

Jonah's Mission (2): Jonah Walks The Plank

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[0 : 00] I cannot find my sermon for tonight on my iPad. So I'm just going to have to wing it. I really hope you don't mind.

But we're in Jonah chapter 1 and from verse 4 to verse 17. You'll have heard of the expression, walking the plank.

A few more gruesome ways to execute someone than to force them to walk the plank. Perhaps it was made famous by Peter Pan.

Perhaps we think when we think of someone walking the plank of pirates making their victims walk the plank. Actually, historically speaking, the most common use of the execution method we know as walking the plank was by mutineers who would, when they mutinied, force the officers of their boat to walk the plank.

For those of you who don't know what walking the plank means, back in the olden days when ships were built with wood, so we're talking back 200 years ago now, to execute someone on board.

[1 : 19] You nailed a plank of wood to the side of the boat and the plank of the wood was projecting onto the sea and then you forced them blindfolded to walk from the plank into the sea and they drowned.

And you might be in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, but walking the plank, whether it's Peter Pan or Mutant in the Bounty or any of these great pirate things, that was a horrible mode of execution. But it wasn't really invented by pirates. In fact, Jonah decided, nearly 3,000 years before Blackbeard, that he would walk the plank.

And in Jonah chapter 1 and verse 4 through 17, we have Jonah, the prophet, walking the plank. Let me remind you that this is the document of mission and evangelism in the Old Testament.

It reveals for us God's passion for mission. Or we might think it's about Jonah and I guess successive sermons and sermon series have been preached with Jonah as the central figure.

[2 : 35] But actually the central figure in this book is not Jonah. It is God. And God's passion for mission, God's passion to reach the men and women of Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, present day Mosul, northern Iraq, with the message of repentance to bring them to know him.

And it's a story of how an unwilling Israel, because after all, remember, Jonah is the representative of the nation of Israel, was unwilling because it didn't want, unwilling to do what God asked it to do because it didn't want Nineveh and the Assyrians, its enemies, to experience the grace that it had experienced from God itself.

And so, Jonah ran in the opposite direction. He ran away from the presence of the Lord. We saw that last week, remember, in verse 3. Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He paid the fare and went down into the boat to go with him to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. It wasn't so much that Jonah was running away from what God had called him to do, to go and preach the message of the steadfast love of God to the people of Nineveh.

It was that Jonah recoiled from the thought that God could be this gracious, that God could love his enemies and not just his own people. And that's where we left it last week.

[4 : 03] But tonight, we're moving on to verses 4 through 17. In this passage here, we're going to see two things. I can't remember what actually the points were, but I remember there are two points.

We're going to see two things. The first is that Jonah can't run away from God. Jonah cannot run away from God. Look at how hard he tries.

He's gone on the ship to Tarshish, which we believe is the modern-day Spanish seaport city of Cadiz on the Atlantic coast. It's through the Pillars of Hercules, the Straits of Gibraltar.

It's as far away from Israel as it's possible to get in the ancient world. And it's thought at the time that if you had passed through the Pillars of Hercules into the Atlantic Ocean, that somehow you were beyond the reach of any God.

But look, you're never beyond the reach of the God of Israel. And Jonah had to learn that for himself. So he tried to run away from the God of all grace, who wanted to show grace to his enemies.

[5 : 16] Wanted to show grace to the Gentiles in Nineveh. But there's two things that Jonah can't run away from. The first thing Jonah can't run away from is the love of God.

And the second thing he can't run away from is the power of God. The first thing he can't run away from is the love of God. Does Jonah really think that by running away beyond the Pillars of Hercules, that somehow he can defy or run away from the steadfast love of God?

Ah, not the steadfast love of God just for him, but the steadfast love of God for the Ninevites. Do you not think that God's purpose for the Ninevites is greater than the preferences, the likes, the dislikes of one Hebrew prophet?

There might be some of us tonight here who think that we can run away from God and run away from the steadfast love of God, that steadfast love demonstrated on the cross of Jesus Christ.

There might be some of us who think to ourselves, I don't want anything to do with Jesus or this cross. You can't run away from the love of God. I know one person here who tried, tried to run and run and run and run.

[6 : 40] Finally, the place that she ran to was the very place that she met the Lord Jesus Christ and became a believer in him. The love of God will keep on coming.

It will not let us go. And it will not let us go, especially in the realm of mission.

For when we are called, God's objective is not merely our good, but it's through us that his love would be declared and proclaimed to the nations.

I remember very well when I was first called to the ministry, I tried my hardest to say no. And I succeeded. And then the second time I was called to the ministry and I said no.

And I succeeded. And the third time I felt called to the ministry and I totally failed. One of the guys who comes to the growth group on a Monday night spoke of how when he came to Christ, to use his word, it was compulsion.

[7 : 59] A compulsion. He felt compelled to come to the Lord Jesus Christ. And in the same way, when God has a call upon your life for mission, it's a compulsion.

Remember how in 2 Corinthians 5, the apostle Paul says, for the love of Christ compels us. The love of Christ is our compulsion.

We can't run away from that compulsion. Just like Jonah could not run away from this compulsion. So, you're seeing him falling asleep in this boat.

Why is he falling asleep in this boat? It's not just because he's tired. Here's a man who cannot run away from God.

And he's trying his hardest to run away psychologically from God and maybe the best way to do that is just fall asleep. Maybe there's some of us here who having heard that what Thomas Davis said on the YouTube video about how we need 70 new ministers by 2030.

[9 : 12] By the way, at the beginning of lockdown it was 60 new ministers. Now it's 70. Maybe some of you are thinking to yourself, well, maybe I'm one of those 70. The love of Christ compels us.

We can't run away from him however far we go. But the second thing that Jonah didn't factor into the equation wasn't just the love of God which compelled him, but the power of God which constrained him.

The power of God which constrained him. Jonah thought, perhaps, that God had no more influence beyond the pillars of Hercules, that God somehow was powerless outside the borders of his own nation because that's the way in which the ancient world thought of their gods.

Gods didn't have an influence beyond the borders. So even today as you go to indigenous tribes with their own native religions, they'll think to them themselves, well, the God we worship is the God of this valley or the God of this mountain and he doesn't have any influence beyond this valley or beyond this mountain.

He's not the God of the white man. He's the God of this particular valley. If I should move out of this valley, he's no longer powerful there. And Jonah perhaps thought that the further he went away

from God, the less God's power would be.

[10:32] How wrong he was. In the ancient world, the sea was a place of chaos and anarchy. It was presented as this place of emptiness, this place of, well, when I say emptiness, it was empty of divine control.

It was filled with fearsome sea creatures. There be monsters here, the realm of chaos. It was almost the kingdom of Satan. So, when we see, for example, Jesus calming the storm in Mark chapter 4, we're trying to understand that the people around him were very superstitious people who believed that in the bottom of the sea there lived monsters.

And these were the monsters that made all the waves and the storms and things like that. Very superstitious people. And clearly, these sailors with whom Jonah was sailing were very superstitious.

And perhaps they thought that there was a God who was responsible for this particular storm. And that God needed to be placated. How little they took account as well of the power of God.

For was this storm not God's power itself? Did God not whip up this storm? We don't really know where in the Mediterranean Sea the ship had reached.

[11:53] Whether it had gone beyond Crete or whether it had gone beyond the boot of Italy or whatever it had gone. But what we do know is that whatever it had gone the power of God was still there. God was still as powerful thousands of miles away from the shores of Israel as he was in Israel itself.

We'll never get away from God. Never. Think about that. Especially when it comes to mission. Maybe some of you here feel called to lifelong mission. You're never going to get away from the power of God. You might think to yourself like our sister Katrina oh I've gone to Southeast Asia. Sure that's beyond the ability of God to influence. Not at all. The power of God is as powerful there as it is here in Scotland. God is powerful all over the world.

Jonah tried to run away from God. What a silly thing to do. Are there anyone here trying to run away from God? Is there anyone trying to put distance between themselves and God?

[13:03] That's a silly thing to do. Because as you learn in Psalm 139 I reckon Jonah probably could have sung Psalm 139 from the bottom of this ship as he was dozing.

Where can I fly from your spirit? Where can I flee from you? I can't go anywhere but you're there oh Lord. You hem me in behind and before.

God won't let the man of mission go because he loves those to whom that man of mission must proclaim the gospel more than they even know.

Jonah runs from God. The second point is this Jonah points to Christ.

Jonah points to Christ. One of the great things about the book of Jonah one of the reasons that I'm really enjoying studying it is that it doesn't just talk about the methodology of mission or the motive for mission or any of these things but actually describes the mission itself or that which we are to proclaim and preach.

[14:19] You'll often find as you go through the Old Testament shadowy pictures of what's going to happen when Jesus comes again or when Jesus comes as Messiah for the first time.

These pictures are all meant to line up together. Sometimes children buy books, I don't know if they still do, join the dots, you know, dot to dot, dot to dot, dot to dot. And a lot of these stories in the Old Testament are like join the dots, join the dots, join the dots.

And here in Jonah chapter one, we've got a lot of dots that when you put them together they point to the message that we as men and women of mission are to proclaim to the nations.

And that's composed in this passage of two elements. the first is this, costly substitution, costly substitution.

One of my colleagues in the ministry has preached 40 sermons on Jonah chapter one. And I rather think he's wasted his time, that he's missed the wood for the trees.

[15:30] Look at verses 7 to 17. what happens in that passage? One man, Jonah, dies and the rest of the ship's crew live.

Isn't that the point? Do not miss the wood for the trees in this passage. The point is, one man dies and the rest of them all live.

So, let's look at verse 15. They picked Jonah up and hurled him into the sea and the sea ceased from its raging.

Jonah himself had suggested that they throw him into the sea, that he be the substitute for them. Can you see what's happening here? Jonah is the substitute for them. God is angry. Jonah takes the blame. Now, Jonah is to blame in this situation. Jonah takes the blame.

[16 : 42] One man thrown over the side and all the sailors live. One man dies for them all. God will.

You know, if you spend 40 weeks in Jonah chapter 1 going verse by verse and word by word, you're going to miss this wood for the trees. You're going to be so busy getting to the psychology of Jonah, you're going to miss the big picture here.

Jonah walks the plank so that these men may live. It's costly substitution, right? And when we come to the New Testament, we see Jesus.

We see Jesus here. Is Jesus not our substitute? Did Jesus not walk the plank in our place? Did Jesus not bear the punishment for our sins?

The difference, of course, between Jonah and Jesus is that Jonah deserved it. Jesus did not. Jesus was dying for sins that were not his own. But ours, he was paying the price that we owe to God.

[17 : 53] And yet, you can see it in black and white here as you read the story and the narrative. One man dies, many men live. As we come to the New Testament, think of all those who live because of Jesus' death.

This one man who gave himself death. Think of the cross of Calvary, to emotional, spiritual, social, physical torture and death.

Think of all those who live because one man sacrificed himself, the God-man, Jesus Christ. Think of the innumerable multitude of whom we read in Revelation, made up of every tribe and nation, every color and tongue.

Think of them all standing before the throne of God. One thing's true for every one of them, Jesus gave himself for them. Jesus was thrown overboard in order that they might be safe.

You know, as we used to sing in Psalm 107, the storm is changed into a camp. At his command and well, why is that? It's because Jesus was thrown overboard on our behalf.

[19 : 14] Isn't that the message that we're called to proclaim? You know, we've got people in Thornwood tonight and guilt is breaking them down.

They're so filled with guilt and wracked with shame at the kind of people they are. We've got the message to proclaim to them, saying, but Jesus, Jesus has died for the guilty.

And Jesus has died to take our shame away. By faith in him, you can be a new person. All this shame and all this guilt goes. There's a heaven to be won and a hell to be lost.

Just believe in Jesus Christ. That's the message of the gospel. We see it here in Jonah chapter one, the message of mission. But then, and with this we close, the second element of how Jonah points to God here, is that he has early success.

He has early success. So remember the big picture of the book of Jonah. Jonah's called to go and preach the word to the people of Nineveh.

[20 : 25] And there are 120,000 persons, Jonah chapter 4 verse 11, in Nineveh, who do not know their right hand from their left. And they're all Gentiles, every one of them. They're all unclean, they're all dirty.

And Jonah's called to go and preach to these Gentiles and say to them, repent and believe. God will be gracious to you.

He's commanded to go and preach the steadfast love of God to these Gentiles. And he's thinking to himself, perhaps, will any of them believe at all? Well, here in Jonah chapter 1, let's go back again.

We're not trying to miss the wood for the trees. We're not trying to miss the meaning of this passage. We have a whole ship's company. And all these sailors worship their own gods.

Let's see. Each cried out, verse 5, the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid and each cried out to his own God.

[21 : 33] So you have a whole ship's company, a couple of hundred men, and they've all got their own gods, and probably their own gods were little idols they had in their banks or in their pockets as they walked around, little necklaces or whatever like that, and everyone had his own God.

By the end of the story, when Jonah had been thrown to the sea as the sacrifice for the substitute for them all, look at verse 16, then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

In other words, between verse 5 and verse 16, a most amazing transformation has taken place. because of Jonah's costly substitution, these men have gone from being idol worshippers to feeding the Lord exceedingly, offering sacrifices to him and making vows.

Now, if God can achieve that through Jonah's death, or Jonah thought he was going to die, of course, he didn't know there was a big fish underneath the sea to swallow him up, how much can he achieve through Jonah's life?

[23 : 03] Jonah needs to stop worrying about the results, because if God can convert a whole ship's company, then sure God can convert a whole city.

We have early signs of success here in Jonah chapter 1, you see. the success of gospel mission. I love the film Contact, and Contact stars Jodie Foster, Matthew McConaughey, and in the Hollywood movie Contact, Jodie Foster's trying to reach intelligent life beyond the stars.

It's about the SETI project, search for extraterrestrial intelligence, written by Carl Sagan, very deep. And Jodie Foster becomes this professor of astrophysics who's trying, using the pinnacle of scientific endeavour, trying to find order in all the disorder of all the signals you find from outer space.

The film begins, not with Jodie Foster, this powerful professor of astrophysics, but as a little girl, sitting in her bedroom, and she's, you know, you kids won't understand this, but she's trying to work a CB radio, and a CB radio was basically a way in which truckers spoke to each other, right?

And when I was a kid, we had CB radios, and we would speak to people in Burghhead and Holtman on the other side of the Murray Firth. How far can you get with your CB radio? I think my handle was Skywalker.

[24 : 39] Skywalker, Skywalker, is anyone there? Skywalker, Skywalker, is anyone there? You can tell Star Wars had just come out at the time. And I remember the fascination when someone from Elgin said, someone from Elgin responded in the CB, and I thought, wow, that's like 50 miles away.

And the film Contact begins with Jodie Foster with a map of the United States, and she's in one of the flyover states, Iowa or somewhere like that, and she's putting pins into where people are responding to her CB calls.

So there's one from Chicago, and there's one from Philadelphia, and there's one from Florida, and her dad comes into her, and her dad says to her, her nickname, her dad's nickname for her is Sparks, and her dad looks at all the pictures and whatnot, all the pins in the wall, and he knows that his daughter wants to reach and discover intelligent life in the stars, and he says to her, small move, Sparks, small move, Sparks.

here in Jonah, Jonah chapter one, with small moves, the fulfillment of Jonah chapter one doesn't take place until Revelation seven, because in Revelation seven, you don't have a ship's company before the throne of the lamb in heaven, you've got an innumerable multitude, can't count them, there's so many of them, and they're all worshipping King Jesus, and they're all worshipping him, why?

Because Jesus gave himself as a costly substitute for them. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word.

[26 : 30] We thank you that in Jonah chapter one, as we engage with your word, we find a man trying to run away from God, a reluctant evangelist, just like the whole nation of Israel tried to run away from its responsibility to spread the good news of your steadfast love and to be a light to the nations, as we see next week.

Lord, we thank you that we can't escape from your love, and we can't escape from your power. You are such a gracious God, and you will have your message go to the nations.

We thank you also for the shadows of Calvary we see here in Jonah chapter one. Jonah the prophet being the substitute for the ship's company, and how Jesus has died on the cross to take away our sins.

We thank you also that we have the small moves of gospel success here, and they're small moves, but yet, oh Lord, they look forward to the days of the church, as we said earlier, 64 million people a year coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, and then that wonderful picture and revelation of an innumerable multitude before the throne of God, each one worshipping King Jesus for dying for them.

Lord, we ask and pray tonight that even though these thoughts have been rambly and disorganized, that you would crystallize them in our minds, that you would fill us with the compulsion of love and power to go with the message of the gospel and to worship your name.

[28 : 13] In Jesus we pray. Amen.