

Nowhere to hide!

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[0 : 00] Good morning everyone again. Well, I wonder if you have ever just wanted to get away from it all. You know what I'm talking about? Be honest with yourself. Haven't you ever felt that you just want to get up and go?

Leave all your responsibilities behind. Just leave your job without even a letter of resignation. Just go. Just forget about all the demands that other people are making on you. And just leave. You know, I think we've all felt like that at one point, haven't we?

We just want to leave our ordinary life behind us and change everything. And the thing is, it's not like it's impossible to do. There are people who've succeeded in doing just that.

I heard of someone who works online for an American company for just three months a year that pays him enough to travel the world for the other nine months. with not a care in the world, get away from all the normal responsibilities of life.

A couple of weeks ago, I met a couple, in fact, in Simonstown. I kind of didn't meet them properly, but I knew what they were doing. I think they were from Germany, and they were living on a 50-foot cruising yacht in Simonstown, but it was just stopping there.

[1 : 14] And what they did is that they just lived sailing from port to port and just buying the supplies that were necessary. Obviously, they had a good enough bank balance. They were kind of semi-retired.

And that's what they did. They just spent their life sailing from one country to the next. No timetable, no responsibilities. They just woke up and went where they felt like going.

They had escaped from the drudgery of ordinary life. Wouldn't you like to do that? Be honest. If you had a chance, wouldn't you like to just get on a boat and go cruising and get away from it all?

Yeah, you can't say that's not a tempting proposition. Well, it certainly was tempting for the prophet Jonah, because that's exactly what he did. He wanted to get away from it all.

And so he found a boat, and he sailed off into the sunset. And it would have been a happy ending and a very short story. But as we follow his story, what we realize is that it wasn't that simple.

[2 : 14] The story of Jonah, the first chapter in particular that we're looking at this morning, is in our Bibles to teach us a very important lesson. Especially when we feel, which we do often, feel like wanting to get away from it all.

And the lesson is that while it is certainly possible to get away, to escape from your responsibilities and to set off on all kinds of adventures in life, one thing you can't do is to get away from God and your duty to Him.

And that's what I want us to see this morning in this chapter. First, though, some background. Jonah. Who was this guy Jonah? Well, Jonah was a prophet of Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II.

And King Jeroboam, he was a bit of a nasty piece of work. But he did make a lot of advances for the nation of Israel. He expanded their borders.

And he ruled during a time when Israel, as a whole, had pretty much sidelined the role of God in their public life. No longer were they committed to God as they once were, as a people.

[3 : 21] And by this time that Jeroboam II was ruling, they had become very much a nation who would pick and choose when and how to obey God.

And unfortunately, we see that Jonah, even though he was a prophet, seems to be very much a man of his time. He also tended to pick and choose when to obey God and when not to.

And that's exactly what happened on this occasion when God gave him a tough assignment. And his assignment was to go to the city of Nineveh and to call them to account for their wickedness before God.

Now, that is a tough assignment because, you see, the Ninevites were pagans. They were Assyrians. They were known for ripping body parts off people they don't like and lining their walls with the skins of their enemies.

And so you can kind of understand why Jonah is a bit hesitant to do this. And he thought, of course, he could pick and choose when to obey God and when not to.

[4 : 19] So he turned the assignment down. And he didn't just turn it down, but he effectively sent his letter of resignation as a prophet to God and made sure that God couldn't follow him up by leaving and setting off in the completely opposite direction to Nineveh.

You see, Nineveh, if you take a map of the ancient world, Nineveh was in the east of Israel, in fact, where modern northern Iraq is now. And so what Jonah did, he took a map and he found the furthest west town that he could in the known world, which was a place called Tarshish, probably in modern-day Spain.

And off he went to get away from it all. And he found passage on a Phoenician ship heading this way. So probably as he was laying there in his cabin, he breathed a sigh of relief as he heard the lions being cast off and the ship getting underway.

But any relief that Jonah felt was short-lived as we read on. Because what he didn't know as he stood on the deck staring at the land slipping away, what he didn't know is that behind his back, out to sea, God was waiting for him.

You see, it wasn't long before the ship encountered a storm. And now it's not like these Phoenician sailors who were very experienced sailors and traders.

[5 : 39] It's not like they hadn't come across a storm before. But it turns out this was no ordinary storm. And they were freaked out. Have a look at verse 4. Then the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

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. Now, these Phoenician sailors really didn't know what was going on.

But even they had some idea that this storm had a divine origin. So they started praying to their pagan gods. While at the same time they tried as best they could to save themselves.

But nothing worked. Not their prayers, not their casting weight off the side of the ship. So, interesting question though, is where was Jonah in all this? You know, there the sailors on the deck trying their best to save the ship.

Where's Jonah? Well, we read in verse 5. Have a look. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. Jonah was hiding.

[6 : 45] He was hiding from the sailors. He was hiding from God. I think, in fact, this is a textbook case of denial. I think he knew deep down inside that his God, the true creator God, had sent this, and that only his God could stop it.

And yet notice, he's the one person who's not praying. Even though he's the one person who knows which God to pray to. Now, why? Why isn't he praying?

Well, because I think he doesn't want to admit the fact that he can't get away from his God. And that this God rules over him and his circumstances wherever he might be, and he can't escape that fact. And so, there's actually nowhere to run. And I think that's a reminder that he desperately needed.

But you know what? I think it's a reminder that we all need, don't we?

Because how often, like Jonah, do we not want to admit the fact that the circumstances in our lives are actually all controlled by God? Because if we did admit that, it would mean we'd need to listen to God in all of those circumstances.

[7 : 55] But no, we want to compartmentalize God, don't we? We want to limit him to only certain areas of our lives where he's allowed to have control. And then be free to pick and choose when to listen to him in other areas.

That's what we do. You know, for example, maybe you are genuinely struggling to find time for church or for Bible reading or for prayer in your life.

Because, you know, you're just finding life is so hard at the moment. It's so busy. And there's so many fires you've got to put out every day. And you're so busy just making enough to get by.

And you have so many responsibilities that you'll get to God when you have time. But in the meantime, you know, he's kind of taken a back seat in your life. I wonder if that's you this morning. And if it is, I wonder if you've ever considered that God is sending you those storms to wake you up. To wake you up to the fact that you can't give him a back seat.

[8 : 54] To wake you up to the fact that you can't compartmentalize this God. You can't pick and choose when to listen to him. You see, the sooner we face that fact, the better.

Which Jonah eventually did. After God made the point to him. When the crew started to pay him some unwanted attention. Let's read from verse 7.

Then the sailors said to each other, Come let us cast lots to find out who's responsible for this calamity. They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. And so they asked him, Tell us, who's responsible for making all this trouble for us?

I can imagine the scene. Jonah's standing on the deck kind of a little bit timid. The sailors circling around him, interrogating him with all these questions. Who's making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do?

Where do you come from? What is your country? What people are you? And so Jonah gets to the point where he can't hide anymore. He's been exposed. The truth comes out. Verse 9, he answers, I'm a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

[10 : 00] This terrified them. And they asked, What have you done? See, Jonah wasn't just running from any God. He was running from the same God, Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, who sent the plagues to Egypt to free his people.

The same God who obliterated the city of Jericho. The same God who sent giant hailstones to wipe out a Philistine army. This was no pagan idol. You see, this was the one true God who made everything and ruled everything.

And Jonah knew it. And so he had a responsibility to tell these sailors, didn't he? He had a moral responsibility. He knew what was controlling this. He knew why they were in the situation they were in.

And so he had a responsibility to tell them just who they were dealing with. Like anyone today who knows the one true God has an actual moral responsibility to tell the people around them living in this world just who they're dealing with, who's in charge.

But do we? Or do we keep quiet? Do we hide away like Jonah and avoid trouble? You see, we're so quick to criticize Jonah, aren't we?

[11 : 17] How could he do that? How could he, you know, he knew who the true God was and yet he kept quiet and yet look at ourselves. How often do we do that? We must admit that often we're no different to Jonah.

But Jonah did eventually under pressure spill the beans. I hope we learn that maybe we should open our mouths a little sooner than Jonah did. But he did let them know who they were dealing with and as a result they were terrified.

Although I want you to notice, this is very interesting, I want you to notice the difference between Jonah's reaction to this knowledge of who they're dealing with in trying to deny it, hiding away in the bottom of the ship.

And I want you to compare that with the sailor's reaction to this knowledge. In verse 11. Have a look. The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, what should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?

You see, it's logical to them. Once they knew who was in control of their circumstances, the obvious question is, what must we do? What must we change?

[12 : 26] What behavior must we adopt now in light of this knowledge? It reminds me, in fact, of the Philippian jailer in Acts, centuries later, after God miraculously opened the doors of the prison that was holding the apostles, the jailer realized who their God was.

And you know what he immediately said? His first words were, what must I do to be saved? What must I do? You see, when people come to know that God is real and they come to know who he is, the right response is to ask, what must I do now?

But Jonah, he already knew this, but instead of wondering what he must do, he just hid away from the fact. And he tried not to do anything. Which shows us something, doesn't it?

It shows us that we can have all the knowledge about God that we want. You can learn the Bible, you can go to GWC and you can study theology. But unless you do something with that knowledge, unless you live in light of who God is, then all that knowledge really counts for nothing.

Knowing God is not enough. Coming to church and Bible study to learn about God is not enough. If you're not asking in response to what you learn, what must I do now?

[13 : 42] How must I change how I live in light of this knowledge? And that's what the sailors did. You see, we're being taught a lesson by pagan sailors. Jonah was being taught a lesson by these pagan sailors.

In asking, what must I do? And so Jonah tells them what they need to do. But as it turns out, they didn't want to do what he suggested. So they took matters into their own hands.

Let's see how that works out for them. Verse 12. Pick me up and throw me into the sea, he replied. And it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.

Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before. Gene and I and the kids often go camping on the Breda River.

There's this farm that we go to on the shore of the river. We love going there. And we've got this kayak as well that we take, put it on the roof of our car, and we go paddling on the river.

[14 : 44] And just downriver of the campsite that we stay at, the river shallows to some very gentle rapids where the water is just moving faster than the rest of the water. But they're not big rapids.

It's actually easy not to see them. And it's very easy just to paddle over them without noticing. But what many people don't know, and often we sit on the banks and we watch paddlers go down the rapids, what many people don't know is once you paddle over them, you can't come back.

Because you can't paddle fast enough to get back over this flowing water. And so if you cross the rapids, you just have to carry on going.

You just have to go with the flow, and you have to see where it takes you, which incidentally I did out of curiosity one day, and Gene had to pick me up three hours later downriver with the car.

Anyway, these sailors, they were trying to paddle against the flow, you see.

But they weren't trying to paddle against some river or ocean current, but they were trying to paddle against God himself. They didn't want to do what they knew they had to do. Now, we sympathize with them.

[15 : 52] I mean, it's not a nice thing to have to throw someone to what they thought was an imminent death. But, you see, their mistake was that they were trying to resolve the situation in their own way, by their own strength.

They were trying to resolve a situation that God had laid upon them, but doing it themselves, without reference to what he wanted. Trying to fix things in their own way.

But how often do we do that, too? How often do we try to counter the circumstances God sends us in our own strength?

Try to fix it our own way, rather than obeying him, rather than coming to him in prayer. Taking matters into our own hands. It's natural for us to do that. We think we're independent, self-governing human beings.

And so our first response is always to try to fix things our way, not God's. You know, maybe God sends you into a period of financial stress at home.

[16 : 53] But instead of trusting God's promise to provide for those who seek first his kingdom, you do the opposite, and you cut back on your giving to the gospel and gospel work to try to save yourself from the storm.

And you paddle against the flow, and you wonder why it doesn't work. You actually wonder why it's getting worse. You know, that's just one example. And we all have different ways that we do that, that we paddle against the flow.

We resist what God is doing by trying to fix it in our own strength. Instead, you see, we need to turn around. We need to stop paddling against the flow.

We need to come to God. We need to submit ourselves to him and what he wants us to do. We need to turn around. A preacher once took up a new post in a church that could best be described as comfortable but lukewarm.

But this new preacher, he was someone who preached the whole counsel of God. He didn't hold back. He laid before the congregation God's demands on their lives. Now, this didn't make him popular.

[17 : 54] He started to ruffle feathers. It wasn't long before the people's warden came to him and said, Pastor, I just thought I'd warn you. I'll put it this way.

You're starting to rub the fur up the wrong way if you take my meaning. Quick as a flash, the pastor replied, Well, if I'm rubbing the fur up the wrong way, maybe the cat's got to turn around.

You see, it didn't take long before these sailors realized they couldn't paddle against God for long. They needed to turn around. They needed to submit to him. And, of course, it's a lesson we need to learn.

When we get rubbed up the wrong way by the preacher or by God, hopefully what the preacher is saying is from God, maybe it's a sign that we need to turn around. Verse 14, They cried out to the Lord, Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life.

Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man. For you, Lord, have done as you pleased. Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard. And the raging sea grew calm.

[18 : 59] At this, the men greatly feared the Lord. And they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. I wonder if you see the irony of the story.

God gave Jonah a mission to convert pagans. He runs away from it. But in doing so, God uses him for the very thing that he's running away from to convert pagans. It's great, isn't it?

And it reminds us that God, this is a sober reminder, God will always achieve his purposes. Alright?

And he will always achieve his purposes through us, whether or not we want him to.

And so, I recommend, save yourself some pain and sign up for God's purposes for your life sooner rather than later. If there's anything that the story of Jonah teaches us, it's that.

God will achieve his purposes. He will have his way to get on board, to use the maritime analogy. But Jonah didn't. In fact, he was thrown off board.

[20 : 01] He ended up alone in the ocean because he didn't get on board with God's plans. He tried to run away from them. And now we see next week that God wasn't finished with him. But in the meantime, I want you to consider what I think this chapter is really all about.

I don't think chapter one is so much about Jonah. And it's definitely not about the big fish that swallowed him, which everybody raves about in Jonah. We'll talk about that next week. I think chapter one is about the sailors.

And the spiritual journey that they went on. In the story. Have a look. Verse four and five. At the beginning of the storm. What was the sailors reaction?

They feared the storm. But at the end of the storm, verse 17, look what happens. They feared the Lord. You see the change in these sailors?

They changed from fearing their circumstances to instead fearing the God that they learned who was in control of those circumstances. And those are two very different things.

[21 : 09] Fearing circumstances or fearing the one who's in control of those circumstances. In fact, the same change happened to the disciples of Jesus centuries later in a situation oddly reminiscent of the story of Jonah that we read in Mark chapter four.

These disciples who were fishermen, trained and experienced sailors, went out on the Sea of Galilee. A furious squall hit them and the boat was about to be destroyed.

The sailors feared for their lives. The captain woke up his sleeping passenger and asked him, don't you care if we drown? Very much like happened in the story of Jonah. But this passenger that we read of in Mark was no prophet trying to run away from God because this passenger stood up, rebuked the wind and the waves and the storm stopped.

And Mark records for us the disciples were terrified and asked each other, who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him.

You see, the disciples changed that day out in the Sea of Galilee. They changed from fearing their circumstances to fearing this man in front of them who it turned out was in control of their circumstances.

[22 : 31] And all of us need to go through that same change at some point in our lives. From fearing the storms of our life to fearing and revering the one who is in control of those storms.

The one who has shown himself to be in control of those storms. Jesus Christ who is the God of all creation as he showed his disciples that day on the Sea of Galilee the same God who sent that storm to a disobedient prophet hundreds of years before and the same God who rules every minute of your day and sends you every storm that you face.

The question is, are you going to just pick and choose when to listen to Jesus? Are you going to try run life your own way even if that means going in the opposite direction of the one that he calls you to?

or are you going to submit control to him? Are you going to stop running and are you going to turn around and start living in obedience to your king?

Because the truth is, even if you don't want to listen to him right now, you can't get away from him. You can't escape him. You will submit to his authority one day. Let it be now rather than later.
[23 : 52] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we are reminded and rebuked as we read the story of Jonah and we see that in many ways we are much like Jonah.

In many ways we try to run life our own way. In many ways we pick and choose when to listen to you. And in many ways we hide ourselves from the world around us and we hide from them the knowledge of the true God that we hold.

Lord, forgive us for this. Forgive us for our disobedience. Help us to turn around. Help us to sign up for what you've called us to do, how you've called us to live.

Help us to recognize Lord Jesus that you are our king. You control the storms of our life and help us to submit ourselves to you every day in prayer and in obedience.

Amen. Amen.