

## “The Wrong Turn: Running from the Call of God” – Jonah 1:1-3

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, [www.sobc.net](http://www.sobc.net).]*

Welcome. Turn with me to the book of Jonah. Are you ready to start a wild ride through the book of Jonah? Ready to *dive* in?

What comes to mind when you think of Jonah? Probably a big fish. There are few biblical characters that have experienced more secular fame than the prophet Jonah. His story of being swallowed by a fish and taken on a three-day, all expense paid, Mediterranean cruise is known all of the world. People know the story and *yet they really don't*. It has been described as “probably the best known and least understood book in the Bible.”<sup>i</sup> Another writer noted that it’s “simple enough to delight a child and complex enough to confound a scholar.”<sup>ii</sup> The text in its original Hebrew is very artistic and clever, yet subtle and terse. It is no wonder the book is considered a literary classic on so many levels.<sup>iii</sup>

We have to resist then the urge to reduce this story to its most famous scene. It’s not ultimately about a stubborn man being gulped down by the Lord’s pet fish. It’s a story that reveals to us the heart of God and drags our own heart into the light in the process. What we discover about both may make us uncomfortable at first, but we cannot afford to overlook the truth. We must come to grips with the scandal of God’s grace and the condition of our own heart. This is where Jonah can help us. But to do so, we may need to approach the book with a fresh set of eyes, putting aside our preconceived notions, reading the story as though it was for the very first time, sitting under the text with a humble and teachable attitude. If we can do this, then we just may come to love this book for an altogether different set of reasons.<sup>iv</sup>

I love the book because of the way it communicates to us the Gospel. It does so by putting before our eyes one of the most precious things about the Gospel, the thing that makes it “good news,” and that is *the grace of God*. But it also does it by showing us just how scandalous God’s grace is. It’s something that we both love and find offensive, sometimes at the same time. But as God intervenes in our lives again and again with His grace, we can become more and more transformed and less and less offended. The offense of the Gospel begins to evaporate in proportion to us realizing the extent to which God relentlessly pursued (and pursues) rebels like us. It points us, therefore, to the work of Christ where the extent of that pursuit is put on display, nailed to a bloody cross.<sup>v</sup>

Billy Graham has a grandson named Tullian Tchividjian (pronounced, “T-UH-llian Cha-vi-jin”). In one of his books he describes how his encounter with the book of Jonah changed his life. Here is an excerpt of what he wrote:

“...for me, it was through probing this story of Jonah that I came face-to-face with one of the most life-changing truths in my experience. I came to grips with the fact that *the gospel is not just for non-Christians but also for Christians*. I once assumed the gospel was simply what non-Christians must believe in order to be saved, but after they believe it, they advance to deeper theological waters. Jonah helped me realize that the gospel isn’t the first step in a stairway of truths but more like the hub in a wheel of truth. As Tim Keller explains it, the gospel isn’t simple the ABCs of Christianity, but the A-through-Z. The gospel doesn’t just ignite the Christian life; it’s the fuel that

keeps Christians going every day. Once God rescues sinners, his plan isn't to steer them beyond the gospel but to move them more deeply into it. After all, the only antidote to sin *is* the gospel...Since we never leave off sinning, we can never leave the gospel...heralded preachers need the gospel just as much as hardened pagans.”<sup>vi</sup>

Later, he adds, “real spiritual growth happens only as we continually rediscover the gospel.”<sup>vii</sup> That is so true. And I'm praying that the book of Jonah might produce a similar epiphany in some of you church folk as you rediscover the gospel and your passion for it.

So let's get after it. We won't get very far in the text over the next couple of weeks because we are introducing the character and background. But we don't need to get very far to enjoy some good spiritual food. Listen now as I read the beginning of the book of Jonah.

*Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.” <sup>3</sup> 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. (Jonah 1:1-3)*

This is God's Word...

Today I want us to get a feel for the background of the story that is implied here and I want us to get a sense for why we need this book as Christians. So I'm not going to give us a bunch of application today. I'm going to try and show us how this text shines the light on some tension in our hearts. So today is more of an exercise in exposure than it is in resolution. You're welcome. But it will set us up for resolution in the weeks ahead. Today is merely introduction.

What we just read is the beginning of the first scene of this book. The structure of the book is very organized and divides nicely into two halves. Here is a quick visual summary:

<i><b>First Half: Jonah 1-2</b></i>			<i><b>Second Half: Jonah 3-4</b></i>			
<b>Scene 1</b> <b>(1:1-3)</b> The Lord with Jonah	<b>Scene 2</b> <b>(1:4-16)</b> Jonah with Gentiles	<b>Scene 3</b> <b>(2:1-11)</b> The Lord with Jonah		<b>Scene 4</b> <b>(3:1-3)</b> The Lord with Jonah	<b>Scene 5</b> <b>(3:4-10)</b> Jonah with Gentiles	<b>Scene 6</b> <b>(4:1-11)</b> The Lord with Jonah

Obviously we are in Scene 1. Scene 4 is clearly parallel to this scene, but we will cover that on another week. The organization of chapter one is also pretty simple. I would summarize it like this for you outline people:

- I. The Commission (1:1-2)
- II. The Objection (1:3)
- III. The (First) Intervention (1:4ff)

The book begins with a common Old Testament expression, “The word of the LORD came to [someone]...” Very often that someone is a prophet as is the case here. What is unusual, however, is for a book to begin with these words. No other book begins this way.<sup>ix</sup> So right out of the gate the readers are

met with something that seems both familiar and foreign at the same time.<sup>x</sup> We are going to see a lot of that in this book. We will come back to that.

That same verse introduces us to the main human character in the story, a man named Jonah. We don't know if Jonah wrote the book. We don't even know for certain when the book was written. These things are debated and those debates are not worth getting into this morning. What we do know about Jonah and his background is pretty scarce, especially from this introduction. All we are told is his name and that he was "the son of Amittai."<sup>xi</sup>

I can tell you that Amittai is derived from the Hebrew word *emet*, which means "truth" or "faithfulness" combined with an abbreviated form of the word "Lord." So the name is roughly equivalent to "The Lord is faithful/true." I can also tell you that "Jonah" means "dove." But how much to make of those details is hard to say. "Doves" are typically associated with peace and compassion, probably on the basis of Genesis 8 where the dove returns to Noah with an olive tree branch. So some have wondered if Jonah, though called to carry a message of judgment, should actually be viewed as God's agent for bringing peace to a foreign people (which was clearly God's intention from Jonah's own perspective as we will see later). In the Old Testament, doves also moan and lament (e.g., Isaiah 38:14; 59:11), which calls to mind Jonah's tantrum in chapter four. Doves were also bird for sacrifice (e.g., Leviticus 5:7, 11) and later in chapter one we will see Jonah as something of a sacrifice to save the sailors. There is even a Psalmist who longed to be a dove ("a jonah") in order to flee from the terrors of death (Psalm 55:4-8). This has led others to speculate that Jonah's flight in chapter one was to flee from the terrors of Nineveh.<sup>xii</sup> All of these are certainly possible associations, but it's hard to know if the author intended them. But this really underscores the beauty of this book. It works on so many levels.

Another example of this is the debate about whether Jonah is a historical account or merely an allegory. Since there is really not much detail given to situate this story on a calendar and not much description of Jonah, it is easy to see why some have wondered if the man Jonah may be representative of the entire nation of Israel. Maybe the tendencies we see in Jonah are a picture of the tendencies we see in Old Testament Israel. Maybe his rebellion against God and his obvious prejudices serve as a mirror for the original audience to see what is inside of them. He is them. He is us.

I actually do think this is true. I think Jonah is a picture of Israel. And, likewise, I think that Nineveh is a picture of the nations (i.e., the Gentiles), not just one nation. But I don't think that empties the story of historical meaning. I don't think that just because Jonah may represent God's people in some sense that we must conclude that there wasn't really a prophet Jonah, or a fish, or journey to Nineveh. No, I believe all of that actually happened in history. And I believe that, first, because Jesus did. Jesus makes reference of the Ninevites in Jonah's day rising up again on judgment day. He also connects his own death, burial, and resurrection with what happened to Jonah. In fact, he even refers to it as the sign of Jonah. I think it is hard to escape the fact that Jesus believed that the events described in this book actually happened. But he also believed the events pointed beyond themselves, ultimately to him. History, then, can work on multiple levels.

Furthermore, I don't see a problem in saying that Jonah stands for Israel in some sense because several of the prophets went through certain things as an object lesson for the people. Some of the events in the lives of Hosea and Ezekiel come to mind. So clearly God has a reputation in the Old Testament for arranging events in history in such a way to teach lessons and present patterns and initiate typologies that point beyond themselves. So the story doesn't have to be *either* about the man Jonah *or* the people of Israel. It can be both.<sup>xiii</sup> And I think it is.<sup>xiv</sup> The "message of Jonah is not merely a rebuke to Jonah the prophet, but

is also a rebuke to the whole nation of Israel whom Jonah represents.”<sup>xv</sup> The story is both meaningful *and* factual. It doesn’t have to be only one.

But there is more to say about the man Jonah. When the text says, “Jonah the son of Amittai,” there is actually more than meets the eye because this is not the only place this man is mentioned in the Old Testament. The prophet also shows up in 2 Kings 14 and the author wants us to make that connection, that’s why he has introduced him in this way. Chances are, you don’t know that passage off the top of your head, so let me read you a portion of it.

*In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel, began to reign in Samaria, and he reigned forty-one years. <sup>24</sup> And he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. He did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin. <sup>25</sup> He restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher. <sup>26</sup> For the LORD saw that the affliction of Israel was very bitter, for there was none left, bond or free, and there was none to help Israel. <sup>27</sup> But the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, so he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash. (2 Kings 14:23-27)*

Okay, so the same description of Jonah is given. Additionally, Jonah is called a prophet. We now know he was from Gath-hepher, which was near Nazareth. And we have the background of Jonah’s ministry in Israel. He served during the reign of Jeroboam II (786-746 B.C.), which would have made him a contemporary of other prophets, like Amos and Hosea. That time period was one marked by peace, prosperity, and growth. We are told that Jonah was famous in Israel because he was the prophet God used to announce that God was giving to Jeroboam the power and freedom to expand the territories of Israel back to the extent that king Solomon had many years before.

So here are two things you need to notice. Number one, Jonah had a sweet gig as a prophet. If you had to be a pick between being the prophet that God calls to preach against the king or the prophet who God calls to proclaim the coming successes of the king, which would you choose? You’d want to be the good guy. That’s an easy job. That’s a job that makes you a hero. That’s a prophetic calling that would give you celebrity status in the entire nation of Israel, particularly when everything you predicted comes to pass. Jonah had it made in the shade (no pun intended).

But here is the other thing you should notice. This is key. God blessed the reign of Jeroboam *in spite of* the king’s wickedness. 2 Kings 14:24, which we read, says that Jeroboam “*did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.*” Did you catch that? God is showing mercy to Israel in a time when Israel was known for great wickedness. He’s showing mercy to the king even though the king is living without regard for the Lord. Hmmm. Hold that thought. We will come back to that.

Clearly, we see now, the background of 2 Kings is important. If the book of Jonah had merely said, “the word of the LORD came to Jonah” [full stop], then we would be left asking, “Jonah who?” But since it says “Jonah the son of Amittai,” the author is flagging which Jonah he has in mind. He wants us to think, “Ohh, that’s the guy from Jeroboam’s day. That’s the guy who predicted the expanding borders in Israel. That Jonah.” The author wants us to have that background in mind as we read the book of Jonah.<sup>xvi</sup>

Now, notice what Jonah is called to do in verse 2. “*Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.*” Simple enough. Go to Nineveh and preach against it.

That's the calling God has for Jonah here. I want us to identify two things about this particular calling that I think are true of many tasks that God might call us to. Here is the first one...

### **God's Call Is Often *Unexpected***

The book itself begins abruptly. No set up. It just goes right into the commissioning scene. This would be unexpected to the readers. But from Jonah's perspective the nature of the calling itself may have been quite unexpected as well. Here's what I mean.

Most of the Old Testament prophets were given messages for Israel and Judah. There were several prophets in the Old Testament, however, who were called to preach to other nations. So, for instance, Obadiah has words for Edom and Nahum has a message for Nineveh (Assyria). But in Jonah's case, he is not just given a message for a foreign place...he's told to go and hand deliver it. He doesn't get to write it out from the comfort of his own home. He has to deliver the message in hostile territory. Going outside of Israel was not part of a prophet's typical job description. This makes his calling unique and unexpected.<sup>xvii</sup>

The same will often be true in our life. God has a plan for each of our lives and each of our lives will contribute to His ultimate plan of glorifying Himself through the redemption and restoration of His creation. Each of our journeys will have much in common. We will be able to relate to one another. There are many things we can expect and anticipate—like joys and hardships. But God is going to call us to some things that will surprise us. There will be times when we feel like we are treading down a path that none of your Christian brothers and sisters has wandered. There will be specific people God has for you to engage. Specific work that He has prepared in advanced for you to do. Many of these things will come as a shock to you. They will interrupt your plans. They will force you to adapt your pursuits and adopt new ones. In short, it will be unexpected and surprising.

What will you do when God calls you to do something you didn't anticipate or doesn't fit nicely into your future planning? What will you do? The truth is, most of us don't do well with surprises. We like to see things coming. And when we don't, it very often brings out the worst in us. But what if we accepted the fact now, which the Bible reiterates again and again, that God's call is often unexpected. We need to settle that in our minds now, in advance of those interruptions in life and in advance of those promptings of the Holy Spirit, that this is how God operates. If we can believe that now, then when the surprises come, it won't surprise us (if that makes sense). We will expect the unexpected (and be okay with it).

Speaking of the unexpected...Jonah's reaction was probably not what the original readers were expecting. There is a certain pattern that we find recurring in the Old Testament in these commissioning scenes and it looks something like this:

Divine Commission  
Objection to Commission (usually based on inadequacy)  
Divine Rebuke/Reassurance  
Ritual/Symbolic Act  
Clarification of Commission<sup>xviii</sup>

Now, the order may vary, but most of the commissioning scenes in the Old Testament have those elements. The classic example would be the call of Moses in Exodus 3-4. There is a divine commission—"Come, I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt" (cf. 3:10). Moses offers his objections—"But God, I ain't speak good none" and "who should I tell them sent me" and so on (3:11-4:13). God rebukes him and reassures Him—this is when God reveals His name "I am who I am" or "Yahweh" (4:14-16).

Then there is a sign given—the staff turns to a snake and his hand turns leprous (4:1-5, 17). And, finally, there is a clarification of the commission—God explains Aaron’s role as a spokesman for the task ahead (4:14-16). I think these same elements can be found in Isaiah’s call as well (cf. Isaiah 6). And those are just a couple of examples.

But when we get to Jonah, it starts out familiar and then there is an interesting twist. Does Jonah object to the commission? Well, yes...but not verbally. It’s a silent objection. Jonah doesn’t talk back. He just disobeys. That was weird. God says, “Arise and go” and the text says in verse 3 that Jonah “rose and fled.” And so begins the major theological argument Jonah is going to be having with God. Which needs to the next point...

### **God’s Call Is Often *Unwelcome***

Jonah wants nothing to do with this. So he runs away from the call of God. More explicitly the text says twice that he is running from the presence of God. How you going to do that Jonah? We will talk more about that next time. For now, let’s deal with the major question this raises: why does Jonah run?

The text doesn’t say, at least not yet. It’s as if the author wants his readers to speculate. In fact, I think that is the narrative strategy. He wants the readers to speculate. Why? Because he wants their prejudices to come up to the surface. He wants them to sympathize with Jonah. I think he’s baiting them along so that the theological point he makes at the end will hit home because they have discovered that they think a lot like Jonah. So he is not ready to tilt his hand just yet and explain Jonah’s rationale.

That said, we live more than a couple of thousands of years after these events and when we hear words like “Nineveh” it doesn’t have the same connotations to us. It doesn’t produce the same emotional reaction that it probably did among much of the original audience. For us then it’s a little harder to speculate, but let’s give it a try any way. We’ll have to cheat a little [spoiler alert!].

The major clue comes in chapter 4:2-3. Look there with me. This is after Nineveh repents and God does not destroy them. Jonah is mad. And he is mad at God.

*And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? 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.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”* (Jonah 4:2-3)

In other words: “I knew this was going to happen God, that’s why I didn’t want to come in the first place.” Translation: He didn’t want to preach against Nineveh, because he didn’t want Nineveh to repent, because he didn’t want Nineveh to be restored. So...why didn’t he want them to be restored? Lot’s of theory have been suggested.

Some have said that it’s because Jonah was a racist. He’s an Israelite and he just doesn’t like Gentiles and doesn’t want them to experience God’s blessings. Yet I don’t find that compelling, because if this was a Gentile-hatred thing why does he go to Joppa, get on a ship with Gentiles, and aim to resettle in Gentile territory, in Tarshish? Clearly, Jonah doesn’t have an aversion for Gentiles. Though he may have one for Assyrians, and by extension, Ninevites (since Nineveh was a major city in Assyria and it’s future capital).

Others argue that Jonah is running because he is afraid of the Ninevites. Maybe he has heard some of the stories that we know from history about the atrocities committed by the Assyrians and he doesn’t

particularly want to go and preach against them face-to-face for fear that they will capture and kill him. Maybe he was afraid. Again, I don't find this too compelling. As we read the story, Jonah doesn't seem to be afraid about dying or anything really, not even God. In fact, on multiple occasions he asks to be killed. I don't think his flight is about fear.

What then? Here's my suggestion. Jonah lives within earshot from the ministry of both Amos and Hosea, two other prophets. Now in Amos' ministry we find the prophet warning the people of Israel that God is going to carry them off into captivity East of Damascus (see Amos 5:27). So God is not just warning about judgment and captivity. He got specific through Amos. They are going into captivity in the East.

Then Hosea rolls around and gets even more specific (see Hosea 11). He says, "We're going into captivity in Assyria." Assyria was a once powerful nation, but by this time they weren't as powerful because of internal turmoil (good ol' politics). But all of the sudden God was warning, through Hosea and Amos, that if Israel did not repent, he was going to judge them by sending them into captivity into the East and the Assyrians would be their escorts there.

Nineveh was a prominent city in Assyria, which would one day become the capital city. Some have even argued that it was already the capital in Jonah's day. I don't think so. But on the basis of Genesis 10:11, it is safe to say that in Jewish history "Nineveh was closely associated with the origins of Assyria as a nation and frequently served to represent Assyria as a whole..."<sup>xix</sup> Nineveh is Assyrian.

So I think, and I'm certainly not alone on this, that Jonah is putting two and two together. "Wait a minute God. You want me to preach to Nineveh. That prominent city in Assyria. To the people that you said were going to carry my people into exile. You could have given me Amos' job. You could have told me to tell the people that they were going into captivity in the East. But no...not eh. You could have given me Hosea's job. I could have warned Israel about Assyria. But no, no. You had to make me the one who actually goes and preaches to Nineveh so that you can save them, because I know that just how you are...you're going to save them. They're going to become stronger. And when they are stronger they are going to kill us or exile us...Man, I'm taking my ball and I'm going to Tarshish."<sup>xx</sup> You get the picture? I think this is most likely what is going on with Jonah.

He doesn't want to see the wicked people of Nineveh experience the grace of God and it is likely because (a) he doesn't think they deserve it and (b) because God has indicated that He's going to use those wicked Assyrians to judge the people of God.

Okay, let's bring this home. Jesus says to us, unambiguously, in word and by example—"love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). How many of you did that this week? How many of you hear that and think, "love your enemies...yeah, that's a great idea. Let's do it!"? None of us. No, we are like Jonah. We have a heart problem. We don't share God's sensitivity toward sin. We don't have God's unshakable commitment to His plan. We don't have His heart for grace.<sup>xxi</sup> We will talk about those things next week. But the point for us today is, don't sit in the pew and shake the finger of your mind at Jonah. You and I are just like him. And here is what I mean: none of us has any issue with receiving God's grace and mercy. But it sure seems like we sometimes have a huge issue with extending it to others.

And please notice, if there was ever a prophet whose ministry should have predisposed him to be obedient to this calling in Jonah 1 it was Jonah. As we saw, he got to announce God's blessings on his own people, the nation of Israel, in a time when they were known for the wickedness and their king is described by Scripture as "doing what was evil in the eyes of the Lord." Do you think they deserved the peace and

prosperity and expanded borders and daily provisions that God showered upon that wicked people of Israel. No way! But Jonah was an Israelite. He knew he didn't deserve it, but he could live with it.

Yet now, when the tables are turned, and God says to Jonah "I want you to go to those wicked Ninevites and preach to them" and Jonah suspects it's because God wants to show them mercy and grace. In other words, when God says I want you to go to them so I can do for them what I have already done for you, he can't stomach it. So Jonah is cool with God showing mercy to wicked people as long as those wicked people are his people, including him. Do you see how tragic and ironic this is?

Jonah should have said, "I don't like it. I don't understand it God. But I trust you. What I know for certain is that you were gracious and compassionate to me and my people and you have even used me to announce those blessings, so who am I to be fault you for doing likewise to others who are just as undeserving as we were. Who am I to withhold grace, when you have showered it on me." But that's not what happened.

You getting uncomfortable yet. You know where this is going don't you? If you are a Christian, you probably already know what I am going to say. But here it is any way. No one on the planet has received more grace and mercy from God, completely undeserved by definition, than us as Christians. We are so loved by God that He was willing to send His only Son to suffer and die in our place on a cross so that we could be forgiven. Jesus laid down His life for you. So that you could have hope. So that you could escape the wrath and judgment of God. We didn't earn that. It was freely given to us by grace, through faith in Christ Jesus alone. We were sinful and undeserving and God looks down on us in Christ and says, "Forgiven. Justified. Guiltless. Loved. My child. Favored. Mine." And we tear up and worship. As we should.

Then one day, the Lord says to us, "As I have loved you love them. As I have shown you grace, grace them. As I have shown you mercy, show them mercy. As I have forgiven you, forgive them. As I loved you when you were an enemy, love them..." And in those moments when God says, "arise and go," could it not be said of us that on occasion, perhaps many occasions, we "arose and fled."

Now, do you see why we need this book? There are Jonah-like tendencies in each of us. We are Jonahs. This is our story in a sense. The same elements, just different circumstances. And what we are going to find is that for this prophet who has trouble being an agent of mercy and grace to the lost world, God again and again intervenes in His life with...you guessed it...grace and mercy. Again and again God shows mercy to Jonah that Jonah might show it to others. That's the solution. That's what prompts and enables Jonah to eventually go to Nineveh.

And this is true for us as Christians. This is the pattern we see in our lives too. Do you know why we struggle sometimes to obey the Lord? Because we have forgotten His grace to us. We have forgotten His mercy. We have lost sight of the Gospel. Or at the very least we have forgotten how scandalous it was from the world's perspective for Him to love us and do what He has done for us in Christ.

Do you feel the tension? Do you feel the tension because you are starting to see yourself in Jonah? I can assure you then, you need this book and you need the same remedy that Jonah did—the Gospel. We don't graduate from the Gospel.

If we are going to be able to do what God has called us to do, even when it is unexpected or unwelcome, we will need to have a keen sense and clear memory of what God has already done for us. That's what this story points us to. That's what's here for us. So buckle up. It's going to be a wild ride. It's not always going

to be comfortable. But I have a feeling God's going to do some amazing things in us along the way. Bring a friend next week...

Let's pray...

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<sup>i</sup> The words of Ray Stedman, from a sermon titled, "Jonah: The Reluctant Ambassador," preached at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, CA, on May 22, 1966.

<sup>ii</sup> Janet Howe Gaines, *Forgiveness in a Wounded World: Jonah's Dilemma* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 8. Also cited by Tullian Tchividjian, *Surprised by Grace: God's Relentless Pursuit of Rebels* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 19. Augustine of Hippo once wrote in a personal letter concerning the difficulty of interpreting Jonah: "What he asks about the resurrection of the dead could be settled...But if he thinks to solve all such questions as...those about Jonah...he little knows the limitations of human life or his own." (Quoted in Thomas M. Bolin, *Freedom Beyond Forgiveness: The Book of Jonah Re-Examined* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997], 13).

<sup>iii</sup> As Bryan D. Estelle comments: "This is often what makes a classic: wonderful literary artistry mixed with many layers of meaning that motivate reading a book more than just once. Consequently, a person ought to read a classic thoughtfully, slowly, and repeatedly. A classic endures the test of time. The book of Jonah is a classic." Bryan D. Estelle, *Salvation Through Judgment and Mercy: The Gospel According to Jonah* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2005), 2.

<sup>iv</sup> Lloyd John Ogilvie once said, "To know Jonah is to love him...And the reason we love him is because he is so much like is in our response to God's guidance." Lloyd John Ogilvie, *God's Best for My Life* (Eugene: Harvest, 1981), daily reading for November 13. Cited by Tchividjian, 25.

<sup>v</sup> I believe that the Old Testament is Christocentric and I believe that Jesus Himself saw it the same way, as evidenced by His use of the Old Testament. But I don't believe that every Christocentric reading of the Old Testament is valid. We must first take the time to understand what a given text meant to the original audience, who in this case lived in a pre-Cross age. If we gloss over these historical realities, we will miss the mark in our interpretation. As Estelle illustrates, "There have been times in the history of the church (and the practice has not completely passed away) when Christ-centered readings of Old Testament texts have run amuck. Some preachers and teachers are too quick to make the typological jump from the Old Testament without responsibly informing their audience how they got there. Jerome (an early Latin church father, born about 347 A.D.), for example, suggested that 'Jonah is like Christ because Christ fled the heavens to come to Tarshish, that is, "the sea of this world," and Jonah in flight is a sign of the incarnate Christ, who "abandons his father's house and country, and becomes flesh.'" Augustine interpreted the worm that devours the plant in chapter 4 as Christ, since in him the privileges of the Old Covenant are devoured. Despite such unfettered imaginative freedom, it does not follow that we should be bashful about observing the pervasiveness of Christ in the book of Jonah or in other Old Testament books." Estelle, 4.

<sup>vi</sup> Italics his; Tchividjian, 15-17. He also writes, "Martin Luther often employed the phrase *simul justus et peccator* to describe his condition as a Christian. It means "simultaneously justified and sinful." He understood that while he'd already been saved (through justification) from sin's *penalty*, he was in daily need of salvation from sin's *power*. And since the gospel is the "power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16), he knew that even for the most saintly of saints the gospel is wholly relevant and vitally necessary—day in and day out. This means that heralded preachers need the gospel just as much as hardened pagans." Ibid., 17.

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<sup>vii</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>viii</sup> Chart adapted from Kevin J. Youngblood, *Jonah: God's Scandalous Mercy* (HTMS 28; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 39.

<sup>ix</sup> Kevin J. Youngblood points out, "Other prophetic books begin with a similar introduction (*dābār yhw̄h 'āšer hāyā 'el...* [lit., "the word of YHWH that was to..."]. The syntax, however, is different from Jonah's opening line and serves in these cases to make the beginning of a collection of oracles rather than a narrative episode. Thus this more typical formula for the introduction of prophetic books serves as a heading or title for the entire collection." Ibid., 48 n. 2.

<sup>x</sup> "The effect of this uncommon opening on the reader is somewhat disorienting. One enters this book with little sense of the precise location or time of the narrative. The suppression of historical and geographical details is atypical for the openings of prophetic books and may be a rhetorical device designed to facilitate the narrative's appropriation by audiences of any historical and geographical setting." Ibid., 48.

<sup>xi</sup> Elie Wiesel once wrote: "His file in Scripture is astonishingly meager. His name, and the name of his father and nothing else. Where does he dwell? Mystery. Who are his friends, his teachers, his enemies? Impossible to ascertain. What was he doing until the incident that made him famous? What became of him afterwards? Nobody tells us. Without Nineveh and its sinners, Jonah might not have figured in sacred Jewish History—and neither would the whale." Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 138-139.

<sup>xii</sup> These background possibilities are catalogued in James Bruckner, *Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 41.

<sup>xiii</sup> Building off of the work of John Stek, Estelle describes three possibilities for Jonah's representative role: "he may be representing people in general (several writers take this position), he may be representing anyone to whom the prophetic role has been given, or he may be representing Israel as a whole nation. Stek argues successfully, in my opinion, for the last option. Jonah was not representing every person, although at times the reader can definitely identify with Jonah. This is the case especially with his foolishness or stubbornness. Moreover, we will see when we turn to the second chapter of Jonah in particular, that the poetry draws us in to sympathize and actually identify with the prophet. Nor was Jonah representing every prophet in Israel. Rather, Jonah represented all Israel. This position is bolstered in many ways according to Stek: we are told very little about the man Jonah, very little is said about the prophetic office, and the whole episode is played out on the vast stage of the world, first with the sailors and then with Nineveh itself, which seems to represent the Gentiles." Estelle, 33-34. Cf. J. H. Stek, "The Message of the Book of Jonah," *Calvin Theological Journal* 4 (1969): 23-50.

<sup>xiv</sup> Similarly, Edmund P. Clowney: "Jonah as the individual servant of the Lord represents the whole nation called to be God's servant." Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1961), 98.

<sup>xv</sup> Estelle, 34.

<sup>xvi</sup> There is no reason to doubt the traditional view that the events of 2 Kings precede the events in the book of Jonah. While neither texts necessitates this order, the way Jonah is introduced in the Hebrew of Jonah 1:1 suggests that this Jonah was already well-known to the audience and this would be the case if he had already had the successful ministry in Israel described in 2 Kings 14. I have yet to see anyone argue convincingly that 2 Kings 14 followed Jonah's ministry in Nineveh and until some evidence is posited to that end, there is no reason to abandon the traditional order of events. This matter does have some bearing on interpretation. If my historical reconstruction is correct, then it all the more highlights how foolish Jonah's rebellion was. How could he have such an issue with God's grace to sinful Nineveh, when he had no issue (as far as we can tell) with God's grace on Israel?

<sup>xvii</sup> An argument could be made that Elijah and Elisha also went beyond the borders of Israel in their ministry as well. Elijah ministry among the Gentile widow in Zarephath (in Phoenicia) is described in 1 Kings 17 and Elisha had an exchange with Naaman, a Syrian general (from one of Israel's enemies). In both cases God's mercy was given to these Gentiles. The point I am making above is that this pattern of going beyond the borders of Israel to deliver a message is not the norm and, outside of the book of Jonah, is absent in the prophetic writings. That said, Elisha's life is patterned after Elijah's and I do believe that Jonah's story has several parallels with Elijah's as well. The above observation is further evidence of this. I will draw out some of the comparisons and contrasts in future sermons, including the next sermon in this series.

<sup>xviii</sup> Itemized and expanded in Youngblood, 50-51. Cf. Norman C. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965): 297-323.

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>xx</sup> Voddie Baucham says something similar in a sermon called "Jonah—The Cost of Rebellion" in a sermon preached in 2002 (date uncertain),

<sup>xxi</sup> These heart problems are described in a transcript of a sermon preached on September 16, 2007, called "Running from the God of Grace" by Paul David Tripp (Paul Tripp Ministries).