

Jonah: You Can't Get There From Here

Series: God's Runaway

by Ron R. Ritchie

What is it that makes us Christians so special? What are we supposed to be doing in this world? How are we to use our lives, our talents and our gifts? What are we all about, we Christians? These are questions that have haunted many of us.

Second Corinthians 5:14-15 says,

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.

So one of the things we're all about is that we are to no longer live for ourselves but for Him who died for us. The problem is, I like living for myself. I enjoy a day when the phone doesn't ring. I enjoy my solitude. But the Lord says we are to no longer live for ourselves, so the tension comes day by day, "What about my rights? What about me? Is there no freedom for me? Is it always serving? Is it always using my gift?"

Then what are we to do if we are to no longer live for ourselves? Paul goes on to tell us in verses 18-19:

God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

We Christians are ministers of the good news, and the good news is that Jesus Christ died for our sins and has come to tell mankind that the Father is no longer angry, that the Father loves us and has demonstrated that love through his Son Jesus Christ. That's what we're all about--the good news.

When I grew up it was all bad news: "You're going to hell!" Well, I knew I was going to hell; I didn't need anybody to emphasize it. "Change your ways!" Well, I'd have loved to but I couldn't. I had no power. Then one day someone came in love and gentleness and sensitivity and said, "Hey, God loves you." That was good news! I thought God hated me all those years, but he loves me and he died for me and gave me new life and if I would but accept that, it was mine. So one day I accepted it because it was such good news.

I would like to demonstrate how much God loves not only you and me but whole races of people. This truth is revealed in the book of Jonah. He was a prophet who loved and served God during the days of Jeroboam the second, a very wicked king who did evil in the sight of God. Jeroboam was the fourteenth king over the nation of Israel, the ten tribes that broke away 150 years earlier during the days when Solomon ruled. After Solomon died there was a civil war; ten tribes went to the north and were called Israel, two tribes went to the south and they were called Judah. Now Jeroboam the second was a king who desired to do those things that pleased himself, and one of the things he did immediately was to introduce in the manner of his great-great-grandfather, Jeroboam the first, the worship of the two golden calves. Now the golden calves, made by Jeroboam the first, had haunted Israel for 150 years. When the Jews wanted to go down to Jerusalem to worship God, Jeroboam said, "Wait a minute! I can't have all my people going down to Jerusalem. They might stay and I'd lose some of my best people. I'll make two golden calves and I'll put one all the way up north in Dan, and one halfway down, in Bethel. I'll get a bunch of priests together and we'll just work these people through this system." So he got some wicked priests together and they collected all the money they could from the poor and they sprinkled calf worship with a little Jehovah worship to make it sound religious.

At the same time there was one little irritant in the land. His name was Amos, a shepherd turned prophet by the hand of God, who was running around telling the king, "You're going the wrong way." They didn't like Amos very much, especially in Samaria, the capital city of the north. Because the religious condition in the land was so bad, the social conditions were just as bad, and the people were being harassed to death by the rich. Land was being stolen from the people by the rich, and there was no court in the land that would even listen to the cases. So the people were harassed and oppressed.

Now, in the midst of all this, there was a war going on between Syria and the ten tribes of the north. Syria would come down and afflict Israel, so God looked down on them and said, "These people are afflicted, and they are bitter. It's as though they are not bond or free, so I'll send someone to help them."

Now, as Amos was going about telling the bad news, God called on Jonah to be the bearer of good news. "Jonah," he called. Jonah says, "Yes, Lord?" "I want you to go to this wicked king Jeroboam the second and I want you to tell the king that I'm going to allow him to deliver the people from the Syrians." (This is all recorded in 2 Kings 14.) So Jonah went to Jeroboam the second with this great good news, and he says, "Jeroboam, guess what? God's going to use you to deliver the people of Israel from the Syrians." Jeroboam the second thought that was great news. He got his army together, went up, defeated the Syrians, took over the capital city of Damascus in the north, and for the first time in 150 years extended the borders all the way back to those of David and Solomon. Jonah of course felt great. I mean, it's nice to be a prophet who brings good news, and have it all fulfilled! So he's walking around town feeling very good about all this.

But Then There Was Another Day 1:1-3

Then there was another day, perhaps several years later, when God decides to pick one of his men again--not Amos, but Jonah. He has a whole new ministry for Jonah. In Jonah 1, it says,

The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh the great city, and cry against it, for their wickedness has come up before Me." But Jonah rose up to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. So he went down to Joppa, found a ship which was going to Tarshish, paid the fare, and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord.

Jonah faced four problems. The first was that Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrians, the greatest city on the earth at the time of Jonah. Within 50 years the Assyrians would take the whole ten tribes into the captivity that we now call the Assyrian captivity of 722 B.C. And the Assyrians were messing with the Syrians, and they knew about the wickedness of these people, knew about their worship of gods and goddesses, and they knew, Jonah including, that they didn't want anything to do with Nineveh. Now you don't mind being a prophet among your own people, but you certainly don't want to be a prophet among people you hate. You're not about to go and give them good news. But Jonah is asked by God to go and cry against the city. To "cry against" means to give them a chance to repent, though Jonah did not want to give them that chance because they were wicked idolators and they should be dealt with, he thought.

The second problem was that Israel itself was also involved in idolatry, drunkenness and sexual immorality. Israel was really in trouble, morally, spiritually, socially, and militarily, and so we can imagine Jonah saying, "Why should I go to Nineveh? We need to take care of our own act at home first. But God says, "No, I want you to go to Nineveh."

The third problem was that Jonah was worried about the fact that God might show compassion to Nineveh, and if he did and they accepted his compassion and repented, then God might love them more than he loved the Jews. The fourth pressure Jonah was thinking about was that God might show the same compassion to Israel if they would repent, and Jonah wasn't sure he wanted to admit that they needed compassion.

So Jonah does five things: He rises up, goes to Joppa, finds a ship, pays the fare and goes on board to run away from the presence of God. (When you run from God you have to do a lot of work and you end up paying for it yourself!) God had asked Jonah to go to Nineveh, which was an 800-mile trip, but he went the other way, to Joppa on the coast of Palestine, to get on a ship going to Tarshish, 1800 miles west. Now there's a man trying to get away! But God says, "You can't hide from me. Don't you know what the Psalmist said?" (Jonah must have known the Psalms as later in chapter 2 he quotes David.)

**Where can I go from thy Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Thy presence?
If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there.
If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
Even there Thy hand will lead me,
And Thy right hand will lay hold of me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,
And the light around me will be night,"
Even the darkness is not night to Thee,
And the night is as bright as day.
Darkness and light are alike to Thee. (Psalm 139:7-12)**

Jonah knew God and he knew God's character. He knew there was no hiding from him, but he tried to hide anyway, because I don't think he wanted to see the salvation of the Gentiles. He wanted nothing to do with them. He forgot what he was all about.

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse was pastor of the 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia when I was a student and as a new Christian I once heard him talk on Jonah. He said that calling Jonah to go to the Ninevites was like asking a Jew from New York to go to Hitler and tell him that God loved him, and that everything he did would be forgiven if he would but repent.

So the Jew got on a train, all right, and went to San Francisco; then got on a ship to Japan! He wanted nothing to do with it. That's the struggle and tension that is going on here.

I wonder how we feel when God asks us about our next door neighbor? Do we say, "There's no way that man will ever accept the Lord! In fact, his wife is so against both of us that there's just no way!" Only to have her come over the next day and say, "Hey, I understand you folks are Christians. Do you mind telling me about your faith?" We weren't planning on that at all! Well, this is what's going on here. A tremendous lack of faith in God, and a tremendous lack of knowledge of God's compassion and his love for all people. I know it's shocking but God really loves the Russians; he really loves the Chinese, and (this will get you) he really loves the Poles! And the Italians, and the Ugandans. He loves them all, and he wants to show compassion to the whole world. He wants us to get involved in his ministry of reconciliation. But Jonah went to Gibraltar. How do you hide?

How do you get away from God? You can't. I was talking to a man recently who had asked his young Christian friend, "Why do you think God chose a man to go to Nineveh when he knew that man would run away?" The young man thought for a moment and said, "I guess there aren't any other kinds of men. They all run away."

I thought of Abraham, who didn't run, I appreciate that, but I couldn't think of a lot more that hadn't run. Gideon had a lot of things he wanted to work out first before he followed God. Moses said, "Lord, they'll never believe I talked with a bush, so could you do a couple other things?" Elijah didn't mind the fire coming out of heaven, but the problem was, he wasn't sure about Jezebel. He didn't like this woman chasing him.

First I told God and my mother I would never be a missionary or a preacher. Then I tried to run away from God

by going to Africa. He found me in a hotel room, spiritually bankrupt. Then I came back from the service and told my wife I wanted to be a professor. A friend came to my house at 3 o'clock in the afternoon when I had all my catalogs on the floor, and said, "Do you want to go to Bible college?" I said, "Are you crazy?" He said, "No. Why don't you come to my school and check it over?" Because I liked him I said, "Well, it's a ride out of town." So I went for the ride to find out where this college was. It was three blocks from where I was raised during the Depression! Well, the haunting memory of all that was too much. I said, "I want nothing to do with it." So I avoided God for two years, then went to the Philadelphia College of the Bible, got an apartment, and found it had a window overlooking the very street where I was raised.

God wanted me in seminary. I didn't want to go. I tried to run away from God. I didn't want to go to Dallas Seminary. I told everyone I wasn't going. It was April, and all my friends were accepted and I heard you couldn't get another man in. But God said, "I want you to go to Dallas." "I won't go!" For three weeks I fought him. We went.

I was in Dallas and after four years I needed to find a ministry. I knew I didn't want to go to California. I had a job offer in Detroit. God said, "I want you in California." I said, "What's the matter with Detroit?" A letter came inviting me to California, but I didn't want to go so I gave the letter to my friends who were looking for a ministry there. Finally the letter came back to me, and I said, "What am I doing with this letter?" I rolled it up, said I didn't want to have anything to do with it. At the same time a friend came into my study and said, "Hey, Ron, you know the pastor who wrote the letter to you from California? He's on campus. He flew out to see you." The following weekend I went to California.

No, I haven't run away from God too much. How about you? When God calls us, why do we spend all that energy running away? Why don't we accept the fact that the God of the universe wants to work with us, wants to use our gifts, our talents, our personality and our being for the ministry of reconciliation so the whole world can enjoy a relationship with him like we do? Why do we fight him so much?

Everything You Always Wanted To Know About Sinking A Ship 1:4-9

And the Lord hurled a great wind on the sea and there was a great storm on the sea so that the ship was about to break up. Then the sailors became afraid, and every man cried to his god, and they threw the cargo which was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down, and fallen sound asleep. So the captain approached him and said, "How is it that you are sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps your god will be concerned about us so that we will not perish." And each man said to his mate, "Come, let us cast lots so we may learn on whose account this calamity has struck us." So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us, now! On whose account has this calamity struck us? What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land."

The Lord caused this great storm and these Phoenician sailors began calling on their gods to save them. And there were many, believe me, that they called on. There was Asherah (the sea goddess), Baal-shamin (the god of the sky), and Baal-tyre (the god of the mariners). There were all kinds of gods and goddesses they could call on so they were trying them all, but they were not working. Then one sailor said to somebody else, "Hey, there's a passenger down in hold, and he's sleeping. Maybe the captain will tell Jonah to pray to his god. Maybe his god will work." So they go down to the hold and say, "How can you sleep? Don't you understand that if the gods get angry you're supposed to get right up and pray to them to get us out of the storm?" Finally, because the storm doesn't stop, they cast lots, and the lot falls on Jonah. So they say to him, "Hey, we discovered it's you! Now what is going on? Where are you from? Why is this all happening to us?"

Jonah knew who he was. In the midst of the storm he understood who he was and who God was, and so he gave his testimony in the midst of his disobedience, "I'm a Hebrew. I'm of the nation of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We're the ones who came out of Egypt into Canaan. I worship the true God, the one who made the heavens, the

earth, the sky and the dry land."

A Positive Witness From A Negative Prophet 1:10-16

Then the men became extremely frightened and they said to him, "How could you do this?" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them. So they said to him, "What should we do to you that the sea may become calm for us?"--for the sea was becoming increasingly stormy. And he said to them, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea. Then the sea will become calm for you, for I know that on account of me this great storm has come upon you." However, the men rowed desperately to return to land but they could not, for the sea was becoming even stormier against them. Then they called on the Lord and said, "We earnestly pray, O Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man's life and do not put innocent blood on us; for Thou, O Lord, hast done as Thou hast pleased." So they picked up Jonah, threw him into the sea, and the sea stopped its raging. Then the men feared the Lord greatly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

I don't understand where Jonah got the confidence to say, "I'm responsible for the storm. All of you are in trouble because of me, so throw me into the sea." Maybe he thought God would deliver him because of his relationship with him, or maybe he was giving up totally and deciding that this was it, that he couldn't fight it any longer, and was going to commit suicide. But the interesting thing is that in the midst of Jonah's disobedience, the ship's crew came to know the Lord. That happens a lot in the midst of our disobedience.

The crew did three things. First, they prayed that the Lord would forgive them for this innocent blood, "Then the men feared the Lord greatly [i.e., accepting him], and they offered a sacrifice [worship], and made vows [they were willing to serve]."

Now in the middle of all this we have a strange little event. God is in charge of the storm, God is in charge of the calm, and now God appoints a great fish to swallow Jonah. Suddenly we have a moment when God brings in discipline, but it is discipline to prepare Jonah to go to Nineveh, not discipline to get rid of him.

About That Fish 1:17

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights.

The interesting thing is not so much that Jonah was swallowed by the fish (we have all kinds of stories of men who were swallowed by fish.) I do know that it was not a whale for they say that whales cannot swallow people because their throats are too small. It just says it was a "great fish." I am not sure what kind of fish it was; it might be a dogfish, one of the shark family; it might be Jaws--I don't know. And the issue is not the fish or the size of the fish, or if he could swallow the man. The truth is that the fish did swallow Jonah, but the key is that he did not digest him. That is the difference.

Now the critics can't swallow this story because they say it couldn't happen. But we must admit it was a miracle, and miracles are part of God's divine plan. If you can't accept this miracle you probably won't accept the fact that the Red Sea was opened for Moses and the Israelites; the manna given to the Hebrews in the wilderness; the fire by night and the cloud by day; the water from the rock; the Jordan River parting for Joshua or the walls of Jericho coming down. However, when it comes to the story of Jonah, Jesus accepted it as true and used it to rebuke the Pharisees, as we see in Matthew 12:38-41:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign shall be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment, and shall condemn it because she came from the ends of the earth to

hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here."

Now Jonah writes this little prayer in this fish that is preparing him for the ministry:

Jonah's Prayer 2:1-10

**Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the stomach of the fish, and he said,
"I called out of my distress to the Lord,
And He answered me.
I cried for help from the depth of Sheol;
Thou didst hear my voice.
He is sharing with us the fact that God hears and answers prayer.
"For Thou hadst cast me into the deep,
Into the heart of the seas,
And the current engulfed me.
All Thy breakers and billows passed over me.
So I said, 'I have been expelled from Thy sight.
Nevertheless I will look again toward Thy holy temple.'**

Jonah shares with us the fact that he understood that the billows and the waves all came directly from God's hand, and he acknowledges this discipline. But, he says to God, "In spite of the fact that I know I have disappointed you, you are responsible for my state. I know that you will save me, and I will look again to you. I will trust you."

**"Water encompassed me to the very soul,
The great deep engulfed me,
Weeds were wrapped around my head.
I descended to the roots of the mountains.
The earth with its bars was around me forever,
But Thou hast brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God.**

"Lord, when I was in my last moments, when I was thrown to the very bottom of the sea, when seaweed wrapped around my very head, when I saw the ends of the mountains on the bottom of the sea, I realized you had brought me out of the pit."

**"While I was fainting away,
I remembered the Lord;
And my prayer came to Thee
Into Thy holy temple.
["My last thoughts were of you, God. "]
Those who regard vain idols
Forsake their faithfulness
But I will sacrifice to Thee
With the voice of thanksgiving.
That which I have vowed I will pay.
Salvation is from the Lord."**

"I understand now, Lord, who you are, and I understand who I am. I know that your character is one that forgives, that you have the characteristic of mercy and compassion. I have deliberately disobeyed you and you have disciplined me by placing me in a fish in preparation for the ministry that I am now ready to carry out. I will go to Nineveh."

Then the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah up on the dry land.

Probably right at Joppa! He crawls out on the beach and says, "Which way to Nineveh? I'm ready to go and serve the Lord!"

I think there are two things we need to consider. The first is that as Christians we are to be about our Father's business and that we no longer live for ourselves but for him who died for us. We have the ministry of reconciliation to everyone who is willing to hear, regardless of where they live, their nationality, or whether they are our enemies or not. If God calls us to give the good news to these people, then we're to go. Now if he gifts us and gives us this commission, the second thing is that if we refuse to participate in that ministry he won't wipe us out, but he will put us in a place of discipline, for "whom the Lord loves, he disciplines." (Heb 12:6) But if we are wise, in the discipline we will see that he is preparing us to see even more of his character, to see even more of his love, and more of his mercy, and then we will be ready again to participate in the ministry that he gave us in the first place.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, we pray that you will teach us your ways; we pray that you will teach us how to walk in righteousness, how to walk in love and compassion for those around us. We pray that you will teach us how to be honest and real ministers of reconciliation. We pray for all those who are struggling right now in the fish's belly, so to speak, that you will teach them to turn to you, that you will teach them to honor you and ask forgiveness from you. When you do that, Lord, we know that you will forgive them, for you forgave Jonah and certainly you can forgive those who are seeking to follow you. Thank you so much for your love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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