

“Running From (For) God”

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Second in a series on the Book of Jonah

Jonah 1

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The LORD's word came to Yonah ben Amittay: *“Get up, go to the huge city of Nineveh and call out against it, because their evil has come up before my face.”* go with them to Tarshish from the face of the LORD.

But the LORD hurled a huge wind into the sea, there was a huge storm in the sea, and the ship made a threat to break up. The sailors were afraid and cried out each of them to his god. They hurled the things that were in the ship into the sea to lighten it of them.

Yonah had gone down into the inmost parts of the vessel, lain down and gone to sleep. The captain went to see him and said to him, *“What do you mean, sleeping? Get up, call on your god. Perhaps the god will give a thought to us and we won't perish.”*

The men said to each other, *“Come on, let's make lots fall so we can know on whose account this evil has come to us.”* They made lots fall, and the lot fell on Yonah. They said to him, *“Tell us, please, on whose account this evil has come to us. What's your work? Where do you come from? What's your country? What people are you from?”*

He said to them, *“I'm a Hebrew. I live in fear of the LORD the God of the heavens, who made the sea and the dry land.”* The men were hugely afraid, and said to him, *“What is this you've done?”* when the men knew that he was fleeing from before the LORD, when he had told them.

They said to him, *“What shall we do to you so that the sea quiets down from upon us?”* (when the sea was growing stormier). He said to them, *“Lift me up and hurl me into the sea, and the sea will quieten down from upon you, because I acknowledge that it was on my account that this huge storm has come upon you.”*

The men rowed to get back to dry land, but they couldn't, because the sea was growing stormier against them. They called to the LORD, *“Oh LORD, may we please not perish for this man's life. Don't put upon us the blood of someone free of guilt. Because of you, LORD—as you wished, you have acted.”* They lifted Yonah up and hurled him into the sea; and the sea stopped its raging.

continued . . .

The men were in huge fear of the LORD. They offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made pledges.

The LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Yonah, and Yonah was in the fish's insides three days and three nights.

Adapted from a translation by John Goldingay.

God selects and sends Jonah to turn people to God.

To people who are not the Lord's people . . . God sends Jonah.

To people who do not spring from God's miracle in Abraham and Sarah, who are not the particular family chosen by God to bless all families . . . God sends Jonah.

To people who do not know God's liberating power to set the enslaved free, who don't know God's oceans-moving power to make out of no-way, who don't know God's promise-making and promise-keeping power, who don't know God's guiding power that leads wanderers through wildernesses . . . to them God sends Jonah.

To people who do not know which way is up, who do not know right from wrong, God's way from all confused ways . . . God sends Jonah.

To these people who are outside of Israel, who were "of the nations," gentiles, *goyim* . . . God sends Jonah.

What God has for these people is so beautiful, so true, so much more "life" than anything else, so to them God sends Jonah, to turn them to God.

Jonah won't go.

God sends the likes of Jonah. God sends the likes of us! So this is going to get messy, detoured, even hopeless. But still, God's mission, God's purposes, the expanse of God's salvation . . . it's all going to get done.

Even by Jonah running from God.

II

I doubt Jonah has ever been to Nineveh. He's almost certainly heard of it. It's huge: in size, power, and the evil it does. Jonah wants nothing to do with it.

Why he runs, I don't know. Later on we'll hear what he says is his reason. For now, who knows? He seems scared of something.

Everything in this story is over-the-top. The wind is huge. The storm is huge. Their fear is huge. The fish is huge. The city is huge. Jonah's running is huge. He books a one-way ticket to Tarshish. That's about as far away the other way from Nineveh as he can get.

Jonah runs from God. . . . Huh!? Jonah runs from God? You know how we finish our worship times: "*Wherever you go, God will be there!*" That's good news! You'd think Jonah would know that, would know better than shipping off to heaven-knows-where, because Heaven does know, even there.

Maybe Jonah does know. He is an experienced prophet of God, after all. He's already spoken God's word to Israel's king.¹ He's got a track-record. He knows the LORD.

Still, there are places where we feel God's Presence more intensely. And places where we more easily forget God. Maybe Jonah just wants to forget.

When he gives his quitting notice and skips town without leaving a forwarding address, the mistake he makes is not miscalculating the metaphysics of divine omnipresence.² His error is not theological. It's disobedience. God has called him. He refuses.

God refuses too . . . to give up on Jonah, or you.

III

You. Me. Who, like Jonah, God selects and sends.

God calls you. The beautiful God calls you into the beautiful life which God has prepared for you. God calls you into God's forgiveness, so you can be reconciled with God. God calls you into God's healing, so you can live in peace, whole and well with others. God calls you into discipleship, so you can learn from God and walk with God.

¹ 2nd Kings 14:25-27 tells of Jonah's commission to speak to King Jeroboam of Israel. His message was that the king should enlarge the nation's boundaries, which he did.

² Philip Cary, Jonah. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008), 39.

God chooses you and God calls you.

God selects you, then sends you into God's mission.

Something we find throughout the Scriptures is God's peculiar and persistent insistence on working through people. So often, God is making things happen, not with a snap of fingers, but with an open hand, God is saying "Come with me. Share in what I am doing. Be part — partners! — in my work."

Sometimes God sends this call through a voice, a vision. Sometimes God sends this call through a sense and a stirring inside. Sometimes God sends this call through a word of wisdom someone gives to you, through the discernment of a church-community which sees God at work in you.

God selects you and God sends you. But do you worry that you might miss it? Or that you will hear, but others will put up barriers to keep you from following? Or that you'll hear, and skedaddle off somewhere else?

Way back when I was a student, a chaplain said this to a small group of us. *"If you think God is calling you to something, the best way to test it is this. Start running the other way. If it really is God's call, you won't get far."*

You'll never make it to Tarshish.

IV

You heard what happens. Storm crashes on them unlike anything they've ever seen. Each cries out to his own gods for help.

This ship's company hails from all over. In the ancient world every nation, each city even, had its own complement of gods. These were particular to each place, each people. But this Storm! Far from any of their homes. Whose god could this be?

They all cry out. Maybe their variety of gods together can lobby on their behalf with whatever unknown god is behind the Storm.³ They drag Jonah on deck, to add his voice to their chorus of terror. You can imagine them saying, *"We know, Jonah. You've told us. You're on bad terms with your god . . . what's his name? . . . Yahweh? . . . 'the Lord'*

³ John H. Walton, "Jonah" in John H. Walton (general editor), Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 5:107.

you call him . . . never heard of him. But try anyway. We need all the help we can get."

Realize this: they don't expect Jonah's god is behind this any more than theirs are.

They toss lots (probably tiles, one with each person's name on it).⁴ Jonah's pops up. Even that doesn't tell them it's Jonah's fault. Just that he has valuable information about what's going on.⁵

What he says, they've never expected. *I belong to "the LORD, the God of the heavens, who made the sea and the dry land."*

They'd figured Jonah's quarrel with his god is just his business. It has nothing to do with them. They've got their own gods. Live and let live. Their pluralism, however, it meets its limits with this Storm.

Jonah's is *the* GOD of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. They believe him. Maybe because Jonah is not bragging about GOD. He is confessing: *This is GOD, against whom I've sinned, and from whom I can't run.* They realize that nothing of what's happening makes sense, unless what Jonah is saying about GOD is true.⁶ If so, their gods aren't.

IV

So they worship . . . GOD.

Especially when they hurl Jonah over and Storm stops!

Jonah, God's prophet, doesn't call out to God. They do.

Jonah doesn't worship God. They do.

Jonah doesn't trust God. These who have never before heard of GOD, they do.

Remember. God selects and sends Jonah to turn people to God. People outside of

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Notice carefully the wording of verses 7-8. They toss lots to find out "on whose account this evil has come to us." When Jonah's lot points to him, though, they don't jump to the conclusion that it's own Jonah's account. Rather, they simply conclude that he can tell them. In other words, they don't realize (yet) that Jonah is the answer, just that he can give them the answer.

⁶ Carey, 61-64.

God's People. People ignorant of God. People lost and confused.

Jonah runs away from this. See what happens though. Because Jonah runs from God, these know-nothing sailors can start celebrating God.

So it seems that, despite himself, Jonah has been running for God the whole time.

As for Jonah . . . now he's been buried at sea, and is food for fish.

But come on! After what you've just seen? You don't think God gives up that easily. On Jonah. On you.