

# Explore: Running from God's call

February 7, 2013

- *This Explore the Bible lesson for Feb. 17 focuses on Jonah 1:1-17; 2:1-10*

Have you ever felt like running away? With the busyness of our daily schedules, deadlines and the weight of our many responsibilities, most people likely have at least had the fleeting thought or desire to escape, even if just for a short time.

Those same thoughts and feelings can arise in relation to our spiritual lives as well. We know God calls all those who believe in him to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. We know God has called us to share the gospel with all people regardless of the barriers or lines of division we must cross to do so.

Often God calls us to specific tasks that do not fit within our plans. At times like this, we may wish to ignore or run from God's call. But God never said following his purpose for our lives would be easy or popular. In fact, the Bible repeatedly talks about following Christ in terms of struggling against our old nature, running a long race and fighting the good fight.

All who have tried it know the safest and most fulfilling place is the path God has laid out and called us to follow. Running from it can have significant consequences. Perhaps no one in the Bible learned this more clearly than Jonah. His story has much to teach us about running away from God's call.

## **Free to say no (Jonah 1:1-3)**

In the beginning, God created humanity with moral freedom that allows

individuals to accept or reject God. It is this freedom of will that gives significance to an individual's choice to love and worship God. Because of this, even after humanity so often has rejected God, God refuses to violate human freedom by imposing his will. Humans maintain the ability to say no to God, and the inner struggle this creates is evident as we see people such as Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah wrestle with fulfilling God's call.

Jonah certainly had good reasons for running from God's call. After all, God had asked him to go preach to the citizens of the despised Assyrian Empire. God had called Jonah to deliver a message to the capital city of Israel's oppressors. Even though the message would be one of judgment, Jonah still had reason to resist. Perhaps he feared for his personal safety or simply could not bear to be among "them." As we hear later in the book, Jonah did not want to go because he knew that if the Assyrians repented, God would be merciful, and "they" did not deserve that.

Today, our reasons may have changed. Maybe what God asks does not fit our plans or takes us too far out of our personal comfort zone. Whatever the specific details might be, we often are tempted to run from God's call. And if that is our choice, God grants us the freedom to run. But there are consequences.

### **Life on the lam (Jonah 1:4-17)**

If it is true the safest and most fulfilling place to be is in the call of God, then being outside that call must subject us to dangers and a lack of fulfillment. While we never are out of God's sight even as we rebel against his call, God will allow us to experience (or specifically send) consequences for our rebellion. In addition, running from God's call gradually can desensitize us to our divine purpose.

In verse 5, Jonah, whose rebellion against God causes the storm, is able to sleep while the trained sailors scramble to save the ship. Even after he is

awakened and it is revealed he is the storm's cause, Jonah still would rather die by drowning in the sea than fulfill his calling to go to Nineveh. Yet even as Jonah reached this lowest point, God protected him (although three days in the belly of a large fish might not have seemed like salvation) so the prophet might have the opportunity to return to God.

Today, we may not literally run from God as Jonah did, but we often fill our lives with so many other things there simply is no room or time for us to follow God's call. These things may be good things, and we have sound reasons for their inclusion in our life, but whether we consciously use them or not, we tend to run from the parts of God's call we are uncomfortable with.

### **Coming back to God (Jonah 2:1-10)**

It is one of the clearest signs of God's love for us that regardless of how far we might run from God, the return trip requires only one step. But that one step often is the most difficult because it requires we humble ourselves and acknowledge our dependence on God and the rightness of his judgment and call on our lives. It is because of the difficulty of letting go of our pride that we often fail to take this step until we are exhausted, burned out or in the belly of a fish.

It should be noted that while we often return hoping for a different assignment, God's plan for us does not change. God still intended for Jonah to preach to Nineveh. When we feel far from God, it is simply a matter of asking, "What was the last thing God called me to do that I have not done?" It is a clear indication of God's grace that humbly following through with the answer to that one question is greeted by a great God who welcomes his child home.

