

Jonah: Running Away from God

SCOTT HOEZEE

Children's author Margaret Wise Brown wrote many classic books for kids, including the well-known *Good Night, Moon*. In another beloved book, *The Runaway Bunny*, we see a little bunny who keeps testing his mother by suggesting he might run away from home. The little bunny says he might become a trout in a stream and swim away, but his mother replies that then she would become a fisherman to catch him. The little bunny says he would become a bird and fly away, but his mother replies then she would become a tree that he would perch in. On and on it goes, and the bottom line is: You cannot run away from the love of your mother. As the book of Jonah opens, Jonah seems to think he can run away, too—run away from God; but he soon learns he cannot. Stay tuned as we begin to explore the book of Jonah.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we are beginning now a four-part series, which will correspond to the four chapters of Jonah. The four chapters of Jonah are broken up very well into, really, the four dramatic acts. If Jonah were a play, it would have four acts; and so, each of the episodes in this series is going to focus on one chapter at a time.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is a drama, but it is also a comedy. So, it might be fair to call it a dramady, because there are plenty of things that are going on in the scripture. There are turns of phrase in Hebrew, if you could catch it. Also, this is one of the minor prophets' books; and of course, we know we don't call them minor prophets because they are lesser than the major prophets, but we call them minor prophets because the books are smaller than the ones...like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel books. This is a short book, this is four chapters; and so, a lot of the books are in sequential order before the intertestamental period before Matthew was written. They are called minor prophets because they are shorter books.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, they are the short ones. There are twelve of them, and they are books like, as you say, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah. Jonah, though, stands out. There are a couple of reasons it stands out. We will note the first one now and we will note the second one in a few minutes; but Jonah stands out from all those other books because Jonah is a narrative. Jonah is a story. Now, you get some stories inside like Jeremiah, but Jeremiah as a book isn't an unfolding story. Neither is Amos, neither is Micah or Malachi. So, Jonah stands out from the other eleven minor prophets because his book is a story—it is a narrative—which makes it unusual in that particular collection.

DARRELL DELANEY

We don't really know that much about Jonah as a man, do we? We don't know very much about him as a prophet; we just know that he has been called on the scene, and there is drama...there is more of a narrative; and I think this one, I mean, for our kids, it is one of the most entertaining stories, even before Veggie Tales came out with it, because it unfolds in a story form as opposed to the prose and narrative that these other

books come in.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I haven't watched Veggie Tales in years, my kids are grown, but thanks for reminding me of that. It was an interesting show...

DARRELL DELANEY

Jonah was a good one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; that was a good one; but right, we don't know anything about Jonah, but then again, we didn't really know much about anybody else either... Amos or Zechariah or Zephaniah. These prophets just sort of appear out of nowhere, and that makes them part of a very, very important tradition in the history of Israel. Way back in Deuteronomy 18, when Moses was on the verge of dying and leaving Israel, there is a very important passage in Deuteronomy 18 that promises that there would always be at least one prophet in Israel. Moses was the first great prophet, but there will always be a prophet like Moses in Israel. You know, they would be there to speak to Israel on God's behalf. Sometimes it was to challenge Israel; sometimes it was to comfort Israel; sometimes it was to rebuke Israel; but there would always be a prophet in the tradition of Moses.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, when we are talking, we are speaking into these microphones so that people can hear us; and when I am speaking at church, I grab the microphone and I speak. The microphone amplifies my voice. What happens with prophets is that they receive a word from God, and like God's microphone, he is speaking through them...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

And they hear the Word of the Lord from these prophets; and Jonah is in a long line of prophets, based on that prophecy in Deuteronomy 18. God continued to have spokespersons and mouth pieces to speak his truth to the people of Israel. Whether they listened or not, that was on them; but usually they got a word or an order from God; and then Jonah is really a twist on it, isn't it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, this line goes way back. Moses was succeeded by Joshua, but then eventually we get Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, Huldah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Malachi, Zechariah, and others; and we know the drill, right Darrell, with these prophets... we know the drill.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God calls them to be a prophet... good; God speaks to them, and as you just said, they turn around and repeat God's words. God speaks, you repeat, you amplify the voice of God for the people. That is the drill... that's the deal. God speaks, the prophet listens, the prophet repeats what he heard.

So, when Jonah 1 begins, we expect how this should go, right?

The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

Okay; so, God has spoken.

DARRELL DELANEY

This is the typical plan you just mentioned, but in history with the Israelites, Nineveh is the enemy...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, Jonah is not all that excited about going to tell the enemy God's Word, because what if they heard it? What if they might turn? What if they changed their ways? I think that he wants to see some sort of vindication for what has happened with the people of Israel, and Nineveh has been the enemy the whole time; but he has a word from the Lord that he has to obey, but he chooses not to obey it, as we see in verse 3. It says:

But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.

So, like you were saying in the beginning, you cannot run away from Mom's love. Well, he is, in a sense, trying to run away from God and God's order to go and preach this good news to the people of Nineveh; and that is a problem when you run away.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, the normal pattern of events is disrupted. The Lord speaks, the prophet listens, the prophet repeats; but here, the Lord speaks, the prophet listens and he runs away. He is not going to do it. But you know, what you were just saying Darrell is really important, because we said earlier one thing that makes Jonah stand out from the other eleven minor prophets is that Jonah is a story...it is a narrative. It is not just a string of prophecies; but the other thing that makes Jonah very unusual...although the book of Nahum works a similar point...but what makes Jonah different from Amos, let's say, or Zephaniah, is that he is not going to be speaking to Israel. All of the other prophetic books have messages for Israel—for Judah. Not here; this is not typical; this is unusual. God is telling him to speak to non-Israelites. So, in addition to Jonah being a narrative, making it a different kind of book, Jonah being commanded to speak to somebody who wasn't Israel makes it a different kind of book.

Darrell Delaney;

So, that actually is a plot twist, if you will...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

Because if God has often called them to speak to their own people so that they could live that standard, it was because he wanted them to be the example that he was calling them to be; but if we look at scripture, we see that God's original plan was for his people to be cross-cultural missionaries; and Isaiah 49:6 says:

"I will make you (Israel) a light to the nations, that my salvation shall reach the ends of the earth."

They cannot reach the ends of the earth if they are only speaking to their own people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or if they are only concerned for their own people. Again, we don't want to get ahead of ourselves in this series, but if they are only concerned with their own people, and if they are only concerned to keep everybody else out...you know, if Israel becomes a members-only club, that is a problem, right, because of what you just read; and it goes all the way back to Abram in Genesis 12: "I will make you a blessing to all nations..."

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But Israel lost sight of that, and Jonah is going to become a cautionary tale on that very point; but Jonah is going to run away, or he is going to try; but, in just a moment, we will see how that goes; so, stay tuned.
Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and this is the first of four episodes on the book of Jonah. So, let's dive right back into Jonah Chapter 1. Jonah has tried to run away. He went to a place called Joppa, bought fare on a ship to go to a place called Tarshish, and then in verse 4...we are not very far into the book already, only verse 4: The Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.⁵ All the sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.⁶The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish?"

So, we know that Jonah is the problem here, but he is sleeping like a baby. You wonder how he could do that when he is trying to run away from God.

DARRELL DELANEY

And we know clearly who the storm comes from.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

The scripture says that God sent it. I think it is also important to note, Scott, that you cannot just do what you want to do and do the opposite of what God commands without any sort of consequences. Even though all these people on the ship are calling out to their own gods, the one who is serving the true and living God is going opposite of the plan that God has for him; and that not only affects him, but the people in proximity with him. So, now that because he has gone down and taken a nap in this thing when he is really supposed to be going to Nineveh, these people in this ship are affected as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; let's just say Jonah's conscience wasn't exactly pricking him at this point, although it certainly should have been. The sailors are religiously all over the map, right? There seem to be as many gods that are believed in as there are men on the ship, so the captain has to wake up Jonah, of all things, and says: Pray to your god, whoever...you know, whoever your god is; just pray to him. The more the merrier. We don't want to die here; so, you know, let's get another god in on the action and maybe some of them...one of these gods can end this storm. But Jonah, I think, has kind of a niggling sense that he is the problem here...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think he kind of knows it.

DARRELL DELANEY

This is one of the reasons why he probably just kind of avoided the whole thing and went and in and took a nap; but I think the people were really in a panic state, because this boat was taking on water; and so, they tried to get down to the bottom of it, as you can see in verse 7: Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let

us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on (surprise) Jonah. ⁸So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?” ⁹He answered, “I am a Hebrew and I serve the Lord, the God of heaven, the one who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰This terrified them and they asked, “What have you done?” (They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he had already told them so.)

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, now we are backfilling a little bit here in verse 10. We weren't told this earlier, but when he came onboard the ship they said: Well, what are you doing? And he said: Well, I am running away from Yahweh...you know, I am running away from the Lord. Oh, okay, fine. These people do not believe there is just one God. So, Jonah is running away from his God...big deal. So, he already told them that, but now he really identifies. What kind of work do you do? Well, he is not doing his work at all right now, is he? That is the very point. He is running away from his job...

DARRELL DELANEY

He doesn't tell them the job either.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; but you know what is interesting, Darrell, is that these are polytheistic people. They believe in many, many, many gods, but they have obviously heard of this Yahweh...this God of Israel...and they know that this God has a reputation. Maybe they have heard the stories about Egypt and the Red Sea, who knows; or the plagues; but this God has a reputation of being one you didn't want to tangle with; and so, when Jonah says: that is the one I am tangling with, they are terrified.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, even though they don't believe in the true and living God, the true and living God has a reputation among the nations; and it is interesting that Jonah would even try to run away from this God, because Hebrews says that it is the face of the Lord that he is running from. So, *lipnê Adonai* means the face of the Lord, and then it says that literally he ran away from the face of the Lord. How could you run away from someone who sees everything; who is paying close attention to every detail? That is really crazy; but then, we see that these people have an idea of who the real God is or they wouldn't even be panicking and terrified like that. So, now they are like: What do we do? Then Jonah says: Toss me over the edge; and they are like: Wait, now you want us to send you...oh, you want us to send you to the grave; that is even worse! We are not going to do that. So then, the problem is going to get worse if they don't listen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And by the way, how is that for irony, Darrell? Jonah is a prophet of Yahweh—a prophet of Israel—but these sailors have more respect for God in this moment than he does...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, they have more respect for God than Jonah does at this particular moment, for goodness' sake; but they are good guys. They don't want to make Israel's God any more angry by killing Jonah. They try their best to row back to land...we are back to reading the text in verse 13...but they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. ¹⁴Then they cried to Yahweh...they cried to the Lord...: “Do not let us die for taking this man's life. (They throw him overboard; and then we read:) ^{15b}The raging sea grew calm, and at this the men greatly feared the Lord (Yahweh), and then they offered a sacrifice to Yahweh and made vows to him. So, despite himself, Jonah spread the knowledge of God after all.

DARRELL DELANEY

Jonah is going to be an example for the Lord, whether he is a good example or a bad example...

SCOTT HOEZEE

In spite of himself, yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

God actually uses him as an example; and these people who do not know the Lord...who are from different countries...it is ironic to see them being more faithful than the one who actually knows God. I think that can help us be humble in our understanding today, that there may be people who don't even know Jesus Christ, but still could live in a way that is faithful and honoring to him; and we could learn something from their testimony, if we are not saying: Oh, we cornered the market on the Gospel—we cornered the market on the Good News—and if we don't say anything, then there is nothing going to happen. That is not true. God worked in the lives of these people in the ship, and he can work in the lives of other people who do not know him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

My friend Neal Plantinga says, and I have said it before on *Groundwork*: God can hit straight shots with crooked sticks; and Jonah is a crooked stick here, but God hit a straight shot with him anyway and got right to the heart of these sailors; but Jonah, of course, should have known better, that this wasn't going to work...this plan of his. If he had only remembered the 139th psalm:

⁷Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? ⁸If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. ⁹If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, ¹⁰even there your hand will guide me.

It is the runaway bunny we talked about at the beginning of the program, Darrell. Psalm 139 tells us you cannot flee from God. No matter how far away you go, you are not going to flee from God—you are not going to get away from God; and Jonah should have known better, that that plan of his wasn't going to work.

DARRELL DELANEY

And if God is everywhere, it makes it useless to flee from an omnipresent God, who is even in the sea, who is even in the situations that we don't think he is in. In this situation, even though Jonah was thrown over into the sea, God actually gave a fish for him to be swallowed by, which is a grace, because he could have drowned to death...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, then in verse 17, as we close this section, we see the Lord has provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights; but there is more to this story; and we want to tell you more about it, so stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this first episode of a four-part series on the book of Jonah. Each episode in this series will correspond to a chapter. So, we are in Jonah Chapter 1; and Darrell, just to recap: Jonah received an unusual request. All of the other prophets in the Bible basically are told to go prophesy to Israel...to Judah. Go tell the people of Israel...the covenant people of God...what God wants them to hear, but not Jonah. He has to go to Nineveh and call them to repentance. We will save it for later in this series, why it was that God cared about a people so wayward and so far outside of Israel; but for now, God gave Jonah a message to deliver, but for reasons that will become clear later, Jonah wanted nothing to do with it, and so he ran away.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; Jonah doesn't want anything to do with this. He runs in the opposite direction. He ends up in this boat with these people down in Joppa...ends up getting a big storm sent on them; and even though they call out to these foreign gods, they realize that everybody needs to be calling out on their god, and then he calls out on the true and living God. They find out after casting lots who the problem is, and this situation gets even more strange and ironic, but Jonah wants no part of this message to the foreigner. It is actually the situation where the Ninevites are not God's people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, Jonah doesn't feel any obligation to help them, and we will find out that later for sure...confirmed later in the book; but we said Jonah tried to flee from God...flee from God's presence...flee from God's command. It didn't work, so he goes overboard—they throw him overboard. The sailors are so impressed with Israel's God that they sacrifice and make vows and promises to the God of Israel. Jonah, meanwhile, does not drown. He is swallowed up by a great fish. So, we are glad Jonah didn't drown, but I don't know how you can breathe inside of a fish either. So, you know, despite all the cute little children's illustrations of Jonah sitting inside of a hollow whale with, you know, a table and a candle, that is not what the inside of a fish looks like. So, we are not going to get hung up on the literalistic details of this. There a fanciful element to all of this. The point is, God has saved him; and we are going to see in the next chapter that Jonah is very, very thankful for the fact that he did not die; but he is not out of God's presence either, and we will pick up that in the next program in this series; but, Darrell, just to sort of bring this home for all of us, we don't want to be overly simplistic here, but you know, I think all of us have a little Jonah in us, right? We all sometimes don't really want to do what we know God really wants us to do; and often it is exactly Jonah's conundrum. We are called to love people that we don't want to love. We don't even like them, right? We are called to love people who behave in unlovable ways, but we know that God has called us, but sometimes, like Jonah, we think: If I just ignore it, God's call will go away. If I just head to a different part of town, then, you know, I am not obligated to help the people in that other part of town; but it is not going to work.

DARRELL DELANEY

Jonah found out in the very, very literal sense that he could not escape God's purview...he cannot escape God's presence...just like you read in Psalm 139; and the challenge is: Will he obey God and do what God has called him to do, even if it is a people group that is not his cup of tea? They don't agree with him. They don't believe what he believes; and that is the challenge that we have as missionaries. God is sending all of us somewhere. He might be sending you to work; he might be sending me to school; he might be sending us to our families, even to people who we consider enemies. So, the names that we give people—the labels that we give people—do not exonerate the responsibility to obey God's call to go and speak when he tells us to go and speak.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And God is the hound of heaven. He is going to stay with us. The writer Anne Lamott wrote in her spiritual memoir that she...she compared the presence of God to like a stray cat that was following her everywhere. She just knew that God was at her back. She didn't want to turn around; she didn't want to look at him, but he was like a stray cat that followed her everywhere. She would get home, she would close the door really quick so the cat couldn't get it; but finally the day came when Anne opened the door and said: Oh, forget it; you can come in; and then Jesus filled her heart and she became a Christian; but that is God! God is relentless. God is going to stay with us. Darrell, I think that it is really important for us to let that stray cat in, because we live in such polarized times. I mean, we are being taught by so many different people, not just to disagree with somebody, but if we disagree then we have got to hate them; we have got to call them our enemy.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we take to Facebook and Twitter and we just send out these tweets or make these posts that are totally unloving, but God's Spirit is going to stay with us, like Anne Lamott's stray cat, to say: That is not what you are called to do. You are called to love all people—you are called to speak a word of love for all people. We have got to listen to that voice, and today perhaps more than ever.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I think that that could be a hard lesson for those of us who have a shorter and a more limited view of who God might send them to, and what God might tell them to do; and even the Apostle Peter was surprised by this in Acts Chapter 10, because God called him to go to people who were not Jewish, who did not look like him, did not eat the same foods as him; and he still found out that God has a mission for them. It is right here in Acts Chapter 10. It says:

¹At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ²He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. ³One day at about three in the afternoon, he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" ⁴Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. ⁵Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. ⁶He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea."

And so, that happens; but Peter eventually, against his wishes, is going to go. He has that vision of the sheet being let down from heaven...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And all the non-Kosher foods, but God says: Kill and eat; and it was God's way of saying: You need to reach out to people beyond Israel; but that detail that I just read there in Acts 10:5: Peter was in Joppa! It is the only other time in the Bible that we learn Joppa. Jonah went to Joppa because he didn't want to go to Nineveh. Peter is in Joppa, but he doesn't want to go to Italy. He doesn't want to go talk to these Italians, you know, the non-Jews; but God is going to get him there; and I think, right, that is just a lesson all the way into the New Testament that our resistance to loving people who are not like us is a perennial problem, but God is going to keep calling us. We are never going to succeed at fleeing from that command of God.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is important for us to know that God is going to call us based on Jesus' great commission to go and share the good news with everyone who bears his image; and so, we have to obey that call, and that is a good call to have, thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks be to God. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney. Join us again next time as we continue our study of Jonah by digging into Chapter 2.

Connect with us on our website, groundworkonline.com. Share what *Groundwork* means to you and tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

DARRELL DELANEY

Groundwork is a listener supported program produced by ReFrame Ministries. Visit reframeministries.org for more information.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/jonah-running-away-from-god>

Printed on February 22, 2025

©  ReFrame Ministries