

Runaway Prophet, Gracious God (Jonah 1-2)

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[0 : 0 0] You're willing to share? What's one thing? Ellen you're smiling. You've got something to share about Jonah? No? Nothing? Okay.! You're brave enough to just one interesting thing that they thought.

I always thought it was general and family for three days and two nights, but there was three days and three nights, so by the last noise we were talking about.

Yeah, okay. Thank you. Good to have that really absent among us. Anyone else? No? No? All right. This is a very common Sunday school story, isn't it? All right? I'm sure many of you, you heard this, or maybe some of the pedicure teachers and so on have taught this story before.

We have looked at this story before, but at the start of year is a good time just to be immersed in any part of God's Word. Here at PCBC English, we go through books of the Bible, generally, and then with a bit of topics alongside as well.

In whole books, let us hear God's Word and let him set the agenda. So we're here in these two chapters and then we'll look at the rest of Jonah's story next week. So let's pray. Let's ask God to help us as we hear from him.

[1 : 2 0] Father, what a holy moment it is to tremble before your Word. You promise us and you tell us in Isaiah that the one who is humble and contrite before your Word is the one that you look on with favour.

You tell us that a blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the wicked and nor stands in the way of the sinners or sits in the seat of scoffers, but delights in your instructions, your life-giving words.

And so as this new year begins, we do that right now. And we ask for your help as we hear what Jonah's story has to tell us, primarily and most supremely about your son, Jesus Christ.

We pray all these things in his name, by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen. I wonder what goes through your mind at the start of a new year. What are you looking forward to in 2026?

What are you hoping to avoid? For many of us, a new year marks time, right? The time to remember what's happened and to make some plans, some goals, some resolutions, right?

[2 : 3 0] Any of you here already made a New Year's resolution, perhaps? New Year, new you, our world tells us. Or maybe you're just trying to make it through another week.

And today it's more like, here we go again. All of us have something in mind. All of us are maybe just getting the courage to make resolutions. And here we have a story of someone who was very resolute though, wasn't he?

But in a very different way. Did you notice how resolute, how set he was on skipping, on running away from his job, right? What he was called to do.

Jonah was a prophet of the Lord. But we see in the story, he was resolved to run. He was fixed on fleeing God's clear call on his life.

I want to suggest to you though, that Jonah's story is not just a story of a runaway prophet that we're to point our fingers at and say, shame on you. More importantly, it's a story of a gracious God.

[3 : 35] A God who shows mercy. The mercy that Jonah couldn't give. A God who speaks with compassion that Jonah didn't really have. And like Jonah, we too live surrounded by people just as lost as the city dwellers of Nineveh.

The sailors in this story, this chapter. But why do we run away from them? And what might help us run towards the lost instead? I want to suggest we look today at Jonah's story in three parts, right?

In this first two chapters. First, we're going to observe the story. Secondly, we're going to confront the sins. And then thirdly, we're going to dive deeper into God's mercy. So, hopefully you can follow along in your Bibles.

There's the outline as well. And let's dive deeper into Jonah's story together. I think the story after chapter two, I suggest, can be broken up into three main actions related to Jonah.

Firstly, we see he runs away. Then he's thrown away, as it were. And then we see him praying away. Have a listen again to Jonah chapter one, verse one. The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai.

[4 : 50] Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me. A little details matter. Son of Amittai immediately tells us this is a historical account.

This is the same Jonah who's mentioned in 2 Kings chapter 14, verse 25. This is locating us in the 8th century BC. It's a long time ago, isn't it? Right?

Nearly 3,000 years ago. This was a time when God's people were split between north and south. And Jonah served King Jeroboam in the north in a time when an evil superpower threatened their northern border.

This was Assyria, represented in the story by their capital city, the great city of Nineveh. For centuries our societies have been shaped by Christian values and morals.

That's why we are shocked when terrorists shoot innocent people at the beach. It's why we are sad when, you know, a boy, a young boy might stab strangers on the streets in Asia.

[5 : 58] Sadly, history records how normal actually this kind of behavior was for ancient peoples. In ancient Assyrian culture, there was lots of idol worship.

There was all kinds of widespread immorality. There was extreme brutality. We've sent the younger kids out, but here's a quote from one Assyrian king. This is what he described, what he did for fun, I guess.

I flayed many. Flaying means to actually skin them. Many ride through my land. I burned their adolescent boys and girls. A pillar of the heads I erected in front of the city. This is a bit more graphic than a game of Fortnite, right?

That's why when God calls Jonah to arise and go preach to these people against their wickedness, right? We, as readers, we're meant to cheer, right?

Finally, go! Judgment is coming. And Jonah is called to deliver the good news. But what happens? He runs the wrong way.

[7 : 02] Right? This is like watching a car drive on the wrong side of the road. Hopefully this never happens to you. But we are meant to, as people watching, go, No! Wrong way, Jonah! Rather than go up to Nineveh, notice the text says he goes down to Joppa, the docks of Joppa.

He goes down, he hops in a boat to get as far away as possible from what he's supposed to do, where he's supposed to be. And we get to hear more of Jonah's own kind of dialogue with God next week in chapter 4 and 3.

At this point though, imagine your own instant reaction, right? Some of you might have parents that say, Please, can you go and dot, dot, dot? What's your instant reaction?

Imagine if God called you to preach to a people as godless, as wicked, as threatening as the Assyrians were. Imagine your instant reaction. What about that awful man at work?

Go tell him about Jesus. What's your instant reaction? What about those people who make fun of you at school? Go show them you're a Christian. What's your instant reaction when God asks you to do a hard thing?

[8 : 14] How would you respond if God asked you to show mercy to someone you don't really like? Where would you turn? That's the question at the heart of Jonah's story so far.

So far, God has a message for the Ninevites. Jonah's meant to go preach to them, but he runs away. That's his first action. He runs away. Second action, Jonah's thrown away.

Verse 4 onwards, as we heard from Irene's reading, it kind of retraces Jonah, and he keeps going down and down and down. Did you notice that? He goes down and down, down below the deck, and then into a deep sleep.

He's there fast asleep. Until the captain echoes the words of the Lord earlier. It's almost uncanny. It's like déjà vu. Verse 6. Arise.

Get up and call on your God. You want to imagine Jonah, he thinks he's on a cruise ship now, and he's kind of rubbing the sleep from his eyes. And suddenly he's surrounded by a bunch of scared sailors, not from his own ethnicity.

[9 : 21] In many cultures, that's not a good way to introduce yourself to someone. So what happens next? It seems like there's a couple of questions that they ask him. Right?

The sailors said to each other, let's... They find out it's Jonah's fault that the storm is happening. Then, verse 8, they ask him three questions, right? Don't they? You notice that?

Where do you come... What do you do? Where do you come from? What's your country? From what people are you? There's a couple of questions there. These are very common questions that you ask someone when you get to know them.

Particularly in non-Western cultures. I was in Central Asia once, and you bump into a stranger, and they'll be like, Oh, what's your religion? You know? Where are you from? What do you do for work?

So very common greetings. But notice how Jonah answers. You see that? Verse 9. I am a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and dry land.

[10 : 19] And this is the moment that the sailors realize, wow, your God is behind us. He's the one causing the storm. And so they ask him, what do we need to do? You're the one with the direct line to God.

Tell us, how can we make the sea calm down right now? And Jonah replies, throw me overboard. Did you see that? And I'll become calm. He knows what's going on.

But I want to suggest this is Jonah's perhaps final attempt to escape God's instructions. Right? Here is a prophet, right? Called by God.

He's meant to go to Nibir. No, he's not there. He's not been able to outrun God though, has he? Right? God is on his case. And so it seems like he's trying to make a permanent exit here.

There's a bit of irony, a bit of sadness there, isn't there? This is God, meant to be God's number one prophet. Right? Representing God's words to the whole country of Israel.

[11 : 22] He would rather die than see his enemies repent. What hard thing are you running away from? What are you doing right now? Well, what's there right now in your life that you're doing anything to avoid, even though that God is telling you?

What's even more ironic in this story is what the sailors do next. Did you notice what happens to them? Okay? You need to do a compare and contrast here. Jonah has been thrown overboard.

He's sinking into the water. And what are the sailors doing? They're raising their hands. They're worshipping the Lord. Crying out to Yahweh for mercy. Acknowledging that he is God over all.

Right? What does verse 14 say? You see that? That's the comparison. And then in verse 15 and 16, the men greatly feared the Lord. And they offered a sacrifice to the Lord.

They made vows to him. Here are outsiders responding better than God's chosen people. And shame to say that this happens a lot in the Bible.

[12 : 26] Right? Think about it. Who were the ones that came to worship King Jesus from far off lands? The wise men. Very distant.

Who were the ones who were like, you know, 10 kilometers from Bethlehem and did not even bother to go see them? It was the Jewish king and his priests. It happens over and over again.

The blind man sees Jesus clearly. The religious leaders don't and won't. But if we're honest, sometimes this is a pattern that happens at church too, isn't it?

Right? Someone who is new to the Christian faith. Wow. They're so hungry to worship. They're so eager to learn. Right? We've had a couple of visitors come to ES and they've stayed.

They're so hungry. They're on fire. They're asking questions after the sermon every week. It's so wonderful. And you compare that with the man and woman who has been at church since they were born.

[13 : 23] But dismissive the Bible. Distant from the good news of Jesus. And a lot of times that's the pattern, isn't it? Here we see a picture. Foreign sailors worshipping the Lord.

And Jonah is still far off. Going down and down. What a joke. Jonah's run away. He's thrown away. And then we see most of chapter 2.

And then chapter 7, verse 17 as well. Jonah prays away. He prays away. The tone shifts. It becomes kind of like him singing a worship song and quoting some lyrics to the Lord.

And he's towing it though in a very odd place. In the belly of a fish. Which God appoints to rescue him. Here I do need to make the mention. Some of us do find the idea of a giant fish swallowing Jonah a bit hard to swallow.

I remember chatting with some school-aged kids on a church program once. And then a boy just sat there and said, Can you tell me how on earth Jonah could survive that acidic environment?

[14 : 27] Because I don't know how I would have survived in a stomach like that. This poor fish is certainly one of the most criticized animals in the Bible. And yet it seems like the person who wrote and narrated Jonah's story, he's not that interested in that question though.

You know, the scientific account. How it all panned out. No doubt this is a miraculous rescue. God has done something here far beyond what scientists like you and I can normally observe.

Time and time again though, that's how God works, right? He uses the spectacular for a specific purpose. And the purpose is this, to show that he has authority to people who need to know that he has authority.

Think about the plagues of Egypt, right? Think about the fire on Mount Carmel, right? With Elijah and the Baal prophets. Think about Jesus himself, his life, right? His miraculous birth.

His death and resurrection. Who is the one person writing out in this story that needs a reminder that God is great?

[15 : 34] Jonah. So, let's not be too surprised, right? That God will do the spectacular just to get his attention. Perhaps the guy who just said, verse 9, I'm a Hebrew, I worship the Lord.

Yet, a band of shit needs a better reminder of God's greatness and his ability to save him. This is Jonah. He's cramped in a fish, miraculously alive.

And he prays. He prays, doesn't he? From Jonah's lips, there's so many different references to the Old Testament scriptures, right? Where you can get a glimpse of Lamentations, chapter 3, Psalm 18, Psalm 120, Psalm 42.

This is a man who knew his Bible and he's praying these words to God. Words that he'd sung or chanted in the safety of his kind of synagogue or church family, as it were.

However, when you're in trouble, they take on a more urgent meaning. Our songs teach. They put God's word on our lips. It's so important.

[16 : 38] First time I prayed, I didn't grow up in a Christian environment. My mum was Buddhist. My dad, he was worship the money God and the comfort God and the send your kids over to get a good education God.

First time I prayed though, it was after hearing at a camp, a World Vision camp, how others had a relationship with God. One that I could not quite grasp.

I was amazed with. At that time, I was feeling low and desperate. I chased earthly success and yet I felt so hollow inside. And there surrounded by people who prayed, I learned, oh, I can ask.

I can ask him something. I can ask him anything. I can even speak to him. Sometimes it's when we listen to each other pray that we start to learn how to pray ourselves.

Isn't that so important? As we listen to someone like Jonah, as we listen to, I don't know, mum and dad, as we listen to, you know, people in church praying, that's how we start to grasp the vocabulary.

[17 : 40] It's like learning a language. How do we talk to God? We listen, we learn, and we do it ourselves. There's power in borrowing the words of others when we need to be real with God. That's what Jonah does, right?

He's borrowing words from the Bible to pray to God. In his distress, I called out to the Lord and he answered me, he says. And it's amazing, right? At this point in the story is a turn.

You notice, I've mentioned this, but all through the book of Jonah, so far the journey has been which direction? Come on, down, right? Down, right? Down. Down, right? Down.

Remember, down to dropper, down into the ship, down below the deck, and then down into the water. Look at verse 6 of chapter 2. You brought my life up from the pit.

Oh, Lord my God. Isn't that good news? No matter how down you are, no matter how low you've gone, you can pray to the Lord.

[18 : 38] You can look up to him. You brought my life up from the pit. Oh, Lord my God. That's an upwards look, isn't it? In this desperation, Jonah has finally turned to Yahweh, the Lord.

He remembers him. He prays to him. His gaze is upwards. His prayers now ascend to him. Sometimes it's in the valleys of life. It's in hard times that God really shows up.

And he shows up with his grace, his mercy. Our sins, they can be many, but his mercy is more. And if you are here right now, maybe in a place of depression, of darkness, you're holding problems, whether at church or at work or at home, that you can't solve, that feel beyond you, here are words you can echo, right?

How God loves to lift up the broken heart. You don't have to be in the middle of a big fish to pray these prayers, right? You can do it anywhere, anytime. There's a certainty Jonah seems to have that God hears him, right?

That his prayers, in the most awkward place, go up to him still. That's a good thing. It's a sign that even from the depths, Jonah seems to not have completely abandoned his faith in God.

[19 : 56] He's not a lost cause. He's one of us. We can relate to this guy. But I do also need to point out that he is still got a little bit of mixed up thoughts, right?

How he views outsiders and enemies, there's still problems, isn't there? I mean, did you notice when Irene read chapter 2, right? Consider this, right? Imagine this.

Pagan sailors, right? Foreigners, they're up above the water, they're worshipping the Lord. What does Jonah say about them? Verse 8, those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

Don't write that on a Christmas card to your friend, please. How gracious. Or, near the end of chapter 2, he vows to make sacrifices at the temple.

Hmm, that sounds really pious, right? I'm going to go to church as soon as I get out of this fish. Where's he meant to go again? To Nineveh, right? He's meant to go on mission.

[20 : 53] He's going the wrong way still in his head. Okay? Be careful. There's no point making lots of sacrifices and vows, saying lots of nice things, when you're not where you're supposed to be, right?

Your declaration, what you say about God, needs to be matched up by your actions. Doesn't it? And there's also the problem of what Jonah doesn't say in his prayers.

Have a look again, chapter 2. Look with me and see if you can tell me where Jonah says, I'm sorry, Lord, for running from you. It's not in my Bible.

What about, I'm sorry, Lord, for looking down on those sailors? It's not there either. There are plenty of psalms that he could have copied from, psalms of repentance.

Jonah seems to be overlooking this point, that he does need to say sorry to God, in light of how he's acted so far. And so actually, when you read verse 9, right?

[21 : 49] What I vowed I'll make good, salvation comes to the Lord. Normally, we put that on a bumper sticker. We say, wow, this is so cool. Jonah's such a, he's a renewed person. We're meant to put this on like one of those billboards and say, yeah, right.

There's something odd about that. Church, it's easy to say lovely sounding prayers, yet still hold hurtful thoughts about someone. I know, I've been there.

I've been there. It's easy to dress up well on Sunday, and then, you know, look really nice, say hi to everyone, happy new year, and then get in the car, and then fight and squabble on the way home.

I know, I've been there. But it just goes to show that, Church, we are just frail men and women. We are people who struggle with mixed motives, aren't we?

We are people who wrestle with the fact, sometimes we wear masks in front of others. Let's be careful about pointing the finger, right, at Jonah, when, I think the story points the finger at us.

[22 : 50] It kind of confronts our sins, not just Jonah's sins, our sins. So he prays away, and I think now that we've heard the story, I want to take a moment to reflect, particularly as we begin a new year.

Let's reflect from Jonah's story. Can I suggest we confront some of the sins, the things that we've been leaving out, not thinking about sins, not just in Jonah's life, but in our life, that we might need to deal with, too.

Firstly, think about the prejudice, right, that Jonah showed. Prejudice, specifically just to be sinfully proud of some kind of earthly identity that you have.

Ethnicity, culture, you know, bank balance, where you are in life, what job you have. I know I'm speaking to a group of people who have probably experienced some kind of, you know, racism or discrimination, whether at school or at work.

So, look, we've been victims of this, too. But are we so innocent ourselves? Who do you cross the road to avoid? Be honest.

[23 : 56] Do you see that colour skin, the way they dress? Who are the people groups that you talk about behind their back?

People groups could be, you know, people from different countries, but people groups could just be people at church, right? They don't worship at the same time as you?

That maybe speak a different language? Not as good as English as you are? Who have you already decided it's not worth the effort to get to know? You see, whatever your identity, right, however you identify yourself, Kiwi, Asian, first gen, second gen, whether you're wealthy or working class, any time your group becomes bigger and better than that group, and it's better to run away from them, then it will sin like Jonah, and we need to repent.

Jonah was proud to be Hebrew, despising of the sailors, and yet they were the good guys in the story. We moved to PCBC in 2020, right, the year that we all love to remember.

That year, I sometimes initially struggled to make sense of the other people in the Cantonese service, right? I confess, like, there were times when I thought, oh, how am I going to get along with this person?

[25 : 18] I can't even understand what they're saying. They worship so differently to how I'd like. Sometimes I'd shake my head at how they said things, what they got worried about, how they would do church.

Sometimes, sadly to say, I would think, oh, how we did things at ES, oh, I think we've got it right. You know, Saturday, Sunday morning, not so much. And yet, the more I lived and served and prayed alongside each of you, the more God helped me to see my sins and to repent.

I could slowly start to see how much kinder and more gracious people were, actually, throughout our whole church. It was quite nicer to me than I was about them.

Sadly, my ES first glasses, you know, got in the way of just enjoying, appreciating, deepening my relationships with the whole church.

How about you? If that's you, remember, Jonah had nothing to be proud about. He had no part to play in his salvation. And so you and I must actually be like Jonah and remember that salvation belongs to the Lord.

[26 : 30] And God saved Jonah in the most humiliating way, right? Okay, stuck in a fish, gets vomited out, it's not nice. Yet he saved him still. And he saves us too, you and me.

Not because of how great our faith is, how many mistakes are made. It's not because of how good we look on the outside, how pretty our life looks on the surface. He saves us, good and bad.

So we can't then look down on other people who don't seem to be as good as us. Let us get to know the rest of our church. What a privilege opportunity as we go on tour to come early, to say hi to people that you might not normally meet, to give an auntie or an uncle away.

What steps could you take this month even? To just break down those prejudices. If you struggle with prejudice, remember, Jesus became an outsider for you. Right?

That's a good news, isn't it? He took not just a high position, he didn't come as a, you know, sitting on a throne, he came as a baby in the manger. And he grew up, he was excluded, he was rejected, he was despised.

[27 : 40] He knows how you feel, and he knows how you should respond as well. To love the outsider. So Jesus' story then becomes the power and pattern for how to love people who don't look like you, talk like you, eat like you.

Maybe it's not prejudice though. Maybe hypocrisy is what you need to work on in your life. Moksi Pasalbert actually mentioned this in the sermon this morning. It bears repeating, isn't it?

To be a hypocrite, to live as if you are just face swapping all the time. Right? One person here, one person there. Like Jonah, you know the facts about the Bible.

You know the right words to say. But maybe at home, or maybe only when God is watching, there's some parts of your life that would make a sailor blush.

It would make an apparent sigh. Maybe it would make a friend of yours shocked if they could see it. A new year is a time to ask, Does my life match my words? Or am I just changing faces depending on who I'm with?

[28 : 50] If hypocrisy is your struggle, like mine, Jesus' death humbles us. Here was the Lord of Lords, who was just who he was. Who never changed depending on who he was with.

And he wants us to live for him in every area of our life. Or maybe your struggle this year, right? Isn't with prejudice or hypocrisy.

Maybe it's just meh. Being a bit complacent with life. Maybe this is day four of 2026. And you're not going to make a resolution, right? Just want to cruise and coast.

Run away on a holiday. One of the most remarkable things about this story is how far God has gone to save Jonah. Right? And to give him the opportunity to obey his calling.

Even said it right in the video. He was very reluctant. He was very unwilling. When you think of why though, what are some reasons that just make us unwilling to take the next step in faith? And compare that to how committed our God was to pursue you, to rescue you.

[30 : 05] How much he loved the sailors to reveal himself to them. If you and I were tempted to just coast through 2026, please remember Jesus' death, right?

Right? That was God costing his only son for us. That's a high cost. And he wants far more for your life than to spend year after year cruising to some fantasy world.

So let me paraphrase Jonah 1-1 for us. The word of the Lord came to PCBC. Go to the great city of Auckland and make disciples of all nations. Will we go forth?

Or will we run off? Will we look up? Or will we go down? I realize, you've been very patient. I've laid it on thick.

This is not a typical story. This is a confronting story. And if you feel like me right now when I first read Jonah and went, oh, I have no hope. What hope do I have?

[31 : 08] The secret is not to just stay here. Right? We need to go to the comfort of Jesus. The one who brings God's mercy in a way that no one else could. Not Jonah.

Because the God who showed Jonah amazing grace is the same God who shows you and I amazing grace. And he did so. He does so through the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel, the good news about Jesus, has everything we need to comfort us.

To cure us from all our prejudice, our hypocrisy. To give us a purpose in life. The good news is this. Jesus, the prophet greater than Jonah, has come.

Right? We've just talked about this in our memory verse. Right? The son of man, he will be three days, three nights in the heart of the earth. And this passage later on goes on to say, someone greater than Jonah has come. Do you believe this?

Do you believe this? Just as God saved Jonah in the most humiliating way. Our God in Christ saves sinners through a prophet better than Jonah.

[32 : 18] He endured the worst. The most shameful spectacle. He was hungry. He was thirsty. Naked, nail pierced. Gasping for breath. Mocked and beaten.

Crucified for you and me. And when you and I place our faith in Jesus. When you and I are united with him. God looks at us. Right?

All our mixed motives. All the ways that we don't measure up. He looks at us, but then he actually sees Jesus in front of us. Covering us. And the faithful prophet who lived a perfect life in our place.

Becomes our savior. The one who leads us into a new year. A new future. So, that should move us to thank him. To say sorry to him. To live for him. And I hope that's going to be the case for many of you.

All of you in 2026. And so, be assured. Our Lord Jesus here will keep rescuing us. Even with all our flaws and failures. Let's pray together.

[33 : 19] Lord, we thank you for this message. And we ask that you would let it sink deep.

Help us to realize our sins are many. But Lord, the mercy that you've shown us through Christ is more. To cover everything. And so, give us an undivided heart.

A joined up life. A passion to love those who are not like us. Who need to hear the good news of Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

Amen.