

Jonah: Part 1

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[0 : 00] I'm going to think for a few weeks about Jonah, this runaway prophet that we encounter, and also the God of mercy.

So we're going to read today Jonah 1 from verse 1 to verse 16. Jonah 1. 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. 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 lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

[1 : 05] The captain went to him and said, How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God.

Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish. 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. So they asked him, Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What 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 land. It terrified them.

And they asked, What have you done? They knew he was running away from the Lord, because he'd already told them so. 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?

Pick me up and throw me into the sea, he replied, and it will become calm. I know that it's my fault that this great storm has come upon you. Instead, the men did their best to roll back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.

[2 : 10] Then they cried to the Lord, O Lord, please do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, O Lord, have done as you please.

Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm. At this, the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

And we'll leave our story there. So what we have in the book of Jonah, in a sense, is his unfiltered autobiography.

One of the things that when you read the Bible you come to appreciate is just how refreshingly honest it is. The Bible, as we read it, is full of flawed heroes.

It doesn't try to hide or gloss over moral failures of God's people. And we'll see this in the book of Jonah. He absolutely fits this mold because, for example, we've seen it in chapter 1.

[3 : 12] He's told to go in this direction, to obey God. Instead, he runs in this direction in order to disobey. And what we'll see fundamentally is that Jonah does not agree with God's big plan for the city of Nineveh because he does not like the idea of God's mercy being extended to his enemies.

And so the Bible is very honest, and Jonah is very honest about where he's at as he reflects on his life. And, you know, in that there's good news for us because our hope never rests in our own goodness and performance.

The Bible is very clear that our hope rests in the mercy of God, that he sees our needs and he shows us compassion and kindness. Our hope rests in the grace of God, giving us a love that we don't earn or deserve.

So the Bible reminds us, and the story of Jonah reminds us, that God is the hero of the story, not Jonah and not ourselves.

The story of Jonah is also a reminder to us that following God can be uncomfortable at times because we discover that God doesn't always give us what we want because he knows better than us what's best for us.

[4 : 37] That God doesn't always conform to our ideas of how life should go. And he certainly acts in ways that we wouldn't always choose.

And that's something that Jonah has to deal with and process. And all of us, if we choose to follow Jesus, at some point or another we'll find this sense of tension.

And so we meet Jonah. He's been called by God to be a prophet, to be God's spokesman. But he is a reluctant prophet in this instance.

But that wasn't always the case for Jonah. We meet Jonah earlier in his story. There's a small verse in 2 Kings chapter 14 and verse 27 where Jonah is called by God to bring good news to Israel's king and to the nation because he's going to announce that God is going to bring a time of peace and Israel's border will be secure.

Jonah's really happy to do that job. But this time when the word of the Lord comes, Jonah goes running. Why? Why does he run?

[5 : 51] Why? For Jonah, it seems like the world is divided into good guys. You've got people like Jonah, people of Israel.

Then you've got the bad guys, the people who are not from Israel. And then there are the very bad guys, the people from the city of Nineveh.

And in Jonah's mind, there is no room for mercy for that kind of people. Same kind of mindset shows up at the time of Jesus.

That's why we read in Luke chapter 15, the people grumbling and muttering because Jesus spends time. He welcomes tax collectors and sinners because the religious people had excluded them from religious society because they didn't make the grade.

Jesus' mercy shocked them because of that welcome. So it was good news for the people that were normally excluded.

[6 : 54] So you find great crowds of them would come and listen to Jesus because they found hope with him. And you know, it should always be that way that Christianity, when it's presented, should always give a very real alternative to the kind of divisions that we see in society and in our world.

We have a gospel that speaks peace, that offers peace with God, but also that breaks down barriers within communities.

So we read in Luke chapter 15, a parable that as we read the book of Jonah, I think that we'll see connections, that parable of the two lost sons and a generous father.

And that message, the message of Jesus, very much ties up with the message of Jonah, that everybody needs God's mercy, whether like Jonah, that we consider ourselves to be good people, or whether like the people of Nineveh, others would look at us as bad people.

Everybody needs God's mercy, and that mercy is open to all. So as we think about chapter one today, as we think about the book of Jonah for the next few weeks, let's ask ourselves some questions.

[8 : 14] How wide is my view of mercy? How concerned am I for the mission of God, for the good news of God, to move beyond my borders and boundaries, however I draw them?

And have I experienced the mercy of God for myself in a way that's changed my heart and my life? So to the story, let's begin looking at Jonah's commission.

He's got a job to do. First three verses. The story begins, the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai. The Lord speaks.

The Lord takes the initiative. We'll see the Lord is the real hero of this story. And here in verse two, we see the message that he wants Jonah to bring.

And it's a message of judgment against the city of Nineveh. Now there's another prophet, another former prophet by the name of Nahum. And the whole book of Nahum is a prophecy against Nineveh.

[9 : 18] And in that, we get some of the details of what this city was like. So we discover things like, this was a city that deliberately plotted and planned against the Lord. They wanted to destroy the people of God.

They are pictured like a lion attacking their prey. They were known for injustice. It's described in that book as a city of blood, as a city of lies, as a city of plunder.

These were not nice people. And so we're reminded in verse two, right at the beginning of our story, of a holy God who judges wickedness.

I wonder how we feel about a God who judges. Possibly uncomfortable. We like the idea of a God of love.

But the idea that a God of love is also a God who judges can be uncomfortable. You know, the Bible says that as people, we are made in the image of God.

[10:26] And you and I, we know that when we see something wrong happen, when we read of or see on our television or personally injustice, the wickedness happen, when we feel a sense that justice should be done because we're made in the image of a God who is just.

And if that's true for us, then we ought also to expect that a perfectly just God will also want to see justice done.

In fact, God cannot remain perfect and holy and good and at the same time simply turn a blind eye to evil. He cannot sweep it under the rug.

And I don't think we would want that to be true of God. The city of Nineveh was guilty of crimes against humanity and cruelty and violence.

And here we're reminded of a God of justice. For the church in war zones, for the church in persecuted countries, what we discover time and again when you get newsletters or prayer notes, you discover that for many in that situation, this reality is actually good news.

[11:42] These people who live every day suffering injustice, place their lives, place their hope in the final justice of God, that their hope lies with Him.

So God is just, but God is also merciful. Perhaps the dominant theme of the book of Jonah is the great mercy of God.

And even in verse 2, we've got a clue that God is a God of mercy because in a sense, why announce judgment is coming? He doesn't need to do that.

He's not obliged to tell Nineveh that. He is completely sovereign. So we need to ask ourselves, well, why is he sending Jonah to make that announcement? And the answer, Jonah knows this, is to give them an opportunity to repent, to change, to seek mercy from God.

In the New Testament, Peter writes in 2 Peter 3 verse 9, the Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness.

[12:57] Instead, He is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but everyone to come to Him in repentance. Why does God delay justice at times?

Because He doesn't want people to perish. He wants people to turn to Him in repentance. And what we'll discover is that Jonah knows this about God, and that's why in verse 3, he decides to run.

His running is a sign of his being unwilling to obey. That he thinks that this people, the people of Nineveh, don't deserve the chance of God's mercy. So again, if we were to think of Luke chapter 15, we see Jonah has the same kind of heart as the older brother did in that story.

Why welcome them back? Why are you showing kindness to that type of people? So he's told to head east to Nineveh, and instead, he heads due west.

He's been given a job to do, but he just doesn't want to do. Jonah wants to run from his job because he can't bear the thought of God changing his verdict on Nineveh, on Jonah, on Israel's enemies, because he knows that to expose their sin is also to give them the opportunity to hear of and to receive the mercy of God, and he wants no part of that.

[14:21] But that's fundamental to what it is to live for God, to share God's values. So for us as a church, for us as Christians, we are called to be God's ambassadors and God's witnesses, and we have that same responsibility.

Responsibility to share the gospel of peace. To say to people that regardless of what they have done, regardless of who they are, there is hope for them in the Lord Jesus.

There is hope of mercy and grace that is greater, perhaps than the mess that people have made of their lives. And so we have this same commission to make the mercy of God known by telling people the good news of Jesus.

And so for us, we need to be reminded, let's not run from that. That's our responsibility. Maybe some of us, like Sarah and Shores, would be called to mission overseas to bring this hope to others.

And let's learn to be open to that, to be praying for those who are on the mission field, to be praying for ourselves, to be willing to go if we are asked to go.

[15:42] So that's Jonah's commission. And so we find him, he's on a boat and he's heading in the wrong direction. And then Jonah is going to get a great wake-up call from God.

Again, in verse four, we see that the Lord is the active agent. The Lord sent a great wind on the sea and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.

The word there is the idea of the Lord threw or hurled a great storm. And then perhaps the image of a bowling ball that you throw down the lane and you're waiting for the pins to scatter.

Here is the ship and it's being hit by God's storm. And in verses five to eight, we see how the sailors respond.

These sailors who don't know the God of Israel, but we get an insight into their worldview. So it says in verse five, all the sailors were afraid and in response to their fear, each cried out to his own God.

[16:52] Verse six, the captain comes to speak to Jonah. How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God. Maybe he will take notice of us. Verse seven, come let us cast lots to find out who's responsible for this calamity.

And then you've got all those questions, that interrogation in verse eight. They understand that the gods control nature. Of course, Jonah knows there's one true God who controls everything.

They believe that the gods are active in the world, that this storm is a sign of God's anger being directed against somebody, perhaps for some kind of disobedience.

And they have this understanding that there are many gods. The gods are local. So you need to find the right God that's been upset. You need to offer the right sacrifices to that God in order that they will be heard, that the storm will perhaps stop.

So in verse eight, when they ask all those questions of Jonah, that interrogation is really religiously loaded. They want to find out, okay, we know our gods over here. Jonah, who are your gods?

[18:06] Have you upset one of them? And when Jonah starts speaking, we see how they respond. We see that they were afraid in verse five, but once Jonah speaks to them in verse nine and verse 10, we discover that that fear becomes terror.

Because Jonah in verse nine says, I'm a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the land. And they're terrified because Jonah has confessed to following a God who's not regional, but global, a God who's not limited, but all powerful.

So they know who Jonah's God is. And so there is fear. In fact, there is a sense of horror. They ask that question, what have you done?

Because Jonah confesses, he's running away from this all-powerful God. So these sailors that don't know the truth, they can see, you can't run from this God.

It's ridiculous to try and run from this God. But you know, ever since Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, men and women, boys and girls, have been doing the same thing.

[19:19] So Adam and Eve ate the fruit that they were told not to eat. The first thing they do after they feel a sense of shame is they try and hide. And they take some leaves and try and cover themselves.

And then they hear God in the garden. They hide behind a tree as if they can somehow evade the God who made them and sees everything.

Sometimes we're not so different. We're like little children. I don't know if you've ever played hide and seek with kids when they're really little. It's like, if I close my eyes then nobody can see me.

That's how it works for little kids. But sometimes we take that attitude when it comes to God. If I sort of block God out of my thinking, if he has no place in my life, then maybe he doesn't see me.

Maybe he's not that bothered. Maybe I'll be fine without him. And the book of Jonah reminds us that God sees everything. God is active in our world.

[20:17] God knows everything about us, which actually makes his willingness to love us and to show mercy to us is still more amazing. So, the boat's still in the storm.

Verse 11, the sea's getting rougher. The sailors are out of options. And so they asked Jonah, what should we do to make the sea calm down? And Jonah says, well, throw me overboard.

He confesses that he's the cause of the storm. He acknowledges his guilt. He's willing, in a sense, to face judgment to be thrown into the storm. But notice, as somebody who is a follower of God, that there's no sign of repentance.

repentance. In effect, he seems to be saying, well, do you know what? Actually, I'd rather die in the storm than go to Nineveh and preach the gospel. He has so much to learn about the mercy of God. But this section of Jonah reminds us, as so much of the Bible does, that God is in control of all the events of our life. We may not recognize that or acknowledge it, but it is true.

[21 : 27] And God can use those events at times to wake us up. I still remember, as a child, one of our elders in the church in Sky, when I grew up, was a fisherman.

And he spoke really powerfully about the fact that it was a storm at sea and his fear of being lost in that storm that caused him to reach out for God, to pray, and to commit his life to Jesus as Lord. For many of us, perhaps it's only the storms of life that will shatter our self-reliance, that cause us to feel our own sense of weakness, and that we need someone greater than ourselves, that we are people who need the mercy of God.

Jonah, as we'll see, will need to learn that his hope is the same hope as is extended by God to Nineveh, God's mercy to those who don't deserve it.

That's true for each one of us. Jonah here is acting as a disobedient prophet, and we see what happens because of that.

[22 : 49] He brings trouble and the judgment of God, not just on himself, but on the people around him. But by contrast, Jesus is the true and the obedient prophet who bears the judgment of God for others so that we might trust in him and receive mercy and not judgment.

Jonah is not our hope, but Jesus is. Let's think, finally, about Jonah's sacrifice as we see it in verse 13 to 16.

And again, we'll notice that Jonah, the prophet, is really honest as he writes his story. So in verse 13, Jonah having said, well, throw me overboard, we read how the sailors react and it says, instead, the men did their best to roll back to land, but they could not for the sea grew even wilder than before.

The irony here is that these sailors who don't know the true God, they actually show more mercy to Jonah than Jonah, the man of God, shows to the city of Nineveh. He's more than happy to see Nineveh destroyed, whereas these sailors want to preserve the life of disobedient Jonah.

And we see again that the transformation that is taking place in the lives of the sailors, they were afraid of the storm, then they're terrified as they hear what Jonah has done in running away from the Lord, the God of heaven and earth.

[24 : 21] And then we see by the end of the story, they're crying to the Lord, asking that they not be held accountable. They throw Jonah overboard, and then it says in verse 16, at this, the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him.

So Jonah had confessed worship, but he's disobedient, whereas we have this wonderful picture of the pagan sailors who come to fear the Lord. They honor him, they sense the awe that surrounds God, and they show thanksgiving, they offer sacrifices because they have received mercy, because the storm has stopped.

So even in the middle of Jonah's disobedience, God is still using that situation to point people towards himself. Now just before we sort of move on from this, one of the things that the Bible teaches us is the reality that there is such a thing as common grace, that God gives gifts to all people regardless of whether we know anything about the God of the Bible or not, that we are made in the image of God, therefore as people we will in different ways reflect the qualities of God.

Not perfectly, but we will reflect the qualities of God, and we see that in these sailors. They didn't know anything about the God of the Bible, and yet we see them looking to show mercy to Jonah.

So I just want to remind ourselves that it's not true to say that Christians are somehow better than other people. It's not true to say that Christians will be necessarily better neighbors or better workers.

[26 : 10] Jonah is proof of that because we're not saved because we've made the grave. We're saved because of mercy. In fact, the images used in the Bible to speak of God's people are things like poverty and weakness and blindness and need.

And so if we have that idea about ourselves as Christians, we're somehow on a different level, we need to repent at that point. That we need to show humility and real care and recognize the goodness that we see in the people around us.

But the question for us now is why does the fear of the sailors, why does it shift from fear to terror to in the end worship?

Well, it's because when they throw Jonah overboard, verse 15, the raging sea grew calm they worship the God who controls the storm.

They see proof of God's sovereign power. And of course, when we fast forward to the life of Jesus, we see that same thing happen. In Mark chapter 4 and verse 41, we find another group of sailors out on the sea, the disciples with Jesus.

[27 : 30] And Jesus is the prophet who's asleep in the boat and a storm comes and the disciples come to wake Jesus saying, don't you care if we drown? Jesus speaks to the wind, speaks to the wave and the storm stops.

And the disciples are terrified. Who is this? They ask themselves because they recognize in the stopping of the storm, here is proof that Jesus is the Son of God with the power of God because He is God.

So our story, we'll leave our story here today with Jonah, this disobedient, reluctant prophet who's willing to be thrown into the sea and with that sacrifice, the storm stops and the sailors are saved and are thankful.

And let's remember Jesus, the true, the obedient, the willing prophet who throws Himself, as it were, into the storm of God's judgment.

There at the cross, He faces the storm of God's judgment against our sin and against our disobedience, bearing that on Himself so that we might know mercy and new life, that we might be saved and that we might be thankful and that we might live lives marked by thankfulness as a result.

[29 : 01] So this week, we see Jonah needs the mercy of God. We see that the sailors need the mercy of God and we will see later on that Nineveh needs the mercy of God.

Whether we're good, whether we're bad, whether we're somewhere in the middle, everybody needs the mercy of God. And the gospel, the good news of the Bible is that Jesus came to invite us to receive that mercy, whoever we are, whatever we've done, to confess our sin, to confess our need, to recognize that Jesus died on the cross for us, that we might worship Him as Lord and Savior and then to be willing with God's help to go on this mission with this message of mercy for the world.