

(1) The sovereign God

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is taken from the book of Jonah in the Old Testament, page 935, the book of Jonah, chapter 1. Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But 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. And the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his God.

They hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship, and had lain down and was fast asleep.

So the captain came and said to him, What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your God. Perhaps the God will give a thought to us that we may not perish. And they said to one another, Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us.

[1 : 23] So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation, and where do you come from?

What is your country, and of what people are you? And he said to them, I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, What is this that you have done?

For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.

Then they said to him, What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?

For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, Pick me up, and hurl me into the sea. Then the sea will quiet down for you. For I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you.

Nevertheless, the men rode hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they called out to the Lord, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood.

[2 : 30] For you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you. So they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

And the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. Thanks, Rob, very much for reading to us.

Do keep Jonah open on page 935. Now we're starting a series of four talks in the book of Jonah today.

And I want to begin really by asking the question, well, why bother with the book of Jonah?

Certainly in the popular imagination, with all the jokes about this being a fishy tale, which is far too hard to swallow.

I couldn't resist that. It's a book, isn't it, which certainly needs to stay very firmly in the children's Bible. Certainly not something for busy adults, who have plenty of other things that they can do with their precious time on a Sunday morning.

[3 : 48] Well, the reason we're looking at Jonah for these four weeks is because it is a book about God. Now that may seem an obvious thing to say. After all, surely the whole Bible is about God. But it seems to me it is very easy to forget that.

I think we can often be all too quick to put ourselves, so to speak, in the shoes of Bible characters, whether it's Jonah or David or Abraham, whoever it is, and to ask, well, what can I learn from them about their lives?

And actually to forget that, above all, the Bible is a book about God and about his purposes for his world. I guess we've seen that, haven't we, in the Bible overview, those of us who have done it over the last year.

And we see that very clearly in Jonah because at the heart of the book are three statements about God from the lips of Jonah himself. I've put the verses there just at the top of the outline on the back of the service sheets.

The first is chapter 1, verse 9, where Jonah says, I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land. Then chapter 2, verse 9, salvation belongs to the Lord.

[4 : 57] And then chapter 4, verse 2, Jonah declares, I knew that you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, relenting from disaster.

In other words, this is a book which is first and foremost about God. And the more we look at the man, Jonah, and see how he responds to what God is teaching him about his character, well, I think we'll find over the next few weeks, it's going to force us to ask the question, well, do I treat God as he really is?

In other words, am I letting God be God in my life? After all, we all hate hypocrisy, don't we? We're quick to spot it in politicians and other public figures.

Here's a newspaper article from just the beginning of this month. It reads, A former parish priest, Colin Pritchard, aged 64, has been sentenced to five years' imprisonment for sexually abusing a boy in St. Andrew's Church in Wellingborough 25 years ago.

Now, that is a shocking thing, isn't it? Indeed, if you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian, I guess this may well be one of the reasons why you're not, because you think Christians are simply a bunch of hypocrites.

[6 : 21] And if that is what you feel this morning, then I can understand that. But I think we're going to see that Jonah reveals the kind of doublespeak or hypocrisy that can so very easily be in all of our hearts, whether we're Christians or not, and forces us to ask the question, am I letting God be God in my life?

Well, three points on the outline today. I'm sorry for the unimaginative headings, but I think they get us to the heart of the chapter. First of all, God's sovereignty. In other words, God rules over every aspect of his creation.

And then once we look to these three points, as usual, we'll have a question time at the end. So then, God's sovereignty. Have a look at verses 1 and 2. Now, the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

Now, Jonah is because surprises. And the first surprise is that Jonah is sent to Nineveh. Now, Jonah was a prophet in the first half of the 8th century BC in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II.

Some of us will know how the kingdom of David and Solomon had been divided in two between the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel.

[7 : 54] And Jonah is a prophet to the northern kingdom. You can find out more about him in 2 Kings 14.25. It's there on the outline. Do look it up later. Don't look it up now.

It's an important verse, though, I think, because it locates Jonah specifically in history. In other words, Jonah is no fairy tale figure. He is there in the history books.

Indeed, Jesus also spoke about him as a historical figure. I've put the three references to him in the Gospels there in Matthew and Luke on the outline, and we'll come back to them later on in the series as well.

But the surprise is that God doesn't send Jonah to his own people, to Israel. Instead, he sent him to Nineveh in modern-day Iraq.

Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, and Assyria was one of Israel's greatest enemies. The point being, of course, that God is sovereign, not just over Israel, but over Assyria, over any nation, wherever it is.

[9 : 04] And so Jonah is called out, we're told, to preach against Nineveh, because its evil has come up before the Lord. Here is the sovereign God who exercises his rule, his kingship, over every nation, every people group, who sees what they're doing and calls each one to account, and will hold each one to account.

It's a very striking corrective, isn't it, to the way our culture so often thinks about God. You see, God doesn't smile benignly and weakly on everyone regardless.

No, he calls each one to account. And nor has God sort of sat down at a power-sharing conference and divided up the world with other so-called gods, sort of making decisions like, well, you know, this people group over here on this continent can worship me, and then you can have this people group on this continent over here, and they can worship you.

No, God is the sovereign God over all nations, the ones to whom every person will be brought to account. And you probably noticed, as Rob read the passage for us, that actually we see God's sovereignty throughout this first chapter.

So, in verse 4, God hurls a great wind on the sea, which causes a storm. Here is the sovereign God powerfully taking the initiative.

[10:37] The picture we should have in mind is not the English Channel, when it's slightly choppy, even though, personally, that's always quite enough to send me up on deck for some fresh air. No, rather, this is the worst storm ever.

These sailors are terrified. If you've seen the film *The Perfect Storm*, starring George Clooney, I take it it's meant to be that kind of storm, which throws a boat around the place, as if it's just made out of balsawks.

It's the same sovereign God who, in verse 15, causes the storm to cease, as soon as Jonah is thrown overboard. In verse 7, the sovereign God who is Lord, even over the throw of a dice.

As, verse 7, the sailors say to each other, come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us. Now, I take it this isn't meant to be a model for Christian guidance, and how today we are to discern God's will.

After all, these are just pagan sailors, aren't they? They're just doing what they think they ought to do. But God is still sovereign over them as they cast their lots.

[11:49] And then, verse 17, God sovereignly provides a great fish, not a whale, interestingly, but it might have been, but we're not told, appointed by Jonah, by God, rather, to swallow Jonah.

Well, I guess many of us will have been on holiday. One of the joys of this particular Sunday in the church year is that suddenly lots of people we haven't seen over the last few weeks are back again. But I wonder where it is you went to if you've been away. Well, wherever it was, God is sovereign there. Those who live there are accountable to him.

We went to Pembrokeshire in Wales. Yes, everyone we met is accountable to him. He is sovereign even over the weather, which in our case is a great comfort as we are battered by the wind and the rain.

Now, I imagine that because most of us here are Christians, that most of us do believe that God is sovereign in his world and in charge of it. I realise that not all of us will believe that, in which case do ask afterwards or come and talk to me afterwards.

[12:58] But for those who do, or at least say we do, let me ask, do you really believe that God is sovereign in his world?

In other words, does your life match up to what you say you believe? Because that is the issue for the rest of the chapter.

So let's move on, secondly, and think about Jonah's hypocrisy. Because here is the next surprise of the book. It's there in verse 3. Have a look at it. Jonah flees from God.

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish.

So he paid the fare and went on board to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. Jonah flees from God. In fact, the author tells us, isn't he, three times that rather than going to Nineveh, which was in the east, he goes to Tarshish, which is in the west, probably in Spain.

[14:09] Now, we're not told why Jonah flees. We'll have to wait until chapter 4 for that. But notice also in verse 3 that we're told twice that Jonah is fleeing from God's presence.

Which is an odd thing, isn't it? Because as a prophet, Jonah would have known his Bible. He'd have been familiar with the words of Psalm 139, which I put on the outline, which ask of God, where shall I go from your spirit?

Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. Something seems to be very wrong, doesn't it?

Jonah knows in his head that he cannot flee from God. Yet that is precisely the thing which he seeks to do. And we see that same kind of disconnect or hypocrisy, as we might call it more bluntly, in the very heart of the storm.

Did you notice how in verse 8 the sailors ask Jonah, a whole series of quickfire questions. Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? [15:17] What is your country? Of what people are you? And he replies, verse 9, I am Hebrew, and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

That's just what we saw in our first point. God is the God of heaven who made the seas and the dry land. But the one thing that isn't true in verse 9 are those two words, I fear.

Indeed, I suspect if this was a children's pantomime, as soon as we heard the words, I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, we'd want to say, oh no you don't, because he so clearly doesn't.

It seems to be a creed that Jonah can recite by heart, I fear the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. But it hasn't begun to impact his life.

In fact, we see throughout the chapter that Jonah doesn't really fear God at all. Did you notice how in verse 5 these pagan sailors pray, they cry out to their pagan gods, while Jonah is fast asleep at peace with the world.

[16:32] It shows, doesn't it, that having a sense of peace about something can never be a guide to what is right. You do sometimes, don't you hear Christians saying something like, well we really have a sense of peace about this particular decision or about this way forward.

But Jonah is blissfully peaceful. Our sinful hearts are quite capable of feeling at peace in situations where we should be hearing alarm bells going off all over the place.

Jonah refuses to pray even in verse 6 when the ship's captain tells him to pray. Even in verse 12 when he's about to be thrown overboard.

He's so clearly on the run, isn't he? In no mood to listen to God, in no mood to pray to him. It's not surprising that in verse 10 the sailors are so shocked as they ask, what have you done?

It's not so much a question but a statement. Jonah claims to know the creator of God yet he has the audacity to flee from him. What are you doing Jonah?

[17:41] How could you do such a thing? But then of course we're not that unlike Jonah ourselves, are we?

I take it. There's so often the most enormous gap between what we say we believe on the one hand and the way in which we live on the other.

I take it you see it in the way in which while 70% of the population or 75% whatever it is are glad to say they are Christians actually it never affects their life.

No desire to hear God's word. No desire to hear God speaking to them in the Bible. No desire to live a life that honors Jesus. But Jonah shows us that Christians can be like that too.

Do we really believe in the God who is sovereign in his world? Or is there actually the most enormous gap between what we say we believe and the way we live?

[18:48] And we say don't we that we believe in the sovereign God who is a loving heavenly father and cares for us? But so often we find ourselves worrying about and getting anxious about all the things that those who aren't Christians worry about.

We say we believe in the sovereign God who will usher in a new creation at the end of time. But then we run after money material possessions and comfort just like those who aren't Christians as if this world is all there is to live for.

We say that we believe in a sovereign God who speaks through the Bible. The sovereign God who answers our prayers. But then we claim we're too busy to read our Bibles and listen to him.

And too busy to pray. Specifically of course Jonah demonstrates this contradiction in his reluctance to take God's message to those who don't know God.

Well like Jonah we are commanded by God to take his message to those who don't know about him and his son Jesus to make disciples of those who don't know him.

[20:02] Yet so often we may not flee but we certainly keep quiet don't we? With friends colleagues family. We heard earlier that in five weeks time Jonathan Fletcher will be speaking at a guest event here at Grace Church.

Now I wonder how you reacted to that. Now I know there are some who simply love inviting people to things. They throw themselves into something like that and they'll take 20 invitations later on.

But it's very easy isn't it just to slightly dread an event like that. Perhaps some of us are unsure we even ought to be telling people about Jesus. After all why on earth should I seek to impose what I believe on other people?

Perhaps we're not sure it's worth inviting them. We think they won't come that it's just not worth the effort. I think that's probably my temptation if I'm honest. Or perhaps like Jonah we're just plain disobedience.

Perhaps we're afraid what others might think of us if we invite them along to talk at church. A few years ago the journalist Matthew Paris who is not a Christian as far as I'm aware summarized the teaching of the New Testament pretty accurately in an article in the paper.

[21 : 24] And he then went on to say this. If I believe that or even a tenth of that how could I care which version of the prayer book I used? I would drop my job sell my house throw away my possessions leave my acquaintances and set out into the world with a burning desire to know more.

And when I found out more to act upon it and to tell others. Far from being puzzled that Mormons and Adventists should knock at my door I am unable to understand how anyone who believes what is written in the Bible could choose to spend his waking hours in any other endeavour.

the gap between belief and life. I take it all of us need to recognise don't we just how much of Jonah there is in each one of us.

Those of us who say we are Christians we say we believe in the teaching of Jesus but does it really affect us and shape us? I take it that one of the marks of our own spiritual health will be the extent to which we recognise ourselves in Jonah and this gap between what we say we believe and the way in which we live and that would be a great topic of conversation over coffee later on.

God's sovereignty Jonah's hypocrisy thirdly the sailors faith verse 16 then the men feared the Lord exceedingly and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

[23 : 07] Here is the third surprise of the book and what a contrast to Jonah these sailors fear God where to fear in the Bible to fear God in the Bible is to treat him rightly to relate to him as he is as the great God that he is and I wonder if you noticed how through the chapter the object of their fear changes so verse 5 we're told they're afraid at that point they're simply afraid of the storm but by verse 10 they're not just afraid they're exceedingly afraid and not of the storm but of the God who might be angry not only with Jonah but with them for taking Jonah on board their boat in verse 14 they then pray to God with a respect for God and respect for totally lax it's a passionate prayer if you look at it as they recognize that God is sovereign you have done as it pleased you and then verse 16 their fear has turned full circle they no longer fear the storm but the

God who sends the storm they fear with awe they fear with conviction you see the whole issue for these sailors is this who is God the pagan God of verse 5 any other God who perhaps they haven't heard of in verse 6 or the sovereign Lord who sent the storm and of course this is not the only time in the Bible when a storm is calmed miraculously it's not the only time in the Bible when hardened sailors are terrified they would be drowned it's not the any time in the Bible when the fear of a storm becomes a greater fear of the one who can calm the storm just with a word because of course it's exactly what Jesus Christ did in Mark chapter 4 do look it up later because the sovereign God of Jonah chapter 1 is the same

God who is fully revealed in Jesus Christ the sovereign God Jonah's hypocrisy the sailors faith you see Jonah chapter 1 shows us that there are two ways in which you and I can be on the run from God the first is to be like the sailors obviously pagan worshipping gods that aren't gods at all and I guess there will be one or two like that here this morning it's wonderful to have folk like that here at Grace Church on a Sunday morning worshipping things that aren't gods at all perhaps it's a job or the family or a lifestyle that is the number one thing in our lives and if that is us this morning then clearly the issue for us is just the same as the issue for the sailors it's will we repent will we put our trust in and fear the sovereign Lord and honour him by putting our trust in his son

Jesus Christ and turning to him and if that's something you've never done and you know it is something you need to do then why not come and speak to me afterwards but the second way in which we can run from God is to be like Jonah the Bible believing prophet Jonah says he believes all the right things then out he goes to the evangelical church where the Bible is clearly and faithfully taught then out he says the creed with great gusto but he's on the run his life simply doesn't match his beliefs and I guess the likelihood is there'll be many of us who are like that this morning and the issue is just the same will we repent well why don't I lead us in prayer and then if anyone would like to ask a question we do usually have a question time so do ask a question let's pray together then

the men feared the Lord exceedingly and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows
heavenly father we praise you for the way in which we see your glorious rule over your creation writ
large at the beginning of Jonah how you control the sea how you call each person to account and
we're sorry heavenly father when in our own lives our lives simply do not match what we say we
believe and we pray heavenly father that as we think through the implications of this chapter as we
look at this book over the next three weeks we pray that for all of us we would be those who'd be
willing to let you be God in our lives and we ask it for Jesus' sake
Amen Amen thank you amigos to an información future um on the fire see you in on the fire that the
extent of all four of you know let's enjoy the part of the map I think that this includes a person that is
equal to students who do not match the effect on the fire we encourage you to allow the damage do
not match the chance so the point of the number of our ■■■■