

Running Away from God's Mission

The Book of Jonah

The Root of Jonah's Problem

Jonah 4:1 – 11

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Introduction:

Late in my junior year of high school, I became committed to Jesus. It happened in the context of a Japanese American church in California. One of the stories that was known to people was the story of Mitsuo Fuchida, the Japanese flying ace who had led the attack on Pearl Harbor in World War II. Fuchida led the 353 Japanese planes. He hated Americans. While looking down from his plane on the black smoke billowing from Pearl Harbor, he knew that the attack was a success, and later recalled, "my heart was almost ablaze with joy." At home, Fuchida became a national hero. But Japan lost the war, and he was left to question many things. Two people stood out to him: a nurse named Peggy Colby who served Japanese prisoners in the U.S. even though her parents, missionaries, had been killed by the Japanese in the Philippines. The second person was a former American sergeant, Jacob DeShazer, who had been captured and tortured in Japan for three years. But he had come to Jesus and returned to Japan to share how Jesus had melted away his hatred. Mitsuo Fuchida's process of questioning led him to Jesus. When he read the first time in his life read the account of Jesus' crucifixion and his prayer to God on behalf of those who were murdering him, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That cinched it for Fuchida; he had traced the power that changed Peggy Colby and Jacob DeShazer back to its root, and he became convinced that it was all true. He gave his life to Jesus, and despite skepticism and scorn in both Japan and the U.S., because he was a very public figure, began to pray for healing. In 1952 he turned down the position of chief of staff in the new Japanese air force and in 1957 declined the honored position of Minister of Defense. For twenty-five years Fuchida crisscrossed Japan as well as the United States preaching Christ as the one hope for our war-torn, fear-filled world. In December of 1966, Fuchida was invited to Pearl Harbor, for the observance of the 25th anniversary of the attack. He later wrote, 'I would give anything to retract my actions of twenty-nine years ago at Pearl Harbor, but it is impossible. Instead, I now work at striking the death-blow to the basic hatred which infests the human heart and causes such tragedies. And that hatred cannot be uprooted without assistance from Jesus Christ.'

Relevance:

I think that story is remembered in the Japanese American Christian community because it reminds us that Jesus heals and that Jesus sends us to manifest his healing to the world. If you are not a Christian, I want you to know at least the reason why Christians think Jesus is important for this world. And that story illustrates it. At various points on our lives, other emotions rule our lives: a survivalist mentality where we just focus on our own survival, anger where we avoid people, pain where we become prisoners of our own pain and fears. For that reason, I think it's helpful to see how God was developing people in various ways for Jesus' mission to all people in this world. One of the best is this character Jonah.

Context:

We are in the book of Jonah, and the final of four messages. We have seen Jonah take off and run after God told him to go to Nineveh, capital of Assyria, one of the ancient enemy peoples of Israel. Brutal and terrifying, the Assyrian Empire was looming on the horizon. Here's some background on Assyria. They are the first true Empire in human history. They force their conquered people to migrate around so they'd be too weak to revolt. They burn, destroy, and salt lands that they could not keep. They rape women, burn children alive, mutilate men until death, and place their heads, arms, hands and even lower lips on the conquered city's walls. They put skulls and noses on wooden stakes and line them around to show who's in charge. Or they'd cut up enemy corpses and feed them to the dogs. They blind people and let them wander throughout the land to strike fear in the hearts of all people. When dealing with rebels, they flay them, impale them, behead them, burn them alive, rip out their eyes, and tear off their fingers, noses and ears.' (Stephen Bertman, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, New York: Oxford UP, 2005, p.268)

Jonah got into a ship and took off. It was foolish but it also made some sense. Why did he run? Was he afraid of Nineveh? This militarist nation, the current Middle East superpower, would probably have killed Jonah. So of course, he's a little scared. Then a great storm hit, and Jonah finally tells the sailors that if they throw him overboard, God will stop the storm. So they do, and God does, and Jonah is swallowed by a giant fish or whale, spat back onto the shore, and makes his way to Nineveh. When he gets there, he says a few words about Nineveh's possible destruction, and all of Nineveh repents. They change their minds and fear the God of Israel. But instead of being thrilled, Jonah is upset. And that's where we pick up the story.

I break down this passage into four sections. First, Jonah's anger in v.1 – 3. Second, God's searching question in v.4. Third, Jonah's problem is revealed in v.5 – 6. And fourth, God searches Jonah again in v.7 – 10.

Jonah's Anger: v.1 – 3

Let's look at the first section, Jonah's anger. ^{4:1} But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD and said, 'Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. ³ Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.'

Here is where we have the great disclosure of Jonah. 'Why did I run away? Let me lay it out.' The Book of Jonah is like a Steven Spielberg movie, where a key disclosure happens midway through the movie and deepens your understanding of a character. In this case, in chapter 4, we finally get our answer to the question, 'Why did Jonah run?' Was it because the Assyrians were so cruel? We would have understood *that* fear. But no. Was it because the Assyrians hated the Jews and might have killed Jonah? We would have understood *that* fear. But no. It wasn't even because Jonah just wanted to stay home and let someone else do it – 'Send Billy Graham instead.' Jonah wasn't afraid of the Ninevites' *evil*. Instead, he was afraid of the Ninevites' *transformation*. He was afraid that they would change, and God would forgive them.

What's amazing is how accurate of a grasp Jonah had on the character of God. 'I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness. I knew that You are...one who relents concerning calamity.' In fact, this is the third time that Jonah quotes one of the worship creeds of Israel in an ironic way.

Jonah repeats a creed...	...in an ironic, inappropriate way
I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD God of heaven who made the sea and dry land (1:9)	Jonah is fleeing from God's presence
Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness, but I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. (2:8 – 9)	The sailors had forsaken idols; they were more faithful than Jonah.
You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity. (4:2)	Jonah DIDN'T WANT God to be gracious, compassionate, and forgiving.

In each case, Jonah is doing something totally weird. It's like saying one thing and doing the opposite. Jonah wanted God to bring 'calamity' on the Assyrians. 'Bring it on! I want 'em dead!' Jonah wanted them wiped out so bad, he could taste it. And it was almost going to happen? Maybe in Jonah's own lifetime! *Jonah wanted to hog God up just for himself, or for his own people, Israel. That is Jonah's mistake.*

Why did Jonah make this mistake? Partly because it's easy and we all do it. Partly because of his past job. Outside the book of Jonah itself, Jonah is mentioned at only one place in the OT: 2 Kings 14:25. There he is identified as a prophet of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who rightly predicted that Israel would recapture territory from Syria that was traditionally part of the Promised Land. His message was nationalistic, or at least could have been understood that way. If you combine faith and nationalism, be careful. We say 'God bless *America*.' The nice thing about being positive is that we don't even have to identify our enemy. It's pretty clear that the U.S. nowadays seems to need an enemy. So after the Soviet

Union, then it's Muslims terrorists like Al-Qaeda, then Iraq because it's not so hidden, and now it's immigrants. Just fill in the implicit blank: anyone who makes us feel nervous at night. God bless *America*, be gracious and compassionate with *us*, but with *them*...??? We don't pray for God to bless *them*. We want to hog God up for ourselves. And when God calls us to love the whole world the way He loves the whole world, we become 'angry,' and 'greatly displeased.'

And yet what would that mean for you and me? It's easy to make this mistake: Israel was where Jonah was from, it's where his affections were, it was his first assignment from God. But there's more. For Jonah, this is all about a certain kind of justice. How should God treat your enemies, your opponents, or people who are just plain far away from you?

Illus: Think about it individually. This past week, a young woman told me that her uncle had attempted to rape her. She had been home alone, and in that vulnerable moment, he had entered the house and threatened her. She asked God to stop him, and miraculously, he stopped. He left. She told her family and now the whole extended family is dealing with this trauma. But she herself, after a few months, let the Lord heal her to the point where she doesn't want to face him, but she wants God's best for him. She sees this man and his problems and the challenges his family is facing, and wants God's best for him.

Do you want God's best for the person who wants to take your job, or show you up, or make you look bad? One of my housemates just got engaged and she went to buy a wedding dress at a major sale at Filene's Basement, and the women there were ruthless, absolutely ruthless and ugly, hoarding up wedding dresses they weren't planning to buy just to barter. Can you wish for God's best for that person? Do you pray for God's best for that parent you're angry with? When I see athletes pray when they win, I wonder what they pray for. Do they pray for God's best for their opponents? Or is the prayer, 'Thank you God for letting me beat that sucker into the ground!!! On public TV!!!'

Last week, Larry said that God wants to use us to reach Boston. Whether you're here for a long time like me or whether you're here for a year, this is your assignment from God while you're here. Whether you thought that or not, and whether you like it or not, Boston is your place of ministry, or one of your places. You might not like how competitive people are here. You might be too caught up in the competition to be loving. Part of the challenge of trying to care about people in Boston is the spirit of competition that is thick in this place. Whether it is the competition for a good grade or the competition for good neighborhoods between ethnic groups, Boston is a competitive place. But nevertheless, God's desire is for people in Boston to receive Him, and to use you to make that invitation. You might be put off by people's lack of hospitality here. You might be inhospitable yourself. But nevertheless, God's desire is for people in Boston to receive Him, and to use you. It might trouble you that 1 in 20 people in Boston are millionaires. Boston is the most gentrified city in the nation, and I imagine that Cambridge is similar. How do you feel about that? Some of you are here at CCFC for God's heart for the poor but not God's heart for the world. You want to reserve the right to judge the rich, to call them the oppressor, and to let that be that. Well, what if they are? Is that anything more than what Jonah faced? God desires them, and He wants to use us.

God's Question: v.4

So how does God draw us in? Well, how did He respond to Jonah? In v.4, the LORD said, 'Do you have good reason to be angry?' Whenever God confronts people who are committing some evil, some sin, he asks them a searching question that demands ruthless honesty. Back in Genesis 3 and 4, how did God confront Adam and Eve and then Cain? He asked them a burning question: 'Where are you?' 'Did you do what I told you not to?' 'Will you master sin alone?' It's not that God is ignorant. He knows the answer. But he wants us to answer the question. When He's asked me these types of questions, this is what I've sensed. First, He wants us to step back into relationship with Him. By asking us a question, He calls us forward. Simply answering the question requires that we step back into relationship with God. Second, He wants us to own the fact that where we are and why we're there are totally messed up. He wants a confession.

But Jonah doesn't respond. Like Cain in Genesis 4, Jonah says nothing. You know you're in a bad place spiritually when God is asking you a question and you don't answer. It's a bad sign for Jonah. I imagine him like one of my children, sticking out his lower lip.

It's childish the way Jonah responds. He hangs up the phone, as it were. He sticks out his lip. The sad thing is that Jonah has experienced God's grace himself in a very profound way. The fish rescued him from drowning and coughed him up on dry land. And yet when God blesses other people, he doesn't like it. He sulks in silence.

Jonah's Love of Shelter: v.5 – 6

In v.5 – 6, we see what Jonah does love. ⁵ 'Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.' Jonah just waits. Maybe, he thinks, the Ninevites will sin after all. Let's see if it's for real! He builds a little 'booth' or 'shelter.' What's intriguing about Jonah is how much he likes being enclosed.

- So he went down to Joppa, found a ship...and went down into it...Jonah had gone below into the hold of the ship, lain down and fallen sound asleep. (1:3 – 5)
- And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights. (1:17)
- Nevertheless I will look again toward Your holy temple. (2:4)
- And my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple. (2:7)
- There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade (4:5)

Jonah's shelter reminds him of what? Of home. In particular, it reminds him of the Temple in Jerusalem. That's why he thinks about the temple in his prayer in 2:4 and 2:7, even though it seems really strange that he's in the belly of a fish and thinks of the Temple. But that's what the Book of Jonah is trying to get us to see. Connect the dots. Jonah just likes to feel protected, sheltered.

So when God adds a nice little sun shade, like an extension on his porch, to Jonah's shelter, Jonah think it's like adding a whole second story to his house. 'Wow!!!' Look at v.6: ⁶ 'So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.' Jonah was 'extremely happy'? What does 'extremely happy' mean? Well the word 'extremely' is used to describe the sailors' fear of the huge storm that was about to capsize their ship. They were really, really, REALLY scared. Now it's used to describe Jonah's happiness. He was really, really, REALLY happy. Scripture is saying something about our emotions. What makes us really happy? If a good beer makes you happy, great. But if it makes you happier than God saving people, then there's something wrong with you. Or if a lot of money makes you happier than God saving people, then there's something wrong with you. There is a deep and fierce joy that we can cultivate: God's joy, which is for the whole world. Jonah is not cultivating it right now.

God Questions Jonah Again: v.7 – 10

If Jonah loved shelters, then God loved taking them away from him. Just as God used the fish, so He'll use a worm. ⁷ 'But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered.' ⁸ When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, 'Death is better to me than life.' ⁹ Then God said to Jonah, 'Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?' And he said, 'I have good reason to be angry, even to death.'

Being stripped of his shelter made him miserable in a childish kind of way. What kind of person is Jonah really? This makes us reevaluate Jonah completely. Back when he threw himself off the ship, when the storm hit, we thought that maybe he was being nice to the sailors. Nope. He didn't care about the sailors. He would rather have died in the ocean than gone to Nineveh and given it a second chance. Back in v.3, Jonah said, 'Death is better to me than life.' In v.8, Jonah 'begged with all his soul to die.' He then says, again, 'Death is better to me than life.' When God questions him in v.9, Jonah says one last time, 'I have good reason to be angry, even to death.' Four times in the text Jonah says he would rather die.

But he doesn't even give a reason. He says, 'Yes, I have good reason, even to death.' But what is it? Why isn't it listed? What Jonah is saying is, 'It feels unfair.' We might also ask, 'If God is also blessing them, how does that satisfy the injustice that I feel?' Who wants to live in a world where Hitler could repent and be forgiven by God? Jonah's problem was the opposite of Job's. Job asked what kind of world it was if the righteous could suffer. Jonah asked what kind of world it was if the wicked could repent and get mercy. Where was the order in the universe? Jonah wanted to live in a world where God was perfectly just, according to Jonah's definition, by Jonah's time table. If God was not going to do this, then Jonah preferred to die.

Anger is important to process with the Lord, but 'human anger does not achieve the righteousness of God' says James 1:20. God is not asking Jonah to shut off his anger. But God is asking Jonah to give Him the anger, and to not let his anger take priority over God's mission and heart of compassion. Look at v.10 – 11.¹⁰ 'Then the LORD said, 'You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight.'¹¹ Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?'

One of the marks of maturity is empathy, and the mark of spiritual maturity is empathy with God. How does God feel? God wants even the Ninevites to know Him, to enter a relationship with Him, to be transformed by Him to also be vehicles of blessing to God's world.

Illus: Haitian men dealing drugs on our street. Men standing around at all times of day and night. I tried to get to know them. Arguments in the middle of the night. Cars driving through our neighborhood at high speed. That was too dangerous. So, I basically gave up being nice to them. Instead, I called the police. Every day. I saw them as only an annoyance. Going to an InterVarsity national staff meeting, being led in a song in Haitian Creole, and not liking the language. I felt the resistance in me. Azibe, Haitian men giving \$, having a church meeting at Azibe's place.

Illus: It also reminds me of Elizabeth Elliot. In 1953 in Quito, Ecuador, Elizabeth Howard married Jim Elliot. They were both missionaries and had been on again, off again in their dating relationship. When they finally got married, it was in many ways a dream come true. They had attended Wheaton College together. They both had a desire to spread the love of Jesus. But they were uncertain about what direction they were going in. Finally they were married. But then Jim was murdered by the Huaorani (or Auca) tribespeople, while Jim was trying to translate the Bible into their language.

Illus: college students not befriending the party type, because of judgment.

Miroslav Volf has a wonderful book entitled *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*. Volf is a Croatian Christian thinker, who is writing about his war-torn Balkans. Volf dives into the question of 'other' and differences across gender, ethnic and cultural lines – how this fear of 'other' has led to both 'exclusion' of 'otherness' and the most brutal acts of hatred and anger known to humanity. He says, 'God was slicing through Jonah's barrier in his theology and it was very destabilizing for him. Jonah could not embrace the notion that those who he considered his enemies could find the grace and mercy that he and his people have found. His resistance to God's unpredictable call was much more complex than not wanting to follow that call – this was a determination to sabotage the extension of God's grace...Jonah had an enemy who was drinking herself to death. God called him to go and tell her that if she did not stop, she would kill herself. He refused to go to her with that message... The book of Jonah is not simply about Jonah – it is a warning for a people – Israel – to leave their unilateral, ethnocentric posture behind and join God in his mission to the nations around them. God uses Jonah as a type of satire – THIS IS WHAT YOU WILL BECOME – Jonah very much was a prophet to warn Israel of the dangers to exclusion. God's mercy reveals how Jonah constructed a very small world for himself.' (Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p.57) So in the end, Jonah was a satire for the entire Jewish nation, but really a story that stands through time. It's an exaggerated situation, but in that way, it's helpful because anytime we start to go down that direction, we can read Jonah and tell. You know your heart is not in line with God's when God blesses others and even transforms them, and you get angry.

Though Isaiah is the most quoted prophet in the Gospel, Jesus never explicitly compared himself with Isaiah. He did compare himself to Jonah. "For as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and nights in the heart of the earth." (Mt.12:38-41; 16:1-4; Lk.11:29-32) Jesus clearly sees his ministry in parallel with Jonah, minus Jonah's bad attitude.

In Jesus' case, the 'sign of Jonah' had two sides. Jesus' death, burial and resurrection in three days are like Jonah being in the fish for three days. And the transformation of the Gentiles is the second aspect of the sign. As the Ninevites respond to God based on this very small bit of information about God from Jonah, so all the nations will respond to Jesus on the very great information about Jesus. Then, the earliest Christians understood Jonah well. Early Christian art, especially in the Roman catacombs, often uses Jonah imagery. The church thought of itself as in the belly of the catacombs and that it was called to proclaim to Rome the message of Jesus, even though Rome martyred Christians.

WHEN WE COMMIT OURSELVES DOWN THE PATH OF GOD'S MERCY, WE LOSE OPTIONS.
We can't stay angry, or limit forgiveness or incur debt.

1. Concern for the poor- "if I go to the city and see the poor, I will also see how much you truly love them. I don't want to do that because I really want my life, so I am going to ignore your call."
2. Concern for my family- "if I go home and pray for my family after all the hurt they have caused me, I will see how much you love them. I don't want to do that because I reserve the right to be angry."
3. Concern for the campus- "If I go to campus and seek to become acquainted with my neighbor who intimidates me because of his liberal views, I will see how much you love them. I don't want to do this because I reserve the right to be "right".
4. Concern for campus- "if we as a fellowship seek to build honest bridges with the gay/lesbian/queer groups on campus and extend both kindness and openness to them in the name of Christ, we will see the love you have for them. We will not do this because we reserve the right to turn on them and fight against issues such as gay marriage.
5. Concern for my enemy- "If I go to my friend and seek reconciliation, I will see how much you love her. I do not want to do this because I reserve the right to shun her and let her feel distance a bit more."

The Missing Ending of Jonah

There is no ending to the Book of Jonah. What did Jonah eventually decide? We're not sure. Certain stories or books of the Bible have no ending like that: Nathan's parable to David, the Gospel of Mark, the parable of the prodigal son, and Acts. In each case, we as the readers are being asked to provide the ending based on the patterns and flow of the story. So how are we supposed to answer God? 'Jonah has no good reason! Jonah is ridiculous!' And how does that boomerang back to us? 'We have no good reason to resist God's compassion.' Oh.

Why are you angry? Are you angry because someone did better than you? Are you angry because your parents weren't perfect? Are you angry because you're single? Are you angry because of historic injustice? Anger is important to process with the Lord, but 'human anger does not achieve the righteousness of God' says James 1:20. God is not asking you to shut off your anger. But God is asking you to give Him your anger, and to not let your anger take priority over God's mission and heart of compassion.