

# An abashed prophet

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[0:00] We're going to look at this passage, quite a short passage but there's an awful lot in it as I think we shall see.!

Says the teacher, utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. That may seem a somewhat depressing place to start but hold that thought anyway because indeed without God we do find that anything is meaningless, everything is meaningless.

And that's what Jonah found and we're going to look at that now. Well, we looked at the sort of political context of Jonah last week.

We now need to take a quick look at the literary structure really to see why it's constructed in the way it is. And we met this structure actually this morning, again if you were here this morning, in Solomon's dedication of the temple.

Phil called it a sandwich. That's alright if you want to call it a sandwich. A technical term for those who are like me and you like to use the correct technical term.

[1:39] It's called a chiasm. If you want to call it a Hebrew sandwich, that's fine too. But it is very common in Hebrew works of literature.

And in this case, the sandwich works as I put it up on the screen there. So it starts with God speaking judgment on Nineveh. And then we learn that Jonah is very unhappy about that.

And as the story develops, God uses Jonah to save some Gentiles, some Sidonian sailors as we looked at last week. And then in the center, the focus point as it were, of the sandwich.

It's a terrible mixed metaphor, isn't it? But you know what I mean. In the center of the filling in the sandwich, the important part, we have Jonah's prayer. And then it unwinds again, and we'll look at the ending next week.

God uses Jonah to save some more Gentiles, in this case the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh. But it turns out, in fact, that Jonah is still unhappy.

[2:47] And we find that in Jonah chapter 4. And at the end, God speaks again to Nineveh. But this time, words not of judgment, but words of grace.

And that seems a bit strange to our Western way of thinking, because we like to put the important bit at the end, don't we? We expect a happy, or at least a dramatic ending.

A denouement, as we call it sometimes. But here the Hebrew structure puts the focus on the prayer at the center. But actually, Jonah really quite brilliantly plays off this structure, the chiasm structure, with the more linear demands of a narrative.

And all the narrative is in chronological order. There's no flashbacks in Jonah's description. And he very cleverly balances the structure, which comes from sort of ideas of Hebrew literature, and the narrative, which is written in chronological order.

And what's more, the whole thing is presented, of course, with Jonah's terrific sense of drama. The book reads like a screenplay, doesn't it? Just remember what we had last week.

[4:07] Jonah flees from the Lord, scene one. A great storm, scene two. Jonah's thrown into the sea. End of Jonah, end of book.

But no, suddenly a dark shape appears. It's a great fish. With one gulp, our hero is swallowed. Roll closing credits.

Don't miss next week's exciting episode. It's written like a screenplay. And there's more to the structure of that as well. The whole book is bracketed by the words of God.

And that's what gives it its context and meaning. And because he doesn't have to put the denouement, as it were, at the end, Jonah does something very clever with the ending of the book.

Because it has something, rather the feel of the wisdom literature. It's intriguing. It's rather enigmatic. It has a lot of questions to which there are not necessarily simple answers.

[5:12] It reminds us that there is a conflict between judgment and grace. And it asks us to think about it and meditate on it. The book starts with a statement.

God says, The sins of Nineveh have come up before me. And he gives Jonah a simple command. Go and speak to the Ninevites. But the ending, although it's the words of God again, is a question. A question from God to Jonah. And we don't actually get Jonah's answer. We're expected to think, perhaps, provide the answer for ourselves. So next week, we're going to study this concluding part. But this week, we're going to look at this central section, the prayer. So, Jonah inside the fish. Bit of a challenge for the set designers, that.

Better have some good mood music, I think. I haven't got any music. Jonah has time to reflect.

[6:19] Here, inside the fish, Jonah suddenly finds himself isolated from the flow of history. He finds himself isolated from the human conflicts.

And in that period, we have this insight. This time of reflection. In the dark there, suddenly light dawns on Jonah.

Jonah. It's Jonah's time of retreat. For Jonah, the fish is a kind of cloister. Jonah can't stay there forever.

Any more than the apostles could stay up on the mountaintop forever. We were hearing about a few weeks ago that Peter wanted to. He can't do that. Jonah's not in the mountaintop.

On the contrary, he's down in the sea in a fish. But it is a time apart. A separate time. But he can't stay there forever. Ultimately, the peace of the cloister is the peace of the grave.

[7:23] If he stayed there for much longer, he'd be dead. Back in the real world, things are going to get complicated for Jonah again. And we find that in the closing section of the book.

Jonah's not ready to face the real world until he's come to that realization of verse 9. Although it is a prayer, it's also a theological reflection, a learning, a description of Jonah's learning curve, if you like, as well as the description of his rescue.

And it's this central moment of clarity, which is the real message of the book. In all the confusions and difficulties of real history, of all the problems of living in the real world, and Jonah's not going to escape those, yet in the center is this moment of clarity and insight.

And that's what gives the book its meaning. So let's just look and see what it is that Jonah learnt, and which he expressed in terms of a prayer.

And I'd just like to bring you three things. It's not going to be a long message this evening. It's a short prayer, the shortest message to go with it. But I hope a very helpful one.

[8:44] Three things. First of all, that Jonah sought escape, but what he found was banishment. And secondly, that Jonah sought freedom, but what he found was a prison.

And then, as he reaches the climax, that's a phrase from verse 9b, salvation comes from the Lord. So let's look at those lessons one at a time.

So first of all, verses 2 to 4. Remember that Jonah had tried to escape from the presence of the Lord in fleeing to Tarshish.

And it seemed he'd got his wish, but no, God sent the storm. Now, if you look in chapter 1, it's actually the sailors, of course, who threw Jonah overboard, but here, Jonah says, well, it wasn't really the sailors.

It was you, God, you, Lord, that threw me into the sea, who took me to the very realm of death. And in fleeing from the presence of God, that's what Jonah found.

[10:02] In his case, not quite literal death, although he got pretty close to it. But even as he thinks in Sheol, in the grave, as he feels as in the grave, God hears him.

And he describes it as banishment, doesn't he? In verse 4, if you can contrast that with what he thought he was seeking, he thought he was escaping. He thought he was escaping the presence of the Lord.

And that's a very human thing, right back from the garden, in the Garden of Eden. Adam tried to hide from the presence of the Lord. Humans want to escape the presence of God.

But just like for Adam, what happens when they do? They think they're finding escape. But when they get there, it turns out to be not escape, but exile.

And that's what it feels like for Jonah. We just find a yawning grave. Just death. If not literally, then spiritually and culturally.

[11:08] And that's why I quoted those words of the teacher. Meaningless, meaningless. Meaningless, utterly meaningless. Everything is meaningless. Jonah went to quite extraordinary lengths to escape from the Lord.

He abandoned all that was home and familiar. To flee to the edge of the world at Tarshish. But he discovered that that kind of freedom feels just like death.

But in the nick of time, all is not lost for Jonah. He remembers what gave his life its structure and its meaning. He remembers where true peace and rest was to be found.

Having fled from the presence of the Lord, he now resolves to seek it in verse 4. And where will he look? Interestingly, not to his home in Galilee.

Remember, Jonah didn't live in Jerusalem. He lived in Galilee. But he knew that if he wanted to find the presence of the Lord, he had to look towards the temple, the very center and symbol of God's presence on earth.

[12:16] And so that's where he looked. We should remember that, of course, as Phil has been reminding us, when we've been looking at the temple in Kings, the true temple is found not in Jerusalem, but in Jesus Christ.

So Jonah sought escape, but instead he found exile and banishment. And in the next few verses, in 5 to 7, he repeats much the same thought, but with a slightly different slant to it.

Jews, remember, dislike the sea. To them it felt like chaos and lawlessness. It was the very abode of the great serpent.

It was the enemy of justice and righteousness. We read in Genesis 1 in the creation story, now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And the word deep there is the same word which means abyss, or it can mean a grave. It's not actually sheol, it's a different word, but it can mean a grave or deep, an abyss.

[13:29] And the word for water there has connotations of impermanence, of things that are flowing and unfixed. At creation, God brought structure and meaning to the world, but in the sea, to the Jewish mind at least, ancient Jewish mind, in the sea, chaos still has power.

And Jonah found that the sea was like a trap. It was a prison. He says that the seaweed and the sand, the earth, barred him in.

Prison words, of course. It was as if he was manacled by seaweed and barred in by the earth. He is a man in a dungeon, in a pit.

And there's no escape on his own. He can only hope for rescue. And so with his last gasp, he calls desperately to the Lord. And indeed, the rescue came.

Not quite perhaps in the form that he'd expected. In fact, it came in the form of probably that which he most feared, the fish, an inhabitant of that great deep, reminding him that even the denizens of the deep were creatures of the living God.

[15:01] But, in verse 7, Jonah still not made it back to Jerusalem. He's still trapped in the fish. But still, he directs his prayer to where he can't go.

He directs his prayer to the temple in Jerusalem. And he knows that his prayer has made it where he as yet can't go. Even from the realm of chaos and death, while Jonah's not actually dead, there is access to the presence of God.

And again, for those of us in this troubled world, which may seem like a place of death, death, and yet there is access. We can direct our prayers to the throne of grace as Jonah did.

And then finally, we have this great affirmation, this great insight as light suddenly dawns for Jonah, still trapped inside the dark fish.

Salvation comes from the Lord. And in verse 8 to 10, his reflection turns to the nature of his still uncompleted rescue. He wasn't drowned, true, but he was still in a pretty bad place.

[16:20] He was still stuck inside the fish, basically. And who knows how he was going to get out. But Jonah, in verse 9, vows to get back to the place where his prayer has already gone, to the mercy seat, the place of grace, the place where God would accept his sacrifice and thanksgiving.

And he believes now that he will be able to get back. He says that in verse 9, doesn't he? He says, I will make good my vow. I vowed that I'm going to give a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Lord in Jerusalem.

And I will make good on it. This was from a man who was still stuck in the fish. How would it be achieved? He thinks back, doesn't he, on his experiences to date.

And he thinks of the idols that had failed the sailors in their time of need. They had sacrificed to their gods, done no good at all. No grace was to be found there.

No favor from God was to be found in the idols. Only by abandoning them and turning to the living God would they find rescue. And perhaps he'd been told to go to Nineveh.

[17:41] Perhaps he was thinking of the gods of Nineveh as well. The idols of Ishtar and what's the name? Asher, I think, was the male god. There'll be no protection for the Ninevites from the wrath of God.

There's no grace to be found anywhere except at the throne of grace, the Lord's appointed place.

And Jonah had been tempted to find a less demanding god as well, hadn't he?

Presumably, that's why he went to Tarshish. Perhaps he thought, if I went to Tarshish, I can find a god who doesn't have such strict standards. but it didn't happen, did it?

He realizes now that those gods, those idols are no use at all. It's complete folly. Simply, those gods simply keep people from the presence of the living God, from the throne of grace and favor.

And so, if he can be restored to the presence of God at the temple, it won't be, reluctantly, but with a song. He says, I'll come with a song of thanksgiving. He wouldn't, and indeed didn't, go to Nineveh joyfully.

[18:57] He still didn't want to go. We find that next week. But, he said he will go to the temple of the Lord with a song of thanksgiving. And so, he makes it into a vow, as I've said, in 9b.

And we come to the high point and theme of the book. As he says, salvation comes from the Lord. Not from the idols, but from the Lord. And we need to notice what he actually says.

He doesn't say, salvation might be found in the Lord if you ask him nicely. You might have found the idols don't work too well, so you could perhaps try Yahweh instead.

He doesn't say that at all. He doesn't say, you might have found salvation if you ask him. Of course, we do need to ask him, and Jonah knows that in verse 7. But Jonah is recognized far more than that.

He's recognized that in throwing him into the sea, God was actually at work in his life. And what seemed like terror and death at the time was actually the beginning of Jonah's rehabilitation.

[20:08] Left to his own devices, Jonah consigned himself to death, didn't he, by heading for Tarshish. The sea thing seemed like death, but it was actually part of God's salvation.

Similarly, if we sometimes find ourselves before we turn to God in the slough of Despond, as the Pilgrim's Progress calls it, it seems like a place of death, but it's actually the beginning of life as it was for Jonah.

The sea thing was part of God's salvation. It was to prove his way back. It was only because of the sovereignty of God over that storm, over the idolatrous sailors, over the sea, and over the fish itself, that his return is now possible.

Notice Jonah's vow in verse 9 isn't vacuous, but he is powerless to execute it himself. There's nothing he can do to find his way back to the temple, not initially at least.

Anyway, he's still stuck there in the fish, and yet he makes a vow and says, I will fulfill that vow, and it's a vow of faith, because he has faith that God is going to complete what he has begun.

[21:29] If God had meant to kill him, he would have done it already, but now he's at work restoring Jonah. And so his affirmation that salvation comes from the Lord is not just referring to his expectation of rescue, it's referring to everything he's seen God, everything he's seen God's work up to that point.

And for Jonah, that's the dividing line. That's the prayer of faith. until he realizes that, that salvation is only to be found in the Lord, then freedom and life are not possible.

He found only banishment and imprisonment. Jonah's come to understand that even though he was a Hebrew, even though he was a prophet of the Lord, that in himself he's no better than those Phoenician sailors with their idolatrous ways.

But now he's understood. Now he sees that God is truly at work and that salvation comes from the Lord and from nowhere else, from no one else.

And that's the dividing point. When he gets to that point, the word of the Lord comes. The Lord commands the fish, verse 10, and Jonah's free and back on terra firma.

[22:59] grace isn't found among the idols. It comes from the Lord's anointed king, Jesus.

We're like Jonah, we can't get to God's presence, so Jesus came to earth to help us. With one word of command, Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb.

one word of command, the Lord saved Jonah from the fish. It's the Lord's command that does it all. So, is he calling you this evening? Is he calling you for the first time? And have you put your faith in Jesus and said salvation is found nowhere else?

And if you have done that, still, is he calling you now to obedience, to following, to do, to follow his commands, even when we don't like them?

[24:10] And Jonah was not going to like it, as I say, he went to Nineveh, as we'll find next week, but he still didn't like it. but is he calling us? And shall we say with Jonah that salvation comes from the Lord?

So, next week, we'll find out what happened when Jonah did indeed go to Nineveh. But let's finish our time, well, our formal part of our time.

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