us to run from God. I've seen it many times. Someone says, "If you knew how big I have sinned, if you knew how often I have sinned the same sin, if you knew how often I have failed God, you would understand why I don't go to church any more, why I can't pray anymore." And God gets more and more distant. By the way, God never moves. Ever been there, felt that? I know some of you have. We've talked about it.
- Or, sometimes we just get tired of following God, of being good, of living a God-honoring life, so we quit ... which is another way of running away, isn't it? "I have tried being faithful to my husband, but it's too hard." "I have tried loving on a difficult friend, but how many times do I have to forgive them? Really?!" "I'm tired of trying to be good." "I have tried to keep coming to church, even though the church keeps disappointing me; even though Christians keep failing me. I'm just tired of trying." Ever been there, felt that? Never at Capital City, right!

Well, Jonah had a boatload of reasons for running away from God.

- #1: He was scared! Because, sometimes doing life with God, for God, God's way is scary. And this was scary on steroids! What would you do if you believed God called you to go to Afghanistan, to find ISIS, wherever they are hiding, and preach Jesus to them – to their faces? Would you push back on God? You're seen what they do to Americans ... and Jesus followers! Think, how long do you think a Jewish rabbi would have lasted on the streets of Berlin in 1941 calling on Hitler to repent?
- And #2: even if Jonah risks his neck and obeys God, it would never work, would it? A hick preacher from Israel going to the greatest city in all the world to tell them they're doing it all wrong. His prospects for success were about 0%. His prospects for ending up with his skin on some wall or his head on some pole, just short of 100%.
- Besides, #3: God was wrong ... Jonah thought. God was wrong! Nineveh was Israel's enemy. They deserved God's wrath, not his grace! The Assyrians were flat out evil – on steroids. They deserved hell, not some second chance. What do you do when you don't understand God, or when you don't agree with him? Do you run?

Well ... we are like Jonah, aren't we? We can come up with a boatload of excuses for running away from God.

- Choosing God's way is scary, sometimes. Going where he wants us to go, doing what he wants us to do is scary, sometimes.

- And sometimes doing life God's way makes no sense. We don't understand why he asks of us what he asks (as if he is asking!). We don't agree with God sometimes. "Maybe it's right for him, God, but that doesn't make it right for me!"
- Or maybe we've tried it God's way before, and it just wasn't working for us. It wasn't making us happy!
- Or maybe we're just get tired of trying to do what some preacher calls "the right thing." It's flat out hard to keep swimming upstream, when everything and everyone is trying to drag you the other way, right?

But ... but ... bottom line ... bottom line ... Actually, we run from God because we don't trust him. Did you hear that? Do you buy that? We run from God because we don't trust him. Randy and I are going to be pulling some of the big ideas for this Jonah series from a great little book by Tim Keller called "The Prodigal Prophet." We've got some copies in our Connections Room if you want to pick one up and follow along. If they run out, we'll order some more. Anyway, Tim Keller says that Jonah was mistrusting God in two ways.

- #1: He didn't trust God because he couldn't see any good reasons for God's orders. And since he couldn't see the reasons, he figured there couldn't be any. "If I can't see the reason for what God is asking me to do, there must not be one," right? Since ... we figure we're as big as God, and as smart as God ... right?
- And #2: Jonah mistrusted God by doubting God's goodness, his wisdom, and his justice. To Jonah, God's just not doing God right! He's thinking, "I don't deserve the danger God is sending me into, and they don't deserve the grace God wants me to offer them." God is wrong. God doesn't have my back ... like he should. He doesn't want my best. And he's not giving them what they deserve. So, I can't trust God. I can't trust his goodness, I can't trust his wisdom, I can't trust his justice. So, I'm going to do it my way.

Hmmm! Did you know that every time we sin – every time we sin – and every time we run away from God, we are telling God: "I don't trust you!" "I don't think you are smart enough, or good enough, or right enough to do it your way."

We've all been there:

- "God wants me to give that up?! You're telling me that God doesn't want me happy?"
- "God wants me to go where and do what? Is God stupid or something?"
- Or, "After God sits there blowing off my prayers, after he let that happen to my kid, after he let me crash and burn, you want me play like he's all that and a bag of chips?"
- It's like, "God is either not smart enough to follow, or he's not good enough to have my best at heart, or he's not strong enough to protect me and mine, or he's not righteous enough to make things right ..." ... .. right?
- "If there is a God, what is he thinking?!" ... ..

Did you know that sin begins with a character assassination of God? All sin is at root a refusal to trust God. So, all sin begins with a character assassination of God. And sin is our ... default. It takes a decision, a choice, it take's choosing trust to do other than sin. Does God know what's best for me, or do I know what's best for me? Well, it's my life, right? Our default it is trust me, not him. And to justify that we have to assassinate his character: God is not good enough, or smart enough, or strong enough to follow him ... sometimes ... we

reason. His goal for me is not always my best ... we reason. I don't see the reason he wants me to do this, or that. And if I don't see the reason, there must not be one ... right? Such ... foolishness!

Guys, it's always been that way. It's been that way since the Garden of Eden. God says, "Eat from any of the trees – any of them – except one. If you eat from that tree, you'll die." (Genesis 2.16-17) And Satan says, "Really! Come on, guys, God's holding out on you! He doesn't want your best! You're not going to die, in fact, eating it will make your life way better." (Genesis 3.4-5) And they look at the tree, and the fruit looked so good, and, and it promised to make their lives so much better. (Genesis 3.6-7) So they assassinate the character of God. "God must be holding out on us!" "God doesn't want us to be happy." "God's just blowing air. We're not going to die!" In other words, "God is not good enough, he's not smart enough, he's not strong enough to tell us what to do!"

Now listen, this is huge: Adam and Eve weren't like, "Let's ruin our lives!" They weren't like, "Let's be bad, and mess up our lives, and the lives of everyone else for all time." No! Almost never ... not absolutely never, but almost never do we lie, twist the truth, cheat, manipulate someone, exploit someone, break a promise, refuse to forgive, or blow God off because we just choose to be evil. We always convince ourselves that we're smarter than God, that God can't be trusted. He's not good enough, smart enough, or strong enough to tell me what to do. At its root, sin is our refusal to trust in God. So, sin ... all sin ... begins with assassinating the character of God. Do you buy that?

We pull him down, and then lift ourselves up. We start trusting God too little, and we start trusting ourselves way too much ... stupidly. How long does it take to learn that lesson?

- My grandson Steven is almost 13. Sometimes he tries to wrangle Kaden and Aubrey – they're 3. They think they know what's best, and Steven's job is to protect them when they're stupid ... which is ... a lot.
- Someday Steven will be 20, he'll be on his own. And he'll look back on how stupid he was when he was 13. We're all like that. We all have it pretty much figured out at 20, right?
- And some of you parents are looking at your 20 somethings, who think they know so much. And you're like, "I wasn't too smart when I was 20 either." But now we know better, right? But now we really do know how things work!
- And some of you guys are pretty old, like me. And you're like, "I wish I knew at 40 what I know now at 65. I was stupid a lot," right? But now we've got it figured out, right? If our kids and our grandkids would only listen to us, if our kids and grandkids would only do things our way ...
- And so often we still don't get it. I don't care how old you are, how smart you are, God is older, God is smarter, God is better. You'll never get to the time here on earth where you see everything he sees, and know everything he knows. You will never get to the time here on earth where your way will be better than God's way. And you'll never be good enough, here on earth, where you can say, "You need to listen to me ... not him."

Bottom line, guys, here it is: We run from God because we trust ourselves more than we trust God ... which is ... stupid. So, will you trust him? We run from God whenever we know

what he wants, and then choose what we want instead. Whether it's out of pride, or because we're scared, or because he's hurt our feelings, or because of our shame, or because we're tired of missing out, bottom line: we don't trust him. So, we assassinate his character, we impugn his character, and we run away. And running away never – it never, ever – works out the way we hope it will. We'll be giving that a lot more attention next week.

So, again, I ask you the question: Do you trust him? Or maybe it's better to ask the question like this: Will you trust him? And most of us in this room would answer immediately, "Yeah, of course I do." And I think most of us think we do, trust him. But here's the deal: most of us trust him with our eternity, but we don't always trust him with our present. Which we prove every time we sin.

- We don't always trust God with our cancer. Sometimes we don't understand the why (as if somehow it's God's fault), and we are so afraid of pain and so afraid of dying, that's it's hard to trust him.
- And we don't always trust Him with our finances. We don't always trust him enough to break the back of our greed. We don't trust him enough to respond when he nudges us to be faithful, or to be generous.
- And we don't always trust him with our love life. Whether it's staying faithful to your wife when your heart is pulling you to another; or whether it reserving sex for the marriage bed; or whether it's choosing a Jesus following partner, we don't trust that his way is best for us, and for all those we're trying to drag to heaven.
- And we don't always trust his truth – God's truth -- so we back down when someone challenges it.
- And we don't trust his grace ... on us. And we don't trust his grace ... on those we despise.

So, will you trust Him ... not just today, here in this room. Will you trust him with your Monday? How about with your Tuesday? Will you trust Him with your kids? Is making that team, or that squad, or earning that scholarship more important than cultivating their faith? Do you trust Him with your career? Enough that you will be a God-honoring person of integrity on the job, whatever the cost? Do you trust him with your retirement? Enough that you refuse to make your either money or comfort your pseudo-gods? Do you trust him with your soul?

Here's the deal guys ... Here's a truth. You can't really love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength if you don't trust him. So, will you try to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength? Won't that make your life so much richer, so much better ... for now, and for forever?

Invitation ...