

I CAN'T +++

PASTOR ZACH ZEHNDER

Rock bottom. Hi, my name is Zach and I am a sinner, genuinely. I desire to be an awesome husband, incredible dad. I wanna be a faithful pastor. And in my inmost being, I'm so devoted to being the dedicated follower of Jesus that I know God has made me to be. And yet I fall short every day.

Gosh, I battle with pride. I battle with greed, materialism. I battle with lust. I've lost all of those battles. I spoke when I shouldn't have spoke. I don't speak when I should speak. Man, I'm really good at telling people what to do, writing and speaking for how they can follow Jesus while I walk the other direction. I'm an imposter. I'm a fraud. I'm far from the man God has called me to become. If I'm honest, I'm far from the man that I want to be.

Hi, my name is Zach and I'm a sinner. How did that make you feel? Judging by how quiet it is in this room, in this room feels uncomfortable. And I don't think what feels uncomfortable is having someone say that they're a sinner. What I think is maybe uncomfortable is someone that is willing to admit how much of a sinner they are. Some of you might be uncomfortable. Some of you might have found it really refreshing. Some of you might be new here and you're like, I'm not sure this is a stable leader here. Can we get out now? Because most of us spend most of our days trying to convince most people that we're mostly fine. And I'm not, and you're not, and we're not.

And so we can continue on a journey where we come together and we share parts of our stories, but hide other parts. We can continue and come and when we're asked how we're doing, we can say, great. God is good all the time, all the time, God is good. How you doing? Blessed and highly favored pastor, better than I deserve. When, come on, be real, you're struggling. You're struggling with sin, you're losing and you can't do a thing about it yourself.

And so welcome to Sinners Anonymous support group, a really large support group across multiple campuses where I alone get to talk, not you. And for the next six weeks, genuinely, I hope you experience healing. Stop fighting your battles alone. Stop fighting your battles alone and discover there is so much freedom in many more chapters to your story than the enemy would tell you.

For six weeks, we're gonna dive deep into a couple of things. We're gonna look into the 12 steps of recovery groups made popular by Alcoholics Anonymous. And at the same time, we're gonna go through the entire book of Jonah. And I'll show you some things that you thought you knew everything about that story, you don't. I mean, it's gonna be an awesome time.

And so today, three parts to the message. First, allow me to set the scene for why I believe the 12 steps are not just for addicts, but for all of us who are sinful. Second, I'll set the scene for the book of Jonah and we'll work through chapter one. And third, we'll land today on step one.

All of you have a 12 step card on your seat or near your seat. I'd love for you to grab that and hold that and bring that back with you all six weeks. By the way, this is not a six sermon series. This is a one

sermon over six weeks and you need them all to be complete. So like recovery circles and communities, I hope you make it a habit to show up and to be present.

So what is the 12 steps? Their popularity grew out of Alcoholics Anonymous, which was a group that started in 1935, but a book that was published in 1939 called Alcoholics Anonymous, otherwise known this book as the big book. And these were not just thoughts or ideas, but these were rather steps that a lot of people had taken up to that point where they had found sobriety and they'd battled against some of the worst sin, some addiction in their lives and found that there's sobriety and freedom. And since then this book and its recovery programs have helped millions upon millions upon millions of people.

And so immediately when you hear this series, you might think, well, this is not a sermon series for me. I'm not an addict. This is for those people. And if you would have asked me a decade ago, I probably would have thought the same as you. I wouldn't have been in the camp of, I don't need this. This is for people that are shooting up, people that are drinking themselves to death, people that are on the edge of despair. If you're going through the 12 steps, that means your life is on fire. But having been around recovery communities for much of my ministry, I no longer think this.

I don't think that your life or my life has to be on fire to go through the 12 steps. You may not consider yourself an addict, but you are a sinner. I know you make mistakes. The old Latin term for sin is just derived from an archery. And it means to miss the mark. You've sinned. You've had little misses, you've had big misses, and you've had misses in between. Romans 3.23 says that we all fall short of the glory of God.

And if you were to look at the 12 steps, what you're gonna discover is that many of these steps, all of these steps are actually very biblical, very biblical. It's just that sometimes some sins and some addictions are easier, right? To disguise or put up with. Some compulsive behavior is a little bit more, I don't know, accepted in our day to day. But my point is rather than continuing on a destructive pathway of sin, why wouldn't you wanna return to healthy habits and be the person God has called you to be?

And if I got to know your story, especially the 1% that you don't wanna share with somebody else, my hunch is that we would have a lot of people that are stuck in a sin pattern and maybe even an addiction. How large is addiction? In 2025, nearly 45 million Americans age 12 and older had a diagnosed alcohol or drug use disorder. Some of those 45 million have both. That number only measures alcohol and drugs. It doesn't capture the broader struggles that people experience with pornography and gambling and eating and playing video games.

And how about addiction to smartphones? There's shopaholics, there's workaholics. Again, they're not all the same diagnosis, but we should not dismiss compulsive behavior, the harm that it can cause just because it doesn't come through a bottle, a pill or a joint. Look at online sports gambling. Pew Research says that the percentage of American adults placing online sports bets has increased 67% in just three years. It's getting out of control. And the fastest demographic is 18 to 29 year old men.

Again, that doesn't mean everybody placing a bet has an addiction, but it is time that we should examine ourselves. Maybe ask these questions. Is there something that I keep returning to for relief or escape, even when I can see it hurting me or the people that I love? What have I told myself that I can

stop doing anytime, but every time I try, why do I find myself going back? How about another one? Is there anything in my life that I'm intentionally hiding?

We all struggle with sin. And again, as we go through the 12 steps, these very biblical things, what we're gonna see in them as you take this and as you study this and learn this and maybe memorize these steps along the way, what you're gonna see is what we're doing is very discipleship type stuff. We are admitting that we're wrong. We are examining ourselves. We are making confession. We are making amends. We're putting healthy habits into practice and we're sharing our story with others. That's what the 12 steps are in a nutshell. They came out of the Bible. Pastor John Ortberg said, AA got the 12 steps from the church and now the church needs them back.

And there've been many a pastor or many a church leader that you kind of know the stereotype of some of these anonymous support groups that they meet kind of in the basement. It's what you picture when you see a support group, an Alcoholics Anonymous, a Narcotics Anonymous, is their meeting in the basement. And there's been many pastors that say, you know what the most Christian churchy thing that happens at my church is? It happens down in the basement, not in the worship center or sanctuary. Because down in the basement, people are being real, authentic, vulnerable. And that's what church ought to feel like. Not a church where we get good at identifying everybody else's problems, but one where we can be honest about our own.

One of the things you'll learn in recovery communities is especially if you have someone who is addicted in your family or friend group, that the best thing you can do for that addict is to focus less on what he or she can do, but rather focus on yourself. You be healthy. You make sure that you don't fall into bad patterns so that you start enabling and fall into some things that you ought not fall into. And so again, this sermon series is for you, for you.

As we open up the book of Jonah, we're gonna meet somebody that could say all the right things while he was headed in the wrong direction. And I think so much of his story that we can relate to. And if you make it through this whole series and all you could think about was how somebody else needed to hear this series, you would have missed the point. This is for you. The 12 steps are for you.

So let me set the scene for Jonah. Church, all campuses on the count of three, I'm gonna have you guess, who do you think the main character of Jonah is? Here we go. One, two, three. Jonah the whale. It's not the whale, smart aleck people. And it's not Jonah, by the way. It is a trick question. The main character is God. And you are gonna see him show up in incredible ways because that's what God does.

So as we open up chapter one, verse one, and read through, if you go to a recovery group or around them, they're very participatory, a lot of energy and excitement to be there because they need one another. And so when you see a word in a different color, I want you to read it with passion. Let's do this. Verse one, chapter one. 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. 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.

Many of us, if you've grown up in church, have heard of the story of Jonah. You likely know two very broad things about this story, that God called Jonah and Jonah ran away and that Jonah got swallowed

by a big fish, many assume a whale. And we'll look at each of those things in this series. But let me tell you who Jonah was. Jonah was a prophet of God. Second Kings 14, verse 25 says that Jonah was a prophet during the reign of King Jeroboam II, who did evil in the eyes of the Lord somewhere between the years 786 to 746 years before Jesus walked this planet.

At that time, Jonah lived and prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. And about 25 years after Jeroboam would reign, Assyria would take over the Northern Kingdom of Israel, again, where Jonah lived and prophesied. Stay with me here because Assyria, the capital city of Assyria is what the Bible just claimed is the great city of Nineveh. Well, you need to know from the onset is that the Ninevites were enemies of the highest degree to the Israelites rival. This is not some Nebraska, Iowa, right? Football field or who's got the better corn rivalry. We already know who that is anyway, right? Don't even need to say it. This is all out hatred and war. Russia, Ukraine, Israel, Iran wanna destroy these people.

Which tells us two things right away. Number one, from the beginning that God desires all people to be saved, even those who are really far from God, amen. And that is good news because you know what that means? That means all of you are included in that. And that there is not so far away that you can go that God would not desire to have you and maybe even to have you back. You're his child and he loves you.

Number two, this is one of the hardest assignments given to a man in service. To a man in scripture, it's hard enough to be a prophet. Many of the other prophets you read, Amos, Hosea, so many others, they are a prophet. Do you know who? To the Israelite people. And that has its own challenges. But I think all of us would agree that it is far more challenging to go and speak a word against the people that literally wanted to kill you and you wanted to kill them.

So you can't just look at Jonah like he's some soft, feeble prophet, okay? Because I would argue that you and I have ran from far, far less. Have you ever run away from God? What he's wanted you to do? I know I have. When I was 14 years old, I must've been having a bad day because my mom asked me to clean my room and I was not in the mood for it. And it was the first time that I ever blatantly, outwardly dropped the F-bomb in front of my mom, which ensured me that I had ample time in my room to clean my room.

And so I stormed up to my room, up the stairs, and I sat down and I said, this is not a great assignment. She doesn't know who I am. She doesn't know what day I had. I don't wanna clean my room. And I decided at 14 years old, I didn't need to clean my room. I was big enough, old enough, mature enough that I didn't even need my parents anymore, my family. And so I started packing my things. I was running away.

And so I packed, I think I had 85 cents to my name because I got a dollar allowance per week and 10 cents went to King of Kings and five cents went to savings. 85 cents, a few airheads, plus all my valuable basketball cards. That was gonna be how I was gonna wheel and deal on the streets. And so I snuck out of the house. Parents didn't know. I walked down Dorcas Circle. Yes, I grew up on Dorcas Circle, okay? You're like, that explains a lot. All the way down Dorcas Circle, rounded the corner, sat down in front of a light pole, just kind of like one more time, weighing my pros and cons on this.

And I started thinking, you know, 85 cents isn't a lot of money. I could probably sell these cards and get \$20, which then I would be filthy rich. I could survive forever on that. But I don't have a car. I'm not gonna get hired somewhere. I'm not sure where I'm gonna stay. Plus I had to sneak out so I didn't get a chance to go by the pantry and mom just bought Gushers and I won't be able to get any of those. Maybe, maybe it's just easier if I go back. And so I went back up Dorcas Circle, snuck in the door, walked up the stairs and my parents never knew I ran away. Well, they might know today now. Dad's right over here.

Sometimes it feels easier in the moment to go in the wrong direction. But when you keep going in the wrong direction, it leads to great disaster. What God asked Jonah to do violated his sense of justice. The Ninevites, I'll tell you more about the nasty Ninevites later in this series, but they tortured the Israelites. In fact, some historians record, they caused their victims to listen to episodes of Cocoa Melon night and day on repeat. My generation think the Wiggles all the time. In all seriousness, they did torture the Israelites.

And again, I want you to know one of the all time brutal assignments in all of scripture was given to Jonah. And we've run from far less. So what happens when we flee from God? When we flee from God. Verse four, 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. But Jonah had gone below deck where he laid down and fell into a deep sleep. How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God. Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.

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 Jonah. And so 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? He answered, I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. Again, he could say all the right things about God while headed in the wrong direction.

This terrified them. And they asked, what have you done? They knew he was running away from the Lord because apparently he'd already spilled the beans and told them so. But the sea was getting rougher and rougher. And so they asked him, what should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us? 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. I know that it is my fault.

Jonah went away from where he was to Tarshish. But we're gonna see that no matter how far away we are, God always provides a way back, a first step. But sometimes the step that gets revealed comes through unordinary means or packaging, if you will, that you didn't expect. In this case, while on the boat, the step was a great storm, which by the way is synonymous with how we live our lives, that when you flee from God, you ought to expect great storms and chaos to come into your life.

Don't hear me wrong and put God in a box to say that if you don't follow God, storms will come. And if you do follow God, you will experience no storms. Jesus is very clear that even if you follow him and when you follow him, not only will you have storms and trial and tribulation, but people will ridicule you, insult you and persecute you. And so expect it. But sometimes we'll hear and we'll talk to people as pastors and they'll say, I'm running from God and there's all these storms around me and I can't

figure out why all these storms are coming. And I'm like, it's not rocket science. What did you expect to happen? You're running away from where God called you to be. And so of course chaos and storms will come.

When I was running from God's call in high school, my youth pastor took me to the side and said, Zach, when you know God has called you to do something and you're running away from that, you will never be comfortable. He said, your life may look fine. It may look great to others on the outside, but I'm telling you on the inside, you will never have that comfort here. You will never have that comfort and that inner peace that only God can give you. Again, I repeat, sometimes it, many times it feels good and it is easier to run from God's assignments, but it always leads to disaster.

In my research, I found that Tarshish was 2,500 miles away from where Jonah lived while Nineveh was just over 500 miles, which goes to show us, church, that sometimes you've got to work five times as hard to get God off of your back than if you'd have just lived according to his will in the first place. Amen? Sometimes you are fighting and fighting and fighting to get God off your back. And it's like, God won't leave me alone. He won't, why? Because he loves you.

The truth is that it's far more difficult to run away from God, even though it feels easy in the moment, than to run back to him. And what we're gonna see in the 12 steps in the book of Jonah all throughout the Bible is that God gives us invitation after invitation to come back. It just sometimes doesn't look like an invitation at first. A storm doesn't look like an invitation. And yet if the storm, which is real and does cause harm and tragedy and loss and pain, but if the storm brings all of that, and yet it brings you to a place that you might consider rock bottom, where you're finally able to say, I know this is my fault, then is the storm at the end of the day, not a blessing? Because it brought you to where you needed to be.

In other words, don't immediately dismiss the storms in your life. God may be using them to bring you where you need to be. And God brings some of his greatest, best redemption through storms. Amen? Amen.

So through some back and forth with the sailors, they find out the reason they're in this mess is because Jonah's running away from God. Let's see what happens. Remember he said, pick me up and throw me into the sea. These are good guys though, right? Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. We're gonna try to get you back. We don't wanna throw you over, but they could not. For the sea grew even wider, wilder and wilder than before. Then they cried out to the Lord, please Lord, don't 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.

And at this, the men greatly feared the Lord and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and they made vows to him, the Lord. And this is rock bottom for Jonah. Part of me wanting to do this series is to give you an out and to tell you that you don't actually have to hit rock bottom before you genuinely put the work in on yourself. You don't have to be like Jonah and go sink all the way down. I believe that's what God and what recovery communities exist for is to show you that at any time you can turn back to God and you don't have to wait for something worse to happen or to sink even lower before getting to the place where you need to be.

And maybe today you are at rock bottom and God will meet you there. In fact, we see that God will go as low as he needs to get you. No matter what muck and mire and slimy pit you've crawled into yourself, God will meet you there. Does not the word of God show how far the depths God would go to get you from how far down you've gone? Does not the word of God say that our God's arm is not too short to save and his ear can hear every time you cry out. Maybe you're already at rock bottom today. Maybe you're not, but maybe you know that there's a sin in your life and it's spiraling out of control and you're putting on a good exterior. But on the inside, you're not sure how much longer you can hold it together before you get found out.

Maybe today God is bringing me as a messenger, not because I'm anything, but because I'm opening his word in front of you to say that today, today, you can find rescue. And it starts with admitting. Jonah admitted it. The admission price into freedom, into healing, into recovery, the admission price into freedom is an admission of your fault. Jonah said, I know that this is my fault. He acknowledged his powerlessness. And I want you to think about this truth today, that there is power in powerlessness. In someone who's so broken, who's so far down, who's willing to admit, I need help. And at the end of the day, that is step one.

Step one of AA is we admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable. And in this series, we're just changing one word, alcohol into sin. So I'd love for you to take that card out right now, all campuses, take that card out. And I'd love for you to say step one together with me. We can put it on the screen as well. Here we go. We admitted we were powerless over sin, that our lives had become unmanageable. Come on one more time. We admitted we were powerless over sin, that our lives had become unmanageable.

It's easy for Jonah to be thrown overboard into a raging sea with nowhere to go, but you don't have to get that far down. But even if you do, God can bring rescue because he not only provided a great wind and a great storm to get to Jonah's attention, but he would provide one other great thing too. Here's how chapter one ends. Now the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. And we'll look at those three days and three nights next week as Jonah cries out.

A couple of quick things on our way out today. Number one, I want you to see that when you sin, when you make mistakes, that it has splash damage on others around you. Do you think for a moment that the sailors wanted to throw Jonah overboard? No way. But your sin, your addiction, your bad habits, they cause chaos and storms in the lives of others. Oftentimes the ones that love you the most. And I do not say that to bring more shame to you or to your story or to your sin. I do that to combat what I know I've said at times in my life of it doesn't matter if I do this little thing, it doesn't affect anybody else. I'll just do this little thing over here. Nobody can know, everybody will be fine. But as you do that and you take steps in the wrong direction, the more steps you take in the wrong direction, the more storms, the more chaos, and the more challenging you make everybody else around you to actually live God's will in their lives. You've heard the phrase, hurt people, hurt people. And that's true.

Don't believe the lie of the enemy that your little step away is not gonna impact anybody. It will, it does, it has. That's why in the steps later, you'll see that one of the great things we're called to do is to make amends with those that have felt the cumulative impact of our sin. And yet, even in the midst of this, it causes this damage to these sailors. Like, ah, why are we stuck in this? They have to throw a guy overboard. They didn't want, they tried to row as hard as they could so they wouldn't have to do that.

And even in that storm, did you notice what happened with the sailors? These formerly atheist sailors called upon and greatly feared the Lord and made vows to follow after him.

What I'm saying is God can flip storms that were meant to destroy, flip them by his grace, and it doesn't have to destroy you. It can be the thing that actually brings you freedom. And we're gonna talk more about this next week. God didn't leave Jonah either. He provided a great fish. But I think we'd all agree, it's pretty easy for Jonah to admit, I've lost control of my life. My life is unmanageable. In fact, if you were to boil down step one into two words, it's simply these two. I can't. I can't. You can't battle your sin on your own. You can't.

And the moment you think you can, in recovery communities, they remind people, oh, I'll just control this. I'll just manage this. I can see my way out of this. They remind everyone around the circle. Remember, it was your very best thinking that got you here. And that's really humbling. This is me at my best. John Ortberg, pastor and author, wrote a book called Steps. And he said, for some people, step one is the hardest. But he says, for those that do it, and this is what I would say to you, his words, welcome to the celebration of personal inadequacy. And he's very clear. Oh, I'm not celebrating your inadequacy. I'm not celebrating your addiction or your sin, but it's considered a great milestone in recovery communities when someone is able to say, I'm inadequate. I can't.

And that's where we end today. I'd like for you to stand. And I'd like for you to actually hold this posture all campuses. Put your hands to your sides. And if you would kind of roll your shoulder blades back a couple of inches and bring your hands maybe two, three, four inches behind you. This is a posture of powerlessness. And this is a posture that God can do a lot with. Jonah would sit in a fish for three days and three nights. We don't have three days and three nights. I mean, I can talk to maintenance and see if they'll keep it open. But I want you to stand in this posture for a moment.

And I want you to silently reflect and confess your sins to God. Confess that thing that you've been holding onto, that thing that you keep running back to, that thing that you keep hidden from everybody else. The word of God says, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, we are not deceiving ourselves. But if we confess our sin, God is faithful and he's just, and he will forgive us all of our unrighteousness. I can't.

At all of our campuses, I'd like for you to stay in this posture as we sing a song. And in a few moments, your leader will come and they will give you words of absolution. Because even though we're stuck in a posture of I can't, the reason we gather across churches every Sunday is step two, Jesus can. And you'll hear those words in just a few moments. In just a few moments. But for now, stay in this posture. Be in a receptive posture. I'm powerless, I can't. Fremont and Northwest Omaha will see you back next Sunday. Amen.