

## **You Can Run But You Can't Hide From God**

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### **Jonah 1:1-16**

#### **Introduction:**

1) Two of the more colorful characters from the days of the Wild West were Robert Leroy Parker and Harry Longabaugh. Their identity will become more apparent to most when it is noted that Paul Newman and Robert Redford portrayed them in the 1969 movie titled, "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." Both were highly successful criminals who led the "Hole in the Wall Gang" in robbing trains and banks. They were so successful that the best law officers and trackers were put on their trail. Equally gifted as escape artists, they found it impossible to shake their pursuers and time and again they made harrowing and narrow escapes. A couple of times, at least in the movie, they look back over their shoulder and ask the question, "Who are those guys?" "Who are these men who will not let us go?" Eventually they flee to South America to escape their nemesis. But in 1909, in Bolivia, the law caught up with them and these two outlaws and their careers of crime came to an end. At least in the case of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, it was discovered you can run but you can't hide from the law.

2) There is another character from the past, a real favorite of mine. He discovered an even greater truth than that of Butch and Sundance. His name is Jonah, and he discovered you can run but you can't hide from the Lord. His remarkable experience is contained in the book that bears his name. It is a marvelous record of the God with a missionary heart and His disobedient prophet. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden proved .you can't hide from God. Jonah, on the Mediterranean Sea, proves you can't run from God. We discover three reasons in Jonah 1 why it is impossible for us to run from the Lord.

#### **I. God has a plan for our life.**

**1:1-3**

- Jonah was an eighth century prophet. He is mentioned in only one other place in the Old Testament, 2 Kings 14:25. Interestingly, he is never called a prophet in this book. Jonah is the only minor prophet Jesus ever names. He is the only prophet with whom Jesus compares himself. He is the only prophet to travel the sea, and along with Daniel, the only prophet to preach directly to Gentiles. His name means “dove,” conveying the ideas of peace and tranquility. However, anyone familiar with this book will immediately recognize that that is one thing Jonah brought to no one in his immediate presence.
- Skeptics of supernaturalism have rejected the historical nature of this book. Some believe it to be mythological; others parabolic, and others allegorical. Yet, an honest and straightforward reading of the book would lead one to conclude it is indeed a historical book. Jonah was a historical person. Joppa, Tarshish, and Nineveh were historical cities. Most importantly, our Lord Himself supported the historical nature of the book in Matthew 12:38-41; 16:4, and Luke 11:29-32. A God who can supernaturally raise his Son from the dead would have no difficulty performing the feats we find discovered in this book.
- Jonah is destined to learn many valuable lessons about God in this book. He will discover that God is no respecter of persons. He will learn that God punishes the disobedient and forgives the repentant, and most importantly, he will discover our God is a seeking God, the God with a missionary heart who wishes to extend his grace and compassion to all men.
- God had a plan for Jonah's life as verse 1 teaches. The Word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amathiah saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh that great city and cry out against it. For their wickedness has come up before me.” “Arise” “go,” and “cry” are all imperatives in

the Hebrew text. God is not suggesting to Jonah that he go to Nineveh; He is commanding him to go to Nineveh.

- Nineveh is referred to as a “great city.” There are many great things in the book of Jonah. Interestingly, the word “great” occurs 14 times in this forty-eight verse, four-chapter book. Nineveh was a great city. Located on the Tigris River in modern day Iraq, it was a great city in size. At its peak, Nineveh’s city walls stretched to a circumference of seven to eight miles, making it an extremely large city by ancient standards. It was a great city in significance. It was the major city of the powerful Assyrian empire in Jonah's day. Assyria was a regional superpower and Nineveh was its most important city. But most importantly, Nineveh was a great city in sin. The Bible says their wickedness had come up before the Lord. Nineveh was the seat of power of the evil empire of Jonah's day. Paul House refers to it as “the most vicious and powerful of all Israel's ancient enemies.” King Ashurbanipal would tear off the limbs and hands of his victims. Tiglath-pileser would flay victims alive and make great piles of the skulls at the city gate of those cities that he conquered. This was the Assyrian calling card, so to speak, which in essence said, “Cross us and you too will meet with the same fate.” In an empire where more than 50 deities were worshipped, Assyria was a mean, cruel, and wicked nation with Nineveh its most prominent city. Indeed, God would later destroy Nineveh at the hands of the Babylonians in 612 BC. The book of Nahum was dedicated to the prophecy of her destruction. In that book, God refers to Nineveh as the “bloody city, full of lies and robbery.” It says, “There is a multitude of slain, a great number of bodies, countless corpses” (Nahum 3:1, 3).

**Transition:** Yet, in spite of her wickedness, Nineveh and its people mattered to God. A

theme that will resonate throughout this book is that lost people matter to God. We see that truth communicated clearly in the first two verses.

1. We may attempt to resist his plan. (1:1-3)
  - Jonah, however, was not impressed with what God wanted to do. And so in verse 3, we find Jonah resisting the plan of God and becoming the man on the run. Jonah arose, not to go to Nineveh, but to flee to Tarshish. Nineveh was five hundred miles northeast by land. Tarshish, on the other hand, was a Phoenician port in Spain two thousand miles west by sea. God had said to Jonah “Young man, go east.” Jonah responded, “Thank you very much; I will go west.” Why is it that Jonah resisted the plan of God? That answer is provided for us in part in 4:2.
  - Let me summarize by simply saying this: Jonah had a heart problem. He may have even been a racist, a bigot. Jonah was a Jew. The Ninevites were Gentiles. Israel, by most standards, was a moral nation. Nineveh was immoral and wicked. They would burn and loot conquered cities. They would hang heads of conquered kings in trees of royal gardens. They would pile the skulls of defeated people beside the road as an object lesson. They would skin people alive and put them on poles in the hot sun to die. They would bury people with their heads out of the ground and nail their tongues to the ground.
  - Jonah worshipped the one, true God. He was a monotheistic Hebrew. The Ninevites, on the other hand, were polytheists, worshipping many false deities. Jonah loved his native land of Israel, but he feared the evil empire of the Assyrians. No doubt he saw Assyria as the greatest threat to the safety of the borders of Israel. So when he heard the Lord say, “I am going to destroy Nineveh unless she repents,” (the message of

chapter 3) to Jonah this was the best news he heard in quite a while. And he determined in his heart that he would not even lift a finger to thwart the plan of God. He hated Nineveh. He despised its people. They were finally going to get what they deserved and Jonah would not do anything to stand in the way. And so he resisted God's plan for his life and instead of going to Nineveh, he made his way to the coast to flee to Tarshish. We can resist God's plan, but secondly...

2. We may attempt to run from his presence. (1:3)

- Twice in verse 3 we see the phrase, “from the presence of the Lord.” It begins the verse and it concludes it. Jonah, the nationalist; Jonah, the racist; Jonah, the legalist sought to do the impossible and run from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa (present day Jaffa) on the sea coast of Israel near its capital, Tel Aviv. He paid a fare and twice the text says “he went down.” He went down first to Joppa, and then secondly, he went down into the boat again to go from the presence of the Lord.
- Verse 3 also contains the simple but significant statement, “He paid the fare.” It cost Jonah to run from God. He paid the fare. Indeed, Jonah will discover it cost much more to run from God than it does to run with God. Jonah is about to discover when you run from God, the trip will take you further than you want to go; be more costly than you want to pay; and more difficult than you want to endure. This is true of all. Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.

**Transition:** God has a plan for our lives. We may attempt to resist that plan. We may attempt to run from His presence, but rest assured, it will cost us when we disobey the Lord.

- **Application:** Those who hesitate or refuse to tell others about Jesus suffer from what we could call a “Jonah complex!” However, we must never forget: no one is too evil to be saved. No one is too wicked to receive God's grace. No one is beyond the love and mercy of our great God.

## II. **God is providential in our life.**            1:4-12

- The hero of the book of Jonah is God. In this book the sovereignty of our God is beautifully and powerfully communicated. We can run, but we cannot hide from God because God is providential in our lives. In the verses before us, we discover two significant areas wherein God is providential.
1. **God controls His creation.**            (1:4-6)
    - The Bible teaches that our God is an all-powerful, all-knowing, and everywhere present God. In the book of Jonah we discover that God indeed is sovereign over His creation (1:4). He controls the wind. In 1:4, He controls the sea. In 1:7, He controls the casting of the lot. In 1:7, God prepares and controls a great fish to swallow Jonah. In 4:6, God prepares a plant. In 4:7, God prepares a worm. In 4:8, God prepares a vehement east wind. God is sovereign over His creation.
    - A Christian may sail on the wrong boat. He may head in the wrong direction. He may stow away, seeking to hide from the presence of God. He may be reluctant to follow the Lord. Yet God does not give up on us. Verse four says, “But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea.” The word sent literally means ‘to hurl.’ It is the same word that is used in 1 Samuel 18:11 where Saul cast, or hurled, a spear at David. Jonah was running from the Lord, and so the Lord hurled, like a great spear, a great wind on the sea. The text says, “It was mighty...” (the same word that was translated ‘great’ in

- verse two.) “There was a mighty or great tempest on the sea.” This tempest, this storm was so great that the ship, it says, was about to be broken up.
- Verse five informs us that the mariners, a word that literally means “salts,” were afraid and they responded in two ways: 1) They cried to their gods. 2) They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten the load of it. They prayed while they worked. Not a bad combination, but one that is worthless when God is in the way. We do not know why this storm terrified these veterans of the sea. Perhaps it was its size. Maybe it was the suddenness with which the storm came. Perhaps it was the strength or intensity. Whatever the reason, they ascribed a providential and divine hand in it. This was not a normal storm. There was something supernatural about it that forced them to the conclusion that a God is causing this.
  - With a bit of irony, we discover in verse 5 that Jonah is not in the deck lending his hand to the sailors as they cast the cargo into the sea. Rather, he has gone down into the lowest parts of the ship and there he has fallen into a deep, deep sleep. The world is coming apart around Jonah. Everything is coming unglued. The foundations are being shaken. And yet Jonah is absolutely and completely oblivious to all of the turmoil about him.
  - **Application:** Sin will do that to a believer. Sin will cause us to have a deaf ear to the cries of others. Sin will blind our eyes to all that is going on around us. Sin will dull our hearts so that we become insensitive to the voice of God and the needs of others.
  - Psalm 139:7 says, “*Where can I go from Your Spirit, or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, behold You are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of*

*the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me and Your right hand shall hold me”*

Jonah is running from the Word of the Lord, but the Word of the Lord is running after Jonah.

- The captain of the ship comes upon Jonah and asks him a most interesting question: “What do you mean, sleeper? Arise, call on your God. Perhaps your God would consider us so, that we may not perish.” Again, the irony is striking. The words ‘arise’ and ‘call’ are the exact same words that Jonah heard from God in verse 2. He had been told to arise and preach by God. Now he was being told to arise and call by a pagan sea captain. However, this was the last thing that Jonah wanted to do. He was resisting God’s plan and he was running from God’s presence. The last thing he wanted to do was talk with God. Jonah was drained of his spiritual vitality. He had lost his voice for God. He had lost his power in prayer. Now it is clear he has even lost his desire to pray. The heathen were praying, but Jonah was sleeping. The heathen were trying to find God, but God’s prophet was trying to flee from God. God is controlling His creation to retrieve His prophet for His mission. But not only is God controlling His creation, we see secondly...

2. God controls our circumstances. (1:7-12)

- In verse 7, the sailors hit upon a new strategy in order to determine why the storm had come upon them. The Bible says that they cast lots. Proverbs 16:33 says, “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” We are not surprised at all when we see in verse 7, “The lot fell on Jonah.” You can run but you can’t hide from God. He controls both His creation and our circumstances. In verse 8, the sailors begin an interrogation of God’s reluctant prophet. They pepper him with five

questions. 1) “Please tell us for whose cause is this trouble upon us.” 2) “What is your occupation?” 3) “Where do you come from?” 4) “What is your country?” 5) “Of what people are you?” The cause of the calamity has been discovered. It is God's prophet.

- Now the sailors wish to understand more fully exactly why it is that such a tremendous storm has come upon them. Jonah responds in verse 9, and his response is very revealing. He does not lie about who he is nor from where he has come. But it is interesting to note that Jonah does not fully answer all the questions that are raised. The one question above all others that stands out that Jonah did not answer is the second one, “What is your occupation?” Jonah probably did not want them to know the answer to that question. Even more to the point, Jonah did not want to answer that question. He was in denial. He wanted to go to sleep, wake up and discover the whole episode was a bad dream. However, this is reality and God is working in His prophet's life and controlling his circumstances for two important purposes:

- **1) God wants us to be truthful to others. (1:9)**
  - Jonah makes a start when he says in verse 9 that he is a Hebrew and that he fears the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. Literally, verse 9 reads, “I fear Yahweh (Jehovah), the Elohim of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.” Jonah is quick to note he is not a follower of any impotent local deity. The God he worships and serves is not restricted by geographical location. He is not limited in power or ability. He is the God of heaven. He made the sea and the dry land. How could you ever expect to escape a God like that? Jonah may not have told the sailors all the truth, but

what Jonah did tell them was accurate. God wants us to be truthful to others but...

- **2) God wants us to be truthful with ourselves. (1:10-12)**
  - Verse 10 records the response of the sailors to the answers that Jonah provided. They were exceedingly afraid and they asked him a very simple and straightforward question: “Why have you done this?” Jonah had informed them that he was running from the presence of the Lord (the third time this phrase occurred). The sailors then make a further inquiry and they asked God’s prophet, “What shall we do to you that the sea maybe calm for us?” For the sea was growing more tempestuous.” Jonah's response reveals, at least implicitly, that he is moving in the right direction spiritually for the first time in the book. Jonah says, “pick me up and throw me [literally, ‘hurl me,’ the same word we saw in v. 4 when God hurled the great wind] into the sea and then the sea will become calm for you. For I know that this great tempest is because of me.” Jonah's reply to the sailors is utterly amazing. If we were looking for a confession, we have received it. Why Jonah “fessed” up at this point, we do not know. Perhaps he had pity on these sailors who were far more open to God’s plan for their lives than was Jonah. Perhaps he felt badly that they were suffering for his sin. Whatever the reason, God’s hard-hearted prophet had been touched in his conscience. He speaks the truth and provides a means whereby the destruction of the ship and these pagan sailors can be averted. Jonah has come face to face with his sin and its consequences. It is not a pretty picture.

### III. God is persistent in our life. 1:13-16

- God has been described as the “Hound of Heaven who will not let us go.” We see this truth more clearly in the book of Jonah than perhaps any other book in the Bible. Why is it that the “hound of heaven” will not let us go? In verses 13-16, we discover at least two reasons:
  1. God wants us to see His power. (1:13-14)
    - The pagan sailors on the ship were caught in quite a dilemma. They did not wish to throw Jonah into the sea, but at the same time they were face to face with Jonah's God. Verse 13 records that they rowed hard to return to the land. Literally, they “dug their oars into the water.” They did their best, but they discovered that human effort is futile against a sovereign God. Try as we might, we cannot save ourselves either physically or spiritually when we come up against the God of heaven and earth. The sailors finally acquiesce to the way of the Lord, and in verse 14 we hear their prayer to God: “We pray, O Lord, please do not let us perish for this man's life, and do not charge us with innocent blood for you, O Lord have done as it pleased you.”
    - Interestingly, the sailors refer to the Lord three times in verse 14 using the personal name of God, Jehovah. Further, their prayer indicates clearly that these men recognized the absolute power of Jonah's God, and that he always acts according to His good pleasure whether in judgment or grace, in destruction or deliverance. Perhaps in times past these pagans had heard of Jehovah's power. Now, they had seen it first-hand. But not only does God want us to see His power...
  2. God wants us to give him praise. (1:15-16)

- In verse 15, the sailors did as Jonah said, picked him up, threw him in the sea, and the sea became calm. In verse 5, the sailors were afraid of the gods. Now, in verse 16, they fear the Lord. Verse 16 records the amazing conversion of these pagan, Gentile sailors. Three things are said about their response to the Lord: 1) They feared the Lord. This is the 4<sup>th</sup> time the word “fear” has occurred in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter (previously it appeared in verse 5, 9 and 10). Here the word “fear” carries the idea, however, of reverence, awe and worship. The text literally reads, “They feared the Lord with a great fear.” However, fear for their lives has now turned into submissive awe and reverence. The men feared the Lord. 2) They offered a sacrifice. 3) They took vows. The miraculous calming of the sea created an equally miraculous conversion of sailors.
- Was it genuine? Yes, according to Jesus in Matthew 12:31: “The men of Nineveh will rise up in judgment...”

### **Conclusion:**

1) It is remarkable to contrast Jonah and these pagan sailors in chapter 1. Jonah was a Hebrew with a rich history and heritage of Jehovah’s faithfulness. He was a religious person. These sailors, on the other hand, were Gentiles, with no history at all of Jehovah God. They were pagans. Jonah was a monotheist. He believed in the one, true God. The sailors were polytheists, worshipping many false gods and idols. Jonah initially was rightly related to the true God. The sailors, on the other hand, had no relationship with the true God. Jonah, however, became spiritually insensitive going in the wrong direction, away from the Lord. The mariners, however, became spiritually sensitive and throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter moved in the right direction toward God. Jonah was indifferent to God's will in spite of knowing him intimately. These sailors

became concerned before God in spite of little or no knowledge of Him at all. Jonah was without compassion toward Nineveh. The sailors were incredibly compassionate toward Jonah. Jonah was rebellious and therefore, disciplined but not destroyed. The mariners were responsive, brought to conversion, worship, and commitment because they had a face-to-face encounter with the living God.

2) Sinner and saint alike can run but they cannot hide from God. Our God is the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

Let me ask you a question. Are you running from God? Has God clearly revealed to you what His will is for your life, and yet you have said, "No?" I can readily identify with Jonah. God worked in a similar fashion in my own life throughout my teenage years into early adulthood. I came to Christ at the age of 7, but I ran from God from the time that I was 12 until I was 19. I was not interested in what He wanted to do in my life. I had no concern for what His plan might be for me. God, however, did not give up on Danny Akin. He worked providentially and persistently to get my attention and to turn me in the right direction. He broke me my senior year in high school and He crushed me as I began college. But in and through it all, a God of grace, mercy, compassion and forgiveness was giving His son another chance. I discovered like Jonah, you can run but you can't hide from God. I also discovered when God finds you, you find yourself asking the question, "Why did I ever run from God in the first place?" It costs far more to run from God than it does to run with God. Are you running from God today? If so, why not stop, turn around and go back home where you belong?