

God's Mission of Mercy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 January 2025

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 01] So if you keep your Bibles open there at the book of Jonah, we're going to begin to think about the mercy mission of our God. But before we get there, some missionary fails of a different kind. So a number of you will be familiar with the mission agency OMF. They work in Southeast Asia. They work in Japan. And in the beginning of the year, they had a series of kind of social media posts, basically making the point that missionaries have to be people who are prepared to be humbled. And in the context of these Japanese missionaries, it was humbled in the context of some rather chronic language fails. And so they were willing to share some of these. So there was one missionary who shared the time that he was trying to preach a sermon in Japanese. And he got halfway through his manuscript, and then he completely forgot all language competency. And somebody from the congregation had to finish his sermon.

Another missionary was meeting a new Christian. He wanted to find out more about him for the purpose of discipleship, trying to ask him what his favorite hobby is. Instead, asked him what his favorite sin was. It's never a good way to start. Another was visiting a new church. He tried to introduce his wife, but he introduced his horse. Let's hope she didn't hold it against him. And he invited the church after that to a time of prayer, and he told them, please crush your eyelids in prayer.

To be a missionary, OMF was telling us, was to be ready to prepare to be humbled. Now, the story of Jonah is a very different kind of missionary failure. Here is a man who deliberately runs away from God. Here is a man who seems very reluctant to share a message that would bring good news and mercy. He wrestles with ideas of obedience and struggles with this idea of a God of justice and mercy. He is someone with a sense of pride, the pride of an Israel. I am part of the people of God.

Somebody who seems to operate with a prejudice towards outsiders. Certainly, God should not want anything good for these enemy Assyrians. They deserve judgment and not mercy. But the missionary story of Jonah is one in which he too will be humbled. And he'll be humbled as he comes to, in different ways, encounter the mercy of God. Sometimes it's for pagan sailors. It's going to climax with mercy for a pagan city. But all the way along, he's going to be encountering God's mercy that he needs for himself.

So, let's jump into our story, beginning with Jonah and God's Word. So, verses 1 to 3. The story of Jonah begins like so many of the stories of the prophets. God's Word comes, and the prophet is to be given a task. A prophet is called so that he will be a spokesman.

[3 : 18] But where things begin to get different is in the reality that God's Word is going to send Jonah. This is something Jonah wouldn't have expected. This is something the audience listening to the story of Jonah would have been shocked about. The first word that comes to Jonah is the word, go. So, we meet in our Bibles other prophets, and sometimes they are called to speak to other nations or even to speak against other nations. But typically, they're going to stay and speak from a distance. But Jonah is different because you're going to have to go right into the heart of the Assyrian Empire to the city of Nineveh. The next thing that's absolutely shocking is simply that, that Jonah is to go to Nineveh. Okay, so we maybe don't know very much about the Assyrian Empire.

Perhaps we do. But I have read scholars describing the ancient Assyrian Empire as a kind of terrorist state. They were notorious in their day for the torture that they perpetrated, young and old.

No one was spared. I read another who said that if the empire was carrying out these kind of acts today, we would talk again about crimes against humanity. There would be war crime upon war crime committed by the Assyrians. And they are, of course, an enemy to Israel, threatening Israel, invading Israel from time to time. The next shocking thing for Jonah is that he is called to go and preach. Preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me. And we might instinctively think, well, this is perhaps good news for Jonah. He's going to announce comeuppance for the Assyrians. But Jonah knows something about his God, something that he wrestles with about his God. Just to fast forward to chapter 4, he's very angry at the Lord's compassion.

And he says, And so Jonah's response, verse 3, is to run away from the Lord. He receives the word of God. His instinct is, I want to try and ignore it and its call. If God says east, I'm going west. If God says, go to Assyria by land, I'm going to go to Tarshish by sea. I think it's important and helpful for us to know that this isn't the first time Jonah has been called into God's service. You can go to 2 Kings chapter 14, verse 25, and you will discover God speaking and Jonah obeying. But not this type.

So why did he disobey? Why did he choose to run from God's mission? Why does he resist the mission of mercy? Three suggestions probably suggest themselves to us? The first, I imagine we can relate to this, is fear. And Tim Keller kind of helpfully sort of captures it. He said, picture a Jewish rabbi in the 1940s, going into central Berlin, proclaiming on the city streets, repent or face judgment.

[7:17] Imagine the fear. Anticipate how long that rabbi would last in Nazi Germany. So fear is likely there. I think we can absolutely say that pride and prejudice lurks in Jonah's mind. His instinct is that God blesses the good, and Israel is the good, and God judges the bad, and Nineveh belongs to the bad.

That he is part of the covenant people. Blessings come to God's people, and he anticipates curse should come to those who are not like him. So there is pride and prejudice that will feature throughout his story. And I wonder too whether there's a sense of doubt and confusion. So there was another prophet called Nahum. And Nahum's message was a very clear message that God would judge Nineveh.

And so we might perhaps imagine Jonah wondering, well, how does my new message fit? Perhaps he had questions and doubts. How can a God of justice also be a God who offers mercy? And it's an interesting tension that you can follow all through the Old Testament. How is it possible that God can be both just and merciful? And of course, that tension is only fully resolved at the cross of Christ, where we see both God's justice against sin and his mercy towards sinners as his son becomes the substitute and the sacrifice. So in applying Jonah's response to ourselves, I wonder whether some of those emotions, whether those responses kind of resonate. Do we ever have a sense of fear when it comes to the mercy mission of God? Do we ever find ourselves tongue-tied, reluctant to go and share?

Because we're not sure how the other person will react. Perhaps we think about the cost to ourselves. Will this mean exclusion? Will this mean I will seem foolish for my Christian views? How will this place me in my peer group if I share? And so fear can be something that can halt us in our mission?

Sometimes, I think, if we're honest, pride and prejudice also probably plays a part. There does seem to be something about our sort of fallen humanity that limits grace and mercy, that we tend to include some and exclude others, that where we're called to build bridges so that we might extend grace. We can be very good at building walls and barriers instead.

[10 : 05] Sometimes in our attitudes and our perceptions. Not for that kind of person. Or we place limits on God's ability to say that person is too far gone, or they seem so utterly disinterested. Have you ever stopped sharing the gospel because you thought that person will never care in a million years? Maybe for us as well, it's doubts that stop us from really being active in our mission. Nagging questions, perhaps about the character of God, perhaps unresolved questions about how to understand aspects of God's Word. And we find it hard to simply trust the wisdom, the goodness, the power, and the love of God. And so we're so busy thinking and contemplating and wrestling that we stop acting. But I think below all that, and certainly the underlying problem with Jonah is that he struggles with the mercy of God. He's reached that point in his life where he's not appreciating that it's God's mercy that has saved him, and that he stands constantly in desperate need of the mercy of God. He doesn't see that the God of justice is a God of mercy, and that this God of mercy loves to turn enemies into friends. He doesn't see what we see in the gospel.

He doesn't have the cross of Christ. Let me read Romans chapter 3 verse 22 to 24 for us. Speaking about the righteousness of God.

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. It's that word of mercy and grace freely extended to all in Christ that fuels the engine of Christian mission, but when we lose sight of it, by contrast, it halts Christian mission. So that's Jonah and God's word. Now as the story moves on, let's think about Jonah and God's storm, which really takes up the bulk of the rest of the chapter.

Hugh Martin, 19th century free church minister and professor of theology, has a book full of sermons on Jonah, and in these middle verses, I think from verse 7 onwards, he has a sermon called, When the World Rebukes the Church. And it's a great title, because it gets to the heart of this section. We see in a sense things turned upside down, because we meet a group of pagans in these sailors who are far more admirable than God's man Jonah. We meet a bunch of pagan sailors who are far more spiritually awake than God's prophet Jonah. We meet a pagan captain who positively points a prophet back towards his God. So there's a great reversal, and things seem backwards. And what we need to do is we need to think about God's storm as it comes, and see how it affects both the sailors and Jonah.

In verse 4, the Lord sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to threaten to break up. The word there is the Lord hurled, like a javelin or a spear. You know, here is God's deliberate sending of a storm. And it's interesting that the sailors, they understand.

[14 : 04] All the sailors were afraid, and each cried out to his God. They know this is no ordinary storm. They don't as yet know the true God of Israel, but they know a God is active, and a God is angry, and so they respond. But just before we get to the response, just to think about this for a moment, for Jonah, as he finds himself in the storm, he is discovering that sin has a storm attached to it.

Because for Jonah, he is receiving the consequences of going against God's Word. And in going against God's Word, he's going against the design for the universe.

Derek Kidner says, sin sets up strains in the structure of life, which can only end in breakdown. And we see that typified in the story of Jonah, that there are storms that come as a consequence to our sin and rebellion. But for the sailors, it's quite different.

Their experience of the storm is simply a consequence for them of living in a fallen world. They are not guilty of a particular sin, but they are just in the same boat.

So two very different experiences. But the amazing mercy of God is such that this storm will draw both the sailors and Jonah towards God. Because the sailors, their instinct of fear and their appreciation of the works of God will ultimately lead them to faith and worship. And Jonah, God's work in him is somewhat slower, but he too learns mercy, and he has shown mercy. He has shown mercy by the sailors, but he especially has shown mercy by God. But let's think about the two different responses. Let's think, first of all, about the response of these, I'm going to call them the sensitive sailors, because they're really admirable in that they're sensitive to what's going on. A number of things stand out, I think. In verse 5, we see them working together for the good of them all. We see them in verse 5, alert and praying. In verse 6, we have the captain's wonderful question, how can you sleep? Get up and call on your God. Maybe he will take notice of us so that he will not perish. So it's understanding that there is some supernatural act, and so there needs to be prayer to connect with God to seek mercy. In verse 7, we find them casting lots to find out who's responsible. They believe that the God will work in providence to show who has been responsible. I think another thing that's striking,

[17:06] I don't know if you've thought about this, when it's discovered that Jonah is the cause of the trouble, they don't get angry with him. They're at the point of death because of this man's disobedience, but they seem respectful. They ask lots of questions, but there's a respect, and there's a care for Jonah.

You know, when eventually it comes, Jonah realizes he's to blame, he says, throw me overboard, they don't instinctively say, of course. They're not trying to preserve themselves. Rather, they do their best to roll back to land. They want to save Jonah, and when eventually they realize this is all they've got to throw him overboard, they pray to God for forgiveness. 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 please. They see God's hand at work in all of this.

And their attitudes and their actions stand as a rebuke for the prophet Jonah. To go back to Hugh Martin, stand as a rebuke often to the church in this sense. Here are a group of pagans who are showing genuine care, mercy, and kindness towards Jonah, who is an outsider to them, who has brought trouble on them, who worships a different God from them.

Let's flip to think about Jonah. We hear Jonah describing himself. Remember, Jonah is very honestly reflecting on his own experience, and he talks about himself, making clear he is a reluctant prophet.

So again, he's on the run. Verse 5, while everyone else is busy trying to deal with a storm and busy praying, we discover Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

[19:11] Again, Hugh Martin talks about the sleep of sorrow. Maybe sometimes we've had that experience of a sense of guilt and anxiety, being such an emotional drain that we find ourselves exhausted. Perhaps that's where Jonah finds himself. Certainly, we recognize he's not praying. He is slow to call on his God, and he's slow to share care for these men.

We get the sense that he's not proactive. He's reactive. He only speaks when he's questioned. What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What's your country? From what people are you?

His response is interesting. Look at verse 9. As he explains who he is, here's my identity. What comes first? I am a Hebrew.

It seems like his national identity comes ahead of, I worship the Lord, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. Again, this explains, I think, his reluctance to show mercy. National identity.

Pagans are outsiders. Ninevites are enemies. Let me run. So instead of that mercy mission that he was sent on, he's risking them all, experiencing the effects of God's judgment.

[20 : 42] Verse 10. They are terrified because they discover he's been running away from the Lord. Things are not looking good at this stage.

Before we see how the tension resolves at this point, a couple of lessons from the storm. This one's largely from the sailors, I think. That invitation to seek the common good.

Again, that's where Hugh Martin talked about the world rebuking the church. In the picture that we have in the book of Jonah, you know, we are all in the same boat.

You know, in society, we're all in the same boat. It can be very easy for Christians to point our fingers out there, can't it? Oh, look at society. We're part of society. Better to seek the common good.

Better to remember that message that Jeremiah was delivering to the exiles. In a different place where they were refusing to settle in Babylon.

[21 : 44] They were captives and they wanted to keep their distance. And the message came, seek the welfare of the city because as it prospers, you will prosper.

There is a call from God to seek the welfare of the places where we live. To be a positive blessing on our communities.

To care about our local community. To find ways that we can, whatever our context, whether that's school or university, the workplace, or the local area where we live.

To seek to be a blessing. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan. Again, there was the world rebuking the church. There was the Samaritan going out of his way to show care and mercy at great risk.

That call from Jesus to the church to learn to move from who is my neighbor, who are those who are like me and who like me, to ask the question, how can I be a neighbor to whoever needs mercy?

[22 : 52] When we do that, we're following the pattern of Jesus. So the storm invites us to seek the common good. And I think it also invites us to call on God in prayer.

The sailors have that instinct. The pagan captain, he gets it. And the Bible reminds us in so many ways that our God, the God who made the heavens and the earth, is a God who listens to prayer.

A God who invites us to pray for mercy for others. A God who builds into his way of establishing his kingdom, the prayers of his people.

And so we're always being called, as we see kind of the storm of confusion and doubt and the urgency, as we recognize there are so many people, as Ian was praying, even our own nation who know nothing of God, who think nothing of God, the urgency to pray, to seek mercy, to pray for those miracles of mercy, to pray for our own opportunities, for openings, to share what we believe, and to pray that people would listen.

Well, that's the story of Jonah and God's storm. The last thing we need to think about is Jonah and God's mercy. God's mercy is really a theme that kind of runs through all the chapters of the book of Jonah.

[24 : 25] It's a wonderful story, really simple story, dramatic story, but it's got lots of complex truths, and it shows God's mercy in different ways, because Jonah experiences what we might call the severe mercy of God.

God disciplines those he loves. Jonah is being disciplined, because he's running from God. And we also see surprising mercy, as these pagan sailors become God-fearing worshippers.

So let's see together how mercy comes to dominate in the storm. First in verse 12, we begin to sense mercy in Jonah's heart, as he takes responsibility.

This is a big moment, when he says, 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.

So remember, why is Jonah here in this boat? He's here because he does not want people who are not like him to receive mercy. But now, as he's looked into the eyes of these sailors, as he has experienced their kindness, their compassion, their determination to save him, his heart begins to change.

[25 : 40] And we see this, in a sense, a preparation for the pattern of substitution. In effect, he says to him, listen, I know I deserve it, and I know you don't, so throw me in.

When we think about Jesus, the greater Jonah, it's quite different. I don't deserve it, you do, but I'm going to stand in your place. God's loving sacrifice, and the salvation of Jesus.

So we see that Jonah begins to show mercy to the sailors. Then we see mercy, both from and then for, the sailors as well.

As we said in verse 13, when Jonah's solution is revealed, the men do their best to roll back to land. They want the best for Jonah, and so they try and fight this plan, and when they can't, they pray forgiveness.

And then in verse 15, they have this experience, as they throw Jonah overboard, the raging sea grew calm. When Jesus stopped the storm, and there was flat calm.

[26 : 49] Remember the disciples, their fear was even greater, because they realize, the one in the boat has the power of God. There is a new fear from the sailors. It's the fear of the Lord.

Verse 16, at this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice, and made vows. Now they know the God of covenant faithfulness. Mercy for them.

And this isn't simply, you know, that phrase, there's no atheists in a foxhole, there's no atheists in the trenches. This isn't just, let me pray, and then if things turn out well, I'll forget this God.

These sacrifices are made, these vows are made, after they've been delivered. Seems like there's been a genuine change of heart here.

And think about God's amazing mercy. so, Jonah, the runaway prophet, is supposed to go east, and instead he goes west. He's never supposed to be on this boat.

[27 : 50] But God's able, even to use that, even that disobedience, becomes a way for God's mission to continue. He is so determined to show mercy, that he'll show mercy through this reluctant prophet, for the sake of the pagan sailors.

And of course, Jonah himself finds amazing mercy, surprising mercy, in verse 17, the Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah.

Jonah. And what we discover, is that the mercy, Jonah has been struggling with, is the mercy, that saves him.

And now he's going to have this, first hand experience, without God's mercy, I would be dead. The God of mercy, that he has run from, is the God of mercy, who has lovingly pursued him.

Controlling even this great fish, to swallow him. And in this little moment, it prepares us to look forward, to see the gospel of God's mercy.

[29 : 03] To think of Jesus, the ultimate Jonah, who willingly hurled himself, into the storm of God's judgment, for the salvation of others.

That what looked like death, and defeat, there on the cross, turns out to bring pardon, forgiveness, life, and victory. And Jesus will do that, for people like Jonah, who think that they're very religious, but actually need, the mercy of God desperately.

And he will do it, for people like these sailors, who are far from God, but yet are invited, by his grace, to draw near. It's a mercy, that's available to all of us.

And as we understand, as Jonah comes to understand, that I would drown, without God's mercy, then we have the fuel, of gratitude, to drive our mission of mercy, for the sake of others.