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**The Book of Jonah**  
**I. Running Away from God**  
**Jonah 1:1-16**

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*“Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ‘Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.’”* So what does Jonah do? He rises up as commanded, but only to head out in the exact opposite direction from Nineveh. Nineveh is five hundred miles or so to the east. Jonah heads west for a town called Tarshish. Scholars believe Tarshish was on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, which in Jonah’s day would have been the farthest western edge of the known world. In other words, Jonah doesn’t just not go to Nineveh as God has commanded – instead to flees to the very ends of the earth to get away from Nineveh and what God has commanded him to do there.

Which immediately raises the question of why. Why would Jonah be so desperate to escape from his mission? Here at the beginning of the story, we are given no explanation. But we can readily imagine that fear had something to do with it. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire – perhaps the most brutal and feared of all the ancient empires. The Assyrians, at that time, had conquered most of the known world – and they treated those conquered peoples with absolute cruelty. Several other Old Testament prophets single out Nineveh and the Assyrian Empire for special condemnation from God. Nahum, for example tells how the whole world will rejoice the day when God finally brings His judgement upon Nineveh:

*All who hear the news of you  
clap their hands over you.  
For upon whom has not come  
your unceasing evil?<sup>1</sup>*

So maybe fear lies behind Jonah’s flight – fear of what the people of Nineveh might do to him personally were he to go and do as God has instructed right in the middle of downtown Nineveh!

Or, peeking ahead a bit in the story, perhaps Jonah’s real fear was not so much what Assyria might do to him, as much as it was what God might do to the Assyrians – namely, allow them to repent, then forgive them, and so not destroy them at all. Which, of course, is exactly what happens. So maybe it is the fear of such an “unfair” outcome that has Jonah on the run from God’s command. But, again, the story doesn’t really say. Jonah doesn’t explain himself – he just rises up and jumps on the first boat to Tarshish. But, for that matter, what reason do any of us give when we find ourselves in a Jonah state of mind – when we, too, are trying to avoid God and what God

wants us to do? Perhaps the great Scottish theologian John Baillie speaks for both Jonah and for us when he writes:

*Part of the reason why I could not find God was that there is that in God which I did not wish to find. Part of the reason why I could not hear Him speak was that He was saying some things to me which I did not wish to hear.<sup>2</sup>*

Well, whatever the reason, instead of heading east as God commands, Jonah heads west to get away from God's command. But Jonah's flight is more than geographical in nature – and this opening chapter wants to be sure that we understand this. Jonah's flight is also spiritual. There may be this geographical fleeing away from God's command, but there is also a spiritual fleeing away from God Himself. Our story tells us this using two different devices. First is the repetition of the word “down” to describe Jonah's flight. God calls Jonah to “arise,” to rise up and go to Nineveh. But, in verse three, we are told that instead Jonah goes “down” to Joppa to find a boat. Once on the boat, he then goes “down” into the innermost part of the boat. And then, finally, tossed overboard, Jonah goes “down” into the depths of the sea. It's a simple picture of Jonah's flight from God, really. God is “up” in heaven – but Jonah keeps going “down,” moving further and further away from God, even into the very depths of the sea.

And it is that sea itself which is the second device used by our story to demonstrate Jonah's spiritual flight from God. Because, in the Bible, the sea is rarely just the sea, meaning a body of water. Rather the “sea” is most often a symbol – the symbol of chaos, of devastation, and even of death. That Jonah's descent should finally land him in the depths of the sea is significant because it tells us that Jonah, in fleeing geographically in the opposition direction of Nineveh is also, as a result – or maybe even primarily so – undertaking a spiritual flight away from the presence of God Himself. Jonah is not just moving from east to west, he is also moving, as it were, from heaven above to hell down below. He is running not just from his mission, but also from the One who has given him this mission. And Jonah in the depths of the sea means that Jonah has even chosen, in effect, a watery grave over God.

We see this even more clearly in the conversation between Jonah and the sailors during the storm. The sailors immediately understand that such a storm could only be supernatural in origin – and once it is determined that Jonah is the source of the divine anger, the sailors plead for Jonah to call upon his God that they all might be saved from the storm. But what does Jonah do? He basically has two choices to stop the storm and save the crew. He can call out to God in repentance, and that would stop the storm and save the crew. Or he can get thrown off the boat and drown in the heart of the sea, and that also would stop the storm and save the crew. Which does Jonah choose? He chooses certain death by drowning over repentance. He chooses the sea over the Savior. Jonah's flight is not just across the Mediterranean in the wrong direction. Jonah is a human being in utter rebellion against the God who has called him into this mission – for that matter, who has called him into life itself. Jonah would rather die than return to God. Jonah, as a matter of fact, at this point in the story, deserves to die.

But that is not what happens. We'll get to the whale next week – but the point is Jonah doesn't die. And it is in this twist in the story that we find this story's central meaning for us this

morning. Jonah does not die when he is cast into the sea. Rather Jonah lives. Jonah lives because, as it turns out, the entire time he thought he was making his escape from God, God was in fact pursuing after him, hard on Jonah's heels. Jonah had not reckoned with the possibility that God just might not be willing to let him get away. It had not occurred to Jonah that it might prove absolutely impossible to outrun God, no matter how far west instead of east he went on earth, no matter how far down and away from God he went in his spirit. It had never dawned on Jonah that God might turn out to be a rather relentless pursuer – something which good King David had discovered a long, long time ago:

*Where shall I flee from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, 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.<sup>3</sup>*

As it turns out, Jonah's God – our God – is a relentless pursuer of His people. Which means that we, like Jonah, are never going to be able to get away from Him either. God will always find us when we flee Him – just as He found Jonah. And this truth – that our God is a relentlessly pursuing God – is the second most important truth that Jonah's story has to teach us. The second most important truth is that eventually, in the course of these lives of ours, we are going to have to stop running and come to terms with God. Sooner or later we are going to have to turn around and face the One who has made us and who therefore refuses to let us get away from Him – the One who is never going to be content just to let us go. We can avoid Him for a while – that is true. And God knows – literally, God knows, how hard we try to do just that. How readily we try to convince ourselves that life is only and ever about what we decide it is about – and that God can only get involved if and when we decide to let Him get involved. Or maybe we try to convince ourselves, having been in one way or another called out by God, maybe we try to convince ourselves that, okay, we will let God get involved in our lives – but only as much and only in those areas where we decide to give Him access, so that we can stay in control.

And what the Jonah story teaches us, this second most important truth, is basically, “Well, good luck with that!” A college freshman went to the chaplain to tell him that he had decided to dump the faith of his youth, just walk away from God and the whole religion business. And that's what the chaplain told him, “Well, good luck with that! You won't be able to succeed, of course – God won't let you. But good luck with your trying!”<sup>4</sup> Why? Because the God who made us, whether we like it or not, is a relentlessly pursuing God – and we simply cannot escape Him. And, whether we like it or not, sooner or later we are going to have to come to grips with the fact that it is indeed God with whom we have to do in these lives of ours.<sup>5</sup> To whom we must answer for these lives of ours. We can reckon with Him now, or we can reckon with Him at the end – but one way or another, He is not going to let us out of His grip. We can run away from Him all we want – but we can never outrun His interest in us, His desire for us, or His love upon us.

Which brings us to the first most important truth that we need to know about this relentlessly pursuing God, Jonah and us – the first most important truth Jonah’s story has to teach us: which is that God is relentlessly pursuing us not to punish us, no matter how much we may deserve it – like Jonah. That God is relentlessly pursuing us not because He is mad at us, no matter how much He deserves to be – as with Jonah. Rather, the first most important truth is this: that the sole reason our God is in relentless pursuit of us – just as He so relentlessly pursued Jonah – is in order to pour out upon us the full measure of His love for us, to rescue us from all our harms and alarms by His mercy, and to bring us into a richer life and a deeper hope and a more abundant joy through His gift to us of His grace. He relentlessly pursues Jonah not to give Jonah what he deserves for his disobedience, but in order to rescue Jonah from his foolishness. And that is why He is relentlessly pursuing you and me. Because He does not want us to get lost, but rather to be found. He does not want us to dwell in the depths of our own sea of despair, but rather to be filled by a hope that will never disappoint. He does not want our lives to be harder or worse, but rather to endow our lives with a deeper meaning and a richer purpose and an overflowing superabundance of His love. *“Restless are our hearts, O God, until they rest in Thee!”*<sup>6</sup> God relentlessly pursues Jonah and you and me for one reason and one reason only: that He might give to us the gift of His grace.

Grace is why God called Jonah to go to Nineveh in the first place – that Nineveh should turn around, turn to Him, and so receive His grace. And grace is the reason God rescues Jonah from the sea and places him in the belly of the whale. And grace is the reason why even if we make our beds in Sheol, even if we take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there His hand will lead us, His right hand hold us. Grace. God’s goodness and His grace. God is relentlessly pursuing us every day of our lives so that we might come to live in and by and for His grace.

And what would it be like, what could it be like for us should we one day finally decide to stop running away – to turn and truly, deeply, openly, and completely let Him catch us up in His grace? We could talk about that the whole rest of this day and not even begin to scratch the surface of how good that would be. But here’s a story – just one story, which at least hints at the ways God’s grace can change us, recreate us, fill and overflow us. The much-loved preacher and teacher of preachers Fred Craddock tells of visiting a small church on a Sunday morning. The small sanctuary was filled to overflowing, and the atmosphere was warm and friendly, vibrant and excited. And Craddock perked up with curiosity about what he was seeing – he couldn’t wait to see the pastor whose ministry had nurtured such a congregation. He must really be something, thought Craddock. And when the pastor entered the sanctuary, Craddock immediately saw that he was indeed something – but not at all what Craddock was expecting:

*I was absolutely shocked. He was very tall . . . I suppose he was 6’4”. He was also very large, maybe 280 or 300 pounds. But the most noticeable feature was his stumbling, lumbering gait. He was awkward, almost falling, with his long useless arms at his sides, like they were awaiting further instructions. His head was misshapen, his hair was askew. He stumbled up the three or four steps to get to the pulpit. When he turned to face us, I saw the thick glasses, and through them I could see the milky film over his eyes,*

*one of his eyes going out, nothing coming in to the other. When he read, he held the book near his nose. When he spoke, the sinews of his neck worked with such vigor as he pushed out the words, it was as if he had learned to speak as an adult. But I lost all consciousness of that after a while.*

*He read I Corinthians 13 and spoke on the subject in the bulletin, "But the greatest of these is love." It was an unusual thing. If you had a copy of his sermon, you would say, "I'd give it a grade of "C." It was not poetic, it was not prophetic, it was pastoral. It was so warm and so full of love and affection. It was firm, and it had exhortation in it. But the relationship between those people, the love that he extended as he preached, and the love that came back from those people who sat quietly, leaning forward, was captivating, and I was captured. What is this? How could this grotesque creature be so full of love? I didn't understand...<sup>7</sup>*

Craddock decided that he had to get acquainted with this extraordinary pastor, and so he lingered at the door following the service so that he could invite him to lunch. As Craddock watched all the warm greetings and words of comfort and care and respect that passed between this pastor and the people at the door, he continued in his wonder and amazement. At one point a woman of about seventy took the pastor's big hand in hers and leaned in to him and said, *"I wish I could have known your mother."* And Craddock thought to himself that this woman was having the same trouble with comprehension that he was: namely, how could this misshapen creature of a man be so full of love and compassion. She couldn't understand, either, where it could have come from – and hence, her question about his mother. The pastor, leaning down, said to her, *"My mother's name is Grace."*

When everyone had left and Craddock had a chance to visit with the pastor, he asked him about that exchange. He said to the pastor, *"That was an unusual response you gave to that woman, 'My mother's name is grace.'"* The pastor replied:

*It is? When I was born . . . I was put up for adoption at the Department of Family Services. But as you can see, nobody wanted to adopt me. So I went from foster home to foster home, and when I was about sixteen or seventeen, I saw some young people going into a church. I wanted to be with young people, so I went in, and there I met grace – the grace of God.<sup>8</sup>*

*"Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 'Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city . . .'"* Instead, Jonah tried to run away from God and from His command. But the relentlessly pursuing God of grace just would not let him get away. Nor will He let us. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Nahum 3:19.

<sup>2</sup> John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), pp. 55-56.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 139:7-10.

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<sup>4</sup> I believe this is a Will Willimon story, but I do not have the original source.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 4:13. See also Romans 14:7-12 and Acts 17:22-28.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, Confessions, I.1, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Fred B. Craddock, Craddock Stories (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 49-50.

<sup>8</sup> Craddock, p. 50.